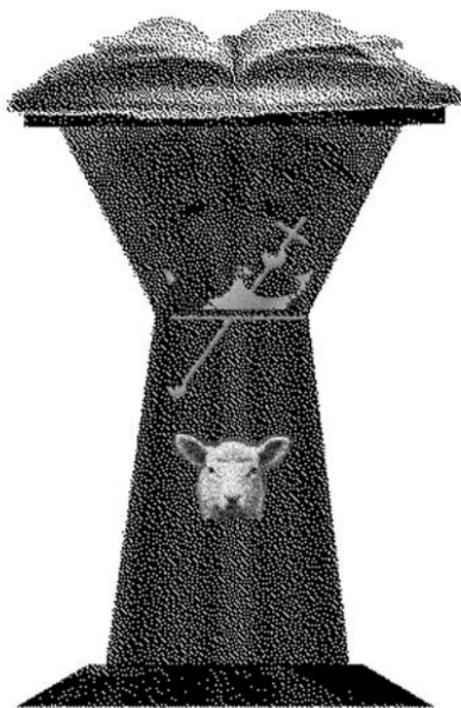


Interpreting the Prophetic Writings



“And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:27, NKJV).

Error Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Dan. 2:28; Matt. 7:16; Luke 24:27

In a branch of statistics called regression, we can predict with a certain degree of confidence that if we increase a variable such as fertilizer with a confidence level of 95 percent, we can be 95 percent sure that the harvest will increase by a certain amount. However, statistics' power of prediction is still subject to error. The validity and accuracy of a prediction depends on the previous data used and the difference between the prediction and the real result. This analysis is called error analysis. Data used to create the equation will determine the degree of the standard error. The higher the standard of error, the less reliable the equation used and the prediction. A good error analysis will show where the flaws are and that certain actions have to be taken to increase the validity of the prediction.

Many dictionaries define *prophetic* as containing the nature of prediction. Therefore, these concepts regarding statistics can be used for prophetic writing. Many people claim to have the prophetic gift, but error analysis shows that all their claims are nothing more than bad guesses.

Seventh-day Adventists believe that Ellen White had the gift of prophecy. The next question, however, is, How do we

Interpretation of prophetic writings must be viewed through error analysis.

interpret her writings? Using error analysis on her writings, with a 95 percent confidence level, we can be sure that what she wrote was inspired by God and has proven to be true.¹ In the past, she reminded people of the danger of nicotine, alcohol, meat, caffeine, and a sedentary lifestyle. At that time, many people mocked her ideas. However, current scientific research has proven that what she wrote about these subjects is true. The number of Seventh-day Adventists who have a healthy and long life is increasing, putting them among the healthiest people in the world.²

This week we will learn more about prophetic writers—not just about Ellen White—and how we interpret and analyze their errors.

1. D. S. McMahon, ed. *Acquired or Inspired? Exploring the Origins of the Adventist Lifestyle* (Victoria, Australia: Signs Publishing, 2005), pp. 141, 146, 147.

2. Dan Buettner, "Longevity, The Secrets of Long Life," *National Geographic*, Nov. 2005.

Sunday
March 8

Focus on Christ

LOGOS

John 16:5–13; Col. 1:9; 2 Pet. 1:20; 1 John 5:12, 13

Basic Rules of Interpretation (2 Pet. 1:20)

Misunderstandings often arise when a statement has been lifted out of context. Context includes both internal and external clues that will establish the truth about any statement under consideration.

Internally, we usually get a clear picture of what an author means by reading the words, sentences, paragraphs, even chapters, surrounding a puzzling statement. We must recognize that the Bible and the writings of Ellen White were the product of thought inspiration, not verbal inspiration, and that some word definitions may change as time passes. We also must understand the meaning of the phrase in which a word is used and recognize that the meaning of a word can change when it is used in a new context.¹

Externally, we should ask questions whose answers may help us to understand,

questions such as *When? Where? and Why?* We must consider all that a prophet has said on the subject under discussion, and we must understand the historical context of the prophecy before coming to a conclusion about it. In addition, we must allow for the maturing of authors, even prophets, in that truth

Not everything in the Bible or in the writings of Ellen White can be understood at first glance.

is unfolded to them only as they are able to understand it. In some instances, a person must understand the experience of an event before understanding the truth of the event. Not everything in the Bible or in the writings of Ellen White can be understood at first glance, or even after years of study.²

Important Things in Interpreting Ellen White's Writings (Col. 1:9)

First, begin your study with a prayer for guidance and understanding. The Holy Spirit, who inspired the work of prophets across the ages, is the only one who is in a position to unlock the meaning of their writings. Second, approach your study with an open mind. Most of us realize that no person is free of bias. Also recognize that bias enters into every area of our lives. But we don't need to let our biases control us. Third, read Ellen White's writings with faith, rather than with doubt.³ "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. 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.”⁴

Avoid Extreme Interpretations (John 16:5–13)

Part of our task in reading Ellen White or any other prophet is to avoid extreme interpretations and to understand their message in its proper balance. That, in turn, means that we need to read a prophet’s counsel from both ends of the spectrum on a given topic. A case in point is White’s advice against playing games. “In plunging into amusements, match games, pugilistic performances, they declared to the world that Christ was not their leader in any of these things.” This statement has led many to conclude that God frowns on all games and ball playing. However, as on all extreme interpretations, one should use caution, for the second sentence after this one reads, “Now that which burdens me is the danger of going into extremes on the other side.”⁵

It is important to read the full spectrum of what Ellen White wrote on a topic before arriving at any conclusions. When we understand why she wrote about a subject the way she did, we can see that bits of advice which appear to be contradictory often balance each other out.⁶

Always asking God’s Holy Spirit to guide our minds wisely as we read can help not to jump to wrong conclusions never intended by the prophets.

Focus on Christ (1 John 5:12, 13)

The whole motive behind prophecy is to testify about Jesus Christ and to set Him at the center of everything. When we are interpreting Ellen White’s writings, or the writings of any other prophet, we must focus on Christ and His second coming and on how He wants us to prepare for His return. This is the ultimate theme.

REACT

Explain the relationship between studying the Bible and interpreting the writings of Ellen White.

1. Herbert E. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1998), pp. 388–391.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 394–405.

3. George R. Knight, *Reading Ellen White* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 1997), pp. 43, 44.

4. *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 255.

5. *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 378.

6. Knight, pp. 63–69.

“Prophecy Is Fast Fulfilling”

TESTIMONY

Isa. 8:20

“On one occasion, when in New York City, I was in the night season called upon to behold buildings rising story after story toward heaven. These buildings were warranted to be fireproof, and they were erected to glorify their owners and builders. Higher and still higher these buildings rose, and in them the most costly material was used. Those to whom these buildings belonged were not asking themselves: ‘How can we best glorify God?’ The Lord was not in their thoughts.”¹

“The scene that next passed before me was an alarm of fire. Men looked at the lofty and supposedly fireproof buildings and said: ‘They are perfectly safe.’ But these buildings were consumed as if made of pitch. The fire engines could do nothing to stay the destruction. The firemen were unable to operate the engines.

“I am instructed that when the Lord’s time comes, should no change have taken place in the hearts of proud, ambitious human beings, men will find that the hand

**“The fire engines could do
nothing to stay the
destruction.”**

that had been strong to save will be strong to destroy. No earthly power can stay the hand of God. No material can be used in the erection of buildings that will preserve them from destruction when God’s appointed time comes to send retribution on

men for their disregard of His law and for their selfish ambition.”²

“We are living in the closing scenes of this earth’s history. Prophecy is fast fulfilling. The hours of probation are fast passing. We have no time—not a moment—to lose. Let us not be found sleeping on guard. Let no one say in his heart or by his works: ‘My Lord delayeth His coming.’ Let the message of Christ’s soon return sound forth in earnest words of warning. Let us persuade men and women everywhere to repent and flee from the wrath to come. Let us arouse them to immediate preparation, for we little know what is before us. Let ministers and lay members go forth into the ripening fields to tell the unconcerned and indifferent to seek the Lord while He may be found. The workers will find their harvest wherever they proclaim the forgotten truths of the Bible. They will find those who will accept the truth and will devote their lives to winning souls to Christ.”³

1. *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 12.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

3. *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, p. 252.

A Light Shining in a Dark Place

EVIDENCE

Isa. 8:20; John 1:14–18; Eph. 1:9, 10; 2 Tim. 3:16

In Scripture, we learn that before sin, God personally visited with humans. However, after falling to Satan's temptation, the mental and spiritual characteristics of human beings became dulled, and they could no longer find God on their own. So He took the initiative by sending His Son Jesus so that they could know God personally through Him (Eph. 1:9, 10; 1 Tim. 3:16; John 1:14–18).

Jesus, after arising from the grave, revealed Himself to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. "And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27, NKJV). What better authority to interpret for the disciples the prophecies about the Messiah and the work He came to do than Christ Himself—the Word who in the beginning was with God (John 1:1, 2).

Ellen White received the gift of prophecy to point God's last-day people back to the Bible and to Christ (2 Tim. 3:16). We must always remember that her writings should not displace the Bible or become a "second" Bible to us. Rather, her writings are a light shining in a dark place that leads us to the bigger light—the Scriptures. Before we can even use the writings of Ellen White, they must be known not to contradict the Bible. "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa. 8:20, NKJV).

**They could no longer find
God on their own.**

"There is an evidence that is open to all,—the most highly educated, and the most illiterate,—the evidence of experience. God invites us to prove for ourselves the reality of His word, the truth of His promises. He bids us 'taste and see that the Lord is good.' Psalm 34:8. . . . And as we draw near to Jesus, and rejoice in the fullness of His love, our doubt and darkness will disappear in the light of His presence."^{*}

^{*}*Steps to Christ*, pp. 111, 112.

Moon and Sun Analogy

HOW-TO

Rom. 2:14–16

We believe that the canon was closed with the book of Revelation and that the Bible contains all that is necessary for salvation even without the writings of Ellen White. I made this statement in a morning worship at the mission office. My former mission president's reply was, "You are not a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, because you don't believe in the writings of Ellen White."

But I do believe her writings. However, I also believe that the relationship of her writings to the Bible is one of the most misunderstood subjects in our church. Her writings are not a second Bible. She herself had this to say about what she wrote, "There is in them [her writings] truth which to the receiver is a savor of life unto life. . . . 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 [her writings] to lead men and women to the Greater light [the Bible]." ¹ She used the analogy of the sun and moon. The Bible is the greater light [the sun], and her writings are the lesser light [the moon]. Here is how we can understand this analogy:

Ellen White's writings are like a local map.

1. The Bible is God's universal message to humankind in all ages, while her writings were written specifically for God's end-time people.

2. Forty different people were inspired by God to write the words of the Bible. Like 40 candles, they will give more light than the one candle of Ellen White, even though the Light and the Source are the same.

3. The Bible is like a map of a nation, while Ellen White's writings are like a local map. The national map covers a larger area than the local one, but the local map gives more detail of a specific area.

4. The writings of Ellen White are also like a telescope focusing on the Son light of the Bible.

Ellen White's writings fulfill the function of directing people's attention to the Bible. Her writings help people to understand the Bible by further impressing the truth already revealed, awakening the mind, and simplifying the truth. Furthermore, her writings teach us how to apply biblical principles to our daily lives.

1. Ellen G. White, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Jan. 20, 1903.

2. T. Housel Jemison, *A Prophet Among You* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1959). Quoted by Norton Edward, *Adventist International Institute of Advance Studies syllabus on Revelation and Inspiration*, p. 42.

Do Interpret, but Not Infallible Interpreters

Thursday
March 12

OPINION

Acts 8:26–38

Luke records the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26–38. On his way home after his pilgrimage to worship in Jerusalem, the Ethiopian was reading from Isaiah 53 but did not understand to whom the prophet was referring.

Luke gives the following scenario concerning the eunuch's encounter with Philip, whom the Spirit had sent to enlighten him: "Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. 'Do you understand what you are reading?' Philip asked.

"'How can I,' he said, 'unless someone explains it to me?' So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him" (Acts 8:30, 31, NIV). Then Philip began to interpret, or to explain, the meaning of what the eunuch was reading, that he was reading about Jesus and the salvation He offers (verse 35).

As Luke concludes his book, he tells Theophilus that Jesus also explained truth to His apostles so that that they too could understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45).

Revelation is what God says, while interpretation is the meaning we give to what He says. We have a way of confusing the two, identifying what we suppose the Scriptures teach with what they actually teach. Those who deny that they interpret, but simply "take the Bible for what it says" are often only kidding themselves.

One who doesn't interpret does nothing.

There is no way to make sense of any literature except by ascertaining its meaning. This is true of the simplest sentences, whether in the Bible or some other printed material. If Jesus tells us that "the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (John 6:33, NIV), we don't just take it for what it says. One who doesn't interpret does nothing. "It is important that we realize that we do interpret and that we are not infallible interpreters."*

REACT

1. In 2 Peter 1:20, 21, how are the believers entrenched in custom or the traditions of the church so that they have difficulties in hearing God accurately?

2. Why do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "Our opinions are founded on interpretations of Scripture. Scripture is infallible, so our views of its meaning are infallible too."

*Leroy Garrett, "The Inspiration of the Scriptures," *Restoration Review* 17, no. 8 (Oct. 1975), p. 150.

A Prophetic Compass

EXPLORATION

2 Pet. 1:19

CONCLUDE

In her time, Ellen White was at the forefront of controversial church developments. She was a female leader in a male-dominated society. She was in the vanguard of remarkable advancements in Bible study. And she was always pointing people to the radiance of Jesus Christ and His soon return. How sad that so often, her work is used as a disciplinary tool rather than as an instrument of light and illumination. Yet the more time we spend in personal prayer, Bible study, and researching her prophetic writings, the clearer will be our understanding of the future—and of Ellen White.

CONSIDER

- Exploring the E. G. White Estate Web site at <http://www.whiteestate.org>.
- Researching the life and work of one of the biblical prophets. What were the societal and political times of this prophet? How reliable were their prophecies? What are the similarities between the life and times of this prophet and those of Ellen White?
- Using a compass to get around for one day. What makes a compass a reliable navigator? Consider how a prophet is a spiritual compass.
- Doing a puzzle (jigsaw, Sudoku, crossword, or other). How do you approach something that at first glance makes no sense? What role do prophets play in helping us unravel the puzzles in Revelation?
- Playing or singing hymns that were composed during Ellen White's lifetime. (Check hymns in the Early Advent section of the *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* as a start.) What themes predominate?
- Tutoring someone. What methods do you use to make the subject clear and easy to understand? What common factors are there between tutors and prophets like Ellen White?

CONNECT

Martin Weber, *Adventist Hot Potatoes*, chap. 10.
Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines, 1988 edition, pp. 222–228.