

Ellen White's Authority as Bible Commentator

by Joseph J. Battistone

Two of the most vexing questions concerning Ellen White's writings concern her interpretation and use of Scripture and our interpretation and the use of her writings. The two questions are related. For example, there is Ellen White's interpretation of the story of Jesus' transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-8). The glorious appearance of Moses and Elijah with Christ on the mount is understood as a miniature representation of the second coming of Christ. Moses typifies the saints who will be resurrected at that time; Elijah represents those who will be translated.¹ The credibility of this interpretation is enhanced when we consider the preceding passage (Matt. 16:21-28). At its end is the problematic text, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom" (Matt. 16:28, RSV). By interpreting the transfiguration as a symbolic portrayal of the second advent of Christ, Ellen White resolves the difficulty.

Nevertheless, there are commentators who interpret the figures in the transfiguration scene differently.² For them, Moses represents the law,

and Elijah the prophets. Instead of the second coming of Christ they see in the transfiguration the atoning work of Jesus. Support for this interpretation can be found in the New Testament.³

Some persons in the church view these two interpretations as complementary rather than contradictory. Others, however, find difficulty in accepting an interpretation of Scripture that differs from one advanced by Ellen White. This difficulty arises, to some extent, from the fact that Ellen White's writings are viewed by Seventh-day Adventists as an inspired—and hence authoritative—commentary on the Bible. But the problem may also develop from a failure to understand in a precise way the purpose of Ellen White's writings. And if we do misunderstand the nature of her commentary, we will inevitably misinterpret and misuse her work.

It is important to distinguish between belief in the inspiration of Ellen White, and the theory of how inspiration functions. I may believe her writings are inspired and, at the same time, fail to understand and use them correctly. This is why faith cannot be a substitute for skills in thinking and reading.

We need also to clarify the functional difference between contemporary biblical commentaries and the writings of Ellen White. Commentators today often use tools and techniques in

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their Bible study that Ellen White did not use. Moreover, their approach to Bible study involves techniques that fall outside the scope of Ellen White's concern. Questions relating to the study of ancient manuscripts, the linguistic and literary character of words in the Bible, the authorship, date and place of a particular writing, or the various literary forms of the material in the Gospels—these are raised from a perspective much different from that of Ellen White's.

To be sure, the truth of the Bible—the knowledge of God's saving grace through faith in Jesus Christ—is not dependent upon our ability to answer such questions. Still, the knowledge gained through such inquiry will enhance and render more precise our understanding of saving truth. So, we cannot dismiss the work of biblical

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scholars as unimportant for a practical approach to Bible study. While biblical scholarship is not necessary to grasp a knowledge of God's saving power in Jesus Christ, it is indispensable for understanding the historical process by which God's revelation has come to us.

If Ellen White's approach to the Bible, then, is different from that of contemporary scholarship, how are we to understand her contribution to the church? I believe that Ellen White's genius—that is, her divine inspiration—is revealed in her understanding and presentation of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. Here lies the uniqueness of her work. She takes a profound and abstract theological problem—the

problem of evil—and discloses in a sublime way its practical significance for each individual. Consequently, her writings assume a sense of urgency akin to that of the Scriptures. Indeed, her keen sensitivity to sin and her profound awareness of the forces of evil operative in the world, have given her ministry prophetic significance⁴ for the church. Her works enjoy a unique status in the church, second in importance only to that of the Scriptures.

Without question, the theme of the great controversy is the most important in her writings. It constitutes the basic perspective from which she interprets the Bible.⁵

As a case in point, consider her commentary on the prophet Elijah. Ellen White devotes more space to his life and ministry than to that of any other prophet.⁶ Upon reading what she says, two points of emphasis emerge which explain her keen interest in Elijah. First, she refers repeatedly to his character—his unflinching loyalty, dauntless courage and admirable faith.⁷ Second, she refers, by way of contrast, to the striking condition of the society of Elijah's time—its alarming apostasy, gross immorality and rampant lawlessness.⁸

The contrast between the character of the prophet and the society of his time are important to Ellen White because of their typological significance in the scheme of the great controversy. This becomes clear in Chapter 14 of *Prophets and Kings*. The entire chapter is a homily on the poverty of spiritual leadership in the modern world, the widespread infidelity and apostasy, and the alarming indifference to the decalogue resulting from the impoverished leadership. Such abysmal apathy, she argues, is the reason for violence and crime in the world.

One of her major concerns in this chapter is the seventh-day Sabbath. Modern-day Baalism—the counterpart or antitype of Israelite apostasy—comes to surface in the “well-nigh universal disregard of the Sabbath commandment.”⁹ While men and women pursue riches, fame and pleasure, she notes, they neglect Bible study, reject God's law, despise His love and ignore His messages. But God has a faithful remnant who will not bend their knee in false worship.

In the chapters on Elijah's ministry, references and allusions to the great controversy

abound in the form of brief homilies, object lessons and general counsel. According to Ellen White, Elijah typifies the saints living at the time of Christ's return.¹⁰ The crisis Israel faced on Mount Carmel represents the great test awaiting the church in the last days. Baal worship in ancient Israel corresponds to apostate Protestantism today.¹¹ Thus, the message to be proclaimed by the remnant church—the “Elijah message”—is essentially a message of judgment.¹²

One further observation is important. In her study of the Old Testament prophets, including Elijah, Ellen White focuses more attention on their actions than on their words. She is more interested in relating the practical results of the prophetic preaching than in explaining the theological significance of the actual messages.¹³ Consequently, her writings tend to be more homiletical than exegetical. This becomes more apparent in the frequent parallels she draws between the time of the prophets and the period of the church today. These parallels enable her to draw lessons from the biblical material which relate to the theme of the great controversy.¹⁴

This points to a fundamental feature of her writings—an interest in the practical nature and value of Bible study. To her way of thinking, Bible study is more than a matter of learning facts or concepts. It is an exercise that generates from an attitude of prayer, faith and humility, culminating in the spiritual edification or enrichment of the student.¹⁵ In other words, there is an inseparable relation between Bible study and character development. The study of the Bible, Ellen White believes, will eventually lead to a dynamic change in the thinking and behavior of the student.

The tendency of Ellen White to draw attention to the controversy between Christ and Satan, particularly as it relates to the individual,¹⁶ clearly demonstrates her own understanding of the practical significance of Bible study. At the same time, it offers insights into the uniqueness of her prophetic ministry. Through her inspired writings, we gain a better understanding of the role of Seventh-day Adventists, collectively as well as individually, in the closing stage of the great controversy.¹⁷

The very nature and purpose of her work, then, determine the uniqueness and, hence, the

value of her writings. These writings abound with insights into the crafty schemes which Satan employs against the world to counteract the redemptive purpose of God in Jesus Christ. She wishes, first, to alert her readers to the reality of Satan's presence in the world, to his cunning influence in the church, and to the subtle temptations he employs against individuals. She wishes, second, to clarify the nature and consequences of the great controversy between Christ and Satan in order to persuade her readers to choose the way of righteousness and truth. While this takes her over many topics and fields of study—history, religion, theology, science, health, education and others—the basic framework throughout is the theme of the great controversy.

What, then, do we mean when we affirm a unique place—a place second only to the Bible—for her writings in the church? We mean that we cannot simply place them on the same level of importance and authority as that of other commentaries. Such a high view of her writings, can be easily misunderstood and misapplied, however. It would be inappropriate to use her writings to settle questions relating to the reading of a text, the meaning of a word, the authorship or date of a biblical book, etc. We would consider it quite strange, for example, to defend the use of the King James Version against modern translations on the grounds that Ellen White used the former and gave no explicit instruction for the need of the latter. And yet, an “all-purpose approach” to her writings leaves us vulnerable to such reasoning.

On the basis of the observations advanced above it seems more accurate to describe her interpretation of Scripture as primarily a religious exposition of the great controversy theme on a cosmic, historical and personal level, than to characterize it as scientific exegesis in a technical sense. In no way is such a classification denigratory. To the contrary! It may help prevent further misunderstanding and misuse of her writings. If her writings were designed to answer questions of a scholarly nature, their significance would be restricted to a relatively small group, and would in time become dated. Such is the nature of scholarship. But her writings have a deeper purpose and a wider scope.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See *The Desire of Ages*, p. 422, and *Prophets and Kings*, p. 277.

2. The different interpretation is not due to a liberal or modernist mindset. See, for example, Charles R. Erdman, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), p. 155.

3. During the New Testament period, the figures of Moses and Elijah were understood to represent the essence of the law and the prophets. See, for example, Matt. 23:2, Luke 16:29; cf. also Luke 24:44 and John 1:17 for Moses. References to Elijah appear in Matt. 16:14; 17:10-11; cf. Mal. 4:5-6, where Elijah is depicted as the one who prepares the way for the coming of the Messiah.

4. By the expression "prophetic significance," I wish to include more than the predicatory aspect of her ministry. Without attributing canonical value to her writings, I believe her role in the formation, development and sustenance of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is comparable in some respects to the part performed by Elijah, Jeremiah, or John the Baptist in the history of Israel and Judaism.

5. The dominant role of this theme in her writings is evident in the titles appearing in the "Conflict of the Ages Series." Note, for example, such topics as "Why Was Sin Permitted?", "Satan's Enmity Against the Law," and "Ancient and Modern Sorcery" in *Patriarchs and Prophets*. The importance of the theme is reflected, moreover, in Ellen White's selection and application of biblical passages. Often the amount of space that she devotes to a passage is out of proportion to the emphasis given to it in the Bible. Her discussion of the sin of Nadab and Abihu is a clear example. She devotes a full chapter to an incident that is presented in the Scriptures in three verses (see Chapter 31 in *Patriarchs and Prophets*. Compare this with Lev. 10:1-3), whereas she makes no comment on a large portion of the book of Leviticus. While she quotes from other portions of Leviticus, she does not offer a systematic exposition of the book. The great controversy theme appears also in connection with numerous character sketches, is found in the object lessons which are frequently drawn from the Bible and, finally, in a typology that is peculiar to Ellen White.

6. In *Prophets and Kings*, she devotes six chapters (Chapters 9-14) to the prophet Elijah. The book of Daniel is given about the same coverage (see Chapters 39-44).

7. See *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 140-142, 147, 152, 156-157.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 120, 127, 133.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

10. "Elijah was a type of the saints . . . who at the close of the earth's history will be changed from mortal to immortal, and be translated to heaven without seeing death" (*Ibid.*, p. 227.).

11. Two features characterizing apostate Protestantism as the antitype of apostate Israel in the time of Elijah are said to be Sunday legislation and liquor traffic supported by Protestants (*Ibid.*, p. 186).

12. According to Ellen White, it is the message of the three angels of Revelation 14 (*Ibid.*, pp. 188-189).

13. As a case in point, we cite her study of the book of Daniel. For the most part, it is not the prophecies that receive attention, but the stories of Daniel and his companions. Six chapters (Chapters 39-44) contain moral lessons which stress the practical value of the biblical narratives for the life of faith. While she affirms the relevance of the prophetic portion (Daniel 7-12) for the church in the last days, she offers no comment on the material.

14. In connection with her study of the book of Jonah, for example, she underscores the urgency of our mission in the world today, particularly in the great cities. The imminence of God's final judgment is proclaimed through conditions of moral decadence and social injustice, coupled with natural catastrophes. During this period of probation, the church must rise to its task and announce the "glad tidings of salvation" (*Ibid.*, pp. 274-278.)

15. The inquiry characterizing this type of Bible study has more than academic significance since it has to do with questions of ultimate concern, namely, the eternal destiny of the individual. Far more is at stake here than the solution of a literary riddle or a historical problem. At the center of such Bible study are questions relating to issues of life and death.

16. This is evident in the numerous character sketches of Old Testament personalities. Some examples are her portraits of Aaron, Miriam, Korah, Balaam, Moses, Gideon, Samson, Samuel and Saul (see *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 319-320, 360-361, 385, 395, 447, 449, 452, 475-477, 557-558, 561-562, 568, 572, 575, 602, 635, 684-688).

17. The idea of a controversy between Christ and Satan is not, of course, unique to Ellen White. What is original to her, however, is her understanding of the place of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the scheme of the controversy. This seems to be one of her foremost concerns in volume one of *Spiritual Gifts*.