

## Herbert Douglass on the Relationship of Ellen White to the Bible: 1998

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*Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* (1998)

From Chapter 35—“Hermeneutics-Part 4: Characteristics Shared by Biblical Writers and Ellen White” (pp. 408-409)

This book is presently used in college and seminary classes dealing with Ellen White’s prophetic ministry. I use it in my class, “Prophetic Ministry of Ellen White,” each Spring semester at Southern Adventist University for undergraduate senior theology majors (editor).

“Little heed is given to the Bible, and the Lord has given a lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light.”

In early 1903 Ellen White, burdened about the decline in colporteur work (literature evangelism), wrote an article for the Review. In that article she expressed appreciation for the successful promotion of *Christ’s Object Lessons*. She also wrote: “Sister White is not the originator of these books. . . . 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.”

Then she amplified this connection between God’s light and her writings, and where her writings, as all other prophetic writings, would lead readers: “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.”

In her larger context, Mrs. White seems to be referring to how all biblical prophets are lesser lights leading their people “to the Saviour” the “Light of the world” (John 8:12; 9:5; 12:46)—even as John the Baptist “came . . . to bear witness of the Light” (John 1:7, 8). Because people in her day were giving “little heed . . . to the Bible” (which was to lead people to Christ, the Light of the world) the Lord spoke to her as a “lesser light” (even as John the Baptist and all other biblical prophets were lesser lights) to lead people to Christ, the “greater light.” {MOTL 408.4}

From another point of view, no one can question that Ellen White regarded the Bible itself as a “greater light” with its centuries of inspired writings and its gold-standard acceptance as the Word of God.

Numerous are the references, from her earliest days to her last, that exalted the Bible, such as: “The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His [God’s] will. They are the standard of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience.”

She saw clearly the relationship of her writings to the Bible. They were not only to exalt the Bible, they were to “attract minds to it,” to call “attention to the words of inspiration which you have neglected to obey,” to “impress vividly upon the heart the truths . . . already revealed,” “to awaken and impress the mind . . . that all may be left without excuse,” “to bring out general principles,” and to “come down to the minutiae of life, keeping the feeble faith from

dying.”

### *Three Metaphors That Illustrate “Lesser Light”*

What did she mean by saying her writings were a “lesser light”? Three metaphors have been used in past years:

·The “testing instrument” and “that which is tested.”

Displayed in the National Bureau of Standards at Gaithersburg, Maryland, is the National Prototype Meter No. 27 which was the national reference for line measurement from 1893 until 1960. It is made of 90 percent platinum and 10 percent iridium. Today the national standard is measured by an even more accurate method involving light emitted by electrically excited atoms of krypton-86. If anyone is unsure about his “yardstick,” he or she may take it to the national standard for comparative analysis.

The application is obvious: the national standard is the “greater light.” Copies of this national standard (called “working standards”) or industrial tools requiring exact precision and accuracy that meet the standard of the “greater light,” would be “lesser lights.” Yet, for all practical purposes, these “copies” function as well as the standard. A prototype standard (“greater light”) exists by which all other measures (“lesser lights”) are tested—but the local hardware yardstick (“lesser light”) is no less faithful to its task than the “greater light,” if it has passed the “test.” Thus, the reliability of the yardstick is, for all practical purposes, the same as the platinum-iridium bar in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

·The comparison of forty candles with one candle.

The analogy here is that the Bible was written by about forty authors—forty candles; Ellen White is one candle. Thus, the Bible is the “greater light.” Both the “greater light” and the “lesser light” give sufficient light to dispel darkness. The quality of light in the “greater light” is the same as that of the “lesser light.”

·National map and the state maps.

Many road atlases have a two-page map of the forty-eight contiguous states followed by the state maps. The national map with its coast-to-coast display of the Interstate highway system is the “greater light”; the state maps, though possessing more detail, are the “lesser light.” Each has its special function. Both the “greater” and the “lesser” lights have equal authority in presenting truth.

·The telescope analogy.

Mrs. S. M. I. Henry, well-known in the late nineteenth century as a leader in the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, became a Seventh-day Adventist while a patient at the Battle Creek Sanitarium. She and Ellen White soon developed a close friendship, largely because of their common life experiences. One of Mrs. Henry’s challenges was to present the Sabbath truth to her

friends in the W.C.T.U., especially because they were often the leaders in promoting Sunday legislation.

However, accepting a prophet in the Adventist Church was not easy for Mrs. Henry. After close study, she saw the role of Ellen White to be akin to a telescope through which to look at the Bible. Mrs. Henry described her new insight in an article for the January 1898 issue of *Good Health*:

“Everything depends upon our relation to it [telescope] 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 expectations. It will reduce nebulae to constellations; faraway points of light to planets of the first magnitude. . . . 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.”

Ellen White saw this article and asked permission to have it republished in Australia. She thought that Mrs. Henry had captured the relationship between the Bible and her work “as clearly and as accurately as anyone could ever put into words.” For Mrs. White, the Bible was always the “greater” light from which she derived her theological principles.