

# Interpreting *the* Prophetic Writings



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** Isa. 65:17; Mark 1:15; Rom. 2:14–16; Eph. 2:8, 9; James 2:14–26; 1 John 5:12, 13.

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

As Seventh-day Adventists we believe that Ellen White manifested the gift of prophecy. The next question, however, is how do we interpret her writings?

Though we believe that her inspiration, *not her authority*, is on the same level as the Old and New Testament prophets, when interpreting what she has written, we must apply the same principles of interpretation to her writings that we do to Scripture. Indeed, principles for interpreting the Bible can be used when interpreting Ellen White’s writings, even though the authority of the Bible is above the authority of the Spirit of Prophecy. To use an analogy from American law, one might use the same principles for interpreting a decision of the United States Supreme Court as for interpreting a decision by a lower court, but in the end the decision of the Supreme Court carries the ultimate authority.

**The Week at a Glance:** What is the difference between exegesis and the homiletical use of a biblical text? Why is context so important? Can people who have never heard the gospel be saved? What distinguishes the kingdom of grace from the kingdom of glory?

\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 14.

## Exegesis

Exegesis is concerned with the original meaning of a text. It focuses on what the author wanted to say and what the text meant to the original reader.

### **What** is the original or exegetical meaning of Romans 2:14–16? Compare *Ezek. 3:17–19, Rom. 10:12–17.*

There is no question that there will be people in heaven who never have heard the gospel. “Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish. Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 638.

On occasion, God, apart from human messengers, reaches out to individuals in heathen lands and saves them. However, they are saved because the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they have responded appropriately as evidenced by their works. They are not saved because they have lived up to their conscience; if they were, then they would be saved by keeping the law, and the New Testament clearly denies that possibility (*Rom. 3:28, Gal. 2:16*). The issue in Romans 2:11–16 is the accountability of Jews and Gentiles, not their salvation. The fact that God is no respecter of persons (*vs. 11*) is illustrated by what Paul says in Romans 2:12. “As many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law” (*NKJV*). Those “without law” are the Gentiles who do not have the written law given to the Israelites on Mount Sinai. However, they will perish, not because they did not have the written law but because they are sinners who have transgressed against the law “written in their hearts, their conscience” (*vs. 15*).

In the judgment, Jews and Gentiles will be judged and condemned by their respective laws, the Jews by the written law and the Gentiles by the law “written in their hearts.” Among the Gentiles, conscience performed the same function as the written law performed among the Jews. Scripture clearly says that “‘there is no one righteous, not even one’” (*Rom. 3:10, NIV*). This means that Jews and Gentiles are sinners alike and are all saved the same way, not by any law keeping but only by Jesus’ death on the cross.

**How reliable a guide is your conscience? Does following your conscience always guarantee that you will make a right decision? Justify your answer.**

## Homiletics

Homiletics is the art of preaching. In a homiletics class a student learns sermon preparation and how to use the Scriptures in preaching. Sometimes a preacher may use just the wording of a text, without special regard for its original meaning, to make a point or an appeal during a sermon. This is called the homiletical use of Scripture.

### **What was the kingdom Jesus was proclaiming as being near in Mark 1:15?**

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The kingdom that Jesus was proclaiming at that time was the kingdom of grace, which He established at His First Advent. But the text also can be applied to our situation today. A preacher on Sabbath morning may tell the congregation, “All the time prophecies have been fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand.” And he may appeal to them that today we need to repent and believe the gospel. The kingdom that the modern preacher has in mind, however, is no longer the kingdom of grace but the kingdom of glory that Christ will inaugurate at His second coming. The first interpretation of Mark 1:15 is exegetical, the second homiletical.

According to Mark 1:17, Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee one day when He saw Simon and Andrew, his brother, casting a net into the sea. Jesus said to them, “‘Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men’” (*NKJV*), and immediately they left their nets and followed Him.

A modern preacher, using the words of Mark 1:17, may call upon church members to follow Jesus because only He can make us fishers of men. Exegetically the text applies to Simon and Andrew, but homiletically it can be applied to every Christian, because Jesus wants us all to become fishers of men (*Matt. 28:19, 20*).

Ellen G. White frequently used Scripture homiletically. She was steeped in the language of the Bible, and whenever she spoke or wrote on a topic, she used biblical language and biblical texts to convey to the church the message that she had received from the Lord. For example, in the book *Education*, Ellen G. White has a chapter on the study of physiology. Speaking of good posture she says, “Among the first things to be aimed at should be a correct position, both in sitting and in standing. God made man upright, and He desires him to possess not only the physical but the mental and moral benefit, the grace and dignity and self-possession, the courage and self-reliance, which an erect bearing so greatly tends to promote.”—*Education*, p. 198. That “God made man upright” is a quote from Ecclesiastes 7:29 (*NKJV*), but when Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, he was referring to moral uprightness, not to posture.

## Time and Place

A crucial rule of biblical interpretation is the principle of studying the times and circumstances during which a particular text was written and by whom.

### **What** is Jeremiah describing in Jeremiah 4:23–26?

When most Adventists read these texts, they think of the millennium. However, when Jeremiah wrote this text, around 600 B.C., he was not thinking of the millennium. The context of this passage is the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

God, through Jeremiah, pleaded with His people to turn from their evil ways, but they would not listen. In verses 23–26 the prophet sees in vision what will happen if they disobey. In poetic language he describes the waste and desolation that will come upon the land of Judah because of their disobedience. The crucial point is that when a text was written and under what circumstances need to be taken into account when we seek to interpret it.

What happened with Judah and Jerusalem in 586 B.C. is a symbol of what will happen to the world in the future. When Jesus comes and the earth is cleansed with fire, Jeremiah 4:23–26 will be an apt description of this earth during the millennium. Thus, exegetically, Jeremiah 4:23–26 refers to the destruction of Jerusalem. Symbolically, however, it also refers to the time of the millennium. Ellen G. White, therefore, quotes from Jeremiah 4 to describe the situation on earth during the millennium.—*The Great Controversy*, p. 659.

In reading Ellen White, we also need to take time and circumstances into account. For example, in 1897 Mrs. White wrote that “the money expended in bicycles and dress and other needless things must be accounted for.”—*Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 398.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the bicycle was not an economical means of transportation but was rather a rich person’s toy. The best early bicycle cost US\$150, an investment comparable to the cost of an expensive car today. People were mortgaging their income for months in advance to buy what was then an expensive luxury item. Within a few years’ time the bicycle became a useful and inexpensive means of transportation, and she never again spoke against it.

Her policy on bicycles was based on the biblical principle of good stewardship. If she were alive today, she probably would apply this principle to other things that people spend frivolously on.

**Time and circumstances are important not just in the interpretation of inspired writings but in all aspects of life. How quick are you to judge the actions of others without getting more background information? How can you improve in this area?**

## Immediate Context

**Read** Isaiah 65:17. What is the new heaven and new earth to which Isaiah is referring? Is it the new earth that Christians expect in the future?

In the immediate context, Isaiah says, “ ‘No more shall an infant from there live but a few days, Nor an old man who has not fulfilled his days; For the child shall die one hundred years old, But the sinner being one hundred years old shall be accursed’ ” (vs. 20, NKJV). Death on the new earth? This cannot be the new earth we expect that follows the millennium. What then is the new heaven and the new earth in verse 17?

In this passage Isaiah describes a “new creation” that would have been brought about had Israel, following the restoration from the Babylonian captivity, remained faithful to God and fulfilled the divine commission to be a light to the world (*Isa. 42:6*). Unfortunately, it didn’t, and thus the prophecy, which was conditional, was not fulfilled. This “new heaven and new earth” never became a reality. Nevertheless, in a secondary sense these verses point forward to the new heaven and the new earth to be ushered in at the close of the millennium. But in that “new earth and new heaven” there will be no children born to the redeemed (*Matt. 22:30*), neither will there be any more sorrow or death (*Rev. 21:4*), so we have to be careful how far we seek to push the imagery.

**In** *Christ’s Object Lessons*, Ellen White makes the statement that “those who accept the Saviour, however sincere their conversion, should never be taught to say or to feel that they are saved.” —Page 155. Does this mean we can never be certain about our salvation? *1 John 5:12, 13.*

When we study the context, we discover that she is speaking about whether a person can fall from grace after conversion. Many Christians in her days believed in the doctrine of “once saved always saved.” Ellen White was clearly against this teaching. In context she says, “Never can we safely put confidence in self or feel, this side of heaven, that we are secure against temptation.”—*Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 155.

The immediate context makes it clear that she is addressing the issue of self-confidence and temptations after conversion. We are never secure against temptations, we can never say that we cannot fall, that we are saved and therefore secure from temptation, but this does not mean that in Jesus we cannot have day-by-day assurance of salvation.

If your hope of salvation rests in what Jesus did for you, how can you then not have assurance of salvation? On the other hand, if you are looking to self, how can you ever have any assurance at all?

## The Larger Context

The larger context refers to what other texts beyond the immediate passage have to say on a particular topic. It can refer to other chapters in a book, the whole book, or to the whole of Scripture.

**Are we saved by grace through faith alone, or do we also need works? Eph. 2:8, 9; James 2:14–26. Is Paul in conflict with James on the issue of salvation? What do the following texts have to say on this topic? Rom. 3:21–28, Rom. 4:3, Gal. 3:6–12.**

When we look at the larger context in Scripture, what other passages have to say on the topic, we discover that James is not arguing for good works as a requirement for salvation. Rather, he insists that there are two kinds of faith, one valid and the other invalid. Paul speaks about the valid faith that is followed by good deeds. James refers to the invalid faith that stops at the intellectual level, faith that is mere mental assent.

Paul uses the example of Abraham to show that we are justified on the basis of valid, or real, faith. James shows that Abraham's faith was real because it produced good works (obedience). Therefore, we do not need anything but faith, valid faith, to be saved, and our behavior will show if our faith is valid or not.

When reading Ellen White, we also need to look at the larger context in her writings; i.e., everything she has written on a particular topic. We cannot just take one or two statements and run with them. For example, on the issue of meat-eating she has very absolute-sounding statements but also many modifying statements that need to be considered, as well.

In the book *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, she says: "Vegetables, fruits, and grains should compose our diet. Not an ounce of flesh meat should enter our stomachs. The eating of flesh is unnatural. We are to return to God's original purpose in the creation of man."—Page 380. Anyone reading only this statement would have to come to the conclusion that under no circumstances are we to eat meat. However, a few pages further on is this statement: "A meat diet is not the most wholesome of diets, and yet I would not take the position that meat should be discarded by every one. Those who have feeble digestive organs can often use meat, when they cannot eat vegetables, fruit, or porridge."—Pages 394, 395. (See also Friday's lesson.) When we look at the total body of what she has written on a given topic, a balanced picture emerges that is invaluable for every Christian who takes religion seriously.

**While we shouldn't make meat and drink our religion, God has given us wonderful counsel about diet that can have a positive impact on our health. How careful are you in your diet and all your habits? Why wait until sickness strikes before you make a change for the better?**

**Further Study:** Read Ellen G. White, “Christ Our Righteousness,” pp. 35–39; “Ellen White Clearly Draws the Lines,” pp. 41–46; “Faith and Works,” pp. 47–50, in *Faith and Works*.

### Further Guidelines for the Interpretation of Inspired Writings

Apart from the guidelines studied in this week’s lesson, we need to (a) ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the study of His Word; (b) ensure that we use one or more good translations; (c) look for principles that are universal and apply to all people, in all places, and at all times; (d) be willing to obey the truths we discover; (e) be open-minded and willing to surrender previously held positions; (f) guard against extreme interpretations; (g) work together with people of experience; and (h) use common sense.

### Ellen G. White on Once Saved Always Saved

“There is nothing so offensive to God or so dangerous to the human soul as pride and self-sufficiency. Of all sins it is the most hopeless, the most incurable. Peter’s fall was not instantaneous, but gradual. Self-confidence led him to the belief that he was saved, and step after step was taken in the downward path, until he could deny his Master. Never can we safely put confidence in self or feel, this side of heaven, that we are secure against temptation. Those who accept the Saviour, however sincere their conversion, should never be taught to say or to feel that they are saved. This is misleading. Every one should be taught to cherish hope and faith; but even when we give ourselves to Christ and know that He accepts us, we are not beyond the reach of temptation.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 154, 155.

### Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Look at the whole context of the Ellen White quote above. Now look at the one statement about not saying we are saved. How easy to take that one statement out of context and come away with a whole different meaning from what was intended. Why must we always be careful not to pull statements out of context? What other examples can you find of people having done just that? Why is it such a temptation?
  
- ❷ What are some other ways that Ellen White’s writings have been misused? What can we do, however, to avoid the trap of throwing the whole thing out, simply because it has not been used properly?
  
- ❸ Think about what we’ve been given with the health message as it appears in the writings of Ellen White. What great blessings can we take away from it if we use it properly? What traps must we avoid?

# Amina's Forbidden God

Amina\* (ah-MEE-nah) lives in northern Africa. From childhood she read her holy book, and there she met Issa (Jesus) and fell in love with Him. She often asked her father to tell her more about this Prophet who was a perfect Man. As she grew to adulthood, Amina became a sincere and faithful follower of her family's religion, but she never forgot Issa.

One day a Christian girlfriend invited Amina to visit the Adventist chapel in her city, and Amina went. She couldn't explain why she went, for going to a Christian house of prayer was a dangerous thing to do. But she went. And something—some power she did not fully understand—drew her to return again and again. Little by little Amina's faith in her family's religion faded as her love for Issa grew.

Amina's father saw that Amina was losing her faith and wanted to wake her up to the danger she was in. Because she no longer submitted to daily prayers with the family, her father refused to allow her to enter his home. He hoped that she would realize her error and once more worship with them. But it didn't work. Finally after almost a year of estrangement, Amina's parents invited her to return home—but she wasn't allowed to speak of Issa or Christianity inside the house. For nearly 10 years Amina kept her faith to herself. For 10 years she didn't worship in the Adventist chapel in town or talk about Issa.

Then one day Amina asked her girlfriend to take her to the Adventist chapel. There she met a missionary who welcomed her with joy. Amina spoke at length with the missionary and asked many questions about Issa. Is He really God? What does He require of followers?

Amina continued worshiping at the chapel, and several months later, she surrendered her life to Issa and was baptized. The Lord, Issa, has become everything to her. Amina has made a dangerous decision, for in her culture to leave her family's faith could mean death.

In spite of the danger, Amina bravely shares her faith in quiet ways and with much prayer. With kind words, a visit, and a smile, she shares her faith. And through her actions, the Spirit of God is touching hearts. God often arranges opportunities for Amina to show her faith in Issa.

Pray for Amina and her quiet ministry in the shadows of her daily life. Pray that her acts of faith become as precious drops of water to the parched desert of her hostile homeland.

Your mission offerings help reach people such as Amina for Issa. Thank you.

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\* Not her real name.