

ELLEN G. WHITE ESTATE

INSPIRATION
/REVELATION:
WHAT IT IS AND
HOW IT WORKS

ROGER W. COON

Inspiration/Revelation: What It Is and How It Works

Ellen G. White

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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 Roger W. Coon

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Part I—The Prophetic Gift in Operation

Introduction

Before the entrance of sin, God communicated with human beings directly through face-to-face contact and personal fellowship. With the advent of sin this relationship was ruptured and man was alienated from his Maker. To bridge this separating gulf, God employed as many as seven modalities of communication—the “divers manners” of [Hebrews 1:1](#)—as He sought to bring mankind back into a personal relationship with Him.

Prophetic night dreams and “open visions” during the day were the methods God most frequently employed in communicating with men and women of His special choosing who came to be known as “seers,” “prophets,” or special “messengers.”

The lot of the prophet was seldom an easy one, as Jesus intimated by His oft-cited observation that “a prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house.”¹

Seventh-day Adventists believe, upon the basis of biblical evidence² as well as empirical data, that one “masterbuilder” ([1 Corinthians 3:10](#)) of their denomination, Ellen G. White, was the recipient of the gift of prophecy. Solomon averred that “there is no new thing under the sun” ([Ecclesiastes 1:9](#)), and criticism of the prophets continues to this day.

Misunderstanding also continues concerning the manner in which the prophetic gift operates. Satan has a vested interest in creating confusion as well as rejection of the prophetic gift by the people it was intended to benefit, “for this reason: Satan cannot have so clear a track to bring in his deceptions and bind up souls

¹Endnotes [Matthew 13:57](#). For an especially helpful—and relevant—examination of this phenomenon of rejection, in the context of the current controversy over the role and function of Ellen G White, see J. R. Spangler’s editorial, “Persecuting the Prophets,” in *Ministry* (February 1981), pp. 21, 25.

²[Joel 2:28-32](#); [Revelation 10](#); [12:17](#); [10:10](#); [Ephesians 4:11-15](#); [1 Corinthians 12:12, 28](#). See also “Prophecy After New Testament Times,” chapter 8 of T. Housel Jemison’s *A Prophet Among You* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1955), pp. 135-147.

in his delusions if the warnings and reproofs and counsels of the Spirit of God are heeded.”³ The “very last deception of Satan” in the Seventh-day Adventist church just before Jesus returns will be the twofold work of (1) destroying the credibility of Ellen White as an authentic, reliable prophet of the Lord, and (2) creating a “satanic” “hatred” against her ministry and writings—satanic in its intensity as well as in its origin.⁴

Satan’s “special object” in these last days is to “prevent this light from coming to the people of God” who so desperately need it to walk safely through the minefield that the enemy of all souls has so artfully booby trapped.⁵

And what is Satan’s methodology for securing this objective? He will work “ingeniously, in different ways and through different agencies.”⁶ For example, in addition to the two methods mentioned above, satanic agencies seek to keep souls under a cloud of doubt,⁷ in a hurried state, and in a state of disappointment.

This is Satan’s plan—his goal and his strategy. This minicourse is dedicated to the proposition that he shall not succeed!

³Ellen G. White, [Selected Messages 1:48](#) (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958).

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ellen G. White, [Testimonies for the Church 5:667](#) (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948). Hereafter shortened to Testimonies.

⁶[Selected Messages 1:48](#).

⁷Ellen G. White, [Sons and Daughters of God, 276](#) (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1955).

Chapter 1—Definitions

Three terms in particular need adequate working definitions as we seek to understand biblical and modern prophetism. The following definitions may be helpful:

1. *Inspiration*. Biblical, prophetic inspiration may be said to be a *process* by which God enables a man or woman of His special choosing both to receive and to communicate accurately, adequately, and reliably God’s messages for His people.⁸

One sometimes tends to say of a particular painter, author, musical composer, or performing artist, “He was inspired!” Indeed, he may have been. But it was a *different kind* of inspiration from that which was possessed by the prophets of God. When Paul wrote to the young ministerial intern Timothy, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Timothy 3:16), he chose to employ the Greek term *theopneustos*, which is a contraction of two other Greek words *Theos* (God) and *pneuma* (breath). What he was saying, literally, was “All Scripture is *God-breathed*.”⁹

While some take this to be simply a delightful literary metaphor, yet it is also true—and significant—that while the prophet experienced the physical phenomena of the trancelike vision state, God breathed, *literally*; the prophet did not breathe while in this condition.¹⁰

The prophet’s inspiration is different *in kind*, rather than different *in degree*, from any other form of inspiration.

The apostle Peter adds to our limited biblical store of information on inspiration by stating that the prophets—these “holy men of

⁸Indebtedness in deriving working definitions is acknowledged to Dr. Raoul Dederen’s “Toward a Seventh-day Adventist Theology of Revelation-Inspiration,” North American Division Bible Conference Notebook, 1974, pp. 1-20.

⁹2 Timothy 3:16. Holy Bible: New International Version. Copyright © 1978 by the New York International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers. Italics supplied. See also The Amplified Bible.

¹⁰See Daniel 10:17, also a subsequent discussion of physical phenomena which follows below.

God”—spoke as they were “moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Peter 1:21). The Greek term Peter employs is *pheromenoi*, from *phero*: “to carry a load, to move.” Luke employed the expression twice ¹¹ in describing the action of a tempestuous wind in “driving” a sailing vessel upon which he and Paul were traveling. The implication is clear: The prophets were “moved by the Divine initiative and borne by the irresistible power of the Spirit of God along ways of His choosing to ends of His appointment.” ¹²

[46]

2. *Revelation*. Biblical, special revelation, we would hold, further, to be the *content* of the message communicated by God to His prophet in the process of inspiration. Adventists hold this content—the prophetic message—to be infallible (inerrant), trustworthy (all sufficient, reliable), and authoritative (binding upon the Christian).

This concept is predicted on three corollaries:

- a) Man is unable, through his own resources or by his own observation, to perceive certain kinds of information;
- b) God is pleased to speak; and
- c) this act takes place and unfolds within human history.

¹³

God has revealed Himself, in a limited way, in nature, which gives us glimpses of His power, His wisdom, and His glory. But nature is unable to reveal clearly God’s person, His holiness, His redeeming love, and His everlasting purposes for mankind. Thus, supernatural revelation transcends the “natural” revelation of God in nature, and consists chiefly in God’s manifesting of Himself and His will through direct intercourse with humanity. ¹⁴

God speaks! In the Old Testament Jeremiah speaks for all of the prophets when he testifies that “the Lord ... touched my mouth, And ... said unto me, Behold I have put my words in thy mouth” (chap. 1:9). In the New Testament Paul assures us that the Holy

¹¹Acts 27:17, 27.

¹²International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (Chicago, IL: The Howard Severance Co., 1915), 3:479, 1480.

¹³Dederen.

¹⁴Ibid.

Spirit “speaketh expressly” (1 Timothy 4:1). Paul continues, elsewhere, to assure us that God reveals His mysteries to the prophets by revelation, which is a progressive work;¹⁵ Paul contrasts natural knowledge with information that is revealed by the Holy Spirit. This knowledge is attainable in no other way and from no other source.¹⁶

3. *Illumination.* Since the implied answer to Paul’s rhetorical question, “Are all prophets?”¹⁷ is negative, there remains one further task of the Holy Spirit, if those *not* possessed of the prophetic gift are to grasp the will of God for them.

Illumination may be defined as the work of that same Holy Spirit who indicated God’s message to the prophet by which He now enables the hearer or reader of the prophet’s words to comprehend the spiritual truths and discern God’s message to himself.

This work of the Holy Spirit is comprehended in the words of Jesus to His disciples concerning the coming of the Comforter: He will teach you all things,¹⁸ He will remind you of Jesus’ words (the only current source of which is the writings of the prophets!),¹⁹ and in doing this work He will guide you into all the truth the human mind is capable of comprehending.²⁰

Concerning the work of this illumination, Ellen White once spoke of the three ways by which “the Lord reveals His will to us, to guide us, and to fit us to guide others”: (a) through an understanding of what inspired writers through the ages have written for our admonition, (b) through providential circumstances (signs), and (c) through the direct impression of the Holy Spirit on the individual Christian’s mind and heart.²¹

¹⁵Ephesians 3:3-5.

¹⁶1 Corinthians 2:6-14.

¹⁷1 Corinthians 12:29.

¹⁸John 14:26.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰John 16:13.

²¹Testimonies for the Church 5:512.

Chapter 2—An Operational Gift

The Divine Initiative

It all started with God. He made the first move.

The very first words of the English Bible are these: “In the beginning God ...” ([Genesis 1:1](#)). Three times in the last book of the Bible Jesus identifies Himself as “Alpha and Omega.”²² Those are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet—the language in which John wrote the book of Revelation. What did that cryptic expression mean? Among other things, Jesus perhaps was saying, “I was here when everything began; and I will be here when all is fulfilled.”

Paul highlights the uniqueness of the Christian religion by showing that while we were still in the state and act of sin Christ died for us ([Romans 5:8](#)). All of the non-Christian religions of the world are alike in one respect: They all show man in search of God. In Christianity alone do we find God in search of man. The central message of Christianity was embodied in the three parables of the “lost” of [Luke 15](#): the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost boy. In each of these parables we are shown a God who cared deeply, and who acted on the basis of this concern.

God’s concern for man prompted Him to bring into existence the office of prophet. While the liturgical priesthood spoke to God on behalf of man, the prophet spoke to man on behalf of God. God had a message to communicate, and He chose special human messengers to be His agency.

While every Christian is the recipient of at least one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (“spiritual gifts”),²³ it is still God the Holy Spirit who decides which man or woman receives which gift.²⁴ And

²²[Revelation 1:11; 21:6; 22:13.](#)

²³[1 Corinthians 12:7.](#)

²⁴[1 Corinthians 12:11, 18; cf. also John 15:16.](#)

the gift of prophecy was given to “some,”²⁵ but not to “all.”²⁶ Prophecy is the preeminent gift;²⁷ and the most a human being may scripturally do is to “covet earnestly the best gifts.”²⁸ God alone chooses who will be His prophets.

And, having made that choice, God speaks! Twice in the stately, measured cadences of [Hebrews 1:1, 2](#), we are told that God had already spoken, first through the prophets and then more recently through His Son. [Revelation 1:1](#) suggests what might well be called “God’s chain of command” (to borrow a phrase from Bill Gothard).

God’s Chain of Command

Just as all three members of the Godhead participated in the creation of this world,²⁹ just so do all three participate in the process of inspiration: The Father gives the message to the Son,³⁰ and the Son gives it to the Holy Spirit,³¹ and the Holy Spirit moves upon the prophets.³²

[47] The Godhead delivers the message to “his angel,” Gabriel; and Gabriel delivers it to God’s servants, the prophets.³³ And thus the prophets could authoritatively declare to their fellow beings, “Hear, therefore, the word of the Lord.”³⁴

Two points of significance immediately suggest themselves from these facts:

1. Of all the billions of angels created by God,³⁵ we today know the names of only two—Lucifer (“light bearer”), who was number one, and who fell; and

²⁵[Ephesians 4:11](#).

²⁶[1 Corinthians 12:29, 30](#).

²⁷[1 Corinthians 1:5-7; 12:28; 14:1](#).

²⁸[1 Corinthians 12:31](#).

²⁹[Genesis 1:2, 26](#). The “Elohim” of verse 26 is plural noun.

³⁰[Revelation 1:1; John 8:28; 5:19, 30](#).

³¹[John 16:7, 13, 14](#).

³²[Peter 1:21](#).

³³[Revelation 1:1; 22:6](#). Cf. [Daniel 8:16; 9:21; Luke 1:19, 26](#).

³⁴For example, [1 Kings 22:19](#). This exact expression appears 36 times in the Old Testament alone; variations appear even more frequently throughout the entire Bible.

³⁵[Revelation 5:11](#).

Gabriel, originally number two, who later became number one. And it was the angel Gabriel, heaven's highest, who communicated God's messages to "his servants, the prophets." Only heaven's highest was good enough for this special task.

2. The prophets are called "his servants," that is, God's servants. Now, a servant is, by definition, "one who is sent"—sent by a superior, of course. Jesus made it abundantly clear that the servant was "not greater than his lord."³⁶ If, then, the message-bearing servant (prophet) is ignored, slighted, or—worse yet—rejected outright, the One who is really rejected is the One who gave the message to the prophet.

Seven Modalities of God's Communication

What were some of these "divers manners" by which God communicated with mankind? There seem to have been at least seven methods:

1. *Theophanies* (visible manifestations of God; face-to-face communication). Abraham met the preincarnate Christ and two angels near his tent on the plain of Mamre ([Genesis 18](#)); Jacob wrestled with an "angel" at Peniel, only to discover "I have seen God face to face" ([Genesis 32:30](#)); and Moses spoke to the Lord in the mount "face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend" ([Exodus 33:11](#)).

2. *Angels*. Those "ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation" ([Hebrews 1:14](#)) have often come to mankind, to bring messages of hope and comfort ([Daniel 10:11, 12](#); [Genesis 32:1](#)), to direct the servants of the Lord to those whose hearts were receptive to God's truth ([Acts 8:26](#)), or to warn of imminent disaster if God's word was not heeded ([Genesis 3:24](#)).

3. *Audible voice of God*. Sometimes God spoke on His own! At Sinai the Ten Commandments were spoken audibly, jointly, by the

³⁶[John 13:16](#); [15:20](#)

Father and the Son in a transcendent “duet”³⁷ that literally caused the earth (as well as the hearts of the human hearers) to tremble.

Upon occasion the audible voice of God addressed the high priest from the Shekinah—that exceeding bright glory that rested between the cherubim in the center of the ark of the covenant.³⁸ The Shekinah was the visible manifestation of God’s presence in the desert tabernacle.

And, of course, God’s voice was heard three times during the earthly ministry of our Lord—at Christ’s baptism, upon the mount of transfiguration, and when the Greek philosophers called upon Him in the temple during the week that preceded the crucifixion. At these times God was heard commanding men to heed the message of His beloved Son.³⁹

4. *Optics.* During the wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel, the high priest’s breastplate had two large stones imbedded at the top—the Urim and the Thummim. The high priest could ask questions, and Jehovah would respond. If the answer were “yes,” one stone would glow with a halo of light and glory; if the answer were “no,” the opposite stone would be partially obscured by a shadow or a vapor.⁴⁰

The high priest had another means of receiving answers from God. In the most holy place the angel on the right side of the ark would glow in a halo of light if the answer were affirmative, or a shadow would be cast over the angel on the left if the answer were negative.⁴¹

5. *Casting of lots.* In Old Testament times God also communicated with His people by means of casting lots. A modern counterpart is “drawing straws”—a number of straws of different lengths are held in the hand, with all the ends appearing to be even, the

³⁷Exodus 20; cf. Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, 616 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946); and *The S.D.A. Bible Commentary* 1:1103, 1104 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1953).

³⁸Ellen G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy* 1:399 (Battle Creek, Mich.: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1870); *Early Writings*, 32 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1882).

³⁹Matthew 3:17; 17:5; John 12:28.

⁴⁰Numbers 27:21; 1 Samuel 28:6; *The Spirit of Prophecy* 1:398, 399; *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 351 (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1913).

⁴¹*The Spirit of Prophecy* 1:399; *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 349.

difference of length being hidden by the hand. After the straws are drawn, and are compared, it is easy to determine who drew the longest or the shortest.

Lots were cast upon goats, upon cities, and upon men. The most celebrated instance of the latter was the discovery of Achan and his theft of the “goodly Babylonish garment” as the cause of Israel’s humiliating defeat of Ai. ⁴²

Interestingly, there is only one instance in the New Testament of determining God’s will by the casting of lots—the selection of Matthias to take the place vacated by Judas among the 12 apostles. ⁴³ When and why this method fell into disuse is not revealed; but we do know that when the practice of casting lots was resorted to by the Austin, Pennsylvania, Seventh-day Adventist Church for the purpose of selecting church officers, Ellen White wrote from Australia, “I have no faith in casting lots.... To cast lots for the officers of the church is not in God’s order. Let men of responsibility be called upon to select the officers of the church.” ⁴⁴

6. *“Open” visions of the day.* The trancelike state into which a prophet entered when going into vision has already been referred to, and will be dealt with more fully below. Both the Old and the New Testaments are replete with references to prophets and apostles receiving visions from the Lord. ⁴⁵

7. *Prophetic dreams of the night.* Often the prophets would receive messages from the Lord in the “night seasons” as well as during the day. There is no evidence that physical phenomena accompanied the prophetic night dreams, nor is there evidence that the kind of messages given at night were in any way different from those transmitted in the visions of the day. [48]

Ellen White was once asked if she, a prophet, experienced ordinary dreams at night as noninspired people did. She smiled and said that she did. The next question was inevitable: How are you able to differentiate between ordinary dreams and inspired dreams? Her response was right to the point: “The same angel messenger

⁴²Leviticus 16:8; Joshua 7.

⁴³Acts 1:26.

⁴⁴Letter 37, March 4, 1900; cited in *Selected Messages* 2:328.

⁴⁵1 Samuel 3:1; Numbers 12:6; Joel 2:28-32; Acts 16:9.

stands by my side instructing me in the visions of the night, as stands beside me instructing me in the visions of the day.”⁴⁶

Physical Phenomena

When in vision state, the prophets experienced supernatural physical phenomena. The tenth chapter of Daniel best illustrates the nature and scope of such singular phenomena. Daniel tells us that in this condition he saw things that others about him did not see (vs. 7); he sustained a loss of natural strength (vs. 8) and then was endowed with supernatural strength (vss. 10, 11, 16, 18, 19). He was totally unconscious of his immediate surroundings (vs. 9), and he did not breathe during this time (vs. 17).

Ellen White experienced all these phenomena in the vision state. However, it should be noted that although her lungs did not function at such times, the heart did continue to circulate blood through the body; her face did not lose color.

Perhaps, as already noted above, there may be a startlingly literal interpretation to *theopneustos*—“God-breathed”—as it related to the physical phenomena associated with a prophet in vision.

In Ellen White’s experience, the physical phenomena of “open visions” were more characteristic of her earlier years; from the 1880s onward all of her inspired messages apparently came from the Lord in prophetic dreams. This leads us to consider the purpose of physical phenomena.

First, physical phenomena were not prerequisites for receiving messages from God. The prophetic dreams of the night seem to make this clear. But God, who has a purpose for everything He does, obviously had a purpose in providing these dramatic supernatural exhibitions.

Perhaps the dramatic nature of these exhibitions gives us a clue to Heaven’s intention. In the case of Ellen White, we have a 17-year-old girl claiming, “I have a vision from the Lord!” “Well,” one might wonder, “how do we know?”

⁴⁶Cited by Arthur L. White in quoting his father, William C. White, in Ellen G. White: Messenger to the Remnant (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1969), p. 7.

In the early days of a prophet's ministry, when he has made few written or spoken pronouncements, it is difficult to apply the test of consistency with previously inspired testimony ([Isaiah 8:20](#)). The test of fruitage ([Matthew 7:16, 20](#)) is equally difficult to apply until a few years pass and results are seen in the life of the prophet and in the lives of those who have followed the prophet's counsels. The test of fulfilled prediction ([Jeremiah 28:9](#), [Deuteronomy 18:22](#)) cannot be applied until enough time has elapsed to allow a judgment about whether any prophecies made have come to pass.

Obviously, God needed to do something to arrest attention, to suddenly cause people to sit up and take notice. Physical phenomena serve this purpose. God had used such methods before (probably for the same reason) at Pentecost when tongues of fire were seen above the heads of the 120, and these men and women spoke contemporary languages they had never previously studied.⁴⁷

Perhaps God used physical phenomena to validate the fact that something supernatural was here at work. Of course, witnesses would still need to validate, to authenticate the messages by means of the conventional Bible tests.

However, the fact that Satan can and does counterfeit many natural and supernatural phenomena should lead us to make a crucial distinction: Physical phenomena are an *evidence* of supernatural activity, but they are never to be a *test* of the authenticity or legitimacy of a prophet.

Today it has become fashionable among the critics of Ellen White to call for a "demythologizing" of Adventists' historic prophet. One critic in particular recently called for the burying of legendary tales involving "magic."

Concerning stories of Mrs. White holding a large Bible for an extended period of time on her outstretched, upraised hand while in vision, this critic alleges that at the 1919 Bible Conference it was declared emphatically that the event never really happened, that no one had ever seen it; indeed, no one was even there to witness it!⁴⁸

⁴⁷See [Acts 2](#).

⁴⁸From the stenographically prepared transcript of Walter Rea's lecture, "White Lies," Adventist Forum, San Diego, Calif., February 14, 1981, p. 10. In a letter dated July 17, 1981, I requested in writing that Walter Rea grant me permission to quote him directly from his verbatim transcript. In his reply dated July 21, Rea in effect declined the request,

If, however, we go to the transcript of the 1919 Bible Conference,⁴⁹ we notice, first of all, that the record has been substantially misquoted by the critic. We find General Conference President Arthur G. Daniells discussing the use of physical phenomena as “proof or evidence of the genuineness of the gift.” And he opposes such use as proof of legitimacy—a position the White Estate continues to hold today!

Instead, said Daniells, “I believe that the strongest proof is found in the fruits of this gift to the church, not in physical and outward demonstrations.”

Then, addressing more directly the question of the stories about Ellen White holding a large, heavy Bible on an outstretched hand while in vision, looking away from the pages, and yet quoting the texts to which a finger of the opposite hand pointed, Elder Daniells declared: “I do not know whether that was ever done or not. I am not sure. I did not see it, and I do not know that I ever talked with anybody that did see it.”⁵⁰

One does not need to look far to discover why Daniells had not witnessed such an event. This writer has uncovered four instances thus far where Ellen White held a Bible in vision: three times in 1845 and once in 1847.⁵¹ Arthur Daniells was not born until 1858, at least 11 years after the latest recorded Bible-holding incident took place.

[49] Research shows that physical phenomena was more characteristic of the earlier days of Mrs. White’s experience. Indeed, the last “open vision” of record took place at a camp meeting in Portland,

tacitly admitting that he might have made some small errors in his presentation to the Forum. Instead, he appealed to me not to get into minor nitpicking but to stay with the larger issues. Physical phenomena is one such larger issue, and Walter Rea had tended to emphasize it by alleging that published reports of Ellen White’s holding a large Bible in vision are mythical and without foundation.

⁴⁹Published in *Spectrum* 10:1 (May 1979), pp. 23-57.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵¹See, for example, “The Witness of the ‘Big Bible,’” by Arthur L. White, September 13, 1979; and “Ellen G. White and the Big Bible,” by Ron Graybill, 1981; both unpublished manuscripts circulated as working papers among the Ellen G. White Estate staff.

Oregon, in 1884, only six years after Daniells entered the gospel ministry.⁵²

We should not be surprised, then, that Daniells never witnessed Mrs. White holding a large Bible in vision. He probably saw very few other manifestations of physical phenomena, which ceased shortly after he entered the ministry. Nor is it surprising that he had not met any contemporaries who had observed such phenomena—they were probably too young, too!

Some critics hold that the evidence behind at least two of the Bible-holding stories is not reliable because the stories were not recorded until 45 years after the events took place; and because they were written down by one denominational writer who was not a trained historian. While there may be some validity to this concern, the fact remains that the White Estate still holds in its vault an eyewitness account of the event, known to have been written sometime between 1847 and 1860. The observer was Otis Nichols, and the incident he reported took place during what was probably Ellen White's longest vision, at Randolph, Massachusetts, in the winter of 1845.

During this vision, which lasted approximately four hours, Ellen Harmon (who was unmarried at the time) picked up “a heavy large quarto family Bible” and lifted it up “as high as she could reach.” The Bible was “open in one hand,” and she then proceeded “to turn over the leaves with the other hand and place her finger upon certain passages and correctly utter their words”—all this with her head facing in another direction! In this activity “she continued for a long time.”⁵³

Ellen White believed this account to be an accurate record of a genuine experience, because she quoted three paragraphs from it in an autobiographical account published in 1860.⁵⁴

⁵²See [The General Conference Bulletin, January 29, 1893](#), pp. 19, 20; *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1976), p. 374; and Paul Gordon's monograph, “Revelation-Inspiration: Ellen G. White's Witness and Experience,” July 1978, p. 1.

⁵³Eight-page report of Otis Nichols (n.d.), p. 7. From internal evidence it is apparent that Nichols could not have written this first-person eyewitness account before 1847; and it is obvious that it could not have been penned after 1860, since Ellen White quotes three paragraphs of it in [Spiritual Gifts 2:77-79](#) (Battle Creek, Mich.: James White, 1860).

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

Arthur G. Daniells never said that the event did not happen, as the critic alleges. Instead, he simply said that he didn't see it and didn't know anyone who had. However, had Elder Daniells (who was a member of the White Estate board of trustees) taken the effort to go to the vault and examine the documentary evidence that still is preserved there, he would have had no doubt about whether Ellen White ever held a Bible in vision, or about whether she breathed while in her open visions of the day.⁵⁵

We must emphasize at this point that the position of the Seventh-day Adventist church today is the same as it has always been. Physical phenomena are an evidence of supernatural activity, but it should never be used as a *proof* because Satan can counterfeit much of the work of the Holy Spirit.

Basic Vehicles of Prophetic Messages

The messages given to the prophets were generally given in two different kinds of packaging:

1. The prophets witnessed events unfolding from past, present, or future historical incidents, such as Moses watching the creation of the world, or the apostle John observing both the second and third comings of Christ. Ellen White witnessed many events of the past, present, and future during her 70-year prophetic ministry.

The prophets also saw symbolic or parablelike events. These representations seemed just as real as the other kind, but of course, the beasts Daniel saw and later wrote about in the seventh chapter of his prophecy never really existed. Ellen White had a number of parablelike visions; perhaps one of the better known was one in which she saw a ship that was on a collision course with an iceberg. The captain instructed the helmsman to hit the iceberg head on rather than to allow the ship to suffer a more severe glancing blow. The incident illustrated the church's meeting the "Alpha" pantheism heresy of John Harvey Kellogg at the beginning of the twentieth century in a bruising (but not fatal) head-on confrontation. During

⁵⁵See "How the Visions Were Given," in *Messenger to the Remnant*, pp. 6-8.

this time the providential intervention of the Lord was witnessed in a remarkable manner.⁵⁶

2. The prophets also heard the voice of a member of the Godhead, or of the angel Gabriel, speaking messages of counsel, instruction, admonition, and sometimes of warning and reproof. These voices apparently were unaccompanied by scenes of events, although Ellen White does tell us that she entered into direct conversation with Jesus Christ on a number of occasions.

The Writing Task: The Prophet's Options

Once the prophet received instruction from the Lord, by whatever method the divine mind selected, his immediate task was that of composition, of writing out the message he had received. In this task the prophet had several options to choose among, as far as the source of the words chosen was concerned:

1. The prophet might choose to follow the role model of a newspaper reporter, simply quoting the words of the heavenly personage who had delivered the message. Ellen White's invariable custom was to place the directly quoted words of the angel within quotation marks, thus making it immediately evident to the reader that these were Gabriel's words, not hers.⁵⁷
2. More often the prophet simply put the message into his or her own words. (More will be said about this aspect in discussing, below, the prophet's unique contribution to such a ministry.)

Ellen White was once asked if the nine-inch-from-the-ground skirt length she advocated came directly from the Lord, or if it was simply her own idea. She responded that the Lord caused three groups of women to pass before her in vision. The first group were dressed in the peculiar fashion of the day, with excessively long

⁵⁶See "The Alpha and the Omega" and "The Foundation of Our Faith" in [Selected Messages 1:193-208](#).

⁵⁷[The Review and Herald, October 8, 1867](#), cited in *Messenger to the Remnant*, pp. 13, 60, and 79.

skirts that swept the filth of the street. Obviously, from a health standpoint, these skirts were too long. A second group then came into view whose skirts were obviously too short. Then Mrs. White was shown a third group of women wearing skirts short enough to clear the filth of the street, but long enough to be modest and healthful. These skirts appeared in vision to be about nine inches

[50] from the ground, and Ellen White described them thus.

The angel had not specified any length in inches; and in response to the question of a reader of the *Review and Herald*, Mrs. White declared:

Although I am as dependent upon the Spirit of the Lord in writing my views as I am in receiving them, yet the words I employ in describing what I have seen are my own, unless they be those spoken to me by an angel, which I always enclose in marks of quotation. ⁵⁸

Incidentally, this statement has been used by one contemporary critic to suggest that Ellen White claimed she always used only her own words, or else the words of an angel (appropriately designated by quotation marks). And then the critic charges her with untruthfulness by demonstrating that she often used the literary productions of others!

The context of Mrs. White's statement demonstrates that the critic is misapplying her statement. But study of the passage does lead us to a third option, exercised by prophets in many different periods.

3. The prophet sometimes might opt to use words of another author. This was true both of Bible prophets and of Ellen White. Sometimes the other source might be an inspired prophet of the Lord; but sometimes the person copied was not inspired. And, generally speaking, the prophets did not cite their sources or provide bibliographical data as modern researchers do.

Critics today accuse Ellen White of plagiarism because she quoted a number of noninspired authors without giving appropriate

⁵⁸Ibid.

credit. Let us look at this charge—and the practice as used by prophetic writers—in detail.

The “Copying” Charge

As we will study in more detail in the second of this series of three presentations, no charge has been leveled against Ellen White in her professional capacity as a prophet of the Lord that had not already been made against the prophets of the Bible—whether the charge be that of copying, or of having made unfulfilled prophecies, or of having made some errors in what was written or said, or of having to go back and change something that was said by the prophet—even matters of major substance that had to be corrected.

We will deal here only with the charge of copying other writers—inspired or uninspired. Originality is not now, nor has it ever been, a test of an individual’s prophetic inspiration, as Robert W. Olson, Director of the Ellen G. White Estate, pointed out to the religion editor of *Newsweek* magazine; and therefore, literary “borrowing does not dilute her [Mrs. White’s] claim to inspiration.”⁵⁹

The Bible writers copied from one another without attribution of source, and apparently felt no compunctions about such practice:

“[Micah 4:1-3](#) borrowed from [Isaiah 2:2-4](#). The scribe who compiled [2 Kings 18:20](#) also borrowed from [Isaiah 36-39](#). Matthew and Luke borrowed heavily from Mark as well as from another common source. None of these ever acknowledged their borrowing. (See [The S.D.A. Bible Commentary 5:178, 179](#).)”⁶⁰

In fact, many scholars openly acknowledge that some 91 percent of the Gospel of Mark was copied by Matthew and Luke when they wrote their respective Gospels!

Of perhaps greater interest, however, is the fact that the writers of the Bible would from time to time copy (or “borrow”) the literary productions of noninspired authors, including pagan writers. For example, about 600 B.C. Epimenides wrote:

⁵⁹“A False Prophetess?” *Newsweek* (January 19, 1981), p. 72.

⁶⁰Robert W. Olson, *101 Questions on the Sanctuary and on Ellen White* (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1981), pp. 105, 106.

“They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one—The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies! But thou art not dead; thou livest and abidest for ever; For in thee we live and move and have our being.”⁶¹

Sound vaguely familiar? Well, the Apostle Paul twice used some of these words, once in [Titus 1:12](#) (“One of themselves, even a prophet of their own said, The Cretians are always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies”) and again in his sermon on Mars Hill in Athens, in [Acts 17:28](#) (“For in him we live, and move, and have our being”).

Jesus did not invent the Golden Rule of [Matthew 7:12](#). A generation earlier Rabbi Hillel had already written: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof.”

The thoughts—and even some of the words—of the Lord’s Prayer may be found in earlier ritual prayers known as the *Ha-Kaddish*.⁶²

Substantial parts of John’s Apocalypse—the Book of Revelation—are lifted bodily from the Book of Enoch, a pseudepigraphical work known to have been circulated some 150 years before John wrote the last book of the Bible; and even Jude borrowed a line (“Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints”) from the same source.⁶³

Indeed, some 15 apocryphal or pseudepigraphical books are cited in the New Testament—generally without attribution of their source.

Doctor Luke tells us that he did a substantial amount of research and investigation in sources then available to him before he wrote the Gospel that bears his name:

“Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, ... it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus;

⁶¹See [The S.D.A. Bible Commentary 6:345](#).

⁶²See [The S.D.A. Bible Commentary 5:346, 356](#).

⁶³101 Questions on the Sanctuary and on Ellen White, p. 106.

so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:1, 3, 4, NASB).⁶⁴

In commenting on this passage, Robert W. Olson remarks:

“Luke did not acquire his information through visions or dreams but through his own research. Yet while material in the gospel of Luke was not given by direct revelation it was nonetheless written under divine inspiration. He did not write to tell his readers something new, but to assure them of what was true—‘that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.’ What Luke wrote was not original, but it was dependable. God led Luke to use the right sources. (See *The S.D.A. Bible Commentary* 5:669).”⁶⁵

Because an inspired writer quotes from an uninspired writer, it does not follow that the earlier writer must now be seen somehow as having come under the umbrella of inspiration. *Inspiration is a process, not a content.*

Just as biblical authors used noninspired sources, Ellen White [51] also copied from the writings of authors who were not inspired.⁶⁶

Divine Dreams Alone Do Not a Prophet Make

Just because an individual receives a dream from the Lord, it does not automatically follow that, *ipso facto*, that individual is a prophet of the Lord.

To suit His providential purposes God has often given dreams to pagans as well as to Christians. However, the receipt of such messages does not thereby transform the recipient into an authentic prophet. Perhaps a helpful differentiation might be the following: The nonprophet is generally not called to the task of guiding the church at large. The direction, rather, is primarily intended for the individual himself (or perhaps for someone close to the recipient).

⁶⁴From the New American Standard Bible, © The Lockman Foundation, 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975. Used by permission.

⁶⁵101 Questions on the Sanctuary and on Ellen White, pp. 106, 107.

⁶⁶See *ibid.*, pp. 64-85; 105-108.

Such experiences are often isolated experiences rather than a continuing relationship that is typical of the prophetic order.

In biblical times God gave divine (but non-prophetic) dreams to many: Abimelech ([Genesis 20:3-7](#)); Pharaoh's chief butler and chief baker ([Genesis 40:8-19](#)); and to one of the Pharaohs ([Genesis 41:1-7](#)); to the Midianite soldier ([Judges 7:13, 14](#)); to Nebuchadnezzar ([Daniel 2 and 4](#)); to Joseph of Nazareth ([Matthew 2:13, 14](#)); to Claudia, Pilate's wife ([Matthew 27:19](#)), and to the Roman centurion, Cornelius ([Acts 10:1-8](#)), to mention only a few.

In the history of the early Seventh-day Adventist church certain believers received divine, but nonprophetic, dreams. J. N. Loughborough had as many as 20 such dreams, which Ellen White apparently accepted as being of divine origin.⁶⁷ William Miller, who started the Millerite movement, but who never accepted the seventh-day Sabbath, had a most remarkable parablelike dream.⁶⁸ Annie Smith, sister of Uriah Smith, and Captain Joseph Bates both had a remarkable "double dream" the same night, which had an even more remarkable fulfillment the following night.⁶⁹ And James White had several unusual dreams that J. N. Loughborough shared with posterity.⁷⁰

The pages of the *Adventist Review* and other regional Seventh-day Adventist periodicals have occasionally carried contemporary stories of Christians and pagans alike who have been led by a divine dream. But these persons were not prophets, nor were they considered to be such by their peers.

⁶⁷[Testimonies for the Church 1:600-604.](#)

⁶⁸Virgil Robinson, *Reach Out* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1970), p. 300.

⁶⁹A. W. Spalding, *Pioneer Stories* (Nashville, TN: Southern Pub. Assn., 1942), pp. 206, 207, cited in *The Spirit of Prophecy Treasure Chest* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Voice of Prophecy, 1960), pp. 28, 29.

⁷⁰J. N. Loughborough, *Rise and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists* (Battle Creek, Mich.: General Conference Association of Seventh-day Adventists, 1892), pp. 231-233.

Chapter 3—Three Theories of Inspiration/Revelation

There are at least three theories regarding the definition of inspiration and the way it operates in the Seventh-day Adventist church and in other Christian bodies today. Two are false and dangerous, for reasons that will shortly be made clear. Let us examine these theories in some detail:

Theory of Verbal Inspiration

Over the years a number of Seventh-day Adventists, including some of our ministers and Bible teachers, have held the verbal view of inspiration, despite counsels of Ellen White to the contrary.

This view is a rather mechanical one, since it perceives the prophet's role as simply that of a stenographer who takes down the boss's dictation word for word. In this model the stenographer is not at liberty to change anything that has been given by the dictator: no synonyms may ever be employed; no failing to dot an *i* or to cross a *t* is permitted.

This view seems to suggest that God, or the angel, puts a heavenly hand over the hand of the prophet and guides it—literally—so that every word, every syllable comes directly from God. The prophet, in this view, is not at liberty to change anything or to state the message in his own words. This mechanical view is strictly, stringently literalistic, with infallibility residing at the point of the written word.

This limited view of inspiration provides no opportunity for translation into other languages, and has other even more serious limitations and dangers. ⁷¹

⁷¹The author acknowledges indebtedness to Dr. Earle Hilgert, who taught a course in “Introduction to New Testament” at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, January 1959, in which much of the material in this section of the article was presented.

The strict verbalist has a problem with [Matthew 27:9, 10](#). Here Matthew does something that every teacher and preacher has done innumerable times. Matthew is probably thinking of one name, but out of his pen mistakenly comes another name. As he applies a Messianic prophecy to Christ—the prediction that He would be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver—he attributes the prophecy to Jeremiah. However, in all the book of Jeremiah, there is not one reference to this prophecy. The alert reader will recognize that Matthew actually meant to attribute this prophecy to *Zechariah* ([chap. 11:12, 13](#)).

The person who believes in plenary (thought) inspiration has no problem with this slip of the pen. But the verbalist finds a serious problem here. Did God make this mistake in dictating Matthew's gospel?

This is not the only problem for the verbalist. God the Father spoke audibly three times during the earthly ministry of His Son. The first time was immediately following Christ's baptism in the Jordan River. The problem is, exactly what did the heavenly voice say?

According to Matthew ([chap. 3:17](#)), the Father spoke in the third person singular: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." But Mark's account ([chap. 1:11](#)) has the Father speaking in the second person singular: "Thou art my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

Exactly what *did* the Father say? The "plenarist" does not see the discrepancy between the accounts as being a problem; he believes that it is the thought that is inspired, not the exact words. There is no disagreement between Matthew and Mark as to the essence of what God said.

[52] Another problem for the verbalist is Pilate's superscription on the signboard he ordered placed on Christ's cross. What did that signboard say? The four Gospel writers give four slightly different accounts of what the sign stated.

Which one was correct? To the plenarist it makes no difference. But the literal verbalist is in a quandary. And it doesn't help to recall that the signboard was in three languages (Latin, Greek, and Hebrew), because we have four different accounts, not three!

Matthew and Luke illustrate yet another kind of problem for the strict verbalist in the way they handle the Sermon on the Mount.

No one today has read or heard the actual Sermon on the Mount. Probably Ellen White's book *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* comes closest to a complete account of a sermon that took virtually all day to preach.

Matthew simply gives an outline of the sermon in chapters 5-7 of his Gospel. But Luke doesn't even give that much. If all we had was Luke's Gospel, we'd never even know there was a *Sermon* on the Mount. For Luke takes the ingredients of the sermon, and plugs in some here and some there as it suits his purpose.

To understand why the material is handled this way, we have to recognize that Matthew was writing to Jews, who liked sermons. So Matthew used a sermon format—indeed, a sermon outline—to display Jesus' ideas from this incomparable discourse, which by some has been called the charter or constitution of the Christian church.

Luke, however, was writing for Greeks, who couldn't have cared less about sermons, as such. They, instead, liked to dwell in the realm of ideas. So Luke took the ideas of the Sermon on the Mount and used them evangelistically, some here and some there, as it served his purpose in dealing with his audience.

The plenarist has no problem with this approach because he sees the *ideas* as being inspired. But the strict verbalist is here in a great deal of trouble. Who is right? Was it a sermon or not? Many questions are raised, but few answers are forthcoming.

Other illustrations could be cited, such as Matthew's listing of the order of Christ's miracles in a somewhat different order than Luke's Gospel. Problems such as these leave the strict verbalist in a real quandary. However, we shall leave him there for now, and proceed to examine the plenary theory of inspiration.

Theory of Plenary Inspiration

In contrast with the view of verbal inspiration, the plenary theory of inspiration suggests that thoughts—rather than words—are inspired. The plenary view is not forced to grapple with the problems of the verbalist. For the Seventh-day Adventist, this view has the

added advantage of having been accepted and advocated by Ellen White.⁷²

Let us examine in some detail the manner in which Mrs. White explicates her views. These views have been praised by a number of non-Seventh-day Adventist theologians as one of the most comprehensive and concise statements on the subject of plenary inspiration to be found anywhere in print.

1. The purpose of inspiration. Ellen White uses two interesting analogies to illustrate the purpose of inspiration. First she likens inspiration to a map—a guide or chartbook for the human family. The purpose of this map is to show weak, erring, mortal human beings the way to heaven, so that they need never lose their way.⁷³ Then she also compares inspiration to “hidden treasure”—or precious jewels that may be discovered by arduous digging.⁷⁴ And then, in summation, Mrs. White remarks that no one need ever be lost for want of this most crucial information unless he is willfully blind.⁷⁵

2. The human element. Next, Mrs. White recognized the existence of the human element. God committed the preparation of His Word to finite men,⁷⁶ thus, in a sense, making problems for Himself. Why? Because “everything that is human is imperfect.”⁷⁷

Speaking to the Adventist workers in Battle Creek, Michigan, in a different context, Mrs. White amplified this thought: “No one has so great a mind, or is so skillful, but that the work will be imperfect after he has done his very best.”⁷⁸

Since the Bible writers had to express their ideas in human idioms, the concepts could not be given in some grand superhuman language.⁷⁹ Infinite ideas can never be perfectly embodied in finite vehicles of thought.⁸⁰ The Lord has to speak to human beings

⁷²Selected Messages 1:15-23.

⁷³Selected Messages 1:15, 16.

⁷⁴Selected Messages 1:16.

⁷⁵Selected Messages 1:18.

⁷⁶Selected Messages 1:16.

⁷⁷Selected Messages 1:20.

⁷⁸Testimonies for the Church 1:562.

⁷⁹Selected Messages 1:19, 20.

⁸⁰Selected Messages 1:22.

in imperfect speech in order that our dull, earthly perception may comprehend His words.⁸¹

In an apt analogy, John Calvin once suggested that God, through the prophets, talked “baby talk” to us humans, much as a cooing mother lisps to her little child in the universal language of love.

3. *The existence of discrepancies.* Ellen White addressed the question of discrepancies, mistakes, or errors in a forthright manner. She does not just suggest that these are possible; she says that they are “probable.”⁸² But she goes on, more importantly, to point out that all of these mistakes will not change a single doctrine, or cause anyone to stumble who is not already inclined to do so. These persons will “manufacture difficulties from the plainest revealed truth.”⁸³

4. *Unique divine-human blending.* Paul incisively pointed out that “We have this treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Corinthians 4:7). Two elements are thus introduced into the analogy: the “treasure,” and the “earthen vessels.” Mrs. White develops these two elements by first commenting that, indeed, the Ten Commandments are ver- bally inspired, being of “divine and not human composition.” The servant of the Lord then goes on, interestingly:

But 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.”⁸⁴

Again, commenting that “In the work of God for man’s redemp- tion, divinity and humanity are combined,” Mrs. White elaborates along a somewhat similar vein:

The union of the divine and the human, manifest in Christ, exists also in the Bible. The truths revealed are

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Selected Messages 1:16.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, vi (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911); *Steps to Christ*, 73 (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1956).

all “given by inspiration of God;” yet they are expressed in the words of men and are adapted to human needs. ⁸⁵

Thus the truths conveyed by inspired writers are all inspired treasure. But the human element—the “language of men,” is the earthen vessel—that is, the packaging.

One theologian has suggested that the *human* aspect of the inspired writings, ancient and modern, is revealed in five ways:

a. The writer expresses himself in his own style. The Bible has many major stylistic differences in its various books.

b. The writer expresses himself at his own level of literary ability. For example, the sentence structure of the book of Revelation is crude. John strings his ideas along with the connector *and* like a string of box cars in a freight train. Stylistically, this book is elementary, not elevated. Its author was a fisherman who was educated by Jesus for three years. John received his education in truth, rather than in rhetoric. In contrast to the book of Revelation, the book of Hebrews exhibits a most elevated stylistic form. Indeed, because of its use of balanced phrases and clauses, some higher critics don’t think that Paul wrote it. But Paul undoubtedly had the equivalent of a Ph.D. from the school of Gamaliel in Jerusalem, and he may well have attended the university at Tarsus before he went to Jerusalem.

c. The writer reveals his own personality. The Gospel of John can be summed up in one four-letter word—*love*. The concept permeates John’s Gospel and all three of his epistles. John, more than any of the other apostles, imbibed this spirit, and yielded himself most fully to Christ’s transforming love. ⁸⁶ And thus his epistles,

⁸⁵Testimonies for the Church 5:747.

⁸⁶Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, 250 (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1940).

especially, breathe out this spirit of love.⁸⁷ His favorite theme was the infinite love of Christ.⁸⁸

d. The writer also uses his own words—words of his selection, and in so doing,

e. The writer draws on his own personal background and experience. Luke was called the “beloved physician.” And indeed, a whole volume has been written on the medical terminology employed in the Gospel of Luke. Luke writes with the perception of a scientist. For example, he is the only one of the four Gospel writers to mention that Jesus “sweat ... as it were great drops of blood.”

Amos speaks the language of the herdsman, the shepherd.

And Paul? Trained in the methodology and phraseology of philosophy, Paul wrote some things that to a fisherman like Peter were “hard to be understood” (2 Peter 3:16).⁸⁹

Then, the *divine* aspect, the work of the Holy Spirit, is revealed in four ways, as suggested by T. Housel Jemison:

a. He enlightens the mind: The writer is enabled to comprehend truth.

b. He prompts the thinking: That is, He stimulates the reasoning processes.

c. He enlightens the memory: The prophet is thus enabled to recall events and ideas.

d. He directs attention to matters to be recorded: This deals specifically with the selection of topic and content.
⁹⁰

5. *Verbal Versus Plenary.* Mrs. White states directly that it is not the words of the Scriptures that are inspired, but rather the men who wrote them—the prophets were “God’s penmen, not His pen.”⁹¹

⁸⁷Ellen G. White, *The Sanctified Life*, 68, 81 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1937).

⁸⁸*The Sanctified Life*, 62.

⁸⁹Earle Hilgert.

⁹⁰A Prophet Among You.

⁹¹Selected Messages 1:21.

The semantic problem here is recognized—a given word may convey different ideas to different people. Yet if a writer or speaker is intellectually honest, he can usually convey his meaning plainly.⁹² The same truth may be expressed in different ways without essential contradiction.⁹³

Basically, “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.”⁹⁴

6. *What the Bible is not.* The Bible does not represent the words, the logic, or the rhetoric of God.⁹⁵ “God, as a writer, is not represented.”⁹⁶ Indeed, God says that His thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are His ways our ways ([Isaiah 55:8, 9](#)). But the Bible does point to God as its “*Author*.”⁹⁷ Christ “Himself [is] the Author of these revealed truths.”⁹⁸

7. *Totality.* Ellen White took the Bible just as it stood—“I believe its utterances in an entire Bible.”⁹⁹ And she urged her hearers and readers to “cling to your Bible, as it reads.”¹⁰⁰ Amplifying this thought elsewhere, she continues, “Every chapter and every verse is a communication of God to man.”¹⁰¹

8. *God’s superintendency.* The Lord miraculously preserved the Bible through the centuries in essentially its present form.¹⁰² Indeed, the preservation of the Bible is as much a miracle as its inspiration.

Of course, the Bible was not given in “one unbroken line of utterance.” Rather, through successive generations, it was given, piece by piece, as a beneficent Providence recognized various needs in different places. “The Bible was given for practical purposes.”¹⁰³

The continuing hand of God is seen in the giving of the messages, in the recording of the messages, in the gathering of the books into

⁹²Selected Messages 1:19.

⁹³Selected Messages 1:22.

⁹⁴Selected Messages 1:21.

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷The Great Controversy, p. v. Italics supplied.

⁹⁸Testimonies for the Church 5:710.

⁹⁹Selected Messages 1:17.

¹⁰⁰Selected Messages 1:18.

¹⁰¹Testimonies for the Church 4:449.

¹⁰²Selected Messages 1:15.

¹⁰³Selected Messages 1:20.

the Canon, and in the preservation of the Bible through successive ages. ¹⁰⁴

9. *Unity.* Ellen White draws an interesting distinction with regard to unity: While there is not always “apparent” unity, there is, however, a “spiritual unity.” And this unity she likens to one grand golden thread, running through the whole, which is discovered by the “illuminated soul.” [54]

However, to trace out this unity requires the searcher to exercise patience, thought, and prayer. ¹⁰⁵

In the days when Britannia ruled the waves, and ships were propelled by wind rather than by steam or oil, the ships of His Majesty’s royal navy all carried rope that had a crimson thread woven through its entire length. This thread served two purposes: It made identification easy in cases of suspected theft; and it also assured the sailors (whose lives often depended upon the quality of the rope they handled) that they had the very best.

Applying this analogy to the Bible, the blood of Jesus is the crimson thread that runs throughout the whole Scripture. This unity is exhibited in at least five areas, according to Jemison:

- a. Purpose: the story of the plan of salvation.
- b. Theme: Jesus, the cross, the crown.
- c. Harmony of teaching: Old and New Testament doctrines are the same.
- d. Development: the steady progression from creation to the fall of redemption to final restoration.
- e. Coordination of the prophecies: evident because the same Holy Spirit was at work! ¹⁰⁶

10. *Degrees of inspiration.* Ellen White makes it clear that the Christian is not to assert that one part of the Scripture is inspired and that another is not, or that there are degrees of inspiration among the various books of the Bible. God has not qualified or inspired any man to do this kind of work. ¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴T. Housel Jemison, *Christian Beliefs* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1959), p. 22.

¹⁰⁵[Selected Messages 1:20.](#)

¹⁰⁶*Christian Beliefs*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁷[Selected Messages 1:23.](#)

Theory of Encounter Inspiration ¹⁰⁸

A third view of inspiration goes by a variety of labels: “Neo-orthodoxy,” “existentialism” (the religious kind), or “encounter” (after one of the more prominent words in its in-house jargon). This view is based, at least in part, on the “I-Thou” concept of Philosopher Martin Buber. The three basic tenets or postulates will now be examined:

Subjective Rather Than Objective.

1. Inspiration is, by its very nature, inherently subjective rather than objective.

Although the verbalist and plenarist views are quite different and distinct, the former holding that inspiration resides in the exact word used, and the latter believing that the inspiration resides instead in the thought conveyed by the prophet, both are alike in one respect: They each hold that inspiration is essentially objective rather than subjective.

Until the turn of the century, these were the two basic positions held by the Christian world. Then along came philosopher-theologian Martin Buber, who helped to develop a new theory of inspiration. This theory holds, among other views, that inspiration is, by its very nature, inherently subjective rather than objective. What does this mean in practical terms?

As “encounter” theology sees it, revelation (or inspiration) is an experience that takes place in an “I-Thou” encounter between the prophet and God. It is then, primarily, an experience, with no exchange of information taking place.

Revelation, for the encounter theologian, is “the personal self-disclosure of God to man, not the impartation of truths about God, ... an ‘I-Thou’ encounter with God, the full presence of God in the consciousness” of the prophet, as seminary professor Raoul Dederen has phrased it. ¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸Indebtedness is acknowledged for many of the ideas in this section to Dr. John L. Robertson, “The Challenge to God’s Word,” and Dr. Raoul Dederen. Unfortunately, it is not possible to identify individual contributions from existing notes.

¹⁰⁹Dederen.

There is no communication of information in encounter theology. God does not utter a word. No statements of truth of any kind are made in this unique relationship. Truth is seen not as conceptual in an objective sense, but as experiential in a subjective sense.

At this point the encounterist would argue that there is a content. But the content is not the impartation of some concept about God, but, rather, the imparting of some One—God Himself, addressing the individual Christian’s soul and calling for a personal response in the transaction.

Revelation, ultimately, for the encounterist, is the full revelation of God to the full consciousness of the prophet. In this experience there is no communication of ideas, truths, concepts, or messages.

As we noted earlier, the Bible writers convey emphatically that God speaks particularly and uniquely through inspired men. There is simply no twisting such declarations as the one made in [2 Samuel 23:2](#): “The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and his word was in my tongue”!

The inquiry of Zedekiah the king to Jeremiah the prophet is central to a genuinely biblical view of inspiration: “Is there any word from the Lord?” ([Jeremiah 37:17](#)).

Nor is this merely an Old Testament view of inspiration. In three places in Acts Luke uses such expressions as “the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake” ([chap. 1:16](#)), “God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began” ([chap. 3:21](#)), and “by the mouth of thy servant David [God] hast said,” et cetera. Chapter four of 1 Timothy opens with “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that ...,” and the opening words of Hebrews declare that whereas in former days God spoke by the mouth of the holy prophets, in more recent times He has spoken more directly to mankind through His Son.

The encounterist holds that the prophet as a person is inspired (which is true), but that the thoughts and the words the prophet conveys are his own ideas rather than God’s ideas (which is false).

Further, the encounterist holds that the prophet is the interpreter of God’s self-disclosure in terms relevant to his own day; and those ideas may contain error. They may even be scientifically or historically inaccurate (as, for example, Moses’ idea of a seven solar-day

literal creation); yet the prophet nevertheless is held to be inspired, since, in this view, inspiration has nothing whatever to do with ideas!

The encounterist lays great stress on context. His purpose is to demonstrate “historical conditioning”—the idea that the prophet is the helpless victim (as well as the product) of his environment, background, education, and climate of thought.

Although the plenarist is also interested in context, he uses it to discover, by examination of the historical circumstances surrounding the giving of a particular message, whether the prophet’s words constitute a principle—(an unchanging, unerring rule of human behavior) or a policy (the application of a principle to a particular situation, in which case the application may change as the situation changes).

2. *Contains the word versus being the word.* The encounterist says that the Bible contains the word of God, but it is not itself the word of God. In this view, the Bible is no longer revelation in the pre-twentieth century sense of the word. It is no longer God’s revealed word, but rather a witness to the revelation experience.

Regarding content, this view sees the Bible as merely the result of its writer’s rational reflection upon God’s individual and personal self-manifestation to them. In other words, Moses did not receive the Ten Commandments directly from God, nor did he obtain specific instructions concerning the earthly tabernacle, its furnishings, or its ceremonies.

Thus the encounterist does not believe that the concepts conveyed in Scripture are the word of God, as the plenarist believes. The plenarist holds inspiration to be objective—that is, something apart from the individual by which he is daily judged. The encounterist sees the word of God as a personal, subjective experience—an inner experience that is remarkably powerful and compelling. Experience, as the encounterist sees it, constitutes the word of God—not ideas, thoughts, conceptions, or propositional truth.

As the prophet attempts to express his own ideas or thoughts in describing this “divine-human encounter” he thus attempts to convey the word of God as he feels it from within. This attempt could be compared to a person’s relating in a prayer meeting testimony what God did for him that week.

For the encounterist, the prophet is inspired in heart, rather than in head. Thus the person who hears or reads the prophet's words also has a subjective experience. Truth is therefore defined as experiential. The experience becomes the word of God for the student, rather than the word of God being defined as the literal words, concepts, and propositions expressed by the prophet.

The plenarist does not disparage the place of experience in the life of the Christian; indeed, in at least 13 locations Ellen White uses the expression *experimental religion*. But human experience never supersedes the objective word of God, which must itself determine the validity of all experience. ¹¹⁰

3. *Quantitative, not qualitative*. Finally, for the encounterist, everyone is inspired. The prophet simply has a more superlative degree of inspiration than the ordinary individual.

The issue at this point is a difference in degree versus a difference in kind. The prophet has a more intense degree of inspiration, it is held, than that of average people. A prophet's, minister's, or politician's eloquence may lead people to do things they would not otherwise do. Because such a person lifts others up out of themselves, he is thus considered "inspired."

There may certainly be some kind of secular, nonprophetic inspiration. We sometimes think of an artist, a sculptor, a musical composer or performer as being "inspired." But this ordinary, secular inspiration has nothing whatever to do with the kind of prophetic inspiration spoken of in the Bible.

In Biblical inspiration, the prophet is taken off in vision. He or she may lose natural strength only to receive a supernatural endowment. For the prophet, God breathes—literally; for in the vision state the prophet does not breathe. And while in this state, the prophet receives infallible messages from the Lord.

Ordinary individuals may be moved by the inspired words of the prophet; their lives may be fundamentally altered for the better. But that experience is not the "inspiration" that the Bible writers and Ellen White possessed. When ordinary people are "inspired," it is some other kind of inspiration than the biblical variety. It is a difference in kind, not in degree.

¹¹⁰[Testimonies for the Church 5:512.](#)

This idea of degrees of inspiration that is so prevalent in encounter theology has, historically, had a certain appeal with Adventism. In 1884 then-General Conference President George I. Butler's series of ten articles in the *Review and Herald* posited this idea of degrees of inspiration. Ellen White wrote him a letter of rebuke¹¹¹ in which she pointed out that God had not inspired this series on inspiration, nor had He approved of the teaching of these views at the sanitarium, college, or publishing house in Battle Creek!

A Significant Difference

At this point, the reader may, rather wearily, say, "What practical difference does it make which position I take?" It makes a big difference. Let us note some of the significant implications that result from accepting the encounterist view:

1. The Bible is no longer the bearer of eternal truths; it is no longer a book of doctrine. It degenerates into merely a witness to the "divine-human encounter" between God and a prophet. It is no longer a statement of truths from God or truths about God. It is merely the personal view of the prophet giving his subjective reaction to a highly subjective experience.

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2. The reader of the prophet's words, then, becomes the authority, the arbiter who decides what (for him) is inspired and what is not. He reads the Bible critically; but he is not obliged to believe what it says in principle, conceptually, but rather what he interprets it to mean to him. He decides whether a given statement is to be accepted at face value, or whether it is to be accepted at all.

The reader's subjective experience becomes normative—the standard of what he will accept or reject as binding on his life and experience.

However, if there is no objective revelation as criterion, then there is no way an individual can validate his experience, no way for

¹¹¹Letter 12, 1889, published in [Selected Messages 1:23](#).

him to determine whether this experience is from the Holy Spirit or from an unholy spirit. It is simply not enough to say that one's experience is "self-authenticating." As John Robertson, former theology professor commented, "It may also be self-deceiving."

1. The subjective view is a distortion. It distorts the proper, legitimate place of context. It also distorts the proper place of experience, by making it the criterion for authenticity. The subjective view emphasizes "the autonomy of historical conditioning," and makes demythologizing of the prophet a necessity to contemporary understanding. Further, it distorts genuine prophetic inspiration by imposing the idea of degrees of inspiration upon it as a central category.
2. The encounter view results in the adoption of the following theological positions:
 - a. Creation, as taught in Genesis, is neither literal nor scientific. Rather, evolution becomes the favored view, with Genesis being seen as merely recording the quaint ideas extant in the time of Moses.
 - b. With regard to the incarnation of Christ, Jesus was not really a divine-human being. He was only a man. The encounter view rejects supernatural events such as the virgin birth and miracles, as we commonly define them.
3. In demonology, the Bible, says the encounterist, merely reports the common ideas of a time when it was popularly but incorrectly believed that demons possessed the physical bodies of certain unfortunate human victims. Today, says the encounterist, we know that *all* mental illness and insanity are caused by external conditions such as chemical imbalances and unfavorable environment—but not by spirits.

Plenarists can certainly agree that some mental illness, perhaps much of it, is caused by external, nonsupernatural causes; but they cannot accept a view that declares that *all* mental illness is so caused.

This author saw too much in his 12 years of mission service to believe otherwise!

In the final analysis, then, the encounterist, subjective view of inspiration ultimately constitutes a denial of the “faith once delivered to the saints.” It is a clever substitution of “cleverly devised fables” for an infallible revelation of truth as given by God through divinely (and objectively) inspired prophets. And those who accept this view risk losing eternal life.

Chapter 4—The Purpose of Inspiration/Revelation

Leslie Hardinge, a veteran Seventh-day Adventist college and seminary Bible teacher, once made a very profound statement: “Without analogy, there is no real teaching.” The most effective teaching in the Bible, or anywhere else, is done through metaphor and simile. Let us notice, then, two metaphors that Bible writers employ in the New Testament to enlarge our understanding of the purpose of inspiration/revelation.

Two Biblical Metaphors

1. The Apostle Paul repeatedly speaks of prophetic inspiration as the gift from the Holy Spirit—one of the so-called “spiritual gifts” ([Ephesians 4](#); [1 Corinthians 12](#)).

A person may receive many kinds of gifts. Some gifts are useless or even embarrassing. However, the most valuable gifts I have ever received were either utilitarian gifts that filled a particular need in my day-to-day existence (such as a pen, an attache case, or a typewriter) or gifts of love in which the sentiment that prompted the gift far transcended the inherent, immediate value of the gift. This sentiment bestowed upon the gift a value it would not otherwise have possessed.

The gift of prophecy can be described in the same terms. To some it is useless. To others it is a continual embarrassment and annoyance, for it cuts across their lifestyle repeatedly, dealing as it does with particulars of day-to-day existence.

The choice of the metaphor *gift* is a fortunate one when we come to the question of inspiration/revelation. The purpose of this gift is to promote the work of the ministry of the body (church) of God—to strengthen and guide the church ([Ephesians 4:12-15](#)). Notice in particular its four purposes in this connection:

- a. The *perfection* of the saints (that they may grow up into Christ).

b. The *unification* of the saints (so that there will be no schism in the body of Christ. See [1 Corinthians 12:25](#)).

c. The *edification* of the saints (inspired writings provide doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness. See [2 Timothy 3:16](#)).

d. The *stabilization* of the saints (that they may have an anchor to keep them from drifting about on every wave of doctrine).

2. The Apostle Peter adds a second metaphor, actually borrowing it from one of David’s psalms. He sees prophetic inspiration as resembling a light that shines in a darkened place for a practical and necessary purpose—to keep us from stumbling and falling ([2 Peter 1:19](#)). A millennium earlier David had likened the word of God to a “lamp” to the feet, a “light” to the path ([Psalm 119:105](#)).

As a “light,” prophetic inspiration serves two valuable functions:

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a. One of the main purposes of the prophetic writings (although certainly not their only function) is to reveal future events. Revelation thus helps us to make adequate preparation for coming events and enables us to relate constructively to these events when they occur.¹¹² However, a less obvious reason for including the prophetic element in Scripture is to validate the Bible’s divine origin—to show that God is its Author. Mortals cannot predict what will happen even moments in advance; but God can tell centuries in advance what will transpire. This function of inspiration was the particular burden of Isaiah.¹¹³

b. Equally important is the function of revelation as light to protect the believer. Inspired writings provide a light that exposes Satan’s goals and his proposed methodology for accomplishing his objective. Truly,

¹¹²See [Revelation 1:1, 2; 22:6; John 16:13; 13:19; 14:29; Daniel 2:28; and Amos 3:7](#).

¹¹³[Isaiah 41:21-23; 42:9; 43:9; 44:7, 8; 45:3, 21, 22; 6:9, 10](#).

“where there is no vision, the people perish” ([Proverbs 29:18](#)).

Conclusion

“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter” is not only a sound pedagogical device, but also a spiritual imperative.

Inspiration has been seen as a process in which God uniquely imparts eternally important truths through “his servants, the prophets,” who “at sundry times and in divers manners” have spoken to their contemporaries and to those who would later follow to enable them to understand the divine mind and will of God for their lives.

Especially in these closing hours of earth’s history, there is an overriding need to understand how this phenomena operates, so that one may not only have an intelligent understanding of what God is trying to say, but also to avoid the perils and pitfalls that arise from the holding of false views.

Paul’s admonition to the saints of the New Testament—“Quench not the Spirit [don’t let the candle go out!]. Despise not prophesyings. Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” ([1 Thessalonians 5:19-21](#))—is but the echo of the counsel of Jehoshaphat in the Old Testament: “Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established; believe his prophets, so shall ye prosper” ([2 Chronicles 20:20](#)).

In the second presentation in this series we will consider the question of inerrancy and infallibility—Does the true prophet ever err? The experience of Ellen White will be examined in the light of the evidence of Bible prophets.

**Part II—Infallibility: Does the True
Prophet Ever Err?**

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Introduction

The theological footballs of “infallibility” and “inerrancy” are agitating minds and hearts in evangelical Christendom today, especially as these issues relate to the question of prophetic inspiration. Much of the discussion revolves around semantical considerations,¹ and is rather closely associated with the verbal view of inspiration. Nevertheless, important questions need to be raised—and answered—such as: Does a true prophet ever err? Do all the predictions of a true prophet come to pass 100 percent of the time? Does a true prophet ever have to change anything he or she has written or said?

Webster defines *infallible* as “1: incapable of error: unerring; 2: not liable to mislead, deceive, or disappoint: certain; 3: incapable of error in defining doctrines touching faith or morals.”² He further renders *inerrant* as “free from error: infallible.”³

The issue of prophetic infallibility is raised because the Scriptures claim to be more reliable than ordinary literacy productions of human authors.

As was noted in part 1 of this series, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Timothy 3:16). It is not amenable to “private interpretation” because the message did not originate by private initiative or from private creativity. Instead, “holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Peter 1:21). Therefore, said Peter, “take heed” to it (vs. 19).

In what may well have been the first book of the New Testament to be written, Paul, in the same spirit as the reference cited above from Peter, admonished the Thessalonian Christians: “Quench not

¹For a recent balanced and extremely helpful discussion of various positions and proponents, see editorial “Rhetoric About Inerrancy: The Truth of the Matter” in *Christianity Today*, vol. 25, no. 15 (September 4, 1981), pp. 16-19.

²Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, Mass.: G & C Merriam Co., 1976), p. 590.

³*Ibid.*, p. 589.

the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings. Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21).

Why? Peter responds, because we have a “more sure” word of prophetic writings (2 Peter 1:19). More recent translators have rendered the passage: the word of the prophetic writers is “made more certain,”⁴ “made more sure,”⁵ “surer still,”⁶ “firmer still,”⁷ “confirmed,”⁸ “reaffirmed,”⁹ and “more fully guaranteed.”¹⁰

The question, then, is not the uniqueness of the inspired writings in being “more sure” than uninspired writings; it is, rather, what is the essence of this “more sureness”? In *what way* are these writings “more sure”?

Several possible analogical models may be found among evangelical Christians and among Seventh-day Adventists:

1. *The “straight-jacket” theory*: This view holds that the control of the Holy Spirit over the prophet during the process of inspiration is so rigid, so tight, that the prophet is prevented from making any type of error.

⁴Holy Bible: New International Version. Copyright © 1978 by the New York International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

⁵Holy Bible: American Revised Version. American Bible Society edition. Copyright © 1901 by Thomas Nelson & Sons, New York. The Bible: Revised Standard Version. American Bible Society edition. Copyright © 1946 and 1952 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, New York. New American Standard Bible (Carol Stream, Ill.: Creation House, Inc.). Copyright © 1971 by The Lockman Foundation, La Habra, Calif.. Used by permission.

⁶Confraternity New Testament—The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Translated from the Latin Vulgate. A Revision of the Challoner-Rheims Version. Edited by Catholic Scholars under the Patronate of the Episcopal Committee of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. (Patterson, N.J.: St. Anthony Guild Press). Copyright © 1941 by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine.

⁷The Amplified Bible (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House). Copyright © 1965 by Zondervan Publishing House.

⁸King James II Version of the Bible (Byron Center, Mich.: Associated Publishers and Authors, Inc.). Copyright © 1971 by Jay P. Green. The New Testament in Modern Speech. Translated by Richard Francis Weymouth. Revised by James Alexander Robinson (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers). Copyright © by James Clarke & Co, Ltd., London.

⁹The Holy Bible: The Berkeley Version in Modern English (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House). Copyright © 1945, 1959 by Zondervan Publishing House.

¹⁰The New Testament: An American Translation. Edgar J. Goodspeed, trans. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press). Copyright © 1923, 1948 by The University of Chicago.

This position is well illustrated in the words of one Seventh-day Adventist evangelist in a sermon explaining Ellen White to non-Adventists:

And by the way, Ellen White's predictions up to this very minute have been right every time. The psychics like to talk about their batting average. They are proud if they are right seventy-five or eighty percent of the time.

Listen! A prophet of God with a batting average? Never! A prophet of God is right one hundred percent of the time or he isn't right at all!

And another thing! A prophet of God doesn't change his mind!

I think you are beginning to see the difference between a prophet—a true prophet—and a psychic.

Three postulates are thus suggested: (a) The true prophet has a PAQ (Prophetic Accuracy Quotient) of 100 percent, whereas psychics (and false prophets) typically have only a 75-80 percent PAQ; (b) if a prophet of God is not right 100 percent of the time, he or she is not right *any* of the time; and (c) a true prophet never has to go back and change anything he wrote or said in his professional capacity as a prophet.

This position borrows heavily from the basic philosophy of inspiration held by the author of a popular book about Ellen White published a few years ago:

A true prophet [italics in original] is not a psychic who performs with the aid of a mental or "spiritual" crutch, but is someone who has *no degree of freedom* either in tuning or in controlling the prophetic impulses or prophetic recall. These impulses are superimposed over the prophet's conscious mind by a supernatural personal being, having absolute knowledge of both past and future, *making no allowance for error or human miscalculation.* ¹¹

¹¹Rene Noorbergen, Ellen G. White: Prophet of Destiny (New Canaan, Conn.: Keats Publishing, Inc., 1972), p. 21. Italics supplied unless otherwise indicated.

This position has serious problems and implications with regard to both the Bible and the writings of Ellen White, as will subsequently be noted.

2. *The “intervention“ theory*: This view holds that if in his humanity a prophet of God errs, *and* the nature of that error is sufficiently serious to materially affect (a) the direction of God’s church, (b) the eternal destiny of one person, or (c) the purity of a doctrine, *then* (and only then) the Holy Spirit immediately moves the prophet to correct the error, so that no permanent damage is done. [60]

This position can be squared with the objective reality of Scripture and of the writings of Ellen White. But before we apply the acid test of these two theories, we should pause to examine the nature and source of religious belief.

Several penetrating questions are relevant here: (1) Which of the two theories presented above do you believe? (Or do you have a third theory to which you subscribe?) (2) Why do you believe it? This second question may be even more important than the first.

Is your belief based on *source credibility*—some favorite preacher, pastor, Bible teacher, or Biblical scholar whom you highly respect has taken this position, and because of your high regard for this person, you have accepted, uncritically, what you were told? Or do you hold your belief because you have *objectively validated* the position?

In Paul’s day the Christian believers in Berea were said to have been “more noble” than their counterparts at Thessalonica for two reasons that have great relevance for us in this discussion:

1. They received Paul’s words “with all readiness of mind.” That is, they were open to new light; they did not have closed minds.
2. They “searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so” ([Acts 17:11](#)). That is, they validated what they had heard before they accepted it; they did not gullibly, uncritically accept what they were told without personally verifying it in God’s Word.

Paul might have been forgiven somewhat had he told the Bereans, “I am not only an inspired prophet of the Lord, but I also have the

highest spiritual gift—that of apostleship. You don't need to check out what I have told you; you can take my word for it, for I have the highest authority from God on this earth.”

But he didn't tell them that. Instead, he praised them for *not* simply taking his word for things, but for going instead to the previously inspired writings to verify what he had said.

Validating Truth

How should one validate truth? By counting heads and accepting the position that attracts the largest number of subscribers? Hardly.

What is the best way to determine the correct time of day? If someone is asked, “What time is it?” and responds, “It is 7:10,” how does one know whether he is correct? Incidentally, if you ask several individuals for the time of day, you may get as many different answers as there are persons with watches. Furthermore, each person will probably assume that his is the only right time if others disagree.

Many communities have a telephone number one may dial to get the exact time of day. Some radio and television networks have a “blip” signal that may be heard exactly on the hour, superimposed over the voice of the announcer giving the call letters of the station.

Validating the time of day for most of us may not be crucial. Whether we are one or two minutes off may not be too important. But validating spiritual truth may be eternally important.

And how does one validate truth? The response of Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, French bishop and seventeenth century court preacher to Louis XIV, is apropos. Louis was a great lover of the theater, and often had command performances in his court. Bossuet, on the other hand, was widely known to oppose the theater as being inimical to the development of Christian character and as being an instrument of evil.

One day, as the story goes, during a lull in the proceedings of court, Louis looked around and, seeing Bossuet on the periphery, called loudly in his direction, “My bishop, what do you think of the theater?”

Courtiers gasped, for they knew the views of both men. They also knew the peril of rendering a verdict contrary to the royal opinion. At the very least, the offender might be banished from court (a fate, for these sycophants, almost worse than death); at the very worst, he might be sent to his death.

Everyone waited breathlessly for Bossuet’s response, wondering whether he would take the expedient way out of the dilemma (on the theory that it is better to be a live coward than a dead hero), or whether he would risk all to speak the conviction of his heart.

Bossuet gravely made his way into the immediate presence of the Sun King, genuflected, and said with great dignity, “Sire, you have asked what I think of the theater. I will tell you, Sire, what I think. There are some great persons in favor of it ... and there are some great reasons against it!”

It might equally be said of the “strait-jacket” theory of “more sureness.” “There are some great persons in favor of it; but there are some great reasons against it.” How does one decide? Validation is potentially a painful process, for facts sometimes force us to change long-held highly cherished opinions. But validation is an intellectual necessity to anyone who holds truth to be as important as life itself.

It is important for each of us to know *what* we believe, as well as why we believe it.

[61] In part 1 of this series we noted Paul’s declaration that “we have this treasure in earthen vessels” ([2 Corinthians 4:7](#)) and Ellen White’s observation that “in the work of God for man’s redemption, divinity and humanity are combined.”¹² Jesus was both Son of God and Son of man; and this same union of the divine and the human exists also in the Bible. The “treasure” consists of truths revealed and inspired by God; the “earthen vessel”—the human packaging—is the words of men, chosen by them to communicate divine truth.¹³

The “treasure”—the God-given truth or message—is not only “an infallible revelation of His will” but is also “authoritative”¹⁴—normative and binding upon the Christian. Commenting upon the question of infallibility, Ellen White wrote, “God alone is infallible.”¹⁵ “Man is fallible, but God’s Word is infallible.”¹⁶

¹²[Testimonies for the Church 5:747](#). Complete bibliographical information for Ellen G. White writings used in both parts 1 and 2 of this article, may be found in the footnotes at the end of part 1.

¹³The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan, p. vii.

¹⁴Ibid., p. vii.

¹⁵[Selected Messages 1:37](#).

¹⁶[Selected Messages 1:416](#).

Concerning the “earthen vessel,” the human side of the equation, Mrs. White added, “Everything that is human is imperfect”: ¹⁷ and “no man is infallible.” ¹⁸

Some have stumbled over the fact that there are imperfections in the writings of Ellen White. Examples cited by the critics include her incorrect numbering of Abraham’s allies; her early statement that God commanded Adam and Eve not to touch the forbidden fruit, later changed to state that these were Eve’s words; her assertion that only eight souls received Noah’s message, contradicted in another place by her statement that there were others who believed and who helped build the ark; and her account of the daily ministration in the ancient tabernacle, ¹⁹ which does not entirely square with the account given in the Pentateuch.

Some critics have gone on to ask if these imperfections, these inaccuracies, this demonstrated untrustworthiness, are not sufficient reason for not basing any doctrine upon her writings. ²⁰

There is no charge that can be leveled against Ellen White, in her professional role as a prophet, that could not and has not first been leveled against the writers of the Bible by the so-called “higher critics,” whether such accusations allege misstatements of fact, copying uninspired writers (a charge examined in detail in part 1 of this series), unfulfilled prophecies, or having to retract statements made at an earlier time.

Let us not claim more for Mrs. White than we would for the Bible writers; but let us not claim less, either (for reasons that will be discussed in some detail in part 3 of this series).

Coming back to Peter’s forthright claim, “We have also a more sure word of prophecy,” let us examine, successively, the lives of the prophets, and then the declarations of the prophets, to see if we are able to determine how this “more sureness” operates—or does not operate.

¹⁷Selected Messages 1:20.

¹⁸Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, 376 (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1944).

¹⁹Ellen G. White, *The Story of Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1958), p. 354.

²⁰Robert W. Olson, *101 Questions on the Sanctuary and on Ellen White* (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1981), p. 52.

Chapter 1—Inerrancy and the Prophet’s Personal Life

The evidence of history and Scripture testify that the control of the Holy Spirit over the lives of the prophets did not preclude their freedom to sin. If “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” ([Romans 3:23](#)), this would presumably include the prophets as well. To verify this, one need but examine their lives individually, as recorded in sacred writ, to discover the nature and extent of their sins of omission and commission.

One of the earliest prophets mentioned in Scripture is Abraham ([Genesis 20:7](#)). Repeatedly the canonical writers of both Old and New Testaments call him the father of the faithful, and indeed, both Jews (through Isaac) and Arabs (through Ishmael) consider him their lineal ancestor as well.

Abraham was not only made the progenitor of peoples too numerous to count, not only given the special relationship with God signified by the role and office of a prophet, but he was also given the title—by Jehovah Himself—“Abraham my friend.”²¹ (In the Koran, written by Mohammed in Arabia, this title is rendered *El Khalil*. Islamic philologists state that the word in Arabic—a language noted for its nuances and fine distinctions of meaning—should not be rendered merely “friend” but rather “*a very special friend*.”)

What kind of man was the “very special friend” of God? In [Genesis 12](#) we find Abraham and his wife Sarah in Egypt. Because Sarah is a very beautiful woman, Abraham fears that Pharaoh will want to add her to the royal harem, and will kill Abraham to pave the way for this conquest. So Abraham prevails upon Sarah to declare that she is Abraham’s sister instead of his wife.

Now Sarah was indeed Abraham’s *half*-sister, so what she said was half true; but she was also his *whole* wife. And what is half-truth is whole-lie, because the intent is to deceive. God stepped into the

²¹[Isaiah 41:8](#). See also [James 2:23](#).

situation in a remarkable manner to protect the life of His friend; and Abraham and Sarah were allowed to leave Egypt unmolested, with all of their possessions intact.

But eight chapters later, in [Genesis 20](#), we find the same story being repeated—with the same results. God bore long with His very special friend—even as He bears long with us. But one somehow tends to expect a little higher standard of behavior of prophets! Surely Abraham should have learned a lesson the first time. But he did not, as we often do not.

Abraham was not only a “royal liar” twice over, but he also sinned in acquiescing to Sarah’s proposal that he take Hagar as a secondary wife in order to “help” God’s plan to make Abraham’s progeny as numerous as the sands of the sea and the stars of the sky.

Sarah was beyond normal child-bearing years ([Genesis 18:11](#)); and not believing that God would work a miracle, she sought a naturalistic solution. But in taking Hagar, one of Sarah’s servants, as his wife, Abraham demonstrated a serious lapse of faith. God intended Isaac to be a “miracle” child—for he was in several ways to be a type of Christ. And even if Abraham and Sarah’s conduct was acceptable by the cultural standards of the day, it was contrary to God’s plan. Paul uses this illustration in Galatians, [chapter 4](#), to allegorize Hagar as salvation by works, with Sarah representing salvation by faith. [62]

Incidentally, the seriousness of Abraham’s lack of faith at this point is underscored by a more recent prophet. Because he did not trust God to produce a miracle child, but instead took Hagar as his wife, Abraham was called upon, a few years later, to offer Isaac as a human sacrifice on Mount Moriah. Wrote Ellen White, “If he had endured the first test and had patiently waited for the promise to be fulfilled in Sarah ... he would not have been subjected to the closest test that was ever required of man.”²²

So much for *El Khalil*, the friend of God.

Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, a prophet, was also a sinner. In fact, his very name had to be changed to Israel after his conversion because the old name meant deceiver or supplanter; and God couldn’t have a prophet going around with *that* kind of name in a day when

²²[The Spirit of Prophecy 1:98.](#)

the giving of a name had a significance far transcending the same event in modern times.

Then there was David. Twice in Scripture, once in the Old Testament and once in the New, David is given the title “a man after his [God’s] own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14; see also Acts 13:22). And what kind of man was he? Well, among other things, he was first an adulterer with Bathsheba, and then a murderer of her husband Uriah in a cover-up effort (2 Samuel 1). Is that any way for a prophet to behave—especially one so close to the heart of God?

Incidentally, the experiences of Abraham and David have been used in recent times by lapsed Christians to condone polygamy, among other sins. However, the question persists, was Abraham the friend of God and was David a man after God’s own heart *because* of their sins, or rather *in spite* of them?

Although the prophets were all sinners—and some of them rather lurid ones at that—their sins did not invalidate their prophetic gift!

Jeremiah complained, charging God wrongfully (chaps. 12:1; 15:15-18). Both Jonah (chap. 1:3) and Elijah (1 Kings 19) ran away from duty. And then there was Peter.

Peter denied his Lord three times with foul fishermen’s oaths that had not stained his lips for three years. Jesus forgave him, and restored him to the gospel ministry, and even gave him the gift of prophetic inspiration. And did Peter then live a morally impeccable, upright life forever after? He did not.

Peter was subsequently guilty of gross hypocrisy. While with the Gentile Christians he was the epitome of friendship; but on occasions when Jews were present, Peter catered to their narrow chauvinistic prejudices by not according the Gentiles the same warmth of Christian fellowship as he would have in private. In fact, this was such a serious moral issue that the apostle Paul was obliged to rebuke Peter in a rather forthright and public manner (Galatians 2:11-14). And Peter was a prophet.

What about Ellen White? She once wrote, “God and heaven alone are infallible.... In regard to infallibility, I never claimed it; God alone is infallible.”²³

²³Selected Messages 1:37.

A recent critic reportedly found Ellen White guilty of three sins (if not crimes): (1) she was a literary thief, since he charged that she stole the writings of others; (2) she was a liar, for she allegedly claimed that those writings were from her own pen when they were not; and (3) she and her husband James were held to be shameless, opportunistic exploiters, writing for a guaranteed, captive market for the purpose of enriching their own family fortunes! ²⁴

Now, for a moment, let us assume that the critics' worst charges about Ellen White are absolutely true. Although these charges have been answered in substantial detail, ²⁵ for the sake of the argument let us momentarily assume the worst. *If* Ellen White were guilty, as charged, would that invalidate her prophetic gift?

And the answer comes quickly, No—not unless you are willing to invalidate Peter's prophetic gift, Jonah's prophetic gift, Elijah's prophetic gift, Jeremiah's prophetic gift, David's prophetic gift, and Abraham's prophetic gift, among others.

We must be consistent; we must treat Ellen White exactly as we would any prophet of biblical times. If we don't tear out of our Bible the Psalms written by David, the prophecies of Jeremiah and Jonah and the two epistles of Peter, then we have no right to throw out the writings of Ellen White.

History and the Scripture testify that the control of the Holy Spirit over the lives of the prophets did not preclude their freedom to sin; and yet, their sinful acts did not invalidate their prophetic gift!

At this point someone is likely to assert that Peter did not say we have a more sure prophetic life; but rather that we have a more sure prophetic word. What about the *words* of the prophet?

²⁴“Plagiarism Found in Prophet Books” by John Dart, Los Angeles Times, October 23, 1980, pp. 1, 3, 21.

²⁵See Olson.

Chapter 2—Inerrancy and the Prophet’s Prophetic Word

Three categories of “problems” appear when we examine the utterances of the prophets, biblical and modern, in which significant questions have been raised: (1) unfulfilled prophecies; (2) inconsequential errors of minor, insignificant detail; and (3) major errors of substance. Let us examine each successively, in detail.

A. Unfulfilled Prophecies

Some time ago I was holding a series of class lectures and public meetings at one of our educational institutions on the Atlantic seaboard. At the close of the Thursday evening presentation a denominational worker at this school asked if he might speak with me privately. I invited him to my guest room where we conversed for more than an hour.

[63] As soon as he was seated, he began, “I really want to believe in Ellen White as a legitimate, authentic prophet of the Lord.” I could tell by the tone of his voice that he was not only deeply sincere, but also deeply concerned as well.

“Fine,” I responded. “Is there any impediment to the fulfillment of your wish?”

Without answering my question directly, he went on, “Isn’t the fulfillment of predictions one of the Bible’s tests of a true prophet?”

“Oh, yes,” I smiled. “When I used to teach college prophetic-guidance classes in California and Nigeria, we examined four such tests (1) the words of the ‘prophet’ under scrutiny must agree with earlier inspired revelations known to have come from the Lord ([Isaiah 8:20](#)); (2) the fruitage test must be applied, both the prophet’s own life and the lives of those who follow the prophet ([Matthew 7:16, 20](#)); (3) the prophet must testify that Jesus was the divine-human incarnate Son of God ([1 John 4:1-3](#)); and (4) the predictions of the prophet must come to pass.”

“This last test,” I told my inquirer, “is twice mentioned in the Old Testament. Jeremiah ([chap. 28:9](#)) presents it from the positive perspective: ‘When the word of the prophet shall come to pass, then shall the prophet be known, that the Lord hath truly sent him.’ And Moses presents it from the negative perspective; ‘When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him’ ([Deuteronomy 18:22](#)).”

“I thought so,” my friend said quietly. Then he went on, “Well, what do we do, then, with Ellen White’s predictions that never came to pass? For example, I understand that in 1856 she said she was shown a group of our church members at a meeting somewhere. She said that some of them would be ‘food for worms,’ some would be subjects of the seven last plagues, and some would be alive and translated at the second coming of Christ. Are any of the persons who attended that meeting still alive?”

“Not to my knowledge,” I replied. “In fact, the last known survivor died in 1937 at the age of 83. His name was William C. White, and he was a babe in arms at the time. His mother, Ellen White, made the prediction.”

“That is what I have heard. Well, how do you handle it—in the light of this Biblical test of a prophet—that his prediction must come to pass, and if it doesn’t this is evidence that the Lord has not spoken through him?”

“I handle it the same way I handle other unfulfilled prophecies of genuine prophets that appear in the Bible,” I replied. “Incidentally, I will deal with this in substantial detail in just a moment. But my policy, when people raise questions about Ellen White’s prophetic role, is to go first to the Bible, to see how the situation is resolved there, before I examine Ellen White. You see, I want to see her in the light of the Bible, not the other way around.”

And so we began a most interesting study of unfulfilled prophecies by authentic, acknowledged prophets in the Bible. Probably the best known example is Jonah.

After finishing his celebrated “submarine” ride in the belly of the great fish, Jonah went to Nineveh to do the Lord’s bidding. Nineveh was a large city; it would take Jonah three days to cover it entirely.

His message was as simple as it was stark: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown” ([Jonah 3:4](#)). No hope was offered, no compromise, no conditional element.

After delivering the message, Jonah went out of town and found a vantage place where he could witness (and relish) the massacre of his nation’s most hated enemies. Jonah despised these people with a passion, for the Assyrians were the most warlike and fearsome of Israel’s pagan foes. When they captured Jewish prisoners of war, they flayed them—skinned them alive—to extract every ounce of trauma in torture that they could before they killed the victim. In such instances death, when it came, was a welcome, merciful release. The Jews quite understandably had no love for the Ninevites.

Although there was no hope explicit in the message of Jonah, the Ninevites (who may have had some prior knowledge about Jehovah from hearing other Jewish prophets, or from reading Jewish prophetic writings) decided to mend their ways. They expressed their repentance in the cultural manifestation appropriate to the times—they put on sackcloth and covered themselves with ashes. God beheld it all, and in love and mercy granted them a stay of execution.

Meanwhile, the prophet was becoming more angry by the moment. One suspects that the real cause of this growing irritation was not merely his narrow chauvinistic Jewish loyalty, but rather a fear that word of this new development might get back to Jerusalem before he did.

Jonah may have been more concerned about his professional reputation as a prophet than about the fate of his 120,000 “converts.” Instead of wishing them baptized by water, he wanted them incinerated by fire! Perhaps he was afraid that when he got back to Jerusalem the little children playing in the street would chant after him, “Jonah’s a false prophet; Jonah’s a false prophet.” Why? Because his prediction didn’t come to pass.

Interestingly, in a footnote to history, we learn that several centuries after this event the Ninevites “repented” of their former repentance (see [2 Corinthians 7:10](#)) and went back to their former ways. God then “repented” of His reprieve, and sent the threatened destruction that Jonah had originally foretold.

But was Jonah proved a “true” prophet 200 years *ex post facto*? No, not at all. If the Ninevites had *never* subsequently been destroyed, Jonah would still have been deemed a true prophet, even though his prediction did not come to pass. [64]

How? By the conditional element that exists in some prophecies, either explicitly or implicitly. A clue to this is found as early as 950 B.C. when the prophet Azariah instructed King Asa, “The Lord is with you, while ye be with him; and if ye seek him, he will be found of you; but if ye forsake him, he will forsake you” (2 Chr 15:2).

More to the point, however, is the interesting (and significant) fact, that in *both* of the biblical books where the test of fulfillment is mandated, this conditional element is also explicitly stated.

Ten chapters *before* giving the test of fulfillment, Jeremiah mentions this conditional element:

At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; If that nation against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; If it do evil in my sight, that is obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them ([Jeremiah 18:7-10](#)).

Moses also mentions the conditional element repeatedly in Deuteronomy. ²⁶

Some have felt that this was a face-saving means of maintaining a prophet's professional reputation in the face of adverse evidence such as nonfulfillment of predictions, ²⁷ but it is not. It is a biblical principle. One does not need an advanced degree in theology to be able to figure out what kind of prophecies are amendable to the conditional element and which are not.

²⁶Deuteronomy 4:9; 8:19; 28:1, 2, 13-15; cf. also [Zechariah 6:15](#).

²⁷Walter Rea is one such, and he lists the “failed” prediction of 1856 as “White Lie” No. 8 of a total of 18 such alleged “White Lies,” in an address to the Association of Adventist Forums, San Diego, Calif., on February 14, 1981: see transcript pp. 14, 15.

One could cite other biblical examples of unfulfilled prophecies given by authentic, legitimate prophets. The category that comes most quickly to mind is that of a host of predictions made by a half-dozen Old Testament prophets about Israel's national honor and glory—predictions about the worldwide mission of Israel and the ingathering of the Gentiles, eternal rest in Canaan, and deliverance from political enemies.

A few of these predictions were fulfilled, secondarily, through “spiritual Israel” (the Christian church); and some may be fulfilled to Christians ultimately, after sin and sinners are destroyed following the last judgment. Despite these exceptions, the majority of these prophecies were not fulfilled in Bible times, are not being fulfilled today, and never will be fulfilled. ²⁸

Then do we say that the prophets who made these predictions—notably Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Zephaniah, and Zechariah—were false prophets? No. Nor do we say, as do the Secret Rapture theorists, that these prophecies will be fulfilled in our own time. Indeed, these latter expositors have built a whole theology on the misunderstanding of the conditional element in prophecy, and they posit a last-day fulfillment in order that these Old Testament writers may be proved to be reliable, authentic prophets of the Lord! ²⁹

A Look at the “Food for Worms” Vision

Let us now come back to Ellen White and the “Food for Worms” vision, to discover the facts in that case. During the latter part of May 1856, a conference in Battle Creek was attended by members and denominational workers of a church which was still four years away from assuming a corporate name. Attendees came to the conference from various parts of the eastern and midwestern parts of the United States and from Canada. The conference opened on Friday afternoon, May 23, and closed on Monday, May 26. On Sabbath the attendance was so large that it was necessary to leave

²⁸For an excellent and extremely helpful treatment of the subject, see “The Role of Israel in Old Testament Prophecy,” [The S.D.A. Bible Commentary 4:25-38](#).

²⁹For additional examples of the conditional element in biblical prophecies, see LeRoy Edwin Froom, *Movement of Destiny* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1971), pp. 573, 574.

the modest chapel that then served the Adventists and go across the street to a large tent pitched to accommodate the crowd.

On Tuesday morning, May 27, another meeting was held, this time back in the chapel, attended largely by workers who were still in Battle Creek. It was at this service that Mrs. White was taken off in vision, and was shown some of those attending the May 23-26 conference.

The report of this vision is found in [Testimonies for the Church 1:127-137](#), and is still published by the church, although some critics claim that the church tries to hide Mrs. White's unfulfilled predictions.

Incidentally, carefully drawn lists of the names of those in attendance at that conference were compiled by a number of interested parties. Some of these lists still survive in the archives of the Ellen G. White Estate in the General Conference office. The lists were actively circulated among Adventists in earlier days, and J. N. Loughborough tells, in a letter written in 1918, about two ministers, a "Brother Nelson" and George Amadon, who took such a roster to Ellen White in 1905 to see if she could add any names that they had overlooked.

Mrs. White is reported to have said, "What are you doing?" When told the purpose of the list—to show the nearness of Jesus' coming because very few of those attending still survived—Mrs. White asked what use would be made of the list. Brother Nelson responded, "I am going to have copies of it printed and sent out to all of our people."

Mrs. White's instant rejoinder was, "Then you stop right where you are. If they get that list, instead of working to push the Message, they will be watching the *Review* each week to see who is dead." Loughborough, in telling the story, concluded with the observation that Ellen White objected to using this incident as a "sign of the times."³⁰ Obviously, she recognized the conditional element in the vision, and the fact that the condition had not then been met by the Seventh-day Adventist church.

Was the conditional element explicit in the angel's testimony to Ellen White in the 1856 vision? No. But then, neither was the

³⁰J. N. Loughborough letter, from Sanitarium, Calif., August 28, 1918.

conditional element explicit in the testimony of Jonah as he trudged for three days throughout the “exceeding great” city of Nineveh. In both cases, however, the conditional element was implicit.

[65] From as early as 1850 to as late as 1911,³¹ Ellen White’s writings repeatedly suggest that if the Seventh-day Adventist church had done its job, “the work would have been completed, and Christ would have come ere this.”³²

The conditional element in *some* prophecy is exhibited both in the Bible and in the writings of Ellen G. White. To accept it in one, but discard it in the other, is inconsistent and irrational.

True, there *are* some unfulfilled prophecies by authentic, legitimate Bible prophets, but the existence of such prophecies does not necessarily discredit the prophet who made them. There are also unfulfilled prophecies in the writings of Ellen White, and the church has never denied (nor tried to hide) this fact from the public. Those studying the prophetic writings should not ask more of Mrs. White than they would of the Biblical prophets.

B. Inconsequential Errors of Minor Detail

In inspired writings, ancient and modern, there are inconsequential errors of minor, insignificant detail. This is true of the Bible, as well as the writings of Ellen White. Such errors—indeed, all of them added up together—do not affect the direction of God’s church, the eternal destiny of one soul, or the purity of any doctrine. That the Holy Spirit *could* have corrected these minor mistakes, one cannot seriously challenge. He obviously chose not to do so, probably because the error wasn’t vital to the *message* or the purpose of inspiration.

Let us look first at the Bible. As we noted in part 1 of this series, the writer of the first Gospel informs us (in [Matthew 27:9, 10](#)) of a Messianic prophecy, written centuries before Christ’s birth, which declared that Christ would be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver. Matthew attributes that prophecy to Jeremiah.

³¹For a comprehensive view of several such statements by Ellen White, see Froom, pp. 583-588; and Robert W. Olson, *The Crisis Ahead* (Angwin, Calif.: Pacific Union College Bookstore, 1976), pp. 75-78.

³²Ms. 4, 1883; published in [Evangelism](#), 695, 696, and [Selected Messages 1:68](#).

Matthew slipped. The writer was not Jeremiah, but Zechariah ([chap. 11:12, 13](#)).

We noted also the slight discrepancies among the four Gospel writers regarding the exact wording of the superscription written by Pilate and placed upon the cross above the head of Christ. Matthew lists Christ's miracles in a different order than does Luke, even as both writers handle the Sermon on the Mount in different ways—Matthew as a sermon outline, Luke as an evangelistic tool to demonstrate the truths taught by Jesus.

Mention might also be made of the fact that Hobab is described as Moses' brother-in-law in [Numbers 10:29](#), while he is identified as Moses' father-in-law in [Judges 4:11](#). The author of [1 Samuel 16:10 and 11](#) identifies David as the eighth son of Jesse, whereas the author of [1 Chronicles 2:15](#) says David was the seventh son. [Luke 3:36](#) mentions a Cainan in the genealogy of Jesus, a person not mentioned in [Genesis 11:12](#). Paul's account of the ratification of the first covenant in [Hebrews 9:19](#) is not entirely in harmony with the account in [Exodus 24:3-8](#).

Nor have we exhausted the list of inconsequential errors of minor, insignificant detail. The point we make here is, simply, that the "treasure" of God's good news is conveyed to mankind in "earthen vessels": and that those earthen vessels—the packaging—contain mistakes, errors, discrepancies, call them what you will—that in no way deny the divine inspiration of the material nor the divine authority behind the messages.

Ellen White is in the same tradition with the Bible writers. The same kinds of minor errors found in Scripture also crop up here and there in her writings. A few were mentioned in the introduction to this presentation. Others could be cited.

Just after the turn of the century a worker in southern California attempted to justify his loss of confidence in the inspiration of the *Testimonies* because of an inconsistency in an Ellen G. White letter. In this letter Mrs. White spoke of the 40 rooms of the Paradise Valley Sanitarium near San Diego; in actuality there were only 38 rooms. The man apparently believed that if there were any inaccuracies in detail in any writings of one claiming prophetic inspiration, such inaccuracies negated the claim, and his confidence in Ellen White was seriously impaired.

In response, Mrs. White commented:

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 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....

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. ³³

On June 4, 1906, Ellen White wrote a letter to a brother in the church who had written to her earlier concerning the inspiration of the *Testimonies*:

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 that you ever spoke in public or private, that every letter you wrote under *any* and *all* circumstances, was as inspired as the Ten Commandments.”

My brother, you have studied my writings diligently, and you have never found that I have made any such claims, neither will you find that the pioneers in our cause have made such claims. ³⁴

When writing about the St. Bartholomew Massacre in the 1888 edition of *The Great Controversy*, Mrs. White mentioned in passing

³³Ellen G. White, Ms. 107, 1909; cited in T. Housel Jemison, *A Prophet Among You* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1955), pp. 394, 395.

³⁴This letter, written from Sanitarium, California, on June 14, 1906, was subsequently published in *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, August 30, 1906, p. 8. Cited in [Selected Messages 1:24-28](#). Italics in original. For a helpful consideration of “How Much Was Inspired?” see Jemison, pp. 394-406.

that it was the ringing of the bell in the palace of King Charles IX in Paris that was a signal to begin the wanton destruction that cost the lives of tens of thousands of French Huguenot Protestants on August 24, 1572.

After that volume was in print someone questioned the accuracy of her statement, suggesting instead that it may have been the bell in the church of St. Germain, across the street from the palace. Still another said no, it was the bell in the Palace of Justice around the corner from the royal palace!

[66]

Ellen White, in the revised 1911 edition of the book, redrafted the statement to read simply, "A bell, tolling in the dead of night, was a signal for the slaughter."³⁵ The identity of the bell was not the issue; it was the events of that night that were important.

Matthew's mistake in attributing the messianic prophecy of 30 pieces of silver to a wrong source (Jeremiah, instead of Zechariah) was duplicated by Ellen White in a *Review and Herald* article less than two years before her death. She wrote: "'The love of Christ constraineth us,' the apostle Peter declared."³⁶ She was, of course, quoting [2 Corinthians 5:14](#), and the attribution should have been to Paul, not Peter.

Dates present unique problems. In two of her published volumes³⁷ Mrs. White mentions joining her husband, James, at Wallings Mills, Colorado, on "Monday, August 8," 1878. This was obviously a clerical error, for in that year Monday fell on August 5, not August 8.

Of potentially greater seriousness is another problem in dating, misunderstood by some, and considered by one critic to be an unsailable argument for downgrading the nature and degree of Ellen White's inspiration.

In a postscript to volume 2 of *Spiritual Gifts*, Ellen White wrote this rather unusual statement and appeal: "A special request is made

³⁵[The Great Controversy, 272](#) (1911 ed.). For a fuller account of this question, see Arthur L. White, *The Ellen G. White Writings* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1973), pp. 31-34.

³⁶[The Review and Herald, October 30, 1913](#), p. 3. Arthur L. White discusses this question at length in *Inspiration and the Ellen G. White Writings*, a reprint of 11 articles from the *Adventist Review* of 1978 and 1979.

³⁷Ellen G. White, [Life Sketches of Ellen G. White, 235](#) (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1915); and [Testimonies for the Church 4:297](#).

that if any find incorrect statements in this book they will immediately inform me. The edition will be completed about the first of October; therefore send before that time.”³⁸

Can you imagine, exclaims one critic, the apostle Paul putting a postscript on one of his epistles telling the members of that church that if they found anything wrong in the epistle that they should write back to him before it was printed and sent out to all the churches?

How is this unusual statement to be understood?

First, volume 2 of *Spiritual Gifts* was an autobiographical account of the experiences of James and Ellen White from 1844 to 1860. The twofold purpose in writing this work was explained in the preface to the book (and therefore was quite likely overlooked by the critic; apparently very few people read the preface of *any* book!):

1. Ellen White wished, quite simply, to refute charges of Mormonism, which had been made especially in the “west.” In March 1860, a man in Knoxville, Iowa, claimed to have known James and Ellen White 20 years earlier when they allegedly were leaders of the Mormon colony at Nauvoo, Illinois. (Twenty years earlier Ellen White was an unmarried girl of 12; she would not even meet James White for at least another five years!)
2. Ellen White also wished to confirm the faith of the believers. Some 16 years had now elapsed since 1844. There was now fruitage evident in the lives of others as well as in the lives of James and Ellen White. The last ten pages of this particular volume are filled with personal testimonies from different Adventist believers regarding the accuracy of the statements made in the text concerning her physical condition in vision, her healings from illness, the nature of the heresies the Whites encountered in the early days, in addition to the refutation of slanders made against the leadership.³⁹

Further along in the preface is this clue explaining the rather odd request for reporting “incorrect statements“:

³⁸[Spiritual Gifts 2:295.](#)

³⁹[Spiritual Gifts 2:iv.](#)

In preparing the following pages, I have labored under great disadvantages, as I have to depend in many instances, on memory, having kept no journal [diary] till within a few years. In several instances I have sent the manuscripts to friends who were present when the circumstances related occurred, for their examination before they were put in print. I have taken great care, and have spent much time, in endeavoring to state the simple facts as correctly as possible.⁴⁰

In writing this autobiographical account Mrs. White relied for dates largely on letters retrieved from the Stockbridge Howland family of Topsham, Maine. They had kept her child Henry for five years while Ellen journeyed with her husband James. Ellen had written the Howlands frequently as she and her husband itinerated from place to place.

Possible evidence that the odd request bore fruit is the fact that two dates appearing in *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 2, were altered in parallel historical accounts from the pen of Mrs. White in later publications:

In the earlier account of the first series of William Miller's prophetic lectures in Portland, Maine, the date is given simply as 1839, and the date of the second series was given simply as 1841.⁴¹

A later parallel account, however, amends the dates for the first series to March 1840,⁴² and the second series to June 1842.⁴³ The two-year interregnum is preserved in the later accounts, but the dates are adjusted by one year in each instance.

Ellen White certainly was not asking any reader to correct a message she had received from the Lord! It is therefore incorrect to give that impression, as some critics have done.

Perhaps one more example of the "earthen vessel" imperfections in the "packaging" of the prophetic message will suffice to show that Ellen White (like the Bible writers before her) was thoroughly

⁴⁰[Spiritual Gifts 2:iii.](#)

⁴¹[Spiritual Gifts 2:12, 14.](#)

⁴²[Testimonies for the Church 1:14,](#) and [Life Sketches of Ellen G. White, 20.](#)

⁴³[Testimonies for the Church 1:21;](#) and [Life Sketches of Ellen G. White, 26.](#)

human, and subject to simple mistakes the Holy Spirit never bothered to correct (although He easily could have):

[67] Ellen White conducted a continuing correspondence with a colporteur named Walter Harper for more than a score of years. In one letter she asked to borrow one thousand dollars, offering him four to five percent interest over the period of the loan ⁴⁴ (while banks at that time were offering only three to four percent—more evidence against the “exploitation” charge).

On November 9, 1906, Mrs. White wrote Brother Harper in a state of great agitation. Her embarrassment and discomfiture are all too evident; they drip from nearly every line on the page!

Harper had written for a copy of a testimony which Ellen White had originally sent to General Conference President George I. Butler and which apparently was already well known generally in the field. It was not uncommon for these kinds of quasi-public letters to be circulated freely among church members at large at that time.

After the letter had been dispatched, Mrs. White discovered to her consternation that she had sent the wrong letter! In writing to Colporteur Harper she first reminds him that what she sent him was “my special personal property,” and then she asks for its immediate return, instructing him not to make the matter public, and if it has already been seen by other eyes such individuals should be instructed in the importance of confidentiality.

She concludes by instructing Brother Harper not even to make a personal copy of the letter before he returns it, telling him that she has, now, the letter she originally intended to send him.

Although obviously embarrassed by the mistake, she does not hesitate to speak of “what I have done in mistake,” admitting (as she always did when asked directly) that she was human, and subject to the frailties of human nature. ⁴⁵

Inspiration’s “more-sureness” did not extend (as the “strait-jacket” theory would erroneously suggest) to precluding the prophet’s making of minor errors. Only when such errors would materially affect (a) the direction of God’s church, (b) the eternal destiny of one soul, or (c) the purity of a doctrine, would the Holy Spirit

⁴⁴Letter 339, 1904, p. 2.

⁴⁵Letter 353, 1906, p. 1.

step in to correct the situation immediately through the prophet, so that there would be no permanent damage.

C. Major Matters of Substance

On occasion the prophets, ancient and modern, did make major mistakes that needed the immediate correction of the Holy Spirit. Probably the most prominent example in Scripture is the incident recorded in both [2 Samuel 7](#) and [1 Chronicles 17](#).⁴⁶

One day King David called in Nathan, a literary but noncanonical prophet, to tell him of his concern over the lack of a suitable building to house the ark of the covenant and other liturgical furniture of the Jewish ceremonial ritual, which dated back to Sinai and the Mosaic tabernacle tent.

In what was probably an expansive mood, David suggests that an appropriate building be constructed, especially since the king himself now lives in a luxurious palace. Perhaps he indicated that this building, worthy of the worship of Jehovah, be on such a scale of magnificence that any Gentile traveling within a hundred miles of Jerusalem would detour just to see this wonder of the ancient world.

Nathan, perhaps thinking of the tremendous cost of such an edifice, and possibly having some misgivings about the prospect that he might be asked to lead out in a fund-raising campaign, displayed some reticence. And quite possibly David, sensing that reticence, suggested further that he, the king, would pay the entire cost out of his royal treasury.

At any rate, Nathan now becomes as enthusiastic as the monarch; and gives his wholehearted approval of the project.

That night, when Nathan was back in his home, God came to him and told him, in effect, that he had not properly represented Jehovah's will when he gave the prophet's cachet to the king's proposal. Nathan should have checked with "headquarters" first before endorsing the project.

⁴⁶Incidentally, these two chapters, which were written by two different biblical authors, are almost word-for-word accounts of the same event; yet neither indicates the source of his data—an interesting situation in the light of the current controversy over a modern prophet's "copying" from other sources!

Nathan was instructed to go back to the king the next day and tell the monarch that God appreciated the generosity which prompted such a magnificent plan, but that it was not God's will for the temple to be built by David. Instead, it would be Solomon's temple, for David had been a man of war, a man of bloodshed. David could draw the blueprints and specifications, he could hire the contractors and artisans, and he could even provide the money to pay for it. But it would be Solomon's temple, not David's.

Nathan, probably somewhat abashed, manfully returned to the king the next day to tell him of the heavenly amendments to the royal plan. And David, "a man after his [God's] own heart," concurred and said, "so be it." And so it was.

In more modern times, God's most recent prophet of record, Ellen White, had several experiences in which she took positions contrary to the will of God, and the situation was sufficiently serious for God to intervene to correct the matter, again working through the prophet to accomplish that end.

One such incident was the resolution of the question of the correct time to begin observance of the Sabbath.⁴⁷ Seventh-day Adventists originally learned of the seventh-day Sabbath through the labors of Seventh Day Baptist adherents, who observed the day from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday. Some Seventh-day Adventists followed the example of the Seventh Day Baptists in this sunset-to-sunset observance.

Three other positions were also taken by Seventh-day Adventists: (1) Some in Maine advocated a sunrise Saturday to sunrise Sunday observance, based upon a misunderstanding of [Matthew 28:1](#) ("In the end of the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week"). (2) Some "legalists" held out for "legal" time—midnight to midnight. (3) And a third group held for "equatorial time." On the equator the sun daily rises at 6:00 a.m. and sets at 6:00 p.m. Captain Joseph Bates was the leader of this group, and he had strong support from both James and Ellen White for his position.

[68] The sunrise group was taken care of comparatively early, for in vision on one occasion Ellen White heard the angel quote from

⁴⁷The chronological events of this experience are told in Arthur L. White, Ellen G. White: Messenger to the Remnant (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1969), pp. 34-36.

[Leviticus 23:32](#), “From even unto even, shall ye celebrate your sabbath.” Most Seventh-day Adventists, however, continued to follow equatorial time.

In the summer of 1855 James White requested John Nevins Andrews, one of our earliest scholars, to research the subject. His conclusions were presented to the General Conference session in Battle Creek in November of that year. On the basis of nine Old Testament texts and two New Testament texts, Andrews demonstrated that, for the purpose of the immediate discussion, “even” and “evening” were synonymous with sunset.

Nearly all attending the conference accepted the Andrews conclusion. But the redoubtable Captain Bates held fast to his equatorial time theory. And Ellen White (who first learned of the Sabbath from Bates) sided with her mentor. The conference was thus left divided and in confusion.

God moved quickly. As this General Conference session drew toward its close, those present united in a season of earnest prayer for the prosperity of the cause, and during this prayer meeting Ellen White was taken off in vision and shown that sunset was the correct time to begin the observance of the Sabbath. Nearly everyone accepted the light from heaven, and the spiritual gift of prophecy again produced its fruit of unity.

It was clear to everyone at the conference that God was speaking and leading, for Ellen White was not now merely repeating her personal, previously held views. And the function of the Spirit of prophecy in the life and work of the church again was illustrated in this experience. For the gift of prophecy was never given to *initiate*, but rather to confirm and corroborate whether the church members were headed in the right direction on the basis of their Bible study, or to correct and redirect, if they had gone as far as they could and were headed in the wrong direction.

Another incident in which Ellen White had to reverse an earlier position had to do with the proposed closing of Southern Publishing Association in 1902. ⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Arthur Grosvenor Daniells, *The Abiding Gift of Prophecy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1936), pp. 322-329.

Ellen White returned from nine years' service in Australia in 1900 and located in the Napa Valley at an estate called "Elmshaven" near St. Helena, California. In 1901 she left early to attend the General Conference session, which would open April 2 at Battle Creek, traveling by way of Nashville, Tennessee, where her son Edson had begun a new private publishing enterprise. A shoestring operation, the printshop was first housed in a chicken house/barn, and was subsequently relocated in town in March 1900.

On the day the GC session opened, Ellen White penned "An Appeal for the Southern Work." She spoke of the need for schools, sanitariums, and a publishing house where books could be produced for use by denominational workers in the south. She spoke of Edson's limited operation, and urged the brethren to take it over since a larger building was necessary for the kind of program she envisioned.

This counsel to establish and equip a large publishing house was one of the first perplexities to confront Arthur G. Daniells, newly elected president of the General Conference. The church already had two publishing ventures, one in Battle Creek and one in Oakland, California. Both were in a state of "marked depression," there being little demand for our literature at this time (there were only a few colporteurs in the field, and these were experiencing only average success). In fact, both publishing houses were taking in a substantial volume of commercial printing in order to maintain solvency.

The GC Committee felt the time was not opportune to take on a third house when the other two were barely functioning on half-time, and that such a move would serve only to drive all three houses further into commercial work.

But Daniells had complete confidence in Ellen White's vision, for he had worked with her in Australia during the 1890s, and he persuaded the committee to ratify Heaven's plan.

Then Mrs. White further complicated the situation for church leadership by urging the discontinuance of all commercial work at all of our publishing houses. This would mean closing half of the presses and dismissing half of the employees, and some members on the committee began to wonder out loud if the prophet (now 74 years of age) might not be suffering from senility. Some even felt the messages on the publishing work were not really inspired of God.

At the end of the year Daniells went to Nashville for the first annual meeting of the board of Southern Publishing Association, only to discover that during the first year of operation the house had lost \$12,000, equivalent to the original capital invested in the venture! He was assured that they had now turned the corner; but at the end of the second year, and at the end of the third, the plant regularly continued to lose \$1,000 a month.

An investigative commission was appointed. It visited Nashville, and returned with the recommendation that the printing equipment be sold to a junk dealer (the machinery was secondhand and “broken-down” when purchased, and they feared the boiler would explode at any moment) and that the “publishing” house be downgraded to a depository where books printed at the other two plants could temporarily be stored until needed by colporteurs.

The GC Committee still deferred to its prophet, and sent a small delegation to Elmshaven to present the hard facts to Mrs. White and receive (they hoped) her approval of their stop-gap plan to salvage the new publishing house.

Meeting with Daniells and Ellen White were: W. T. Knox, president of the newly-organized Pacific Union Conference (in 1909 he would be elected treasurer of the General Conference); W. C. White, the prophet's son, traveling companion, and confidant; A. T. Jones, president of the California Conference (he would later defect and join John Harvey Kellogg in Battle Creek against Ellen White's counsel); J. O. Corliss, a minister in California at the time who had pioneered the work in Australia with both the prophet and Daniells; E. R. Palmer, secretary of the General Conference; and Clarence Crisler, formerly Daniells' private secretary and now stenographer to Ellen White. [69]

Ellen White listened in silence to the tragic litany of failure reported by the brethren. She was deeply grieved and perplexed, undoubtedly in part because it was her son who had started the program, and because she had given her personal backing to the denomination's taking it over in an expansion program.

Perhaps the committee members reminded her of her recently published counsel:

As church schools are established, the people of God will ... learn how to conduct the school on a basis of financial success. If this cannot be done, close the school until, with the help of God, plans can be devised to carry it on without the blot of debt upon it.... We should shun debt as we should shun the leprosy. ⁴⁹

Mrs. White finally spoke. She agreed that the publishing house must be put on a sound financial basis. "If it cannot, it had better be closed." Pressed for a solution she did not have, Mrs. White finally conceded that the publishing house should be turned into a depository.

Daniells, fortified by Crisler with a transcript of Mrs. White's written words in his pocket, boarded the train for Battle Creek, greatly relieved. He promptly called the GC Committee into session upon his return, and they as promptly voted the publishing house out of existence as a printer of literature, and then turned their attention to other, more pressing concerns.

A few days later a bombshell exploded in the form of a follow-up letter from Mrs. White. She now counseled *not* closing the printing operation at Nashville, but rather recommended that the brethren lay plans to prevent further indebtedness and move forward in faith; if the Lord's counsel were followed, He would give success. With some embarrassment, undoubtedly, she said that the instruction she had given to the committee of visiting brethren was wrong. The very night after the meeting the Lord had given her a vision, showing her she was wrong, and telling her what course should actually be pursued.

On October 20, the day after the committee met under the large oak tree on the lawn at Elmshaven, Ellen White wrote A. G. Daniells:

Last night I seemed to be in the operating room of a large hospital, to which people were being brought, and instruments were being prepared to cut off their limbs in a big hurry. One came in who seemed to have authority, and said to the physicians, "Is it necessary to bring these

⁴⁹Testimonies for the Church 6:217.

people into this room?" Looking pityingly at the sufferers, he said, "Never amputate a limb until everything possible has been done to restore it." Examining the limbs which the physicians had been preparing to cut off, he said, "they may be saved. The first work is to use every available means to restore these limbs. What a fearful mistake it would be to amputate a limb that could be saved by patient care! Your conclusions have been too hastily drawn. Put these patients in the best rooms in the hospital, and give them the very best of care and treatment. Use every means in your power to save them from going through life in a crippled condition, their usefulness damaged for life."

The sufferers were removed to a pleasant room, and faithful helpers cared for them under the speaker's direction; and not a limb had to be sacrificed. ⁵⁰

In a letter written several weeks later, addressed to "My Brethren in Positions of Responsibility," Mrs. White pointed out that

During the night following our interview in my house and out on the lawn under the trees, October 19, 1902, in regard to the work in the Southern field, the Lord instructed me that I had taken a wrong position. ⁵¹

The prophet had erred, and the error was sufficiently serious to warrant the Holy Spirit's stepping in immediately and correcting it so that there would be no permanent damage.

We *do* have a "more sure word of prophecy." If the prophet in his or her humanity errs, and the error is sufficiently serious to affect the direction of the church, the eternal destiny of a member, or the purity of a doctrine, *God moves in* immediately through the prophet, to correct the error so that there is no permanent damage!

One other instance of Ellen White's reversing herself and her position comes to mind in connection with the premature issuance of her Testimony No. 11. The brethren were trying to raise money

⁵⁰Letter 162, 1902; cited in Daniells, pp. 326, 327.

⁵¹Letter 208, 1902; cited in *ibid.*, p. 327.

to launch Battle Creek Sanitarium, and they knew that Ellen White had had a vision on the subject. They felt, logically, that if they could use her counsels in marshaling their arguments on behalf of the sanitarium, they could more quickly raise the funds they so desperately needed.

So they pressured Mrs. White to bring out *Testimony* No. 11 before she was prepared to hand it over to the printer. She acceded reluctantly to their importunings, but later regretted it; and in *Testimony* No. 12, which followed shortly, she publicly admitted that “under these circumstances I yielded my judgment to that of others and wrote what appeared in No. 11 in regard to the Health Institute, being unable then to give all I had seen. In this I did wrong.”⁵²

Elaborating, she said, “What appeared in *Testimony* No. 11 ... should not have been given until I was able to write out all I had seen in regard to it.”

A comparison of No. 11 and No. 12 shows a slight (but perhaps significant) shift in her theological position with regard to the relationship between health reform and the third angel’s message.

In No. 11 she wrote: “The health reform, I was shown, is a part of the third angel’s message and is just as closely connected with it as are the arm and hand with the human body.”⁵³ In No. 12 she wrote: “The health reform is closely connected with the work of the third message, yet it is not the message.”⁵⁴

[70] Concerning this undue pressure from church leaders, Ellen White vowed never again to be forced into an untenable position of writing on any subject before she felt ready:

I must be allowed to know my own duty better than others can know it for me, especially concerning matters which God has revealed to me. I shall be blamed by some for speaking as I now speak. Others will blame me for not speaking before.... Should I delay longer to speak my views and feelings, I should be blamed the more by both those who think I should have spoken sooner and by those also who may think I should not

⁵²Testimonies for the Church 1:563.

⁵³Testimonies for the Church 1:486.

⁵⁴Testimonies for the Church 1:559.

give any cautions. For the good of those at the head of the work, for the good of the cause and the brethren, and to save myself great trials, I have freely spoken.⁵⁵

⁵⁵Testimonies for the Church 1:563, 564.

Conclusion

What do Seventh-day Adventists say, then, about the infallibility and inerrancy of the prophets? “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter.”

The Bible *writers* themselves were not infallible *men*. However, the Holy Spirit who inspired them *was* infallible. Their revelations (“this treasure”) came directly from an infallible God. These inspired men communicated the message as fallible men, using imperfect human language (“earthen vessels”) as the medium of that communication.

With regard to Ellen White, the question was raised while she was still alive, “Do Seventh-day Adventists regard Sister White as infallible?”

The question was answered in the pages of the *Review and Herald* in 1883 by W. H. Littlejohn in a succinct, forthright statement:

No. Neither do they believe that Peter or Paul was infallible. They believe that the Holy Spirit which inspired Peter and Paul was infallible. They believe also that Mrs. White has from time to time received revelations from the Spirit of God, and that revelations made to her by the Spirit of God are just as reliable as revelations made by the same Spirit to other persons. ⁵⁶

The Seventh-day Adventist denomination today still holds that Ellen White was reliable, trustworthy, and authoritative as a prophet of the Lord.

The Adventist church maintains that she was inspired in the same manner, and to the same degree, as the prophets of the Bible; and yet, paradoxically, the church holds also that we do not make her writings another Bible, nor do we even consider them an addition to the sacred canon of Scripture.

The explication of this position more fully in a discussion of “the proper relationship of the writings of Ellen G. White to the Scriptures” will be the subject of part 3 of this series.

⁵⁶[The Review and Herald, December 11, 1883, p. 778.](#)

With Peter one may declare with courage and confidence, “We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day drawn, and the day star arise in your hearts” ([2 Peter 1:19](#)).

**Part III—The Relationship Between the
Ellen G. White Writings and the Bible**

[71]

Introduction

There is perhaps no subject more misunderstood in Seventh-day Adventist beliefs than the question of the proper relationship between the writings of Ellen G. White and those of Scripture.

A comparison of the writings of Christian authors such as Walter R. Martin,¹ Norman F. Doughty,² and others who have written critically about the doctrinal beliefs of Adventists, with some of the statements often quoted from Adventism's own writers which appear to present differing, if not conflicting, positions, makes one wonder if we in the church may not ourselves be responsible for causing some of the confusion outside!

For example, take the definition of two words we have often used in this three-part presentation: *inspiration* and *revelation*. Former Adventist minister Walter Rea, following Webster, sees inspiration as "the divine influence directly or immediately exerted upon the mind or soul of men." Rea labels this as "subjective." Revelation is seen as "God's disclosure of Himself and His will to His creatures": this Rea labels as "objective."³

After further defining *objective* and *subjective*, Rea alleges that this objective revelation possesses authority, whereas subjective inspiration does not. Objective revelation, in Rea's eyes, is concerned with fact and policy, whereas subjective revelation is seen as associated with values and personal opinions.

Rea then draws the conclusion that Ellen White's utterances convey mostly subjective inspiration. That is, they consist mainly of personal values or opinions (either hers, those of persons who influenced her, or authors from whom she copied). As such, her

¹Walter R. Martin, *The Truth About Seventh-day Adventism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960).

²Norman F. Doughty, *Another Look at Seventh-day Adventism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1962).

³Stenographic transcript of Walter Rea's lecture on "White Lies," San Diego, Calif.: Association of Adventist Forums (February 14, 1981), p. 9.

writings possess virtually no authority from God unless they can be proved from other sources, preferably Scripture.⁴

John J. Robertson, in his book, *The White Truth*,⁵ takes issue with this subjective/objective dichotomy. For him, “Revelation represents God’s activity as the sender of a message to His chosen prophet. Inspiration represents God’s activity upon or within the prophet, who then becomes the transmitter of that revelation to His people.”⁶

This writer also takes issue with the subjective/objective dichotomy projected by Walter Rea, but would prefer to define the terms—as was done in part 1 of this series—somewhat differently than Robertson. Borrowing in part from Raoul Dederen, we suggested that inspiration may be thought of as a *process* by which God enables the prophet to receive and communicate His message, whereas revelation is seen as the *content* of the message thus communicated.⁷

A stranger to Adventism, reading these three sets of definitions, might perhaps be forgiven for wondering if the church really has its theological act together! It has been much the same with our pronouncements on the relationship of the writings of Ellen White to Scripture.

Inside the church there has also been some confusion about, as well as abuse and misuse of, Mrs. White’s writings. Some members have indeed made a second Bible of them, often seeming to make Mrs. White the more important of the two. Some ministers and teachers have quoted Mrs. White ten or more times for every quotation from Scripture; some have even preached “freight-train” sermons (the locomotive is the sermon’s introduction, followed by a string of freight cars—quotations from Mrs. White; bringing up the rear is the caboose, the conclusion of the sermon). The frustration and irritation experienced by a motorist who is held up by a long,

⁴Ibid. Walter Rea refused to grant copyright permission to cite verbatim statements from the transcript. His remarks, therefore, are paraphrased.

⁵John J. Robertson, *The White Truth* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1981).

⁶Ibid., p. 79.

⁷The Journal of Adventist Education, vol. 44, No. 1 (October-November 1981), p. 18.

slow freight train is almost identical to the feelings of exasperation and anger on the part of one forced to listen to this kind of homiletical monstrosity.

Mrs. White's writings have also been misused by parents, teachers, and preachers who have used statements from them as a theological club with which to bludgeon an offender into submission.

[73] However, such misuse, whether by proponents of the "second-Bible" view (or even the "addendum to the Bible" idea) or by other misapplications, is not the position of the Seventh-day Adventist church even if these positions are adopted by some of its well-intentioned, though ill-informed, members. And, as John Quincy Adams was wont to say, "Arguments, drawn from the abuse of any thing, are not admissible against its use."⁸ In other words, "Don't throw out the baby with the bath water!"

What, then, *is* the position of the denomination with regard to the proper relationship between the writings of Mrs. White and sacred Scripture? As I understand it, we hold that Ellen G. White was inspired in the same manner and to the identical degree as were the prophets of the Bible; but—and this will be paradoxical to some—we do *not* make of her writings a second Bible, or even an addition to the sacred canon of God's Word. Let me explain.

⁸John Quincy Adams, sixth president of the United States and part-time Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory (1806-1809) at Harvard College. From a series of 37 lectures on rhetorical theory and practice, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*, recently republished (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), pp. 62-67.

Chapter 1—God’s Word Through the Prophets

Seventh-day Adventists generally believe that the sacred canon of Scripture was closed with the inclusion of the Apocalypse of John. And the canon, therefore, is both complete and sufficient in itself. In other words, it is possible for an individual to find Jesus Christ, to obtain salvation and eternal life, without ever having heard of Ellen G. White or ever having read one word of her writings.

Adventists, further, have traditionally held since their earliest days that the Scriptures are the *source* of our doctrinal beliefs, the *authority* of those beliefs, and the *test* of all beliefs (and all religious experience, as well).

However, having said all that, it is also clearly evident from Scripture that God also used a number of prophetic messengers, many of whom were contemporaries of the Bible writers, but whose utterances do not form a part of the canon itself. Some of them did their work during Old Testament times, some during New Testament times. It seems evident that their prophetic ministries involved the same kinds of work as that of the Bible writers. And this list of noncanonical prophets included women as well as men—five such as mentioned in each of the Testaments.⁹

The first prophet mentioned in Scripture was Enoch, “the seventh from Adam” (Jude 14); thus the “spiritual gift” of prophecy was among the earliest of the so-called “gifts of the Holy Spirit” to be given to the human family. During the first 2,500 years of human history all prophetic utterances were oral. Moses marks a transition point: He was the first literary prophet. From his time onward both varieties of prophet flourished.

⁹Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1957), pp. 90, 91, hereafter cited as Questions on Doctrine.

Literary but Noncanonical Prophets

Not all of the literary prophets, however, found themselves as authors of works that would later be gathered together in the canons of the Old or New Testaments. At least eight literary but non-canonical prophets are mentioned by name in the Old Testament. Jasher was the first, in the fifteenth century B.C., perhaps a mere 40 years after Moses' time. Although the Book of Jasher is mentioned in both [Joshua 10:13](#) and [2 Samuel 1:18](#), this book was not included in the Old Testament.

For-and-one-half centuries later, "Nathan the prophet" and "Gad the seer" wrote books ¹⁰ during the reign as King David; but while the latter's psalms were incorporated into the Old Testament, the books of the former were not. About two decades later Ahijah the Shilonite authored prophetically inspired writings, ¹¹ and another 20 years later along came the prophet Shemaiah ¹² and Iddo the Seer ¹³ as literary but noncanonical prophets. Then some 20 years afterward, Jehu wrote an inspired prophetic book ¹⁴ and the last of the literary but noncanonical prophets (at least as referred to in the Bible) was Elijah ¹⁵ in the early ninth century B.C.

The question immediately comes to mind, if these men were truly inspired, why were their writings not included in the Old Testament? Some have suggested a ready solution: Their writings, though inspired, were not *as* inspired as those of the biblical authors. This idea of degrees of inspiration has a long history in Adventism; a variation of the theme has surfaced in our own time. ¹⁶

One hypothesis of equal (if not superior) validity is that the messages of these literary but non-canonical prophetic writers were of a local nature: They were written to meet an immediate situation

¹⁰1 Chronicles 21:9; 29:29; 2 Chronicles 9:29; 29:25.

¹¹2 Chronicles 9:29; 1 Kings 11:29; 14:7.

¹²2 Chronicles 12:15.

¹³2 Chronicles 9:29; 12:15; 13:22.

¹⁴1 Kings 16:1, 7; 2 Chronicles 19:2; 20:34.

¹⁵2 Chronicles 21:12.

¹⁶The efforts of contemporary polemicists to disassociate the new "degrees of revelation" from the discredited "degrees of inspiration" position instinctively brings to mind Shakespeare's observation: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet" (Romeo & Juliet, Act II, Scene 2, Line 43).

in their own day. The Holy Spirit in His infinitely superior wisdom felt that it was unnecessary to preserve those messages for later periods in history.

Degrees of Inspiration?

We now offer three arguments against the view of degrees of inspiration (or degrees of revelation):

a. From empirical observation: The scriptural record does not differentiate between the canonical and noncanonical prophets as to the source of their messages, or the “chain of command” employed in communicating the messages from the Godhead to the prophet. There is no difference in the method of communication; no difference with regard to the physical phenomena associated with a prophet in vision; no difference in the kinds of messages communicated—encouragement, counsel, admonition, reproof, rebuke; no difference in the kinds of “imperfections” in the “earthen vessels”: no difference in the responses the messages elicited—some hearers heeded and were blessed, others disregarded and paid the consequences. Admittedly this is arguing from silence; but is it unreasonable to hold that the burden of proof must rest squarely upon the person who would seek to establish different degrees of inspiration?

b. From logic: To raise the question of degrees of inspiration (or of revelation) immediately creates the necessity of determining just who will do the classifying. Such an arbiter must of necessity be raised not merely to the level of the prophet, but must be raised to a level *above* that of the prophet, since he sits in judgment, decreeing that one part of the prophet’s writings is more inspired than another.

This problem is further compounded because no man can raise himself even to the level of a prophet—much less a position above a prophet. Paul clearly declares that the *Holy Spirit* divides the spiritual gifts “severally” to every man “according to his own will” (1 Corinthians 12:11; Hebrews 2:4). “No man taketh this honour unto himself”: the most any human, on his own, can do is to “covet earnestly the best gifts” (1 Corinthians 12:31). Surely no mere human should presumptuously place himself over the prophets to determine such a question as this!

c. From faith: I accept Ellen White as an inspired prophet of the Lord, and she once declared that there was no such thing as degrees of inspiration. And that, if there were no other argument, would be sufficient to settle the question for me.

No less a person than the president of the General Conference, George I. Butler, once discoursed on the subject of inspiration and revelation. In his ten articles, which were published from January 8 through June 3 of 1884 in the *Review and Herald*, Butler posited the idea that there were “differences in degrees” of inspiration.¹⁷

Ellen White remained silent for five years. Was she, charitably, hoping that he would discover his own blunder and correct it, thus sparing himself (and her) the embarrassment of a public rebuke?

We do not know; however, in 1889 she wrote a rather trenchant response:

Both in the [Battle Creek] Tabernacle and in the college the subject of inspiration has been taught, and finite men have taken it upon themselves to say that some things in the Scriptures were inspired and some were not. I was shown that the Lord did not inspire the articles on inspiration published in the *Review*, neither did He approve their endorsement before our youth in the college [there]. When men venture to criticize the Word of God, they venture on sacred, holy ground, and had better fear and tremble and hide their wisdom as foolishness. God sets no man to pronounce judgment on His Word, selecting some things as inspired and discrediting others as uninspired. The testimonies have been treated in the same way; but God is not in this.¹⁸

Degrees of Authority—An Untenable Position

Some favoring the idea of degrees of inspiration (or revelation) have recently advanced the idea that prophets also have degrees of authority. The latter position is as untenable as the former, largely for the same reasons. Empirically, there is no evidence from Scripture that one group of prophets had more—or less—authority than

¹⁷See especially the article published January 15, 1884.

¹⁸Letter 22, 1889; cited in Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages 1:23* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958).

another group. However, if there were, indeed, degrees of authority, how would these be determined? And by whom?

King David's experience with two literary but noncanonical prophets who ministered during his reign would seem to provide evidence against degrees of inspiration or authority.

Nathan. In part 2 we discussed the problem of Nathan's enthusiastically endorsing David's plan to build the temple without first checking with God to see whether the plan met *His* divine approval. It did not, and that night God spoke to Nathan telling him to go back to the king and correct the earlier message ([2 Samuel 7:1-17](#)).

Five chapters later we find Nathan back at the palace, at God's direction, to rebuke David for his twin sins of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah. Using the guise of a parable Nathan courageously drives home to David's heart the enormity of the monarch's crimes; and David, convicted by the Holy Spirit through His messenger, confesses and repents. Nathan then assures David that God has accepted his response and has forgiven him ([2 Samuel 12:1-14](#)).

Nathan warns, however, that inexorable consequences will result from David's acts. These consequences will still take place in spite of God's generous and merciful forgiveness (vss. 15-23). Later, out of his genuine repentance and remorse, David penned [Psalm 51](#), in which he appeals to God to "blot out my transgressions, ... cleanse me from my sin, ... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy holy spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and ... Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee" (vss. 1, 2, 10-13). And God granted him this heartfelt wish.

Nathan and David were both prophets. A few hundred years later when the Old Testament canon would be drawn up (perhaps under the supervision of Ezra), the Book of Nathan would not be included, but the psalms of David would be. Thus David would become a canonical prophet, Nathan a noncanonical prophet. We know of this encounter not because it is found in the Book of Nathan, but because the author of [2 Samuel 12](#) included it in his book. ¹⁹

¹⁹There is a Jewish tradition that Nathan and Gad authored [1 Samuel 25-31](#) and [2 Samuel](#). [See [The S.D.A. Bible Commentary 2:447](#) (Washington, D.C.: Review

If David perchance had been given a vision of the future, in which he was informed of his subsequent status and that of Nathan, and if David had subscribed to the fanciful theory of degrees of inspiration, the following exchange might logically have taken place:

Upon being rebuked by Nathan, David might have raised his hand in caution and said, “Wait a minute, Nathan. You must show more respect and deference to me. Yes, you’re a prophet; but you will be a forgotten noncanonical prophet a few centuries from now. I’ll be a canonical prophet; Christians three millennia from now will be singing my psalms in their churches. My fifty-first Psalm of repentance will encourage the hearts of millions down through the ages. But 3,000 years from now no one will know a single word of anything that you wrote in the Book of Nathan!”

[75] David might even have chided Nathan somewhat, in an effort to defend himself, by adding, “Be careful now, Nathan. Remember, you didn’t get it quite straight awhile back when you delivered your prophetic approval of my plan to build the Temple. Are you sure you’ve got it right now?”

What about degrees of authority? Well, the story begins very simply, “And the Lord *sent Nathan* to David.” Did Nathan have authority? Whose authority? How much authority? Those simple words quoted from [2 Samuel 12:1](#) answer these questions in a most forceful way.

The experience of Gad, the other literary but noncanonical prophet who ministered to David, is useful at this point.

In [1 Chronicles 21](#) we read that Satan tempted David to sin by numbering Israel. The king’s general, Joab, protested in vain. Israel was numbered (vss. 1-6), “and God was displeased with this thing; therefore he smote Israel” (vs. 7).

and Herald Pub. Assn., 1953).] However, the only source is Talmudic tradition, whose accuracy and authenticity is “problematical” at best, according to Dean Gerhard F. Hasel, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Mich. (interview, November 6, 1981). Whether the last part of 1 Samuel and the whole book of 2 Samuel incorporate portions of the “lost” Book of Nathan and Gad is only conjecture. It is not known whether these books—and the writings of the other noncanonical literary prophets—even survived until the time (perhaps 400 B.C.) when the Old Testament canon was formed; so we do not know whether their exclusion was a deliberate decision on the part of the compiler(s), or whether there was no choice because the books were already lost to history.

In the very next verse, David engages God directly in conversation. He confesses his foolishness and guilt and asks for pardon. But in verse 9 God does not address David directly, as He surely could have, for prophets have a special “pipeline” with the Almighty.

No, “the Lord spake unto Gad, David’s seer.” Since David would be a canonical prophet, why didn’t God communicate directly with him? Why did He choose, instead, a noncanonical prophet?

Notice, further, what God said to Gad: “Go and tell David, saying, Thus saith the Lord ...” (vs. 10). Surely this phrase indicates most forcefully the authority of Gad’s message. Did Gad need any more authority than a “thus saith the Lord”? *Is there any more authority than a “thus saith the Lord”?*

What did God tell Gad to do? He was instructed to tell David that God was now offering the king his choice of three punishments: three years’ famine, three months of destruction by his enemies, or three days of pestilence in the land (vs. 12).

God also told Gad to tell David, “Now therefore advise thyself what word I shall bring again to him that sent me” (vs. 12). David had the unique prophetic “pipeline”: but he was not to use it in this instance; rather, he was to communicate back to God through Gad.

Again, there is no evidence that David claimed inspiration superior to that of Gad. Instead, “David went up at the saying of Gad, which he spake in the name of the Lord” (vs. 19).

It is absurd to speak of degrees of inspiration. Either a prophet is inspired, or he is not. I recently attended a meeting in which there was a large number of women who were expecting to bear children at some time in the near future. Some were well advanced in pregnancy; some were in its early stages. Sometimes we speak of a woman in the first trimester of pregnancy as being “a little bit pregnant.” But the expression is not only inexact, it is incorrect. You have never seen any woman who was a “little bit pregnant.” Either she is pregnant, or she is *not* pregnant!

Likewise, you have never seen a prophet who was a “little bit” inspired.

It is equally absurd to speak of degrees of authority. On February 2, 1980, respected Adventist scholar Don F. Neufeld ²⁰ preached

²⁰Neufeld edited the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Student’s Source Book and the Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia (vols. 9 and 10 of The Seventh-day Adventist Bible

a sermon in the Takoma Park, Maryland, Seventh-day Adventist church entitled “When Jesus Speaks.” For this, the last message he ever preached,²¹ Neufeld took for his text [Revelation 19:10](#): “For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” In his message he discoursed on the various possible renderings of those phrases familiar to Adventists, “the testimony of Jesus” and “the spirit of prophecy.” And in his conclusion he drove home a very cogent point:

Through His witness to the New Testament prophets, Jesus predicted that prophetic activity, as one of many spiritual gifts, would continue in the church. In other words, the testimony of Jesus to His people was not to cease once the books that make up our present canon of Scripture would be written. Prophetic activity would continue beyond the close of the canon.

This brings us to an important question. If in all prophetic activity it is Jesus who is speaking, whether in Old Testament times, in New Testament times, or in post-New Testament times, *can we logically draw a distinction and say that what Jesus said in any one period is more or less authoritative than what He said in any other period*, at least with reference to the generations involved?

For example, could something that Jesus said in the first century A.D. be more or less authoritative than what He said in the 19th century A.D.? The answer, I think, is obvious. It doesn’t make any sense to argue for degrees of inspiration, as if what Jesus said in one generation was more inspired than what He said in another.

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Commentary series), as well as serving as one of the general editors of The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary. At the time of his death he was one of the associate editors of the Adventist Review.

²¹Letter of Maxine M. Neufeld, Loma Linda, Calif., n.d. (in response to the author’s letter of inquiry of August 19, 1981).

²²Sermon manuscript, “When Jesus Speaks,” p. 10; preached at the Takoma Park Seventh-day Adventist Church, February 2, 1980. Italics supplied.

Seventh-day Adventists generally hold that Ellen G. White is best understood in the role of the literary but noncanonical prophets of the Bible. As such, her writings were inspired by the Holy Spirit in the same way and to the same degree as the writings that were incorporated into the Bible; yet we do not make a second Bible of them, nor even consider them as an addition to the sacred canon of Scripture.

Let us note next how Ellen White saw her writings in relation to the Bible.

Chapter 2—The “Greater Light” / “Lesser Light” Analogy

In an “open letter” to her fellow church members, written December 6, 1902, and published in the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* of January 20, 1903, Mrs. White was looking ahead to the new year and was especially burdened about the colporteur work, which was languishing at the time. “I have been instructed that the canvassing work [door-to-door sales of Seventh-day Adventist literature] is to be revived, and that it is to be carried forward with increasing success.”²³

[76] She expresses appreciation for the united efforts of the laity and literature evangelists in promoting *Christ’s Object Lessons* (the royalties from which she dedicated toward lifting the indebtedness of Battle Creek College), and urges giving greater attention to the circulation of her other works. Highlighting the importance of this missionary endeavor, she adds:

Sister White is not the originator of these books. They contain the instruction that during her life-work God has been giving her. They contain the precious, comforting light that God has graciously given his servant to be given to the world. From their pages this light is to shine into the hearts of men and women, leading them to the Saviour. The Lord has declared that these books are to be scattered throughout the world.²⁴

Then, by way of amplifying this idea that “light is to shine” from her writings, and to demonstrate the relationship between those books and the writings of Scripture, she employed an oft-quoted metaphor:

²³“An Open Letter From Mrs. E. G. White to All Who Love the Blessed Hope,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 20, 1903, p. 15. Hereafter shortened to *Review and Herald*.

²⁴*Ibid.*

The Lord has sent his people much instruction, line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little, and there a little. Little heed is given to the Bible, and *the Lord has given a lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light.* ²⁵

Here Mrs. White makes incidental reference to [Genesis 1:16](#): “And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night.” By analogy she is saying that the Bible is the “greater light,” and her writings are the “lesser light.”

Before examining this analogy in detail to determine what Mrs. White intended to teach by it (and, of equal importance, what she did *not* intend to convey), let us first examine the question of how Mrs. White herself viewed this “greater light” of Holy Scripture.

Synthesizing a helpful list provided by Denton E. Rebok ²⁶ and some remarks in three paragraphs from the introduction to *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*, ²⁷ we note Mrs. White’s position on Scripture, and then how she saw her writings vis-à-vis the Bible:

a. Nature of the Bible

1. The entire Bible is the inspired word of God.
2. The “truth of God is found in His word.” No one need “seek elsewhere for present truth.”

b. Purpose of the Bible

1. The Bible sets the pattern for Christian living.
2. It contains “comfort, guidance, counsel, and the plan of salvation as clear as a sunbeam.”
3. It is fitted for the needs of all—rich and poor, learned and illiterate, “all ages and all classes.”
4. It contains all the knowledge that is “necessary for salvation.” Therefore, men should “cling” to their Bibles,

²⁵Ibid. Italics supplied.

²⁶Denton Edward Rebok, *Believe His Prophets* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1956), pp. 165, 166.

²⁷Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), p. vii.

believe and obey them; and then “not one” of them would be lost.

c. Primacy of the Bible

1. It is to be accepted “as an authoritative, infallible revelation” of God’s will.
2. As such, it is “the standard of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience.”

d. Role of Spiritual Gifts (Prophecy):

1. The existence of the Bible “has not rendered needless the continual presence and guiding of the Holy Spirit.”
2. Rather, Jesus promised His followers the gift of the Holy Spirit to “open the word to His servants” and “to illumine and apply its teachings.”
3. Since consistency is an attribute of Deity, and since it was the Holy Spirit who originally inspired the Bible, it is impossible that the teaching of the Holy Spirit through the gifts of the Spirit would be contrary to what the Bible says.
4. The Holy Spirit was not, is not, and never will be given “to supercede the Bible” because “the word of God is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested.”
5. The Testimonies were given only because man has neglected his Bible; and these are given to direct him back to the Bible.
 - (a) They are not given as an addition to the Word of God.
 - (b) They are not to take the place of the Word of God.

Metaphors to Interpret the Analogy

There are perhaps four metaphors that can be used to help us understand what Mrs. White intended to teach from her “greater light”/

“lesser light” analogy (and in so doing keep us from misinterpreting it):

1. *Time and geographical relationships.* The Bible is God’s universal message for all men for all time. Its 66 books were written by approximately 40 literary, canonical prophets over a period of approximately 1,500 years, and the Bible has represented the will of God for all mankind for between two and three millennia. On the other hand, the literary but noncanonical prophets—eight are mentioned in the Old Testament, and Adventists today put Ellen White into this category—wrote primarily for their own time and people. Thus the canonical prophets may be seen in this narrow distinction to be the “greater light,” and the noncanonical prophets may be seen as the “lesser light.”

2. *Tester/testee relationship.*²⁸ Every nation in the world, from ancient Egypt with its Pharaonic cubit to modern nations with their meter and kilogram, have maintained national standards of line and mass measurement in which precision and accuracy are of paramount importance. Without such, no nation could function. Commerce and trade, the building professions, and mass production would be an impossibility.

A visitor to the museum adjoining the library of the United States National Bureau of Standards at Gaithersburg, Maryland, will see on display the original National Prototype Meter No. 27 which was the U.S. national reference for line measurement from 1893 until 1960 (when the meter subsequently was defined in terms of the light emitted by electrically excited atoms of the gas krypton-86).

After the Treaty of the Meter was signed at Sèvres, France, in 1875, the International Bureau of Weights and Measures made 31 prototype meters and kilograms of platinum (90 percent) and iridium (10 percent), a substance especially noted not only for exceptional durability but also for a low coefficient of expansion and contraction. The signatory powers drew lots (the U.S. thereby acquired Meters Nos. 21 and 17 and Kilograms Nos. 4 and 20), and these new standards were sent to the national capitals of the participating nations. There these were preserved in an environment in which humidity

²⁸Carlyle B. Haynes was perhaps the foremost exponent of this analogy in his evangelistic crusades in North America during the first half of the twentieth century.

[77] and temperature were stringently controlled. (The technician who works with the national kilogram in Gaithersburg, for example, is not allowed to touch the metal weight—moisture from her fingers could affect its weight! She must also wear an aluminized apron to deflect body heat away from the standard.)

In addition to the national reference standards of length and mass, the National Bureau of Weights and Measures also has “working standards” of exactly the same length and weight, made of the same materials. If you suspect your yardstick or ruler is an incorrect length, you could take it to Gaithersburg and compare it with one of the working standards.

Incidentally, the working standards are indistinguishable from the national reference standard; the only difference between them is that one was arbitrarily chosen by lot for its elevated position as *the* standard of the nation.²⁹

Now to the application: The national standard could be seen as the “greater light”: the working standard could be seen as the “lesser light.” Or in an equally valid analogy, the working standard could be seen as the “greater light”: the ruler or yardstick you bring to have tested would thus be the “lesser light.”

The national yardstick is never tested by your hardware-store yardstick; likewise, the Scriptures are never tested by the writings of Ellen G. White. However, if and when our store-bought articles of measurement are tested by the authority and found to be totally accurate and reliable, we do not hesitate to use them as an authoritative standard—but always in relationship and reference to the ultimate accepted standard (the “greater light”).

3. *Forty candles/one candle.*³⁰ Place 40 identical lighted candles at one end of a table, and another lighted candle at the other. (The Bible was written by about 40 different authors, and Ellen G. White’s writings, of course, by one author.) Since 40 candlepower is greater than one candlepower, so the Scriptures may be seen to be the

²⁹Interview with Walt Weinstein, Historical Information Specialist and Curator of Museum, National Bureau of Standards, United States Department of Commerce, Gaithersburg, Md., October 29, 1981.

³⁰M. L. Venden Sr., is believed to have originated this illustration, and popularized it during his evangelistic crusades in North America during the first half of the twentieth century.

“greater light,” while the writings of Ellen White are seen as the “lesser light.”

It is especially important in this context, however, to remember that what is emitted, by either the 40 candles or by the single candle, is “light.” And Ellen White’s analogy of the sun and the moon as superior/inferior lights is particularly apt because the light that is radiated by the two orbs in the heavens is all the same kind of light. The moon has no light of its own; it simply reflects the light of the sun. Light is light; whether from the sun—or the Son. And if the light that is in you goes out in darkness, “how great is that darkness!” ([Matthew 6:23](#)).

It is also worth remembering that these metaphors we call parables are generally intended to teach one truth and one truth only. If pressed too far, they will break down. For example, while Ellen White is to some extent well represented by the one candle, the fact remains that the bulk of her writing exceeds by many times the total word content of the Old and the New Testaments combined (the “greater light”). The analogy should not be carried too far!

4. *National Map/State Map*. Many travelers in the United States take with them an atlas to aid them in navigating the nation’s highways. Many atlases have a double-page map of the 48 contiguous States at the beginning, followed by individual single-page state maps. The national map would thus be seen as the “greater light,” the State map as the “lesser light.”

Two applications are worth making here: There is no disagreement between the representation of Maryland, for example, on the two-page national map and on that of the single-page state of Maryland map. However, there is substantially more detail on the “lesser light” state map of Maryland than there is on the “greater light” national map.

In concluding our discussion of this “greater light”/“lesser light” analogy, it is probably worth noting that, on the basis of Ellen White’s own statements, it would seem to be an improper distortion to assert (as do some modern critics) that by this figure she meant that the Bible had greater inspiration or authority than her writings.

³¹For an interesting, if somewhat controversial, discussion of the entire question, see Ron Graybill, “Ellen White’s Role in Doctrinal Formation,” *Ministry*, October 1981, pp.

The Analogy of the Telescope

Apart from the “greater light”/“lesser light” metaphors, another analogy, also drawn from the world of nature, has been particularly helpful in defining the relationship between the writings of Ellen White and those of Scripture. It was developed by Mrs. S.M.I. Henry, an “evangelist” for the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union in the mid-nineteenth century and a convert to Seventh-day Adventism while a patient at the Battle Creek Sanitarium in 1896. (She subsequently found divine healing through prayer.)³²

Mrs. Henry wrote, in an extended and fascinating autobiographical account, about her initial misunderstanding of the role of the *Testimonies*, her further disillusionment at discovering that many Adventists in Battle Creek gave only lip-service to belief, her personal struggle to understand the function of the spiritual gift of prophecy in modern times, and her subsequent enlightenment as a result of a season of special prayer. Her study led her initially to view Ellen G. White’s writings as a lens—and subsequently, as a telescope—through which to look at the Bible.

Developing the analogy, she said that these writings were also “subject to all telescopic conditions and limitations“:

Clouds may intervene between it and a heaven full of stars,—clouds of unbelief, of contention; Satan may blow tempests all about it; it may be blurred by the breath of our own selfishness; the dust of superstition may gather upon it; we may meddle with it, and turn it aside from the field; it may be pointed away toward empty space; it may be turned end for end, so that everything is so diminished that we can recognize nothing. We may change the focus so that everything is distorted out of all harmonious proportions, and made hideous.

7-11. Especially valuable to this writer are Graybill’s two compilations of Ellen G. White statements, one emphasizing the subordination of her writings to Scripture and the other illustrating her claim to the right to define and interpret Scripture (p. 9).

³²“Sarepta Myrenda (Irish) Henry,” *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, p. 581. Mrs. Henry is credited with conceiving a plan for what she called “woman ministry,” and with being the first in the Seventh-day Adventist church to present an organized plan to train mothers and fathers in the art and science of parenting (*ibid.*).

It may be so shortened that nothing but a great piece of opaque glass shall appear to our gaze. If the *lens* is mistaken for the *field* we can receive but a very narrow conception of the most magnificent spectacle with which the heavens ever invited our gaze, but in its proper office as a medium of enlarged and clearer vision, as a *telescope*, the Testimony has a wonderfully beautiful and holy office.

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Everything depends upon our relation to it and the use which we make of it. In itself it is only a glass through which to look; but in the hand of the Divine Director, properly mounted, set at the right angle and adjusted to the eye of the observer, with a field, clear of clouds, it will reveal *truth* such as will quicken the blood, gladden the heart, and open a wide door of expectation. It will reduce nebulae to constellations; faraway points of light to planets of the first magnitude; and to suns burning with glory.

The failure has been in understanding what the Testimonies are and how to use them. They are not the heavens, palpitating with countless orbs of truth, but they do lead the eye and give it power to penetrate into the glories of the mysterious living word of God.³³

Denton Rebok attests that “Sister White herself said that Mrs. S.M.I. Henry had caught the relationship between the writings of the Spirit of Prophecy and the Bible as clearly and as accurately as anyone could ever put into words.”³⁴

A telescope doesn’t put more stars into the heavens; it simply reveals more clearly the stars that are already there. And Ellen White’s writings, to change the figure, may also be seen as a microscope that helps “to magnify and make clear the details of the truths of the Word” of God.³⁵ Likewise, the writings of Ellen White add detail and make clear the teachings of the Scriptures.

³³Originally published in *The Gospel of Health, January 1898*, pp. 25-28, cited in Rebok, pp. 180, 181.

³⁴Ibid., p. 181.

³⁵Ibid., p. 182.

Chapter 3—The Jemison Model of Relationship

The late T. H. Jemison, in a work that for decades was the standard Seventh-day Adventist college textbook for prophetic guidance, devotes an entire chapter to “The Ellen G. White Writings and the Bible” in *A Prophet Among You*.

Quoting extensively from Ellen White’s own words, chiefly in the chapter “The Nature and Influence of the ‘Testimonies,’”³⁶ Jemison shows that Mrs. White saw her writings as fulfilling eight functions, which could readily be subsumed under three categories:

A. To Direct Attention to the Bible:

1. To exalt the Bible.
2. To attract minds to the Bible.
3. To call attention to neglected truths.

B. To Aid in Understanding the Bible:

4. To further impress truths already revealed.
5. To awaken minds.
6. To simplify truths.

C. To Help in Applying Bible Principles in Our Lives:

7. To bring out principles and help apply them.
8. To instruct in details.³⁷

Jemison’s concluding paragraph in this chapter is especially instructive. After posing the question, what is meant by such Ellen White expressions as “additional truth is not brought out”³⁸ and “the written testimonies are not to give new light”³⁹ and “are there no

³⁶Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* 5:665.

³⁷T. Housel Jemison, *A Prophet Among You* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1955), pp. 367-371.

³⁸*Testimonies for the Church* 5:665.

³⁹*Ibid.*

descriptions given and details enumerated in the Ellen White books that are not mentioned in the Bible?” Jemison responds:

Certainly, or there would be little purpose in the giving of these messages. Are these not “additional truth” and “new light”? Not at all. *The writings introduce no new topic, no new revelation, no new doctrine. They simply give additional details and round out subjects already a part of the Scripture record.* The whole realm of spiritual truth is encompassed by the Bible. There is no need for more to be added. But further details, incidents, and applications made in these modern writings lead to keener perception and deeper understanding of the truth already revealed. ⁴⁰

The Two “Special Resurrections”

An illustration of how those writings give us not only additional details but also suggest new relationships between certain specific passages of Scripture is seen in the treatment Ellen White gives in her discussion of the two special resurrections spoken of in the Bible.

1. *The special resurrection at Easter.* Twice in the Bible, once in Matthew’s Gospel and once in Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians, there is mentioned an intriguing subject with tantalizingly little detail: the special resurrection that took place on Easter Sunday morning and the amazing aftermath, 40 days later at the Ascension.

These are the facts as they are found in Scripture: In [Matthew 27:51-53](#) we are told that (a) there was an earthquake at the moment of Christ’s death; (b) It opened a number of graves; (c) after Christ arose Sunday morning “many” were raised to life; (d) these persons were identified as “saints” (in the Bible a saint is not some super-righteous, miracle-working holy person, but rather an ordinary, garden-variety Christian, a sinner saved by grace); (e) the persons raised from the dead then went into Jerusalem (“the holy city”); (f) they appeared to “many” of the citizens of that place; and

⁴⁰Jemison, p. 372. Italics supplied.

in [Ephesians 4:8](#) (margin) we are further told that (g) they ascended with Christ to heaven 40 days after they were raised from the dead.

Ellen White, however, draws back the veil and gives nearly a dozen additional facts of identification and information:

- During their natural lifetimes they were “co-laborers with God.” ⁴¹
- They were martyrs; “at the cost of their lives” ⁴² “they had borne their testimony unflinchingly for the truth.” ⁴³
- They represented “every age” of history “from creation down even to the days of Christ.” ⁴⁴ (Abel was the first martyr; John the Baptist the last martyr of record before Calvary.)
- They differed in stature and form, “some being more noble in appearance than others.... Those who lived in the days of Noah and Abraham resembled the angels in form, comeliness, and strength.” ⁴⁵ [Adam was more than twice the height of men now living; Eve a little shorter (her head came a little above his shoulders)]. ⁴⁶
- These were raised to immortality; ⁴⁷ whereas the three persons raised during Christ’s pre-Calvary ministry were not raised to eternal life, and subsequently died again. ⁴⁸
- Christ was the One who raised them to life. ⁴⁹
- Their work was to witness to the resurrection of Christ. They were witnesses that the priests could not silence.

⁴¹Ellen G. White, [The Desire of Ages](#), 786 (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1940).

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³[Selected Messages 1:304](#).

⁴⁴Ellen G. White, [Early Writings](#), 184 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1945).

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ellen G. White, [Spiritual Gifts 3:34](#) (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1945).

⁴⁷[Selected Messages 1:304, 305](#).

⁴⁸[The Desire of Ages](#), 786.

⁴⁹[Selected Messages 1:304](#); [The Desire of Ages](#), 786.

⁵⁰ Their testimony contradicted the perjury of the bribed Roman soldiers. ⁵¹

- Their message was: The sacrifice for man is now complete; Jesus, whom the Jews crucified, is now risen from the dead. ⁵² The proof? “We be risen with Him.” ⁵³

- They were the living fulfillment of the prophecy of [Isaiah 26:19](#). ⁵⁴

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- Jesus presented them in person to His Father in heaven as the first fruits of all the righteous dead who someday would be brought back to life. ⁵⁵

It is true that in Ellen White’s writings we have “no new topic, no new revelation, no new doctrine“: but we do have a great deal of new information!

2. *The special resurrection just before the second coming of Christ.* Four passages of Scripture speak, directly or by implication, of a special resurrection just before the second coming of Christ. ⁵⁶ Ellen White interprets for us: There will be three classes of people—(a) all those who have died in the faith under the third angel’s message, keeping the Sabbath; (b) the crucifiers of Jesus who did not find salvation before they died 19 centuries ago; and (c) the most violent opponents of Christ’s truth and His people. ⁵⁷ Only the first two categories are reasonably inferred from Scripture, the third comes to us as additional, extrabiblical information, from the prophetic gift in our own time.

⁵⁰The Desire of Ages, 786.

⁵¹Selected Messages 1:305.

⁵²Early Writings, 184.

⁵³Ibid.; The Desire of Ages, 786.

⁵⁴Selected Messages 1:305.

⁵⁵Selected Messages 1:306.

⁵⁶Daniel 12:1, 2; Matthew 26:64; Revelation 1:7; 14:13.

⁵⁷Early Writings, 285; The Great Controversy, 637.

Ellen White and Development of Seventh-day Adventist Doctrine

Many of those in the Seventh-day Adventist church today who express concern (if not doubt) about the authority of Ellen White in the church generally focus their interest on the issue of doctrinal authority. This being the case, it is especially helpful for us to examine, successively, how we as a people arrived at our doctrine, what role Ellen White played in the development of these doctrines, and how Ellen White herself viewed the nature of her contribution to that process.

The Sabbath Conferences

Most Seventh-day Adventist church historians would probably agree that the doctrinal framework of the denomination was largely hammered out during a series of long weekend gatherings that we today call Bible conferences, but which in earlier times were generally known as Sabbath conferences.

The historians, however, appear to be in less agreement regarding the time of when these gatherings were held. LeRoy Edwin Froom, author of the monumental, exhaustive four-volume work, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, in a chapter entitled “Sabbath Conferences Consolidate Emerging Movement,”⁵⁸ seems satisfied to settle for merely the six conferences held in 1848:

1. *Rocky Hill, Connecticut, April 20-24, at Albert Belden’s home.* Attendance: about 50. Speakers: H. S. Gurney, Joseph Bates (the Sabbath and the law), and James White (the dawning significance of the third angel’s message, its scope, and specifications).
2. *Volney, New York, August 18, in David Arnold’s carriage house.* Attendance: about 35. Speakers: Joseph Bates (the Sabbath), and James White (the parable of [Matthew 25:1-13](#)).
3. *Port Gibson, New York, August 27 and 28, in Hiram Edson’s barn.* No specific details available.

⁵⁸LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1954), vol. 4, pp. 1021-1048.

4. *Rocky Hill, Connecticut, September 8 and 9, in Albert Belden's home.* No specific details available.
5. *Topsham, Maine, October 20-22, in the Stockbridge Howland home.* Discussion centered around the possibility of publishing a paper, but since the participants were without funds, no concrete action was taken.
6. *Dorchester, Massachusetts, November 18, Otis Nichols' home.* A further discussion on publishing a paper took place, and Ellen White received affirmative counsel from the Lord regarding this literature ministry.

The editors of the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, however, see a three-year period as involved in doctrinal formation, rather than merely the beginning year of 1848; and they point out that in 1849 there were another six conferences (James and Ellen White attended at least three of them: Paris, Maine, in September, and Oswego and Centerport, New York, in November). And in 1850 there were a total of ten Sabbath conferences, eight of which the Whites attended. ⁵⁹

The conferences were attended mostly by those who had been caught up in the Millerite movement and were unwilling, after the great disappointment of October 22, 1844, to throw over their former experience (as many others had done). Interested friends of these ex-Millerites also attended the meetings, which might run over Friday and Sabbath, or Sabbath and Sunday, or Thursday through Sunday.

Keeping in mind that the Millerite movement was probably the most ecumenical movement of the entire nineteenth century, it is not surprising that this remnant of it comprised a group of people with widely divergent theological viewpoints. Commenting upon the first of the 1848 conferences, James White, in a letter written afterward to Stockbridge Howland, said of the 50 who attended, "They were not all fully in the truth." ⁶⁰

Regarding the second of the Sabbath conferences (and the first general meeting to be held in western New York), Ellen White, in describing the positions of the approximately 35 attendees, wrote that "hardly two agreed. Some were holding serious errors, and each

⁵⁹"Sabbath Conferences," *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, p. 1255.

⁶⁰Cited in [Spiritual Gifts 2:93](#).

strenuously urged his own views, declaring that they were according to the Scriptures.”⁶¹ The problems discussed did not center so much on whether a belief could be found in Scripture, but rather on what the Scripture *meant* by what it said. Yet, invariably, when the weekend was over, there was unity of belief. What happened to bring this unanimity out of such diversity?

[80] First, there was earnest Bible study and prayer. Writing in 1904, more than a half-century after the events, Ellen White still had vivid memories of the conferences. She wrote about them because “many of our people now do not realize how firmly the foundation of our faith has been laid.” She identified by name some of the more prominent participants “who searched for the truth as for hidden treasure.” Concerning her own participation, she added:

I met with them, and we studied and prayed earnestly. Often we remained together until late at night, and sometimes through the entire night, praying for light and studying the Word. Again and again these brethren came together to study the Bible, in order that they might know its meaning, and be prepared to teach it with power.⁶²

But Bible study and prayer alone were not enough to convince the participants. These hardy farmers and tradesmen held tenaciously to their pet theological theories, hardly budging an inch. Concerning this Mrs. White added:

These strange differences of opinion rolled a heavy weight upon me. I saw that many errors were being presented as truth. It seemed to me that God was dishonored. Great grief pressed upon my spirits, and I fainted under the burden. Some feared that I was dying. Brethren Bates, Chamberlain, Gurney, Edson, and my husband prayed for me. The Lord heard the prayers of His servants, and I revived.⁶³

⁶¹Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White*, p. 110 (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1915).

⁶²*Selected Messages* 1:206.

⁶³*Life Sketches of Ellen G. White*, 111.

In addition to earnest and extended Bible study and prayer the conferences saw the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit; but this intervention did not come until the participants had gone as far as they could go. Let us note next, then, the work of the Holy Spirit as He worked through the human vessels at these conferences at which our doctrinal positions were established.

The Role of the Visions in Doctrinal Formation

The function of the visions given at the conferences appears to have been to (a) correct the brethren if they were on the wrong track, or (b) confirm and corroborate if they were on the right track, but (c) never to initiate doctrinal formulation. As Arthur L. White would later state in point No. 12 (of 21) “Helpful Points in the Interpretation and Use of the Ellen G. White Writings“:

The counsels are not given to take the place of faith, initiative, hard work, or Bible study. God did not use the Spirit of Prophecy to make us dependent or weak. Rather, the counsels are to make us strong by encouraging us to study the word of God, and by encouraging us to move forward. ⁶⁴

Wrote Ellen White concerning this stage of doctrinal development:

When they came to the point in their study where they said, “We can do nothing more,” the Spirit of the Lord would come upon me, I would be taken off in vision, and a clear explanation of the passages we had been studying would be given me, with instruction as to how we are to labor and teach effectively. Thus light was given that helped us to understand the scriptures in regard to Christ, His mission, and His priesthood. A line of truth extending from that time to the time when we shall enter the city of God, was made plain to me,

⁶⁴Comprehensive Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1963), vol. 3, p. 3214.

and I gave to others the instruction that the Lord had given to me.⁶⁵

Speaking of the second Sabbath conference in particular, and of the work and place of the visions, Ellen White wrote in her autobiography:

The light from heaven then rested upon me, and I was soon lost to earthly things. My accompanying angel presented before me some of the errors of those present, and also the truth in contrast with their errors. These discordant views, which they claimed were in harmony with the Scriptures, were only according to their opinion of Bible teaching; and I was bidden to tell them that they should yield their errors, and unite upon the truths of the third angel's message.⁶⁶

What caused those post-Millerite Adventists to accept the visions of this young prophet hardly into her twenties? Perhaps three reasons were instrumental:

First, there was the content of the visions. They were relevant and helpful in solving the immediate problems with which the conferences were dealing.

Second, there was the awesome physical phenomena accompanying an open vision. This was never a *test* of authenticity, because Satan can and does counterfeit physical phenomena, but it surely was an evidence of supernatural activity.

Third, there was the continuing phenomena of the prophet's mind being "locked" when she was not in vision. This apparently lasted for a period of "two to three years"—concurrent with the Sabbath conferences—and during this time when *not* in vision, all Mrs. White could do was to report what she had seen in vision; she could not enter into the subsequent discussions of either the meaning of what she had seen or of Bible truth

⁶⁵Selected Messages 1:206.

⁶⁶Life Sketches of Ellen G. White, 111.

generally. “My mind was locked, as it were,” she wrote years later, “and I could not comprehend the meaning of the scriptures we were studying.” And it remained thus “locked” until all of the principal points of our faith had been systematically developed.⁶⁷

She also wrote of the effect of this on those attending the conferences: “The brethren knew that when not in vision, I could not understand these matters, *and they accepted as light direct from heaven the revelations given.*”⁶⁸

From her perspective at the age of 77 years, Ellen White’s observation concerning her feelings toward this phenomena in which her mind was locked is even more poignant: “This was one of the greatest sorrows of my life.”⁶⁹

Largely because of the helpful nature of her visions at the Bible conferences, Mrs. White could write of such occasions: “Our meeting closed triumphantly. Truth gained the victory. Our brethren renounced their errors and united upon the third angel’s message, and God greatly blessed them and added many to their numbers.”⁷⁰

Froom, looking at the above facts, sees Ellen White’s role in doctrinal formation as essentially that of an umpire: To one, “your idea is right”: to another “your idea is wrong.” Says he:

Throughout this entire time of intense searching the Spirit of prophecy was a help—but only a help. No doctrine or interpretation of prophecy was initially discovered or disclosed through the Spirit of prophecy. The doctrines of the Sabbatarians were *all* founded upon Holy Scripture, so that theirs was a truly Protestant platform.⁷¹

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One cannot help but wonder, however, if Froom’s statement conflicts with Mrs. White’s testimony that “a line of truth ... was made plain to me” and, in addition, “instruction was given as to

⁶⁷Selected Messages 1:207.

⁶⁸Ibid. Italics supplied.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Life Sketches of Ellen G. White, 111.

⁷¹Froom, pp. 1046, 1047.

how we were to labor and teach effectively“: although Froom’s observation is probably fairly close to the mark.⁷²

How Ellen White Saw Her Authority

In view of the rather dramatic, if not sensational, experiences through which she passed, not only during 1848-1850 but in later years as those original doctrines were repeated and amplified by the Holy Spirit, it is interesting to examine the effect of these experiences upon Ellen White’s consciousness. How did she see herself? How did she evaluate the work God led her to perform? What consequences would result from a rejection of her work?

1. *She disclaimed giving merely personal knowledge/opinion.* Ellen White was the object of vitriolic attack even during her lifetime; and she spoke out sharply in defense of herself—and God. She disclaimed the notion that she was presenting merely human information or opinion, but rather asserted that all her statements came from God and that she was merely the conduit.

I have no special wisdom in myself; I am only an instrument in the Lord’s hands to do the work He has set for me to do. The instructions that I have given by pen or voice have been an expression of the light that God has given me.⁷³

In her letters and testimonies, said Ellen White, “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.”⁷⁴

⁷²For a more detailed step-by-step analysis of the formulation of Seventh-day Adventist doctrines, see Froom, pp. 1021-1048; and Arthur L. White, Ellen G. White, Messenger to the Remnant (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1969), pp. 34-37.

⁷³Testimonies for the Church 5:691.

⁷⁴Testimonies for the Church 5:67. Italics supplied. The use of “merely” should alert the reader to the fact that Ellen White was not claiming that she never got ideas or materials from the writings of others, but rather that what she wrote was always in harmony with the messages God gave her in vision.

Ellen White claimed a unique place in her church—a work not given to any other member. She quoted an angel as telling her ““God has raised you up and has given you words to speak to the people and to reach hearts as He has given to no other one.... God has impressed this upon you by opening it before your vision as He has to no other one now living.””⁷⁵ Speaking for herself, she went on, ““God has not given my brethren the work that He has given me.””⁷⁶ To illustrate the essential nature of that uniqueness she added:

“When I am speaking to the people I say much that I have not premeditated. The Spirit of the Lord frequently comes upon me. I seem to be carried out of, and away from, myself.... I ... feel compelled to speak of what is brought before me. I dare not resist the Spirit of God.”⁷⁷

“From higher ground, under the instruction given me of God, I present these things before you,” she declared.⁷⁸ She went on to deny that anyone could accept part of her writings, while rejecting other parts. “We cannot be half the Lord’s and half the world’s. We are not God’s people unless we are such entirely.”⁷⁹ Next, note this: Speaking of her testimonies, she affirmed:

“God is either teaching His church, reproving their wrongs and strengthening their faith, or He is not. This work is of God, or it is not. God does nothing in partnership with Satan. My work ... bears the stamp of God or the stamp of the enemy. There is no halfway work in the matter. The *Testimonies* are of the Spirit of God, or of the devil.”⁸⁰

⁷⁵Testimonies for the Church 5:667, 668.

⁷⁶Testimonies for the Church 5:677.

⁷⁷Testimonies for the Church 5:678.

⁷⁸Ellen G. White, *Christ in His Sanctuary* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1969), p. 10

⁷⁹Testimonies for the Church 5:83.

⁸⁰Testimonies for the Church 5:671.

She was not giving “merely the opinion of Sister White“: and those who asserted this, she declared “thereby insulted the Spirit of God.”⁸¹ She further amplified this, saying:

If those to whom these solemn warnings are addressed say, “It is only Sister White’s individual opinion, I shall still follow my own judgment,” and if they continue to do the very things they were warned not to do, they show that they despise the counsel of God, and the result is just what the Spirit of God has shown me it would be—injury to the cause of God and ruin to themselves.⁸²

2. *Mrs. White claimed authority to define doctrinal truth.* But she went still farther. Not only when she spoke about matters in the homes and churches of her fellow church members was she a direct spokesperson for God, but also when she defined a doctrinal position, that definition was authoritative and reliable.

Speaking of “our early experience” (undoubtedly a reference to the Sabbath conferences of 1848-1850), when “one error after another pressed in upon us,” with “ministers and doctors bringing in new doctrines,” the little bands would sometimes spend “whole nights” searching Scripture and praying to God for guidance. At these times “the Holy Spirit would bring the truth to our minds.... The power of God would come upon me, and *I was enabled clearly to define what is truth and what is error.*”⁸³

Mrs. White declared, in effect, that her statements on doctrine were essentially without error. “There is one straight chain of truth, without one heretical sentence, in that which I have written.”⁸⁴ Her testimonies “never contradict” the Bible because she was “instructed in regard to the relation of Scripture to Scripture.”⁸⁵ Even doctrinal matters in her personal diaries, she wrote five years before her death,

⁸¹Testimonies for the Church 5:64.

⁸²Testimonies for the Church 5:687, 688.

⁸³Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, 302 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1948). Italics supplied.

⁸⁴Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages 3:52* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1980).

⁸⁵Selected Messages 3:38.

should be put in print because they contain “light” and “instruction” that was given her to “correct specious errors and to specify what is truth.”⁸⁶ To Evangelist W. W. Simpson, laboring in southern California, she wrote in 1906 that “I am thankful that the instruction contained in my books establishes present truth for this time. These books were written under the demonstration of the Holy Spirit.”⁸⁷

In 1905, shortly after having had to rebuke the spurious doctrines advanced by Dr. John Harvey Kellogg and his followers, and again looking back to those early Sabbath conferences in which the manifestation of the Holy Spirit was so marked, Mrs. White declared without equivocation:

When the power of God testifies as to what is truth, that truth is to stand forever as the truth. No after suppositions contrary to the light God has given are to be entertained.⁸⁸

In the rest of the passage she talked of men arising in the future (as they had in the past) with “interpretations of Scripture which are to them truth, but which are not truth.” These people would claim to possess “new light.” But, she asserted, the doctrines of these men would “[contradict] the light that God has given under the demonstration of the Holy Spirit.” She then counseled the future leaders of the church to reject such messages that contradict the “special points of our faith” and move even “one pillar from the foundation that God has sustained” from 1844 to the turn of the century. Acceptance of such views would “lead to a denial of the truth that for the past fifty years God has been giving to His people, substantiating it by the demonstration of the Holy Spirit.”⁸⁹

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3. *Motivation of critics.* The fundamental motivation of those who “dissect” Mrs. White’s writings “to suit your own ideas, claiming that God has given you ability to discern what is light from heaven and what is the expression of mere human wisdom”⁹⁰ was

⁸⁶Selected Messages 3:32.

⁸⁷Letter 50, 1906; cited in Graybill, Ministry, p. 9.

⁸⁸Selected Messages 1:161.

⁸⁹Selected Messages 1:161, 162.

⁹⁰Testimonies for the Church 5:691.

identified by the prophet as “the prevailing spirit of our time ... infidelity and apostasy—a spirit of pretended illumination ... but in reality ... the blindest presumption.” She added:

There is a spirit of opposition to the plain word of God and to the testimony of His Spirit. There is a spirit of idolatrous exaltation of mere human reason above the revealed wisdom of God. ⁹¹

And pressing the question of causation still farther, Mrs. White explained the “*true*” reason (italics hers) for opposition to her writings which is seldom uttered publicly: She has written or said something that cuts across the lifestyle of the critic, perhaps in the area of diet or dress, reading matter, entertainment and amusement, stewardship, or Sabbath observance. The critic thus exhibits by his criticism “a lack of moral courage—a will, strengthened and controlled by the Spirit of God, to renounce hurtful habits.” ⁹²

4. *The danger of doubt.* Next we notice Mrs. White turning her attention to the question of doubt—doubt of Scripture and doubt of the writings of God’s contemporary prophet:

“Satan has ability to suggest doubts and to devise objections to the pointed testimony that God sends, and many think it a virtue, a mark of intelligence in them, to be unbelieving and to question and quibble. Those who desire to doubt will have plenty of room. God does not propose to remove all occasion for unbelief. [If He did, He would simultaneously remove all opportunity for the exercise of faith!] He gives evidence, which must be carefully investigated with a humble mind and a teachable spirit, and all should decide from the weight of evidence.” “God gives sufficient evidence for the candid mind to believe; but he who turns from the weight of evidence because there are a few things which he cannot make plain to his finite understanding will be left in the

⁹¹Testimonies for the Church 5:79.

⁹²Testimonies for the Church 5:675.

cold, chilling atmosphere of unbelief and questioning doubts, and will make shipwreck of faith.”⁹³

Mrs. White earnestly declared, “If you lose confidence in the *Testimonies* you will drift away from Bible truth.”⁹⁴ She even gives the successive steps on the ladder that leads down to “perdition.” Note them:

a. Satan causes church members to engage in a spirit of criticism of denominational leadership at all levels—he excites “jealousy and dissatisfaction toward those at the head of the work.”

b. Spiritual gifts in general (and the gift of prophecy, as exercised through Mrs. White, in particular) “are next questioned;” with the end result that they have “but little weight, and instruction given through vision is disregarded.”

c. The basic, or pillar, doctrines of the church, “the vital points of our faith,” engender skepticism; and closely following this:

d. “Then [follows] doubt as to the Holy Scriptures” themselves, “and then the downward march to perdition.”

Mrs. White elaborates:

“When the *Testimonies*, which were once believed, are doubted and given up, Satan knows the deceived ones will not stop at this; and he redoubles his efforts till he launches them into open rebellion, which becomes incurable and ends in destruction.” “By giving place to doubts and unbelief in regard to the work of God, ... they are preparing themselves for complete deception.”⁹⁵

5. *An appeal—and a warning.* Mrs. White earnestly entreated the critics of her day

not to interpose between me and the people, and turn away the light which God would have come to them. Do not by your criticisms take out all the force,

⁹³[Testimonies for the Church 5:676.](#)

⁹⁴[Testimonies for the Church 5:674.](#)

⁹⁵[Testimonies for the Church 5:672.](#)

all the point and power, from the *Testimonies*.... If the *Testimonies* speak not according to the word of God, reject them. Christ and Belial cannot be united. For Christ's sake do not confuse the minds of the people with human sophistry and skepticism, and make of none effect the work that the Lord would do. Do not, by your lack of spiritual discernment, make of this agency of God a rock of offense whereby many shall be caused to stumble and fall, "and be snared, and be taken."⁹⁶

Going further, she charges that "your unbelief will not change the facts in the case":⁹⁷ "your unbelief does not affect their [the *Testimonies*'] truthfulness. If they are from God they will stand."⁹⁸

Then, "God is not as man; He will not be trifled with."⁹⁹ And "opposition to God's threatenings will not hinder their execution. To defy the words of the Lord, spoken through His chosen instruments, will only provoke His anger and eventually bring certain ruin upon the offender."¹⁰⁰

Speaking about her work, and the Lord who commissioned it, Mrs. White further warned:

If God has given me a message to bear to His people, those who would hinder me in the work and lessen the faith of the people in its truth are not fighting against the instrument, but against God. "It is not the instrument whom you slight and insult, but God, who has spoken to you in these warnings and reproofs." "It is hardly possible for men to offer a greater insult to God than to despise and reject the instrumentalities that He has appointed to lead them."¹⁰¹

In a night vision the Lord told Mrs. White about those who had turned from the light sent them. "In slighting and rejecting the

⁹⁶Testimonies for the Church 5:691.

⁹⁷Testimonies for the Church 5:66.

⁹⁸Testimonies for the Church 5:674.

⁹⁹Testimonies for the Church 5:664.

¹⁰⁰Testimonies for the Church 5:678.

¹⁰¹Testimonies for the Church 5:680.

testimony that I have given you to bear, it is not you, but Me, your Lord, that they have slighted.”¹⁰²

And, finally, “if you seek,” said Mrs. White, “to turn aside the counsel of God to suit yourselves, if you lessen the confidence of God’s people in the testimonies He has sent them, you are rebelling against God as certainly as were Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. You have their history.”¹⁰³

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On the other hand, “all who believe that the Lord has spoken through Sister White, and has given her a message, will be safe from the many delusions that will come in the last days.”¹⁰⁴

To sum up this consideration of Ellen White’s role in the development of Seventh-day Adventist doctrine, we conclude that she played an important part in the formation of Adventist doctrinal belief, especially during the Sabbath conferences of 1848-1850; but her role was essentially limited to passing on messages from God given in vision, rather than entering into dialog with those who were developing the framework of our doctrinal system.

The Spirit of God did not come upon her until those engaged in serious study and prayer had gone as far as they could; then the messages given through Mrs. White tended either to correct (if the participants were going in a wrong direction) or to *confirm* and *corroborate* (if they were headed in the right direction); but there is no evidence that the visions were given to *initiate* doctrinal formulation.

Mrs. White, while maintaining the primacy of Scripture, nevertheless saw herself as the counterpart of the Bible prophets in receiving God’s messages and passing them on to His people. Since it was the same Holy Spirit, speaking in Bible times and again in modern times, those messages carried equal weight. They could not be ignored with impunity, either by critics who tried to dissect them, or by others who conveniently neglected or ignored them.

¹⁰²Testimonies for the Church 5:668.

¹⁰³Testimonies for the Church 5:66.

¹⁰⁴Selected Messages 3:84.

Chapter 4—” The Bible and the Bible Only! “

In the days of the Protestant Reformation the rallying cry of the “protesters” against the primacy of human tradition over inspired Scripture was “The Bible and the Bible Only!”

In the early days of the Advent movement this same slogan was often heard, but at this time the slogan was primarily employed to camouflage subtle denigrations of Ellen White’s ministry and messages. This slogan is also heard today in the same connection.

At a camp meeting last spring an Adventist pastor from one of our North American colleges told this experience: One Sabbath, in a certain Sabbath school class taught by a professor on campus and attended by college students, the teacher started out by asking the class members individually what insights they had found in extrabiblical contemporary writings that would bear on the day’s lesson study. Responses were offered by way of quotations from such helpful writers as Luther and Calvin, as well as Keith Miller, Paul Tournier, C. S. Lewis, and so on. Next the teacher asked for student reaction to the lesson, and a series of individual testimonies followed. At this point one member of the class, a college student well versed in the writings of Ellen White, said that she had found something helpful, something that met her need, in Mrs. White’s writings; but before she could elaborate, the teacher cut her off with the remark, “Let’s stay with ‘The Bible and the Bible Only’ in this class!” Ironically, up until that moment, the direct witness of the Bible had been totally absent from the class!

Ellen White, in addressing Sabbath school teachers in 1900, instructed them to “leave the impression upon the mind that the Bible, and the Bible alone, is our rule of faith.”¹⁰⁵ And in the last book she wrote before her death in 1915 she admonished the church’s ministers that “the words of the Bible, and the Bible alone,

¹⁰⁵Ellen G. White, [Counsels on Sabbath School Work](#), 84 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1938).

should be heard from the pulpit.”¹⁰⁶ Did this mean, as some today allege, that her writings should never be incorporated into a sermon? Not at all.

In a helpful 37-page monograph¹⁰⁷ Arthur L. White, for years the secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate at the General Conference (and himself a grandson of the prophet), surveys the position of the pioneers of our denomination and cites published statements not readily available to the present-day inquirer. He also examines the 13 major statements from Mrs. White’s pen in which she used the Reformation slogan “The Bible and the Bible Only,” and comes to four conclusions in summarizing the documentary evidence:

1. That at no time was this phrase employed to exclude the binding obligation to respond to the visions as light which God has given to His people.
2. That in most instances the words are employed in the setting of contrasting the teachings of God’s Word with tradition or man’s theories of a false Sabbath, et cetera.
3. In several cases the words are used in defining our position on the visions with the explanation that to follow the Bible enjoins the acceptance of the workings of the gift of prophecy as binding upon all who accept God’s Word, which forecasts the appearance of this gift in the last days.
4. That through the visions God has led us to a correct understanding of His Word and has taught us and will continue to do so. Further, we must ever recognize our obligation to accept this leading of God.

Arthur White also points out that although the 13 major statements from Ellen White’s pen span more than half a century (from 1851 to c. 1914), still the tenor of the statements at the end of her life

¹⁰⁶Ellen G. White, *The Story of Prophets and Kings* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1943), p. 626.

¹⁰⁷Arthur L. White, “The Position of ‘The Bible, and The Bible Only’ and the Relationship of This to the Writings of Ellen G. White,” unpublished document, Ellen G. White Estate, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Washington, D.C., January, 1971, 37 pages.

are not appreciably different from the earliest statements written on the subject. ¹⁰⁸ Mrs. White never changed her stand on this subject.

Uriah Smith's Parable

“Do We Discard the Bible by Endorsing the Visions?” was the question posed by Uriah Smith in an editorial in an 1863 issue of the *Review and Herald*. He answers with a resounding “No!” and in the course of his treatment of the subject he tells an interesting parable to illustrate his position:

[84] “Suppose,” he proposes, “we are about to start on a voyage.” Before departure the ship’s owner gives the crew a “book of directions,” and assures them that its instructions are sufficient for the entire journey. If these instructions are heeded, the vessel will arrive safely at its destination.

So the crew sets sail, and opens the book to learn its contents. They discover that, in general, the author has laid down basic principles to govern the conduct of the crew during the voyage, and has touched on various contingencies that might arise. However, the author points out that the latter part of the voyage may be particularly hazardous, for “the features of the coast are ever changing by reason of quicksands and tempests.” Because of this, the author has arranged for a pilot to join the crew to provide special help in guiding the ship safely into the final port.

The author also counsels the crew to give heed to the directions and instructions of the pilot, “as the surrounding circumstances and dangers may require.”

At the appointed time, the pilot appears, as promised. But, inexplicably, as he offers his services to the captain and crew, some of the sailors rise up in protest, claiming that the original book of directions is sufficient to see them through. “We stand upon that, and that alone; we want nothing of you,” they declare.

Smith then raises the rhetorical question, “Who now heed that original book of directions? Those who reject the pilot, or those who receive him, as that book instructs them? Judge ye.”

¹⁰⁸Ibid., pp. 19, 20. The appendix material in this monograph is especially helpful, consisting in part of reprints of periodical articles by J. N. Andrews, Uriah Smith, and Ellen G. White.

Finally, anticipating the objection of some of his readers that he intended this parable to oblige the church to take Ellen White as their "pilot," the editor attempts to forestall such complaint with this postscript:

We say no such thing. What we do say is distinctly this: That the gifts of the Spirit are given for our pilot through these perilous times, and whenever and in whomsoever we find genuine manifestations of these, we are bound to respect them, nor can we do otherwise without in so far rejecting the Word of God, which directs us to receive them. ¹⁰⁹

The position of General Conference President George I. Butler, in a *Review and Herald* article, is fairly typical of the apologetic response of early Seventh-day Adventist pioneers. To the objection that the Bible is sufficient because Paul declares that "all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Timothy 3:16, 17), Butler's rejoinder was:

If all Scripture is profitable, we suppose those portions are which teach the perpetuity of spiritual gifts, and that tell us they will be in the church in the last days, and tell us how to distinguish between the false and genuine. These prove the visions under consideration to be of the right stamp. ¹¹⁰

Many who today sound the Protestant rallying call, "The Bible and the Bible Only," seem to infer a false dichotomy, an either/or situation: If you have the Bible, you cannot have Ellen White; if you have Ellen White, you cannot have the Bible. This dichotomy is patently invalid.

¹⁰⁹The *Review and Herald*, January 13, 1863; cited in Robert W. Olson, 101 Questions on the Sanctuary and on Ellen White (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1981), p. 40. The entire editorial appears as Appendix D in the Arthur White monograph.

¹¹⁰The *Review and Herald*, June 9, 1874; cited in White monograph, p. 12.

Some Seventh-day Adventists, including ministers and scholars, say, for example, “I cannot find the Seventh-day Adventist doctrine of the investigative judgment in the Bible.” These persons state, however, that they still accept the doctrine because of the legitimate hermeneutical rule that allows for a later prophet to enlarge the understanding of truth by an earlier prophet.

What these people are really saying, in the opinion of this writer, is: “With my present theological a prioris and my present hermeneutical tools—my presuppositions and my predilections—I do not find that doctrine in Scripture.” However, other Seventh-day Adventist scholars, of equally impeccable academic pedigree, assert that they do find that doctrine in Scripture—in the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, and in Jesus’ parables of the wedding garment and the net.

Conclusion

What does the Seventh-day Adventist church hold regarding the relationship between the writings of Mrs. White and the Bible?

1. We do not regard the writings of Ellen G. White as an addition to the sacred canon of Scripture.
2. We do not think of these writings as of universal application, like the Bible, but as written particularly for the Seventh-day Adventist church.
3. We do not regard Mrs. White's writings in the same sense as the Holy Scriptures, which stand alone and unique as the standard by which all other writings must be judged. ¹¹¹

But, having said that, we need to say more. Since we believe that inspiration is indivisible, and since the only activity of the prophet is to tell us what Jesus told him (“the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy”), there is therefore no basis for a belief in either degrees of inspiration or degrees of authority. Ellen White was inspired in the same manner and to the same degree as were the Bible prophets. And the counsel that Mary gave to the servants at the wedding feast at Cana concerning her Son might well be paraphrased: “Whatsoever he saith unto you [and by whatever prophet] do it” ([John 2:5](#)).

If, as at least some scholars believe, Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians was the first book of the New Testament to be written, then his concern as expressed in its closing verses may have an interesting significance to Christians today:

“Quench not the Spirit” ([1 Thessalonians 5:19](#)). “Don't tune Him out,” as we might put it in today's vernacular. The existence of the possibility of doing just this undergirds the necessity for the warning.

¹¹¹Questions on Doctrine, p. 89.

[85] “Despise not prophesyings” (vs. 20). Was Paul here, first of all, telling the Christians that the word of God to them did not end with the closing of the Old Testament canon of Scripture? That the spiritual gift of prophecy was still being exercised—and would continue to be exercised—until the end of time? Was he warning, don’t despise latter-day prophets, who will be just as inspired and authoritative—prophets whose messages also come directly from the Holy Spirit? Perhaps.

“Prove all things” (vs. 21). The Christian has an obligation to “try the spirits” ([1 John 4:1](#)), because while not all of them are from God, the obverse is equally true: Not all of them are from the devil, either! The Christian is hereby commanded (by the Holy Spirit through Paul) to seriously examine the content of purported prophetic writings. He must also examine the fruitage of these writings, both in the life of the alleged prophet and in the lives of those who follow that prophet. This task must be undertaken with an open mind willing to receive more truth, a mind that seeks to validate all new light by what has been tested before ([Acts 17:11](#)). And, having made the test, and noted the results:

“Hold fast that which is good” ([1 Thessalonians 5:21](#)).

In a time of acute crisis, at the turn of the century when leaders in the Adventist church were bringing in subtle heresies, God’s prophet proclaimed a message that has startling relevance for us today, in another time of crisis:

The Lord will put new, vital force into His work as human agencies obey the command to go forth and proclaim the truth.... The truth will be criticized, scorned, and derided; but the closer it is examined and tested, the brighter it will shine....

The principles of truth that God has *revealed* to us are our only true foundation. They have made us what we are. The lapse of time has not lessened their value. It is the constant effort of the enemy to remove these truths from their setting, and to put in their place spurious theories. He will bring in everything that he possibly can to carry out his deceptive designs. But the Lord will raise up men of keen perception, who will

give these truths their proper place in the plan of God.

¹¹²

May you be one of them!

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¹¹²*Selected Messages 1:201*. Italics supplied.