
Ellen G. White and the Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics: A Historical-Theological Study

Neema Mwamfwagasi¹ (PhDc)

Kenneth Oppong² (PhDc)

¹² Theological Seminary, Adventist University of Africa, Kenya

ABSTRACT

The writings of Ellen G. White occupy a distinctive place within Seventh-day Adventist theology and practice. Her extensive engagement with Scripture raises an important hermeneutical question: What principles governed her interpretation and application of the Bible, and how should those principles inform contemporary Adventist biblical interpretation? This study examines Ellen G. White's understanding and use of Scripture through a historical-theological analysis of her published writings and selected Adventist scholarship on biblical hermeneutics. The study argues that White's hermeneutical approach was fundamentally Scripture-centered, holistic, contextual, canonical, Christological, practical, and spiritually oriented. She consistently presented Scripture as the supreme standard of faith and practice and rejected the notion that her writings should replace or supplement the biblical canon. At the same time, her interpretation of Scripture cannot be reduced to a modern technical exegetical method. She frequently employed Scripture devotionally, homiletically, typologically, intertextually, and pastorally. Her approach therefore demonstrates both significant strengths and important methodological tensions. Her insistence that Scripture interprets Scripture, her concern for the totality of biblical teaching, her resistance to speculative interpretation, and her emphasis on the practical transformation of the believer remain significant for contemporary Adventist hermeneutics. However, responsible use of her writings requires attention to literary context, historical setting, genre, development of thought, and the distinction between inspired application and the original meaning of biblical texts. The study concludes that White's hermeneutical legacy is best understood not as a substitute for biblical exegesis but as a prophetic contribution that calls interpreters back to Scripture, Christ, and the transforming purposes of God's Word.

Keywords: *Ellen G. White, Biblical Hermeneutics, Adventist Theology, Prophetic Interpretation, Biblical Authority*

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Correspondence

Kenneth Oppong

oppongk@aua.ac.ke

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Biblical hermeneutics concerns the principles and practices readers use to understand the meaning and significance of biblical texts. Because Scripture emerged within particular historical, linguistic, literary, cultural, and theological contexts, responsible interpretation requires more than simply reading words on a page. The interpreter must attend to the relationship between author, text, historical setting, literary form, canonical context, theological claims, and contemporary application. Within Christianity, questions concerning the proper interpretation of Scripture have therefore remained central to theological reflection.

The question matters in Seventh-day Adventism because of the church's distinctive understanding of the prophetic ministry of Ellen G. White. White's writings have exercised enormous influence on Adventist theology, spirituality, education, health, mission, and institutional development. Yet Seventh-day Adventists have historically affirmed that her writings do not constitute an additional biblical canon and that Scripture remains the supreme standard of doctrine and practice. A General Conference statement on the inspiration and authority of White's writings explicitly affirms Scripture as the foundation and final authority in doctrine and practice, while describing White's writings as an authoritative prophetic ministry that guides the church in understanding and applying biblical teaching (Seventh-day Adventist Church 1982, 414–15).

This distinction creates a significant hermeneutical question. If White was understood by Adventists as a recipient of the prophetic gift, how did she herself interpret Scripture? Did she employ identifiable principles of biblical interpretation? How did she understand the relationship between Scripture and her own prophetic writings? And what implications does her approach have for contemporary Adventist biblical interpretation?

These questions cannot be answered simply by cataloguing quotations in which White encouraged Bible study. Her writings contain thousands of biblical quotations, allusions, interpretations, applications, and

theological reflections. Her extensive use of Scripture demonstrates that the Bible was not merely one source among many in her theology. It was the central textual and theological matrix within which she articulated her understanding of God, humanity, salvation, the church, mission, and Christian life. Indeed, scholars have observed that her writings are deeply immersed in biblical language and imagery and that Scripture profoundly shaped her thought and expression (Paulien 2014, 171-196).

This paper therefore examines White's hermeneutical principles rather than merely her doctrine of inspiration. It argues that her approach to Scripture can be characterized by seven major features: the primacy of Scripture, Scripture interpreting Scripture, attention to the whole biblical canon, respect for contextual and grammatical meaning, recognition of literary and figurative language, Christ-centered interpretation, and practical-spiritual application. At the same time, the study critically argues that White's hermeneutics should not be transformed into a rigid technical methodology that she herself did not formulate. Her biblical interpretation frequently moved between exegesis, theological reflection, prophetic application, typology, devotional exposition, and pastoral exhortation.

This study argues that Ellen G. White's hermeneutical contribution is best understood as a Scripture-centered prophetic hermeneutic in which the Bible remains the supreme norm. In contrast, prophetic insight illuminates, applies, and presses biblical principles into the concrete life of God's people. Such a model can contribute significantly to contemporary Adventist hermeneutics when employed critically and contextually, without allowing White's writings to displace the biblical text.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative historical-theological methodology. Primary sources include Ellen G. White's published writings, especially *The Great Controversy*, *Selected Messages*, *Testimonies for the Church*, *Gospel Workers*, and *Early Writings*. These sources are examined to identify recurring principles in White's understanding and use of Scripture.

Secondary sources include Adventist scholarship on biblical interpretation, inspiration, and the relationship between White's writings and Scripture. Particular attention is given to the work of Gerhard F. Hasel, George R. Knight, Jon Paulien, Denis Kaiser, and other scholars who have examined Adventist hermeneutics and White's biblical interpretation.

The study is theological rather than purely historical. It does not attempt to prove or disprove White's prophetic claims. Instead, it examines the internal coherence of her hermeneutical principles and considers their theological implications. The approach is also critical in the academic sense: it recognizes both the strengths and limitations of her interpretive practice and distinguishes White's own statements from later Adventist attempts to systematize them.

3.0 THE CONCEPT OF BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

Hermeneutics may broadly be understood as the theory and practice of interpretation. In biblical studies, it encompasses the principles interpreters use to understand biblical texts and apply their theological meaning. Adventist scholarship has traditionally emphasized the importance of historical, grammatical, literary, theological, and canonical considerations in interpreting Scripture. Gerhard F. Hasel argues that biblical interpretation must respect the biblical text within its historical and literary contexts rather than impose preconceived ideas upon it (Hasel 1974, 163-93).

This point is significant for the study of Ellen G. White. White lived and wrote in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. Her language, education, theological vocabulary, literary conventions, and historical circumstances inevitably shaped how she expressed biblical ideas. Therefore, interpreting her writings requires attention not only to what she said but also to when, why, and to whom she said it.

Adventist materials on interpreting White's writings appropriately emphasize this contextual principle. Understanding an author's meaning requires consideration of language,

historical circumstances, literary context, and the totality of the author's statements rather than isolated quotations (Coon n.d.). This principle matters because White wrote more than 100,000 pages of letters, articles, manuscripts, books, and testimonies during a ministry that extended from the 1840s until she died in 1915.

Hermeneutics therefore protects readers from two opposite errors. The first is reductionism, which treats a complex author as though every statement can be understood independently. The second is relativism, which makes interpretation so dependent upon the reader that the author's intended meaning becomes inaccessible. A responsible hermeneutical approach seeks to understand what a text meant within its original setting before asking what significance it may have for contemporary readers. This principle is particularly relevant to White's writings because her statements are sometimes applied to circumstances radically different from those she addressed. Her hermeneutical principles should therefore be used to interpret her own writings rather than selectively quoted to justify predetermined conclusions.

3.1 The Primacy and Authority of Scripture

White's foundational hermeneutical principle is the authority of Scripture. Her writings consistently present the Bible as the standard by which religious belief and practice must be evaluated. In *The Great Controversy*, she describes Scripture as the authoritative revelation of God's will and the standard of character, doctrine, and experience (White 1911, vii).

Her conviction was not merely theoretical. White repeatedly encouraged believers to study Scripture for themselves. In *Selected Messages*, she declared, "I take the Bible just as it is, as the Inspired Word" (White 1958, 1:17). She urged believers to hold firmly to Scripture rather than allow speculative criticism to undermine confidence in God's Word (White 1958, 1:17-18). This principle establishes an important hierarchy of authority. White's writings cannot legitimately be used to replace Scripture because White herself rejected such a use. In a letter written in 1901, she stated

that God had not given additional light to take the place of Scripture but that the light given through her ministry was intended to bring people back to God's Word (White 1958, 3:29).

This position has considerable theological significance. Within an Adventist framework, White's prophetic ministry is understood as subordinate to the canonical authority of Scripture. The church's official statement similarly denies that her writings add to the biblical canon or serve as the foundation and final authority of Christian faith (Seventh-day Adventist Church 1982, 414-15). This principle provides an important corrective to what might be called "prophetic substitution," whereby interpreters consult White's writings before engaging Scripture itself. Such a practice reverses the hierarchy White intended. The appropriate movement is from Scripture to prophetic application, not from prophetic commentary to Scripture.

At the same time, White's strong affirmation of biblical authority should not be confused with a simplistic theory of inspiration. She did not treat the Bible as though it had been dictated mechanically. Her own writings recognize differences in style, expression, and presentation among biblical writers. She nevertheless maintained that such diversity exists within an underlying unity of divine revelation (White 1958, 1:25).

Consequently, White's view of Scripture combines high authority with recognition of literary diversity. This provides an important theological foundation for interpreting the Bible as a collection of writings with different genres and historical settings that participate in a coherent canonical witness.

3.2 Scripture Interprets Scripture

A second central principle is the conviction that Scripture should be interpreted in the light of Scripture. White repeatedly opposed interpretations based upon isolated texts or speculative ideas. She considered the Bible sufficiently coherent that one passage could illuminate another. Her statement that "the word of God, as a whole, is a perfect chain" expresses this conviction (White 1958, 1:25). The principle is not simply that one may quote any

verse to explain another. Rather, the meaning of a particular passage must be located within Scripture's wider theological witness.

This principle is closely related to canonical interpretation. A text should not be detached from the larger biblical narrative. White's writings frequently move between Old and New Testament passages, identifying theological relationships among creation, covenant, redemption, judgment, sanctuary, Christ, and eschatological restoration.

This method's strength is its resistance to proof-texting. A doctrine should not rest on a single isolated verse when the broader biblical witness points elsewhere. Scripture interprets Scripture because the Bible's theological claims are interrelated.

However, this principle also requires careful qualification. "Scripture interprets Scripture" can be abused if it becomes an excuse for ignoring the historical and literary context of individual passages. A verse from Proverbs, for example, should not automatically be interpreted according to a statement in Paul without first considering each text's distinctive literary and theological purposes. Canonical coherence does not eliminate textual particularity.

White herself recognized the importance of context. Her hermeneutical statements indicate that the apparent meaning of a text should normally be accepted unless the literary context demonstrates the use of symbol or figurative language (White 1911, 598-99). Thus, White's canonical approach should be understood as complementary to contextual exegesis rather than as a replacement for it.

3.3 Context, Language and the Obvious Meaning of Scripture

Another important feature of White's hermeneutical perspective is her resistance to unnecessary speculation. She opposed interpretations that transformed clear biblical statements into mysterious or esoteric doctrines. In *The Great Controversy*, she argues that Scripture's language should normally be understood according to its obvious meaning unless the context indicates the use of symbols or figures (White 1911, 599).

This principle has important implications. It recognizes that biblical interpretation begins with the text itself. The interpreter should not assume hidden meanings when the literary context supports a straightforward reading.

White's position also reflects a concern about interpretive elitism. She repeatedly affirmed that Scripture was accessible to ordinary believers and not reserved exclusively for scholars. She believed the Bible suited people of different levels of education and intellectual ability (White 1958, 1:18). This does not mean scholarship is unnecessary. Rather, it suggests that theological scholarship should serve the understanding of Scripture rather than create artificial barriers between Scripture and God's people. In this sense, White's hermeneutics contains a strong ecclesial and pastoral dimension.

Nevertheless, the "obvious meaning" principle must be used carefully. What appears obvious to a modern reader may not have been obvious to an ancient audience. Cultural assumptions, idiomatic expressions, literary conventions, and historical circumstances can significantly affect meaning. Modern readers therefore require historical and linguistic tools to determine what was obvious within the biblical world. Here a productive tension emerges between White's emphasis on accessibility and contemporary biblical scholarship. Her principle encourages clarity and discourages unnecessary speculation, while historical-critical and literary approaches remind interpreters that genuine clarity requires serious engagement with the ancient context.

3.4 Literary and Figurative Interpretation

White did not interpret every biblical statement literally. She recognized symbols, figures, metaphors, types, and other literary forms. Her statement that biblical language should be interpreted according to its obvious meaning unless a symbol or figure is employed demonstrates an awareness of literary differentiation (White 1911, 599).

This is particularly important for Adventist interpretation because apocalyptic literature occupies a major place in Adventist theology. Daniel and Revelation contain

symbols that cannot be understood by mechanically applying literalism. White's interpretation of prophetic literature therefore distinguishes between literal and symbolic language. Her approach also reflects an important theological principle: the Bible itself should provide the interpretive framework for its symbols. She criticized interpreters who use imaginative speculation to create meanings detached from the biblical witness (White 1884, 344).

This principle is especially valuable in contemporary religious environments characterized by sensational prophetic interpretation. Symbolic biblical texts can easily become vehicles for political speculation, date-setting, conspiracy theories, or elaborate systems of prediction. White's emphasis on biblical control corrects such practices. Yet there remains a methodological challenge. Determining whether a passage is symbolic or literal requires careful attention to genre, literary structure, intertextual relationships, and historical context. An interpreter cannot simply declare a passage symbolic because its literal meaning appears difficult. Consequently, White's principle requires disciplined application.

3.5 The Christological Centre of Biblical Interpretation

A further characteristic of White's biblical interpretation is its Christological orientation. In her view, Scripture ultimately points to the character, mission, sacrifice, ministry, and kingdom of Christ. Her biblical theology cannot be separated from the great controversy framework in which Christ's character and God's government are central theological concerns.

White's Christ-centered interpretation is particularly evident in *The Desire of Ages*, where biblical narratives are interpreted through the person and mission of Jesus. Scripture is not treated merely as a collection of doctrinal propositions but as testimony to God's redemptive work. This approach corresponds with the broader Christian conviction that Christ is central to the biblical canon. The Old Testament anticipates God's redemptive

purposes, while the New Testament presents their fulfilment in Christ. The interpreter therefore risks fragmentation if individual texts are separated from the biblical narrative of redemption.

At the same time, Christological interpretation should not become a license to disregard the original meaning of Old Testament texts. The New Testament itself uses diverse ways to relate Old Testament passages to Christ, including promise, typology, fulfilment, analogy, and theological correspondence. A responsible Christological hermeneutic therefore requires both canonical sensitivity and historical awareness.

White's Christ-centered approach matters for Adventist theology because it keeps distinctive doctrines from becoming detached from the gospel. Sabbath, sanctuary, judgment, second advent, health, education, and Christian ethics are meaningful within her writings because they participate in the larger story of God's redemptive purpose in Christ.

3.6 Theological Unity and the Totality of an Author's Statements

White's writings contain another important hermeneutical principle: individual statements should be interpreted within the totality of her writings. This principle is particularly necessary because isolated statements can produce distorted conclusions.

Adventist hermeneutical resources have therefore recommended studying all relevant statements on a subject before concluding. Roger Coon, summarizing earlier Adventist approaches, argues that interpreters should consider the full body of an author's teaching rather than letting a single statement determine the interpretation of a complex subject (Coon n.d.).

The principle is sound, but it must be distinguished from the assumption that every statement has the same historical or theological function. White wrote letters, sermons, editorials, devotional works, books, testimonies, and manuscripts. A personal letter responding to a particular pastoral crisis does not necessarily have the same rhetorical function as a published theological exposition. This distinction is

essential. "Totality" should not mean flattening all texts into a single undifferentiated corpus. Rather, it means reading individual statements within the wider conceptual and historical development of White's thought.

The principle also protects against quotation mining. Because White's writings are extensive, virtually any theological position can potentially find an isolated quotation that appears to support it. Responsible interpretation therefore requires comparing statements, identifying context, attending to chronology, and recognizing genre.

4.0 ELLEN G. WHITE'S USE OF SCRIPTURE

White's hermeneutics becomes clearer when one examines not merely what she said about Scripture but how she actually used it. Jon Paulien observes that White's writings contain extensive biblical quotations and allusions and that her use of Scripture operates at multiple levels (Paulien 2014, 171–96). She could quote Scripture directly, paraphrase it, combine passages, apply biblical principles to contemporary circumstances, employ biblical imagery, and interpret biblical narratives within the larger great-controversy framework.

A study of more than five hundred pages of White's writings found that she used Scripture in a variety of ways, including historical exposition and homiletical application (Dederen 1974, 154–161). This matters because it shows her biblical interpretation cannot be reduced to one method.

White's use of Scripture also shows that inspired writers may employ biblical texts differently from modern academic exegetes. Her purpose was frequently pastoral and theological rather than narrowly philological. She sought not only to explain what a text meant but also to show how its theological principles should shape Christian life.

This feature is both a strength and a methodological challenge. It is a strength because biblical interpretation that never reaches the transformation of life remains incomplete from a Christian theological perspective. It is a challenge because contemporary readers can confuse White's

inspired application of a biblical principle with the original historical meaning of the biblical passage.

The distinction among exegesis, theological interpretation, application, and prophetic application is therefore crucial. Exegesis asks what the biblical text meant within its original literary and historical context, taking its language, genre, historical setting, and intended meaning seriously. Theological interpretation, by contrast, asks what the text communicates within the broader biblical canon and the Christian faith, considering how a passage relates to Scripture's larger theological witness. Application moves from interpretation to contemporary life by asking how the theological principle derived from the text should shape present-day belief, conduct, and practice. Prophetic application may further apply biblical principles with particular spiritual urgency to a specific community or historical situation, calling attention to the moral and spiritual implications of the biblical message. Ellen G. White's writings frequently move across all four levels, sometimes interpreting the biblical text in its historical setting, sometimes drawing broader theological conclusions, and at other times applying biblical principles directly to contemporary religious life. Academic interpretation should therefore carefully identify which level is operating in a particular passage rather than treating every statement as a direct exercise in biblical exegesis.

4.1 The Relationship Between Ellen G. White and Scripture

Perhaps the most important hermeneutical question concerns the authority of White's writings in relation to Scripture. White consistently rejected the idea that her writings should function as a second Bible. She described her prophetic ministry as pointing people toward Scripture rather than away from it. Her famous "lesser light" analogy expresses this relationship: her writings were intended to direct people toward the "greater light" of Scripture (White 1903, 15).

Theologically, this means that the proper Adventist approach should avoid two extremes. The first extreme is canonical equivalence, in

which White's writings are treated as though they constitute another canonical Scripture. This position conflicts with White's own statements and with the official Adventist understanding of Scripture.

The second extreme is prophetic reductionism, in which White's writings are treated as merely devotional literature with no theological authority. This position also fails to represent the Adventist understanding of her prophetic ministry.

The Adventist position seeks a middle ground: Scripture remains the final normative authority, while White's prophetic writings provide inspired counsel, correction, guidance, and application. The 1982 statement on White's inspiration explicitly maintains this distinction (Seventh-day Adventist Church 1982, 414-415). Denis Kaiser demonstrates that this issue has not always been interpreted uniformly within Adventist history. Early Adventists generally affirmed Scripture as the rule of faith while assigning White's writings a significant but subordinate function. Later disagreements emerged over whether her writings should be treated as authoritative in biblical interpretation, particularly in doctrinal controversies (Kaiser 2023).

This historical complexity is important. The question is not merely whether Adventists believe Ellen White was inspired. The more difficult question is how inspiration functions hermeneutically. If White's writings are inspired, what kind of authority do they exercise? Do they determine the meaning of biblical texts? Do they provide binding interpretations? Or do they illuminate and apply biblical principles without exhausting Scripture's meaning? A responsible answer must preserve the distinction between inspiration and canon. White's prophetic authority does not mean that her writings exhaust the meaning of Scripture. The official Adventist statement explicitly rejects that proposition (Seventh-day Adventist Church 1982, 415).

4.2 Ellen G. White and The Problem of Proof-Texting

One of the most significant contemporary dangers in using White's writings is proof-

texting. The same problem that affects biblical interpretation can affect interpretation of White. Proof-texting occurs when a statement is removed from its literary and historical context and used as evidence for a conclusion that the original author may not have intended. White's enormous corpus makes this danger particularly serious. For example, a statement written to address a specific pastoral problem may be transformed into a universal principle. Similarly, an observation about nineteenth-century technology, education, medicine, diet, or social circumstances may be transferred mechanically into the twenty-first century without examining the underlying principle.

A hermeneutically responsible approach therefore asks several important questions when interpreting Ellen G. White's writings: Who was White addressing, and what historical situation prompted the statement? What specific problem was she addressing, and what biblical principle underlies the counsel? It is also necessary to determine whether the statement is descriptive or prescriptive and whether it is intended to be universal or context-specific. Furthermore, the interpreter should examine how the statement relates to White's other writings and, most importantly, to Scripture. Such an approach seeks to identify the theological principle that remains valid even when historical circumstances change. This method does not weaken confidence in White's prophetic ministry; rather, it demonstrates a serious commitment to her writings by seeking to understand and apply them responsibly within their historical, literary, theological, and biblical contexts.

5.0 WHITE'S HERMENEUTICS AND ADVENTIST BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION TODAY

White's hermeneutical principles remain highly relevant to contemporary Adventism, particularly because the church now operates within a global, digitally connected, and religiously plural environment.

First, Ellen G. White's emphasis on Scripture provides an important safeguard against theological fragmentation within contemporary Christianity and, specifically,

within Seventh-day Adventism. In an environment characterized by competing claims to religious authority, believers can easily let popular religious personalities, denominational customs, political ideologies, social-media commentators, personal experiences, or contemporary cultural assumptions substitute for biblical authority. White consistently directed believers back to Scripture rather than to human opinion. She described the Bible as the standard by which faith and practice should be tested and insisted that religious positions should be substantiated from the Word of God (White, 1858/1884, 1:229; White, 1911, p. vii). This principle closely aligns with the historic Adventist understanding of sola Scriptura, according to which Scripture is the final norm for doctrine and practice. The Seventh-day Adventist Biblical Research Institute likewise maintains that the Bible is the ultimate standard against which teaching and experience must be tested (Biblical Research Institute, 1986). Importantly, White's emphasis on Scripture does not imply that other sources of knowledge are entirely irrelevant; rather, it establishes a hierarchy in which human traditions, experience, and contemporary claims remain subject to biblical evaluation. In this respect, her hermeneutical approach offers a corrective to what may be described as an increasingly fragmented religious information environment, in which authority can be transferred from Scripture to charismatic personalities or digital platforms. Her repeated insistence that believers return to the biblical text therefore remains significant for maintaining theological identity and doctrinal accountability within Adventism (Kaiser, 2020; Pfandl, 2021).

Second, White's emphasis on the unity of Scripture provides an important foundation for theological coherence. Biblical doctrines should not be constructed primarily from isolated proof texts but should emerge from sustained engagement with the broader canonical witness. This principle is consistent with the Adventist hermeneutical conviction that "the Bible is its own best interpreter" and that Scripture, when studied as a whole, presents a consistent and harmonious truth (Biblical Research Institute, 1986). White similarly

encouraged readers to compare Scripture with Scripture rather than establishing doctrine from individual passages detached from their wider contexts. This approach is especially important for a theological tradition such as Adventism, whose distinctive teachings—including the Sabbath, sanctuary, second coming, conditional immortality, and the great controversy—depend on synthesizing evidence from different biblical books and genres. A coherent biblical theology therefore requires attention to a passage's immediate literary context as well as its relationship to the wider biblical narrative. The Adventist document *Methods of Bible Study* explicitly recommends examining a passage's context, relating it to the surrounding literary unit, and identifying major biblical themes from the totality of Scripture rather than imposing preconceived ideas on individual texts (Biblical Research Institute, 1986). White's hermeneutical emphasis consequently challenges interpreters to move beyond selective proof-texting toward a canonical reading of Scripture. This approach matters in contemporary theological debates, where isolated biblical statements can easily be detached from their literary, historical, and theological contexts and used to support positions the broader biblical witness does not sustain.

Third, White's opposition to speculative interpretation remains particularly relevant to contemporary apocalyptic studies. Apocalyptic literature has historically attracted attempts to identify particular contemporary personalities, nations, political events, technological developments, or social movements as direct fulfillments of prophetic symbols. While historical circumstances may legitimately shape the interpretation of prophecy, an approach dominated by speculation can produce sensationalism and weaken the theological purpose of biblical prophecy. Adventist hermeneutics traditionally interprets prophetic passages by comparing them with the broader biblical witness, historical context, literary context, and the central themes of Scripture (Biblical Research Institute, 1986). White's approach reinforces this restraint because she repeatedly directed readers away from

speculative theories and toward the principles clearly established in Scripture. Her concern was not that prophecy should be ignored, but that interpreters should avoid allowing conjecture to become the foundation of religious conviction. This distinction is especially significant in an age of rapid technological and political change, when apocalyptic interpretations can spread through social media before careful exegetical examination. A responsible Adventist hermeneutic should therefore distinguish between what the biblical text actually establishes and what interpreters merely speculate may be occurring in contemporary society. The principle that Scripture must control interpretation provides a theological boundary against sensational readings while preserving the church's historic interest in biblical prophecy (White, 1888/1911; Biblical Research Institute, 1986). In this respect, White's hermeneutical legacy calls Adventist interpreters to take prophecy seriously without reducing it to predictions about every contemporary crisis.

Fourth, White's Christ-centered approach to Scripture prevents Adventist hermeneutics from becoming merely a technical exercise in doctrinal formulation. For White, the purpose of biblical revelation ultimately extends beyond accumulating correct theological propositions; Scripture points believers toward Christ and transforms their relationship with God. This orientation is consistent with the broader Adventist understanding that Jesus Christ and His saving work constitute one of the central themes running throughout Scripture (Biblical Research Institute, 1986). This principle means biblical interpretation must ultimately lead to discipleship, faith, obedience, holiness, mission, compassion, and practical Christian living. White repeatedly connected biblical truth with character transformation and Christian service rather than treating theological knowledge as an end in itself (White, 1900). Consequently, an interpretation may be intellectually sophisticated yet spiritually deficient if it fails to lead the believer toward Christlike character and faithful Christian practice. A Christ-centered hermeneutic also corrects approaches that reduce Adventist

identity to a collection of distinctive doctrines. Doctrines such as the Sabbath, sanctuary, second coming, and the state of the dead have theological significance precisely because they belong within the larger biblical story of God's work in Christ. At the same time, a responsible Christ-centered hermeneutic should not use "Christ-centeredness" to justify disregarding biblical teachings that do not immediately fit a preferred theological emphasis. Adventist hermeneutical scholarship has therefore cautioned against turning Christ into a selective hermeneutical principle that effectively creates a "canon within the canon" (Biblical Research Institute, n.d.). White's contribution is most appropriately understood as calling interpreters to discover Christ throughout the biblical canon while allowing the whole of Scripture to retain its authority.

Fifth, White's practical orientation challenges academic theology to remain ecclesial and missional. Hermeneutics, in her view, should not merely produce technically sophisticated interpretations for scholars; it should help the church understand God's will and live faithfully according to it. This practical dimension appears in how her writings repeatedly connect biblical truth with Christian character, education, mission, health, family life, social responsibility, and personal spirituality. Her approach therefore resists a sharp separation between theological reflection and Christian practice. The purpose of interpreting Scripture is ultimately connected with transformation and mission. The Adventist *Methods of Bible Study* similarly places biblical interpretation within the broader purposes of understanding God's revelation, salvation, and Christian life (Biblical Research Institute, 1986). This perspective is especially relevant to theological education because academic theology can sometimes become detached from the needs of the church. Scholarly research is valuable because careful historical, linguistic, literary, and theological investigation can strengthen the church's understanding of Scripture; however, such scholarship should ultimately contribute to faithful Christian living and the church's mission. White's hermeneutical legacy therefore encourages Adventist scholars to

integrate academic rigor, spiritual formation, ecclesial responsibility, and mission. Her approach does not require abandoning critical scholarship; rather, it challenges scholarship to remain accountable to the theological and missional purposes of the Christian community. In this sense, hermeneutics becomes not simply the study of how texts are interpreted but an essential component of how the church hears, understands, embodies, and communicates the Word of God.

Taken together, these principles demonstrate that White's hermeneutical significance extends beyond her individual interpretations of particular biblical passages. Her emphasis on Scripture, canonical coherence, restraint in prophetic interpretation, Christ-centeredness, and practical Christian living provides a framework within which Adventist biblical interpretation can remain both theologically grounded and ecclesially relevant. At the same time, these principles should not be detached from the wider history of Adventist hermeneutics. Historical scholarship demonstrates that Adventists have held different views concerning the precise role of White's writings in interpreting Scripture, with some historically assigning her writings a more normative interpretive function than others (Kaiser, 2020). Consequently, her hermeneutical contribution is best understood not as a replacement for Scripture but as a prophetic ministry that continually directs the church back to Scripture. The Biblical Research Institute similarly emphasizes that White's writings are not an addition to the biblical canon but function as an authoritative prophetic resource for the Seventh-day Adventist Church (Pfandl, 2021). Her enduring contribution, therefore, lies not in providing a shortcut around careful biblical interpretation but in encouraging a Scripture-centered, Christ-focused, contextually responsible, and practically transformative engagement with the biblical text.

Nevertheless, contemporary Adventist interpreters should not simply reproduce nineteenth-century interpretive practices without modification. Modern biblical scholarship has developed extensive resources in textual criticism, archaeology, linguistics,

genre studies, social-scientific interpretation, narrative criticism, and canonical studies. When used responsibly, these tools can deepen rather than undermine a high view of Scripture. The challenge, therefore, is integration rather than rejection. Adventist hermeneutics should maintain its theological commitments while critically engaging contemporary scholarship.

6.0 CRITICAL EVALUATION OF ELLEN G. WHITE'S HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES

Ellen G. White's hermeneutical practice possesses several significant strengths, particularly her high view of Scripture, canonical orientation, Christological focus, practical concern, and resistance to speculative interpretation. Nevertheless, these strengths should be evaluated critically rather than merely affirmed. White did not develop a systematic textbook on biblical hermeneutics comparable to modern academic treatments. Consequently, her hermeneutical principles must be reconstructed from how she described Scripture and how she actually used biblical texts. Jon Paulien observes that White's use of Scripture is more complex than simply exegetical, theological, or homiletical, since her writings employ Scripture in multiple ways and for different purposes (Paulien 2014, 171-196). This complexity makes both appreciation and methodological caution necessary.

6.1 Scripture-Centeredness

The most fundamental strength of White's hermeneutics is her insistence upon the supreme authority of Scripture. Her writings consistently direct readers toward the Bible rather than toward herself as the final source of religious authority. Frank M. Hasel notes that White treated Scripture with exceptional respect and regarded it as the ultimate norm and standard for faith, doctrine, and practice (Hasel 2015, 297-315). Her well-known description of Scripture as the "standard of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience" demonstrates the centrality she assigned to the biblical text (White 1911, vii).

This Scripture-centeredness provides an important theological safeguard for Adventist

interpretation. It prevents White's prophetic ministry from becoming a second canon and establishes a hierarchy in which prophetic counsel remains subordinate to Scripture. Denis Kaiser's historical study shows, however, that Adventists have differed in how they understand White's writings to function in biblical interpretation. Some have attributed normative authority to her interpretations, while others have emphasised their subordinate and confirmatory function (Kaiser 2017, 1-6). This historical diversity indicates that the relationship between White and Scripture requires careful theological definition. The strength of White's position, therefore, lies not simply in affirming biblical inspiration but in insisting that readers encounter Scripture directly. Her writings are most faithfully used when they stimulate deeper biblical study rather than replace it.

6.2 Canonical Coherence

A second strength is White's emphasis on Scripture's unity and coherence. Her interpretation frequently moves across biblical books and Testaments, connecting individual passages with broader theological themes. This approach aligns with Gerhard F. Hasel's argument that biblical interpretation should recognise Scripture's unity and not construct doctrine from isolated passages detached from the wider biblical witness (Hasel 1974, 163-193).

White's approach therefore offers an important corrective to fragmented proof-texting. A theological proposition should be tested against the whole counsel of Scripture rather than established solely on one difficult or isolated passage. This canonical orientation is particularly significant in Adventist theology, where doctrines such as the Sabbath, sanctuary, judgment, second advent, and human mortality are developed by comparing multiple biblical passages.

Nevertheless, canonical interpretation must not excuse neglecting the particular meaning of individual texts. Paulien's analysis of White's use of Scripture suggests that her writings often move beyond strict exegetical analysis toward theological synthesis and

practical application (Paulien 2014, 171-196). Thus, interpreting Scripture through Scripture must remain connected to attention to historical setting, literary genre, language, and authorial intention. Canonical coherence is strongest when it builds upon responsible exegesis rather than bypassing it.

6.3 Christological Focus

A third strength is the Christological orientation of White's biblical interpretation. Her theological writings repeatedly direct attention toward Christ, his character, his ministry, his sacrifice, and his redemptive mission. This prevents biblical interpretation from becoming merely an intellectual exercise or a collection of disconnected doctrinal propositions.

White's Christ-centred approach corresponds with the broader Christian conviction that Scripture ultimately bears witness to God's redemptive purposes fulfilled in Christ. It also gives Adventist theology a central theological anchor. Doctrines should not be considered merely as denominational distinctives but as components of a larger biblical narrative concerning God's character, human salvation, and the restoration of creation.

Paulien observes that White's use of Scripture frequently operates within the broad cosmic perspective of the "great controversy," enabling her to connect individual passages with a larger theological picture (Paulien 2014, 171-196). This provides theological coherence but also requires careful interpretation. Readers should distinguish between the biblical meaning of a passage and White's theological synthesis of that passage within her broader theological framework.

6.4 Practical Orientation

A fourth strength is the practical character of White's hermeneutics. For her, Scripture was not merely information to be mastered intellectually; it was divine revelation intended to transform character and conduct. Her interpretation therefore consistently moves from theological understanding toward Christian experience, obedience, mission, and character formation.

George R. Knight's work on reading White emphasises that her writings should be understood in terms of their purpose, context, and intended application rather than treated as collections of isolated statements (Knight 1997, 16-20). This practical orientation is important for theological education because it reminds scholars that biblical interpretation occurs within a community of faith and should ultimately contribute to faithful Christian living.

Yet practical application also creates a methodological danger. An interpreter may move too quickly from a biblical text to contemporary application without adequately establishing its original meaning. Gerhard Hasel emphasises that biblical interpretation must first seek to understand the biblical message within its historical and literary circumstances before determining its contemporary significance (Hasel 1974, 163-193). Thus, application should follow interpretation rather than replace it.

6.5 Resistance to Speculative Interpretation

A fifth strength is White's resistance to speculative and imaginative approaches to Scripture. Her writings repeatedly encourage believers to remain grounded in the biblical text rather than construct elaborate theological systems from uncertain interpretations. This principle is particularly relevant in contemporary religious culture, where social media and digital communication can rapidly disseminate sensational interpretations of prophecy.

White's emphasis on Scripture as the controlling authority provides an important theological restraint. It encourages interpreters to distinguish what Scripture clearly teaches from what may be mere speculation. This corresponds with Hasel's methodological principle that exegetical possibilities should not automatically become the foundation for doctrine (Hasel 1974, 163-193).

Nevertheless, White's resistance to speculation should not be interpreted as opposition to serious theological inquiry. Responsible interpretation involves asking difficult questions, examining alternative explanations, and engaging historical and literary evidence. The objective is not to eliminate interpretive

complexity but to prevent speculation from being mistaken for biblical certainty.

6.6 Methodological Cautions

Despite these strengths, several methodological cautions are necessary. First, White's writings should not be used as substitutes for biblical exegesis. Even when her comments are regarded as inspired within Adventist theology, they do not remove the interpreter's responsibility to examine the biblical text itself. White's own understanding of her prophetic role points readers back to Scripture rather than away from it.

Second, White's interpretations should be distinguished from the original historical meaning of biblical passages. A prophetic or devotional application may illuminate a passage's theological significance without necessarily providing a complete account of what the biblical author intended in the original historical setting. This distinction is especially important in academic theology. Paulien's discussion demonstrates that White's use of Scripture cannot simply be assumed to function as technical exegesis in the modern academic sense (Paulien 2014, 171-196).

Third, interpreters must account for genre and literary context in White's own writings. Knight emphasises the importance of understanding what White was trying to accomplish in a particular statement and of avoiding the misuse of isolated quotations (Knight 1997). White wrote letters, sermons, articles, devotional works, books, testimonies, and manuscripts. These genres do not necessarily function in the same way.

Fourth, historical development should be considered. White's ministry extended over several decades, and her theological vocabulary and applications developed within changing historical circumstances. Kaiser's historical study demonstrates that early Adventists themselves wrestled with the precise role of White's writings in biblical interpretation (Kaiser 2017, 1-6). Consequently, interpreters should avoid assuming that every statement from one period automatically represents the complete development of her mature thought.

Fifth, interpreters should not isolate White's writings from their biblical foundations. Because she frequently applied Scripture to contemporary pastoral and theological problems, interpreters must distinguish between the enduring theological principle and the particular historical application. A nineteenth-century application may contain a theological principle whose significance extends beyond its original setting. Still, the application itself should not automatically be transferred unchanged into the twenty-first century.

These cautions do not diminish White's hermeneutical contribution. Rather, they protect it from misuse. As Knight demonstrates, responsible reading requires attention to context, purpose, and how White herself communicated her ideas (Knight 1997, 16-20). A mature Adventist hermeneutic therefore neither absolutizes every isolated statement nor dismisses White's theological contribution. Instead, it places her writings within their proper relationship to Scripture, recognises their prophetic and theological significance, and interprets them historically and contextually.

The resulting approach is both faithful and academically responsible: Scripture remains the primary normative authority; White's writings function as a prophetic witness that illuminates and applies biblical principles; and both Scripture and White's writings must be interpreted with attention to context, genre, language, historical development, and theological purpose. Such an approach enables contemporary Adventist theology to benefit from White's hermeneutical legacy without turning that legacy into a substitute for serious biblical scholarship.

7.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

The study has important implications for Adventist theological education because the formation of pastors, theologians, teachers, and church leaders depends substantially on how they understand the relationship between Scripture, Ellen G. White, and theological interpretation. A responsible educational model should therefore cultivate both deep

commitment to Scripture and disciplined hermeneutical skills.

First, students should be taught to read and interpret Scripture carefully before consulting Ellen G. White's writings on a particular subject. This approach aligns with White's emphasis on Scripture as the primary source and supreme standard of Christian faith. Students should first examine the biblical text in its literary, historical, grammatical, and theological contexts, then consider how White applies or illuminates the biblical teaching. This sequence can prevent students from becoming dependent on secondary interpretations and encourage them to become competent biblical interpreters.

Second, courses on Ellen G. White should include explicit instruction in hermeneutics. Students should learn to identify historical context, genre, chronology, intended audience, literary form, rhetorical purpose, and theological development. They should also learn to distinguish between universal theological principles and counsel addressed to particular historical circumstances. This training would reduce the danger of interpreting isolated statements without considering their broader context.

Third, Adventist seminaries should integrate the study of White with biblical studies rather than treating the two disciplines as completely separate fields. Because White's writings are extensively shaped by Scripture, students can understand her theological contribution more accurately when they are familiar with the biblical texts, themes, narratives, and theological concepts that she interprets and applies.

Fourth, theological educators should explicitly teach students to distinguish among quotation, paraphrase, allusion, interpretation, application, and theological synthesis. Such distinctions are essential for determining precisely what White is doing when she uses a biblical passage and preventing her theological application from being mistaken for the original exegetical meaning of Scripture.

Fifth, students should be trained to engage critically with non-Adventist biblical scholarship without abandoning their Adventist

theological commitments. Exposure to diverse scholarly approaches can strengthen rather than weaken theological formation when students learn to evaluate external scholarship carefully. Academic rigor and denominational faithfulness need not be competing objectives; rather, they can work together in developing intellectually responsible Adventist theologians.

8.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Adventist theological education should recover Scripture as the primary object and normative foundation of theological study. Biblical interpretation should attend carefully to literary context, historical setting, language, genre, canonical relationships, and theological themes. This Scripture-centered approach is consistent with White's repeated emphasis on the authority of the Bible. She urged believers to study Scripture for themselves and cautioned against allowing human authority to replace the Word of God (White, 1911, p. 598). Likewise, the *Methods of Bible Study* document affirms Scripture as the normative basis for doctrine and calls interpreters to examine biblical texts within their contexts rather than imposing preconceived ideas upon them (Biblical Research Institute, 1986).

At the same time, Ellen G. White's writings should be interpreted contextually. Kaiser (2020) argues that White's statements should be understood in their historical and literary context rather than treated as isolated, universally applicable propositions. This approach recognizes audience, purpose, genre, and the development of White's thought while preserving the theological significance attributed to her prophetic ministry. Pfandl (2021) similarly emphasizes the appropriate relationship between Scripture and the prophetic gift within Adventist theology.

Adventist hermeneutics should therefore integrate historical, literary, linguistic, and theological analysis. These methods do not undermine faith; rather, they help interpreters distinguish Scripture's original meaning from later applications. White's use of biblical passages may provide valuable theological or prophetic application, but such application should not automatically be equated with the

original intention of the biblical author. Major doctrines should therefore be established through sustained biblical evidence, with White's writings serving as an important interpretive and prophetic resource rather than isolated doctrinal proof texts.

Finally, Adventist hermeneutics should remain Christ-centered and globally dialogical. Scripture should lead interpreters toward Christ, salvation, discipleship, and mission (White, 1900, pp. 132-133). As Adventism expands globally, African, Asian, and Latin American scholars should contribute contextual insights while testing interpretations against Scripture's universal claims.

9.0 CONCLUSION

Ellen G. White's approach to biblical interpretation represents an important component of Seventh-day Adventist theological identity. Her writings demonstrate a strong dependence on Scripture and consistently present the Bible as the supreme standard for faith, doctrine, and Christian life. Her hermeneutical principles emphasize Scripture's unity, interpretation through Scripture, attention to the plain meaning of biblical texts, recognition of figurative language, canonical coherence, Christ-centered interpretation, and practical spiritual application. A central conclusion of this study is that White's contribution should not be understood as a competing system of biblical authority. She did not intend her writings to constitute an additional canon; rather, she repeatedly directed readers to Scripture. Scripture therefore remains foundational and normative, while her prophetic writings function as an inspired witness that illuminates and applies biblical principles. Responsible use of White's writings requires attention to their literary, historical, theological, and pastoral contexts. Her interpretations should not automatically be equated with the original meaning of every biblical passage she discusses. Her legacy is most fruitful when it leads interpreters toward Scripture, Christ, canonical coherence, faithful Christian living, mission, holiness, and spiritual maturity.

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Head of School at Mbeya Adventist Secondary School in Southern Highlands conference. Before, she had actively served as a Director in the Education, Religious liberty and communication departments in the Same Conference and served as a director in the Family, Women, and Children departments in the South East Tanzania Conference. She has contributed to Ajotre with two publications on religious studies.

Kenneth Oppong is a PhD student in Biblical and Theological Studies at the Adventist University of Africa, Kenya. He holds an MPhil in Religious Studies from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, an MA in Biblical and Theological Studies from the Adventist University of Africa, and Bachelor of Arts in Theological Studies as well as Postgraduate Diploma in Education from Valley View University. He serves as an Associate Dean of Spiritual Life and Development, and Lecturer at Valley View University, Ghana. His research interests include biblical-theological studies, Adventist theology and history, doctrinal development, contextual theology, faith integration, and the historical development of Adventism in Africa. Kenneth authored over twenty-five academic papers in peer-reviewed journals.

About the Author

Neema Sindika Mwamfwagasi is a PhD student in Biblical and Theological Studies. She did her M.A. in Divinity in Adventist University of Africa, B.A. in English and Kiswahili (University of Arusha). Neema serves as the