

EGW and Hermeneutics: Its Importance and Place

An Introduction

(Part 1 of Four Parts)

Introduction:

A. All study of hermeneutics by SDAs is based on two assumptions:

1. God has spoken through “His servants, the prophets” (2 Peter 1:21; Rev. 1:1; 19:10, 22:6; Jer. 1:4-10).
2. It is possible for men and women to understand this revelation sufficiently to enable the Christian to function (Isa. 1:18; John 7:17).

B. Definitions:

1. Hermeneutics

- a. *Webster*: “The study of the methodological principles of interpretation (as of the Bible)” (*Webster’s new Collegiate Dictionary*, 1974 ed.).

2. The chief concern of hermeneutics:

- a. “What does the prophet mean by the what the prophet says?” The words are significant and important, but the focus is on the meaning/message conveyed by those words.
- b. Hermeneutics is concerned with:
 - (i) What words mean (and do not mean)
 - (ii) How to arrive at the moral (lesson) from the data

C. Objectives and Methodology:

1. The **goal** of hermeneutics: to “rightly” divide “the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:25).
2. The **guiding purpose** of hermeneutics is twofold :
 - a. To achieve balance
 - b. To avoid distortion (7BC 336, 337)
3. The **importance** of hermeneutics: “Listen as for your life to ‘what saith the Scriptures.’ It is of supreme importance that you hear aright . . . Your salvation depends on your hearing aright, and receiving with meekness the engrafted Word.” (UL 50:1; from Lt. 32, Feb. 5, 1907)
4. The best **methodological approach** is to develop and employ rules by which meaning may be correctly extracted from the message.

I. The Biblical Preoccupation with the Search for Meaning:

A. Earliest Preaching:

1. Preaching was first done in the post-Exilic synagogues of Palestine following the Captivity. It was inextricably intertwined with concerns about hermeneutics. Note the various translations of Nehemiah 8:8:
 - a. **KJV**: “They read in the book of the law of God distinctly [mar., “with an

interpretation”], and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.”

- b. **NIV:** “They read from the book of the law of God, making it clear, and giving the meaning, so that the people could understand what was being read.”
- c. **NASB:** “And they read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.”

- 2. **Solomon:** The book of Proverbs was compiled by Solomon from many contemporary sayings (Eccl. 12: 9, 10), to which he added many of his own. In it the words “understand” and “understanding” alone appear some 60 times. The typical admonition is “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom; and with all thy getting, get understanding.” (Prov. 4:7)
- 3. **Jeremiah:** Jeremiah admonished men and women not to “glory” in knowledge, power, or wealth, for the most essential quest in life is to “understand” and “know” God (Jer. 9:23, 24).
- 4. **Philip:** This New Testament deacon asked the Ethiopian treasurer, who was reading the Book of Isaiah as he rode in his chariot near Gaza, “Understandest thou what thou readest?” (Acts 8:30).
- 5. **Paul:** He prayed that the Christians at Colosse “might be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding” (Col.

1:9). He urged Timothy to “Consider what I say: and the Lord give thee understanding in all things” (2 Tim. 2:7) and to “study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needed not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (v. 15).

II. The Continuing Quest for Balance:

- A. Significantly, EGW’s first vision (Dec., 1844) depicted “a straight and narrow path, cast up high above the world,” upon which the Advent people were traveling with Jesus, with the New Jerusalem destination lying ahead.
 - 1. A light shone from behind them on the pathway; light also emanated from Jesus before them.
 - 2. Some rashly denied the divine origin of the light from behind (the “Midnight Cry”), and—for them—it went out, leaving them to stumble off the path, dropping back down into “the dark and wicked world below.”
 - 3. Others who maintained their faith and balance and arrived safely at the City, to meet Jesus and to receive His commendation. (EW 14, 15)
- B. As Satan views struggling Christians attempting to reach heaven on this symbolic path of life:
 - 1. His **goal** is to get them off from the path leading upward.
 - 2. His **methodology** is to divert them into either the right-hand ditch or the left-hand ditch.
- D. EGW was concerned about “extremists” within her church:
 - 1. Categories employed:
 - a. “Bigot,” bigotry
 - b. “Extreme,” “extremism,” “extremist”
 - c. “Fanatic,” “fanaticism”

- d. "Narrow"
- e. "Smallness"
- f. "Zeal"
- g. "Tangent"

2. Concepts conveyed:

- a. Balance
- b. Moderation
- c. Temperance
- d. Equilibrium
- e. "Middle-of-the Road (especially important on a "narrow" road)
- f. Common sense
- g. "Rightly dividing"
- h. Not going "overboard"

III. EGW's Counsel Against Extremism:

A. The Counsel Summarized:

- 1. In Matters of Dress:
 - a. "Christians should follow Christ and conform their dress to God's word. They should . . . shun extremes." (2SM 476, 477)
 - b. "There is a medium position in these things. Oh, that we all might wisely find that position and keep it." (1T 425)
- 2. In Matters of Diet: "Take the middle path, avoiding all extremes." (CD 211)
- 3. In Matters of Educational Theory/practice: "God wants us to have common sense, and He wants us to reason from common sense." (3SM 217; context: age at which children should begin formal schooling)

B. The Counsel Expanded:

- 1. "Take the middle path, avoiding all extremes." (CD 211, Lt. 57, 1886)
 - a. "Christians should follow Christ, and . . . should shun extremes." (2SM 476, 477)
 - b. "There is a medium position in these things. Oh, that we all might wisely find that position and keep it." (1T 425)
 - c. "The people who follow Christ's example will not be extremists." (GW 317)
Every vice is a virtue carried to an extreme position: "It is in carrying that which is lawful to excess that makes it a grievous sin." (4T 505)
 - d. Satan seeks to get Christians into either "the fires of fanaticism," or the "ice-cold water of indifference." (5T 644; TM 228; CH 628)
 - e. "There is a class of people who are always ready to go off on some tangent, who want to catch up something strange and wonderful and new . . ." (Ev 611, undated Ms 111)
 - f. "True Temperance" defined:

For EGW: Total abstinence from ("dispensing entirely" with) everything harmful/hurtful; and a "judicious" (moderate) use of that which is healthful/good (PP 562).

- g. Why extremists are harmful to the church:
 - (i) They bring it into disrepute; a few can discredit the entire church.

- (1T 212)
 - (ii) They greatly injure and hinder the cause of truth. (3T 315)
 - (iii) They make Christian duties burdensome. (2SM 319)
 - (iv) They raise a false standard, and then try to force everyone else up to it. (2T 375)
 - (v) Satan uses them to cast contempt upon the work of the Holy Spirit. (GC 8)
 - (vi) Their spiritual eyesight is perverted. (Ev 610, 611)
- h. Areas in which extremism is a problem to SDAs:
- (i) “health Reform”
 - (ii) Diet
 - (iii) Dress
 - (iv) Recreation/amusement
 - (v) Education: theory/practice
 - (vi) Religious experience/practice
 - (vii) Racial issues
 - (viii) Cultural issues
 - (ix) Debt
 - (x) Homemaking (especially in areas of neatness/order)
2. No human being (apart from Christ) is to be a criterion for any other human being--not even EGW.
- a. “I eat the most simple food, prepared in the most simple way But the other members of my family do not eat the same things I do. I do not hold myself up as a criterion for them. I leave each one to follow his own ideas as to what is best for him. I bind no one else’s conscience by my own. One person cannot be a criterion for another in the matter of eating. It is impossible to make one rule for all to follow.” (CD 491, Lt 127, 1904)
- b. “Do not give up the use of meat [or cheese] [just] because Sister White does not eat it. I would not give a farthing for your health reform if that is what it is based upon Do not make any human being your criterion You are not to lean on any human being.” (Ms 43, Apr. 1, 1990, pp. 13, 16)
3. Daniel and his friends were “well-balanced.”
- a. They were “well-balanced” because:
- (i) They had yielded themselves to the control of the Holy Spirit.
 - (ii) They were not self-exalted.
 - (iii) They had studied science without being corrupted.
 - (iv) They gave God all the glory for their endowments: secular, scientific, religious.
- b. Their learning did not come by chance:
- (i) They obtained knowledge by the faithful use of their powers.
 - (ii) God gave them skill and understanding:
 - (a) They had to study--use the gifts already given them.
 - (b) They didn’t ask even their Jewish leaders what to believe.
 - (iii) The Berean Christians were “more noble” than their counterparts in Thessalonica because:
 - (a) They were not prejudiced/bigoted: they received the Word

were entirely contrary to the Scriptures. He saw how difficult it would be to instruct the people to read the Scriptures correctly, when their teachers read them in the light of their perverted judgment. What could He do to soften and subdue their hearts? This was the burden of His prayer [when He prayed all night in the mountain-- Luke 6:12].” (UL 80:2, from Ms 31a, mar. 7, 1898)

b. By His own disciple, Judas Iscariot:

He [Judas] would introduce texts of Scripture that had no connection with the truths Christ was presenting. These texts, separated from their connection, perplexed the disciples, and increased the discouragement that was constantly pressing upon them. Yet all this was done by Judas in such a way as to make it appear that he was conscientious. And while the disciples were searching for evidence to confirm the words of the great teacher, Judas would lead them almost imperceptibly on another track. Thus in a very religious, and apparently wise, way he was presenting matters in a different light from that which Jesus had given them, and attaching to His words a meaning that He had not conveyed. His suggestions were constantly exciting an ambitious desire for temporal preferment, and thus turning the disciples from the important things they should have considered. (DA 719)

B. A Continuing Problem for Ellen White:

1. **1893:** A. W. Staton, in Battle Creek while EGW was in Australia, published a pamphlet *The Loud Cry of the Third Angel's Message* in which he alleged that the SDA Church had become spiritual Babylon, and that true believers must now “come out of her, My people.” (TM 521)
 - a. EGW’s response appeared in a four-part series in the RH of Aug 22 (TM 32-38), Aug. 29 (TM 38-45), Sept. 5 (TM 45-52), and Sept. 12 (TM 52-62).
 - b. In these articles her major concern was how Stanton was misusing and misapplying her writings.
2. **1901:** “Many men take the testimonies the Lord has given . . . picking out a sentence here and there, taking it from its proper connection, and applying it according to their idea. Thus poor souls become bewildered, when could they read in order all that has been given, they would see the true application, and would not become confused. Much that purports to be a message from Sister White, serves [only] the purpose of misrepresenting Sister White.” (1SM 44, from Ms 21, 1901).
3. **1906:** Addressing George C. Tenney, a teacher and chaplain at the Battle Creek Sanitarium, editor of the *Medical Missionary Magazine*, and co-editor (with Uriah Smith) of the RH (1895-97), who apparently had erred in contextual misuse of her writings, she reproached:

“Those who are not walking in the light of the message, may gather up statements from my writings that happen to please them, and that agree with their human judgment, and, by separating these statements from their connection, and placing them beside human reasoning, make it appear that my writings uphold that which they condemn. I charge you not to do this work. To use my writings thus . . . is misleading and inconsistent.” (Lt 208, June 29, 1906, p. 3; cited in ALW’s *Messenger to the Remnant*, p. 86)

V. The Need for an Adequate Hermeneutic--Differing Viewpoints:

A. Some say we do not need hermeneutical rules to understand the Bible/EGW:

1. These advocate: “Take it just as it reads, in plain English. You don’t need a fancy set of rules to interpret inspired writings.” There is, therefore, no need for hermeneutical rules to understand the Bible/EGW.
2. They feel confident in relying on the command of Mary, the mother of Jesus, to the

servants at the wedding feast of Cana: “Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it” (John 2:5).

3. They consider each issue in life as either “black-or-white.” There is no “gray” area. A matter is either right or wrong, good or bad. As such, they often have a simplistic world view.
 - a. The following texts are quoted to substantiate this view:
 - (i) “Let your communication be yea, yea, and nay, nay, for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil” (Matt. 5:37; Jas. 5:12).
 - (ii) “I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou were cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth “ (Rev. 3:15, 16).
 - b. Everything in life appears to be divided into but two categories:
 - (i) Sheep or goats
 - (ii) Wheat or tares
 - (iii) “Right-hand” or “left-hand”
 - (iv) Good or bad, right or wrong.
4. They are often given to sweeping, all-inclusive generalizations, and unsupported exaggerated claims.
 - a. They are often found in a group that is categorized as “Ultra-right-wing” conservative Christians.
 - b. They often have a tendency toward rigid legalism..
 - c. They often hold a rigid verbal/mechanical view of inspiration/revelation.
5. They have a suspicion that rules of interpretation are dangerous. They be justifiable at times, for there is a potential problem.
 - a. “Liberals,” they claim, have invented unnecessary rules of interpretation as a cloak under which to hide their “watering-down,” if not totally nullifying the clear intent of the Word of God. Rules of interpretation are, for them, mere subterfuge, and are neither necessary nor legitimate for proper study of inspired writings.
 - b. At the turn of the century, EGW warned of such a danger:

“And now, brethren, I entreat you not to interpose between me and the people, and turn away the light which God would have come to them. Do not by your criticism take out all the force, all the point and power, from the *Testimonies*. Do not feel that you can dissect them to suit your own ideas . . . 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.” (5T 691)

- c. An excellent Biblical example of this “watering-down,” “explaining away” is the “Corban” policy and practice of the Jewish leaders in Christ own day (Matt. 15:6, DA 396, 397).

B. Nine Reasons Why We Need Hermeneutical Rules to Guide in Interpretation:

1. Sometimes the words themselves may be clear; but the intended meaning of those words may remain unclear.
 - a. Ambiguous words arising from a language that lends itself to more than one interpretation.
 - b. Jargons understood by only people of a particular class, profession etc.
 - c. Initial-abbreviations may have different perceived meanings by several

different persons

2. A mistaken use of synecdoche (a figure of speech in which a part represents the whole) may actually distort the intended meaning totally.
 - a. Psychology: EGW once wrote, “Satan works through the science of psychology” (MYP 57; 2SM 351; 1T 290-92). But does this mean that all psychology is evil? Not necessarily, for Mrs. White also wrote, “The true principles of psychology are found in the Holy Scriptures.” (ML 176)
 - b. Music and drums in the church: In connection with the “Holy Flesh” fanaticism of 1900, EGW wrote to condemn “drums, music, and dancing” in certain SDA churches in Indiana. (2SM 36-38) However, this does not interdict the use of all drums and music in the church upon any and every occasion. Her expressions are qualified by additional descriptions indicating the particular reasons she opposed certain performances:
 - (i) “Every uncouth thing will be demonstrated.”
 - (ii) “A bedlam of noise shocks the senses and perverts that which, if conducted aright, might be a blessing.”
 - (iii) “The powers of satanic agencies blend with the din and noise. . .”
 - (iv) “Satan works among the din of such music, which, if properly conducted, would be a praise and glory to God.”
 - (v) “Satan will make music a snare by the way in which it is conducted”
 - c. Since “those things which have been in the past will be [found] in the future” in the remnant church, just before Jesus comes, it is especially important that we learn to differentiate between the good and the bad on the basis of genuine, legitimate hermeneutical principles.
3. The possibility may exist of a technical/editorial error in the printed text.

In 1T 296 we read a statement that has puzzled many and troubled some. “Phrenology and mesmerism [hypnosis] are very much exalted. They are good in their place, but they have been seized upon by Satan as his most powerful agents to deceive and destroy souls.” What is the antecedent of *they*?
4. Words in every language evolve in meaning over a period of time, and the nature of that evolution is from a broad to a more limited meaning of the word.
 - a. As believers (with EGW) in thought-inspiration (in contradistinction with the strictly verbal/mechanical view), while we are interested in the words a prophet may choose to employ, we are still more interested in the meaning which they may seek to convey.
 - b. The KJV was translated in 1611 A.D.--nearly 390 years ago. What was “plain English in 1611 A.D. is, in many respects, no longer such today.
 - c. Some KJV words have a much more narrow meaning today:
 - (i) **Conversation:** today indicates oral discourse between two or more persons; in 1611 A.D., it meant one’s whole way of life.
 - (ii) **Meat:** to any SDAs today, any article of flesh food; to nonSDAs it means flesh food that would exclude fish and poultry’ but in 1611 A.D., it meant food in general.
 - d. Some KJV words have an altogether different even opposite meaning today:
 - (i) **Meet:** today, short for the noun “meeting,” or as a verb indicating gathering together of a group; then, “appropriate,” “suitable,” “fitting.”

- (ii) **To allow:** Today, “to permit;” then to approve or accept.
- e. A number of words employed by EGW herself have changed in the comparatively short time that has elapsed between when she used them and today:

Example:

Shut door: as used by ex-Millerites, after Oct. 22, 1844, meant that the door of probation was shut for all who did not accept the validity of Oct. 22, but, by 1852, it meant that probation was closed only for those who had openly turned their backs on the doctrine of the Second Advent in 1844, but that the door of mercy was still open for others (on the basis of 3:7, 8, in the light of their new understandings of the heavenly sanctuary).

5. Cultural factors may affect meaning.

- a. Culturally, the Bible is basically an Eastern rather than a Western book:
 - (i) In the Middle East, and in much of Africa, respect is shown by removing the footwear (see Ex. 3:5) and also in Eastern Europe and the former USSR by standing for prayer (in contrast with kneeling). In the west, respect is shown by kneeling, removing one’s hat (and, often, by placing it over one’s heart), rising to one’s feet, or (for military personnel in uniform) saluting.
 - (ii) The Aso Ebi custom of the Yoruba tribe of western Nigeria, West Africa, is manifested by a group of individuals who appear at special public occasions (religious, social, or political), all wearing garments made of identically patterned cloth; and better enables the Christian to understand the parable of the man who attended a feast without the “wedding garment” (Matt. 22:9-13). This custom in Africa had a twofold purpose today:
 - (a) To show one’s identification with either the host or the principal guest of honor
 - (b) To show respect for such an honored person.
- b. Prophets are sometimes said to be “a child of their age.”
 - (i) SDAs have no problem in understanding that the prophets (including EGW) were influenced by the cultural milieu in which they were raised and lived.
 - (ii) However, we do not accept the idea that the prophet was a “prisoner” of the culture of his or her times, and thus unable to transcend it.
 - (iii) The understanding of the age will often help us better understand the prophet and his/her utterances.

6. Circumstances often affect meaning.

Two men in New Testament times asked an identical question, under quite different circumstances, and each got a different answer.

- a. The rich young ruler asked: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17). Christ told him to (1) sell all he owned, (2) give the proceeds to the poor, (3) take up his “cross,” and (4) follow Jesus.
- b. The Philippian jailer asked virtually the same question, worded slightly differently: “What must I do to be saved?” Paul and Silas told him that he must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:30).
- c. Why the different answers to the same question? Because the conditions,

and, therefore, the needs of each man differed from that of the other. The rich young ruler's problem was idolatry of wealth;; the Greek jailer's problem was one of intellectual belief.

7. A given word/expression may have a different meaning in different books by the same author or even different meanings in different places within the same book.
 - a. In DA 780, EGW wrote: "Christ came forth from the tomb glorified;" yet, only 25 pages later in the same book she wrote: "Christ had not yet been glorified."
 - b. Why the discrepancy? In the first statement, "glorified" refers to Christ's physical appearance, whereas in the second, it refers to His legal status before God, as Savior.

8. Authors sometimes make statements that seemingly contradict the teachings of the Bible or even other expressions from their own pens.

- a. In MM 14, EGW wrote: "The way in which Christ worked was to preach the word, and to relieve suffering by miraculous works of healing. But I am instructed that we cannot now work in this way; for Satan will exercise his power by working [counterfeit, but genuinely supernatural] miracles. God's servants today could not work by means of miracles, because spurious works of healing, claiming to be divine, will be wrought" (See also. "God's people will not find their safety in working miracles, for Satan will counterfeit the miracles that will be wrought" 9T 16).

These statements superficially appear to be a contradiction of the Bible teaching and SDA position that all of the gifts of the Holy Spirit given to the Apostolic church will continue in the church until the end of time.

- (i) They also seem to contradict another EGW statement to the effect that in the time of the pouring out of the Latter Rain of the Holy Spirit, "mighty miracles" (including those of healing) will be wrought by SDA church members (See EW 178; GC 612; 9T 126).
- (ii) They also seem to contradict the historical record that miracles of healing were performed (some of them by EGW herself) in her own day, in answer to prayer (See EW 37).
- b. However, the very next paragraph in MM 14 indicates that SDAs are to be involved in a work of healing, but that the Lord's present plan (in view of the prevalence of false Satanic miracles of healing) is to be done now through sanitariums and other similar institutions.

9. As with the written mode, so also with oral communication: an identical act may be interpreted widely differently by two different persons, who, taking identical data, come to divergent conclusions as to what was meant by the data.

Illustration:

A New Zealand motorist flashes his headlights at an oncoming American tourist who is coming toward him from the opposite direction. The tourist knows clearly what the other driver is doing, but he may not understand what the New Zealander means by the gesture. There are three possible meanings:

- (i) "You're driving on the wrong side of the road; get over to the other side quickly lest you cause a serious accident!"
- (ii) "It's getting dusk; for safety's sake, turn on your headlamps immediately!"
- (iii) "There's a police speed-trap down the road behind me (in the direction you are heading); slow down now, or you'll get caught!"

