

**Ellen G. White and Hermeneutics, Part 3:
Contexts—Literary, Historical, and Theological**
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I. Review

A. Five-step Hermeneutical Outline

1. Personal preparation
 - a. Heart
 - (1) Attitude
 - (2) Prayer
 - b. Mind
 - (1) Broad general knowledge.
2. Wide Reading; All Available Evidence
3. Contexts—Literary, Historical, and Theological
 - a. Literary
 - b. Historical
 - c. Theological
4. Principles vs. Particular Applications of them.
5. Specialized Tools for exceptional cases.

B. Overview of Today's Topic: (3) Contexts—Literary, Historical, and Theological

1. Literary Context: The sentence, the paragraph, the page before and after the item under scrutiny.

"In order to sustain erroneous doctrines or unchristian practices, some will seize upon passages of Scripture separated from the context, perhaps quoting half a single verse as proving their point, when the remaining portion would show the meaning to be quite the opposite. With the cunning of the serpent they entrench themselves behind disconnected utterances construed to suit their carnal desires. Thus do many willfully pervert the word of God" (GC 521).

2. Historical Context: The time, place, and circumstances in which the message was originally given.
3. Theological Context: may be found in the immediate passage or elsewhere.
 - a. The entire theological context of Ellen White's writings includes the whole teaching of Scripture.

¹This lecture outline is adapted with permission from GSEM 534 lecture outlines by Roger W. Coon, "EGW and Hermeneutics: Jemison's Second Rule," April 6, 1995; and Denis Fortin, "Ellen G. White and Hermeneutics: Part III—The Historical Context," April 26, 2000.

- b. Theological details or obscure points are to be interpreted in harmony with the great central teachings of the Bible and Ellen White's writings.

“The testimonies themselves will be the key that will explain the messages given, as Scripture is explained by Scripture” (ISM 42).

II. Aspects of Literary Context

A. Original Language if Possible.

B. Word Definitions.

1. By historical dictionary (*Oxford English Dictionary*).
2. By comparing her usage in this and other contexts. (The EGW CD-ROM is especially useful for such word studies.)

C. Example of change in word meaning:

“Phrenology and mesmerism are very much exalted. They are good in their place, but they are seized upon by Satan as his most powerful agents to deceive and destroy souls. His arts and devices are received as from heaven, and faith in the detector, the Bible, is destroyed in the minds of thousands. Satan here receives the worship which suits his Satanic majesty. Thousands are conversing with, and receiving instructions from, this demon-god and acting according to his teachings. The world which is supposed to be benefited so much by phrenology and animal magnetism, never was so corrupt. Satan uses these very things to destroy virtue and lay the foundation of spiritualism” (1T 296-297 [1862]).

1. Definitions:

- a. Phrenology: “a psychological theory or analytical method based on the idea that certain mental faculties and character traits are indicated by the configurations of a person's skull” (*Random House Dictionary*). A forerunner of modern psychology.
- b. Mesmerism: “hypnosis as introduced by F. A. Mesmer through animal magnetism.” F. A. Mesmer was an Austrian physician (1733-1815).
- c. “Mesmerism” was originally a general term for *all* of Mesmer's psychological theories. Since hypnosis was the most predominant, mesmerism came to mean simply “hypnosis.”

2. In the statement, “Phrenology and mesmerism are . . . good in their place,” Ellen White was evidently using the term “mesmerism” in one of its meanings as a forerunner of modern psychology. The following sentences apply especially to hypnosis, which was originally only one (negative) aspect of mesmerism, but which came to be the primary meaning of the term “mesmerism.”

3. Following the hermeneutical principle of “All Available Evidence,” leads to parallel statements that clarify what she believed:

“The advantage he [Satan] takes of the sciences, sciences which pertain to the human mind, is tremendous. Here, serpent-like, he imperceptibly creeps in to corrupt the work of God” (ST, November 6, 1884 par. 1).

“The sciences of phrenology, psychology, and mesmerism, have been the channel through which Satan has come more directly to this generation, and wrought with that power which was to characterize his work near the close of probation” (RH, February 18, 1862, par. 1).

“The true principles of psychology are found in the Holy Scriptures. Man knows not his own value. He acts according to his unconverted temperament of character, because he does not look unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of his faith. He who comes to Jesus, he who believes on Him and makes Him his Example, realizes the meaning of the words, “To them gave he power to become the sons of God” (ML 176).

D. Figures of Speech and Related Issues.

Is a given expression intended to be taken as a precise statement of empirical fact? (John 21:25), or as a figure of speech?

1. Metaphor (this **is** that)
2. Simile (this is **like** that)
3. Hyperbole
4. Approximation
40 or 38 rooms in the Paradise Valley Sanitarium (1SM 38).
5. Generalization, with possible exceptions
“A youth not out of his teens is a poor judge of the fitness of a person as young as himself to be his companion for life” (MYP 452).
6. Synecdoche (the part for the whole, or vice versa; the general for the special, or vice versa).
 - a. Common examples:
 - (1) “All *hands* on deck” is naval terminology for “every *sailor* on the deck of the ship.”
 - (2) Forty *head* of cattle = forty live cows.
 - b. Psychology (see also “Change in Word Meaning,” [C], above)
 - (1) Ellen White wrote : “Satan works through the science of psychology” (1T 290-292). (And, for a fact, he surely does!)
 - (2) But does that mean that *all* psychology is evil?
 - (3) Not necessarily. She also wrote: “The true principles of psychology are found in the Holy Scriptures” (ML 176).
 - c. The “daily” in Daniel 8:11-13.
 - (1) “Correct view” of the ‘daily’ = synecdoche for:
 - (a) The correct view that “sacrifice” in Daniel 8:11-13 is a word supplied by the translators, and is not found in the Hebrew text;
 - (b) The “correct view” of the 2300-day prophecy—that it did end on October 22, 1844,—and that all attempts to find a later termination date will fail (EW 74-75).

- (2) She later stated in an interview with A. G. Daniells, W. C. White, and C. C. Crisler, that she had **not** been shown other aspects of the “daily,” such as what was meant by “the taking away of the daily” in Daniel 8:11 (see Moon, *W. C. White and Ellen G. White*, 423-424).
7. Printer’s error.
 Ellen White comments about 2 Tim 4:9-10, “These words, dictated by Paul just prior to his death, were written by Luke* for our profit and warning.” The asterisk directs the reader to a footnote that says, “The substitution of the name of Mark for that of Luke in the first edition was an error of the printer, and not of the manuscript. A few similar errors have been discovered and corrected in this revision” (4T 353). That “Luke” is factually correct is seen in the next verse, 2 Tim 4:11: “Only Luke is with me.”

III. Historical Context

A. Time

B. Place

“Regarding the testimonies [of Ellen G. White], nothing is ignored; nothing is cast aside; but time and place must be considered” (1SM 57 [1911]).

C. Circumstances

“That which can be said of men under certain circumstances cannot be said of them under other circumstances” (3T470 [1875]; reprinted in 5T 670).

“God wants us all to have common sense, and He wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things” (3SM 217 [1904]).

IV. Case Study in “Time”:

A. The Time When Probation Closes.

1. In Letter 20, Jan. 16, 1898, EGW wrote: “We are still in probationary time.” The statement was true when written, in 1898.
 - a. Is it true today, more *than* a century later? I hold that this is still true
 - b. Jeanine Sautron, a French woman who claimed to have been given EGW’s prophetic gift, alleged that probation, for all SDAs, closed in the spring of 1991.
2. But even though I believe the declaration remains true today—that we are “still” in probationary time—we *also* know that the time *is* coming when that which was true on Jan. 16, 1898, will *no longer* be true—because of subsequent intervening developments.
 - a. Because the decree will one day go forth that those who are “unjust” and “filthy” will forever remain such, and that those deemed “righteous” and “holy” will also have their eternal destiny irrevocably fixed (Rev. 22:11).

B. Is the “Voice of the General Conference” to be Heeded as the “Voice of God”?

1. Some things true at one time, are not true at another time, as, witness, statements made by EGW concerning “the voice of God.”
 - a. In 1875 she wrote, concerning the General Conference: “When the judgment of the General Conference, which is the highest authority that God has upon the earth, is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be maintained, but be surrendered” (3T492).
2. However, in the 1890s two situations, in particular, began to develop; and the prophet now took a position diametrically-opposed to that of 1875:
 - a. 1895: “The voice of the General Conference has been [note: *past* tense!] represented as an authority to be heeded as the voice of the Holy Spirit. But when members of the General Conference Committee become entangled in business affairs and financial perplexities, the sacred, elevated character of their work is in a great degree lost” (Ms 33, 1895, in MR #1118).
 - (1) (Note that one of the two particular problems cited here is waning spirituality on the part of members of the GC Committee-and note, also, the stated cause.)
 - b. 1896: “The voice from Battle Creek which has been [again, note: *past* tense] regarded as authority in counseling how the work should be done, is no longer the voice of God” (Letter 4, July 1, 1896).
 - c. 1898: “It has been some years since I have considered the General Conference as the voice of God” (Letter 77, Aug. 26, 1898.)
3. The **GC Session of 1901**, however, began to mark a further transition, back to the earlier, 1875, position.
 - a. It opened April 2 (and closed April 23), with 267 delegates, representing 75,000 church members (four-fifths of which lived in North America).
 - (1) And during this Session, EGW began to change her mind, again!, on the “voice-of-God” issue.
 - b. On April 1st, the day *before* the Session officially opened, EGW twice addressed church leaders who had gathered early for this landmark occasion. (And no change in the 1890's negative stance is yet discernable.)
 - (1) In a *morning* talk, in the Review and Herald chapel, she said:
 - (a) “The people [in the church] have lost confidence in those who have the management of the work [G. C. leaders]. Yet we hear that the voice of the Conference is the voice of God. Every time I have heard this, I have thought it was almost blasphemy. The voice of the Conference ought to be [the ideal goal] the voice of God, but it is not, because [1] some in connection with it are not men of faith and prayer, they are not men of elevated principle. . . . [2] Two or three voices are not to control everything in the [whole world] field” (Ms 37, April 1, 1901, pp. 1, 8). [Note the two problems identified: a lack of personal piety, and organizational deficiencies.] [NOTE: When the GC Committee was created, in 1863, it consisted of but three members. Some 20 years later it increased to five. In 1887, seven; in 1889, nine; in 1893, 11; and by 1899, there were 13 members. But, these 13 were widely scattered, and the full committee seldom met: six were “District Leaders” (Union Conference presidents), scattered across the USA; two were based overseas; and only five were resident in Battle Creek, plus the GC Secretary-Treasurer, and thus available to transact most of the business of the world church.]
 - (2) In the *afternoon* meeting, speaking to leaders in the Battle Creek College library, she

- added: “In reference to our Conference, it is repeated o’er and o’er, that it is the voice of God.” But, from the context of her remarks that immediately followed, it is obvious that *she* believed that time had now passed (Ms 43a, Apr. 1, 1901, p 2).
- c. On April 2 (opening day), she addressed the delegates immediately after the first item on the agenda, the address of the GC President. And she was still very clearly in the 1890s mode of opposition:
 - (1) “That these men should stand in a sacred place, to be as the voice of God to the people, as we once believed [note, again: *past* tense] the General Conference to be, that day is past. What we want now is reorganization [the 2nd problem]. We want to begin at the foundation, and to build upon a different principle” (1901 GCB, p. 25, col. 1).
 - d. By the afternoon of April 4, a “Committee on Plan and Organization” had not only been created, but was already beginning to report back initial proposals regarding line-and-staff structural change; and EGW warmly, enthusiastically approved:
 - (1) “I want to say, from the light given to me by God, there should have been, years ago, organizations such as are now [being] proposed” (*ibid.*, p. 68).
 - e. When the Session finally closed, on April 23, with a “Missionary Farewell Service” at 3 p.m., EGW noted with amazement, and deep personal satisfaction:
 - (1) “Wrongs – serious wrongs – have been committed in Battle Creek. I did not know how we would get along at this meeting. The Lord gave me instruction regarding this. . . .
 “Who do you suppose has been among us since this Conference began? Who has kept away the objectionable features that generally appear in such a meeting? Who has walked up and down the aisles of this Tabernacle? The God of heaven and His angels. . . . They have been among us, to work the works of God. . . .
 “Angels of God have been at work here. The Lord knew our needs, and sent us food, . . . showing us how we should work. We have been trying to organize the work in right lines. The Lord has sent His angels, . . . telling us how to carry the work forward.
 “I was never more astonished in my life than at the turn things have taken at this meeting [Session]. This is not our work. God has brought it about. Instruction regarding this was presented to me [as the Session progressed], but until the sum was worked out at this meeting, I could not comprehend this instruction. God’s angels have been walking up and down in this congregation. I want every one of you to remember this, and I want you to remember, also, that God has said that He will heal the wound of His people” (*ibid.*, pp. 463, 464).
4. **Post-1901 Session:** With these changes [1] in leadership personnel (many new leaders were re-elected; many former leaders were changed, or retired), and [2] in organizational machinery, it now becomes clear that EGW is reverting to her 1875 position, and now is opposed to the 1890s position (which she initially brought into the 1901 GC Session).
- a. Only two months later (June, 1901), EGW became aware, and very concerned, that her eldest surviving son, Elder J. Edson White, was now, erroneously, taking pre-1901, Session statements of his mother, and misapplying them in the post-1901-Session milieu.
 - b. From what she wrote him, you see, the old statements no longer applied now, in the new, altered context:
 - (1) “Your course would have been the course to be pursued, if no changes had been made in the General Conference [Session just closed]. But a change has been made, and many more changes will [yet] be made [and they were, at the 1903 Session, and subsequently], and great developments will [yet] be seen. No issues are to be forced.

“It hurts me to think that you are using the words which I wrote prior to the Conference [to apply them now]. Since the Conference great changes have been made.

“A terribly unjust course has been pursued in the past. A want of principle has been revealed. But in pity to His people, God has brought about changes. . . . The course of action which before the Conference might have been a necessity is no longer a necessity, for the Lord Himself interposed to set things in order. . . .” (Letter 54, June, 1901).

5. **1909:** By this year, EGW is very clearly out of the 1890s mode, and very definitely back in the 1875 mode:
 - a. “God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General conference [Session], shall have authority” (9T 261).
6. **1911:** and two years later, she added, finally:
 - a. “God has invested His church with special authority and power which no one can be justified in disregarding and despising, for he who does this despises the voice of God” (AA 164).
 - b. And she never changed her mind again, as far as the record evidences.
7. Thus, we note in summary, that “Time” factors do make a difference: (a) in 1875 EGW took a position; (b) in 1895, 1896, 1898, and in early 1901, she totally reversed the 1875 position. But after the 1901 GC Session (c) after significant changes had been made in both leadership personnel and operating machinery, she now reverted to the former 1875 position. In 1909 and in 1911, she is clearly back in the 1875 mode, having abandoned the positions of the 1890s.
8. “Time” factors are sometimes quite crucial, *when* a prophet says something may make a difference; for things true at one time may well not be true at another!

V. Case Study in “Place.”

A. The Case of “Church A” and “Church B”

1. If we think of “Time” factors as being represented by a vertical dimension, then we may also think of “Place” factors as being represented by a horizontal dimension (see diagram):
 - a. This diagram depicts two congregations, whom we will identify as “Church A,” and “Church B.”
 - b. And we will note that inspired testimonies that factually apply to “Church A,” upon a given day, may well not apply equally to “Church B”--on that very same day!
2. In the diagram we note that:
 - a. The present spiritual condition of “Church A” (whom we will characterize as “Reluctant” and “Hesitant”) is some Five Miles distant from the “Goal” (which we will further identify as a “Balanced View of Truth”).
 - b. The present spiritual condition of “Church B,” (whom we will characterize as “Eager” and “Zealous”), however, is only Two Miles distant from the same “Goal” (a “Balanced View of Truth”).
3. Both churches need help from the Prophet; but, quite understandably, each congregation needs a somewhat different message in order to enable it to arrive at the same Goal.

- a. So the Prophet writes a “Five-Mile” message to “Church A” (“Reluctant” and “Hesitant”)-which, if followed faithfully, will bring it right up to the Goal (a “Balanced View of Truth”); but writes only a “Two-Mile” message to “Church B” (“Eager” and Zealous”), which, if faithfully followed, will also bring them right up to the same Goal (a “Balanced View of Truth”).
 - b. But a problem develops: the office secretary has two letters, and two addressed envelopes. But, unwittingly, inadvertently, she switches the letters, and mails them in the wrong envelopes!
4. Both churches, thus, receive the “wrong” prophetic testimony; but both churches--believing in the prophet--strictly follow the message received. And the diagram illustrates their final, respective position, vis-à-vis the Goal, after having taken corrective measures.
 - a. “Church A,” which originally was Five Miles from the Goal (and, therefore, needed a Five-Mile Message), received, and faithfully followed, a Two-Mile Message; but it is still Three Miles from the Goal (a “Balanced View of truth”).
 - b. “Church B,” however, originally only Two Miles distant from the Goal, received, and strictly followed, a Five Mile Message (intended for “Church A”). And, now, “Church B” finds itself to be Three Miles *beyond* the goal (a “Balanced View of Truth”)! And “Church B,” thus, is now *farther* from a Balanced View of Truth than it was before it started its journey, it is now *more* unbalanced that it was before it started its journey toward the Goal! And that isn’t good, either.
 - (1) Counseled the prophet in 1872: “We should be very cautions not to advance too fast, lest we be obliged to retrace our steps. In reforms we would better come one step short of the mark than to go one step beyond it. And if there is error at all, let it be on the side next to the people” (3T 21:0).
5. This was the problem to which James White alluded in his *Review and Herald* editorial of March 17, 1868. Speaking of his wife’s unique ministry – which was often unnecessarily made more difficult – he said: “She works to this disadvantage, namely: she makes strong appeals to the people, which a few feel deeply, and take strong positions, and go to extremes. Then to save the cause from ruin in consequence of these extremes, she is obliged to come out with reproofs for extremists in a public manner. This is better than to have things go to pieces; but the influence of both the extremes and the reproofs are terrible on the cause, and brings upon Mrs. W. a three-fold burden. Here is the difficulty: What she may say to urge the tardy, is taken by the prompt to urge them over the mark. And what she may say to caution the prompt, zealous, incautions ones, is taken by the tardy as an excuse to remain too far behind.” (For the complete text of James white’s remarks, see *Sourcebook*, Sec. D-4.)
6. Thus we note that the proper identification of the *audience* to whom a particular prophetic message may be sent, may, contextually, be crucial to a correct understanding of the prophet’s intended meaning for that particular message.

VI. Aspects of Theological Context

- A. Scripture. Ellen White never intended for her writings to be used in isolation as a substitute for careful study of Scripture. She intended her writings to call people back to a faithful study and following of Scripture. Therefore the entire witness of Scripture is the general theological context for all her counsels.

- B. Great Controversy Theme

“The central theme of the Bible, the theme about which every other in the whole book clusters, is the redemption plan, the restoration in the human soul of the image of God” (Ed 125).

“The Bible is its own expositor. Scripture is to be compared with scripture. The student should learn to view the work as a whole, and to see the relation of its parts. He should gain a knowledge of its grand central theme, of God’s original purpose for the world, of the rise of the great controversy, and of the work of redemption.

“He should understand the nature of the two principles [Christ and Satan] that are contending for supremacy, and should learn to trace their working through the records of history and prophecy, to the great consummation.

“He should see how this controversy enters into every phase of human experience, how in every act of life he himself reveals the one or the other of the two antagonistic motives; and how; whether he will or not, he is even now deciding upon which side of the controversy he will be found” (Ed 190-91)

For a thorough exposition of this theme, see Herbert E. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord*, 256-260, 268-277.

- C. Ellipse of Truth—unites paradoxical principles that are both true.

See Herbert E. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord*, 260-265, 268-277.

- D. Righteousness by Faith

Testimony of a long-time legalist, finally converted: “Righteousness by faith—I never saw it in Ellen White, but once you learn it, it’s on every page.”

- E. Radical Discipleship. Uncompromising Devotion to Jesus.

This is why the *Testimonies* are so stringent, because written out of a white-hot devotion to Jesus and the realization that every sin or deception we knowingly cling to crucifies Jesus afresh and jeopardizes the accomplishment of His eternal will for me.

- F. Case Study in Context: Should Ministers Ever Use EGW’s Words in the SDA Pulpit?

1. EGW wrote, upon various occasions:
 - a. “The words of the Bible, and the Bible alone, should be heard from the pulpit” (PK 626, 1969).
 - b. “In public labor do not make prominent, and quote that which Sister White has written” (3SM 29).
 - c. “The Testimonies of Sister White should not be carried to the front. God’s word is the unerring standard” (Ev 256).
2. Do these words teach (or even imply) that the writings of Ellen White should never be quoted from the pulpit? No!
3. Internal Context:
 - a. Statement #1, above, is addressed to the nominal Christian churches of our world—not to Adventist preachers, and the contrast is between preaching human philosophy and traditions vs. the inspired word of God.
 - b. Statements #2 and #3, above, were specifically addressed to Adventist evangelists, in the context of their need to prove the doctrines they were teaching from the Bible, rather than from the Spirit of prophecy writings.
 - c. Another statement, purportedly from EGW, that is sometimes used as “proof” that EGW herself said that her writings should never be quoted from the SDA pulpit, allegedly appeared in “The Proper Use of the Testimonies,” pp. 4, 5, or “The Greatest Thing in the World,” p. 5. But there is no proof that this statement is from EGW.
 - d. Nowhere does EGW suggest that it would be improper to mention her or use her writings from an SDA pulpit.
 - (1) Now, *how* this is done may well be even more important than *what* is done. We must always be “wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.”
 - (2) But it may be relevant to this topic that the title of the largest multi-volume series of EGW writings is known as the *Testimonies for the Church*.

VII. Compilations and Context

- A. Advantages of Compilations:
 1. Emphasis on conceptual or theological context, because quotations on a given topic are grouped with other statements on the same topic.
 2. Multiplicity of witnesses on one topic, intensifies theological or conceptual context.
- B. Disadvantages of Compilations:
 1. Loss of internal or literary context, the context in which the counsel originally grew.
 2. Loss of balance by super-concentration on one topic.

VIII. Summary for Exam Preparation

- A. Know the hermeneutical check list.
- B. Study Douglass, chaps. 22-23 on Great Controversy theme and elliptical principle.
- C. Be able to give two advantages and two disadvantages of compilations.