

The Integrity of the Prophetic Gift



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Sam. 7:1–7, 1 Kings 22:10–18, Jer. 43:2–4, Dan. 8:27.*

Memory Text: “As the Lord lives, whatever my God says, that I will speak” (*2 Chronicles 18:13, NKJV*).

If you ever read modern criticism of the Bible, one thing you'll notice: The same kind of attacks leveled against the Bible are similar to the attacks leveled against Ellen White. And one attack against Ellen White is that because she used other sources, she is not reliable or honest.

Yet, Ellen White has explained in print how she used the writings of others, and why. She even recommended that people read certain books she used in writing her own works. That hardly sounds as if she were trying to hide her use of other sources.

This week we'll explore a little more about how inspiration works, both with Bible writers and with Ellen White.

The Week at a Glance: What do we know about the integrity of biblical prophets? If Scripture and the writings of Ellen G. White are both inspired by the same Spirit, what is the relationship between them? What is the danger in seeing prophets as infallible? Can prophets give wrong advice?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 28.*

The Integrity of the Prophet

The year was 853 B.C. King Ahab of Israel invited King Jehoshaphat of Judah to go with him into battle against the Arameans, and Jehoshaphat agreed. However, he requested that before they go into battle they ask for a word from the Lord. When Jehoshaphat refused to accept the word of the four hundred prophets of Ahab, Micaiah, a prophet of the Lord, was called.

Read 1 Kings 22:10–18. How did Ahab’s officer attempt to influence Micaiah, and what did the prophet do, regardless of the circumstances?

Micaiah’s message was unpopular with the king, and he was sent to prison for it (*1 Kings 22:27*). King Ahab, in spite of the prophet’s warning, went into battle and was killed; and King Jehoshaphat, who in a weak moment had agreed to support King Ahab, barely escaped with his life.

Though prophets, like all humans, have their moments of weakness, in this case Micaiah was determined to tell the truth, no matter how unpopular it was with those in authority. Throughout history, God’s prophets have endured hardship because they refused to change their testimony to suit their contemporaries.

During Ellen White’s lifetime, critics questioned her integrity and have continued to do so ever since her death. She has been accused of deception, falsehood, and lies. One major reason for these accusations has been personal presuppositions about how a prophet should function. For example, some critics believe that “prophets ‘should have full knowledge’ from the start of their ministry; their predictions should be unalterable, their writings exempt from all errors, discrepancies, and mistakes, and never include uninspired sources. For them, prophets never express merely personal opinions in their writings.” —Herbert E. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1998), p. 468. As we have seen in our study of biblical prophets, these presuppositions assume a verbal-inspiration concept that Seventh-day Adventists do not hold. If we don’t hold it for the Bible itself, why should we for Ellen White?

Have you ever had to deliver an unpopular message? What kind of pressures did you face? In what ways did you try to make excuses to yourself that could have allowed you not to deliver the message? What have you learned from that experience?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *2 Chronicles 18:13*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: That prophets are not perfect.

Feel: Generous toward the flaws and failings of prophets.

Do: Revisit the writings of Ellen G. White with a deeper appreciation for her humanity.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Integrity (*1 Kings 22:10–18*)

A What external pressures do prophets experience?

B Read Jeremiah 43:1–4. What accusations have prophets faced through the ages? Does Ellen G. White’s use of literary assistants affect the integrity of her messages?

II. Thus Says the Lord (*Hos. 1:1*)

A How do you feel about people who claim to speak for God? How can we avoid becoming skeptical or cynical?

B Read Galatians 2:11–16. Why does God use progressive revelation? What contributes to the growth of a prophet’s character and understanding? What might this experience be like for the prophet?

C How do you feel about the fact that as God gave more light, Ellen G. White’s understanding of various subjects could develop or even change over time?

III. Prophets in Error (*2 Sam. 7:1–7*)

A Why do some people expect more of Ellen G. White than biblical prophets? How can we respond to unrealistic expectations or misunderstandings about inspiration?

B How do you feel about the possibility of God leading His church beyond the understanding of Ellen G. White on some points of belief? Why might that possibility be necessary? What role do the spiritual gifts of wisdom and knowledge play in this progression?

► **Summary:** Prophets are not perfect. Our expectations of Ellen G. White should reflect the model of the biblical prophets. God is able at any time to correct and further develop the understanding of prophets and His church.

The Integrity of the Message

A few months after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., Gedaliah, the governor appointed by Nebuchadnezzar, was assassinated. The leaders and the people left in the land were afraid of Babylonian reprisals and decided to seek safety in Egypt; but they wanted to make sure that God was on their side. So, they asked Jeremiah to inquire of the Lord concerning their plan.

What was Jeremiah’s message, and how did the people respond to it? **Of what** did they accuse Jeremiah, and who was said to have originated the counsel that Jeremiah declared to be from the Lord? *Jer. 43:2–4.*

Because some did not like the clear instructions God gave, they claimed Jeremiah’s message actually had originated with his literary assistant Baruch and not with the Lord.

How interesting that thousands of years later, Mrs. White (like Jeremiah) has at times been the focus of claims that her literary assistants wrote her books or that she plagiarized most of what she wrote. Yet, in the introduction to *The Great Controversy* she stated that she had used other books: “In some cases where a historian has so grouped together events as to afford, in brief, a comprehensive view of the subject, or has summarized details in a convenient manner, his words have been quoted. . . . In narrating the experience and views of those carrying forward the work of reform in our own time, similar use has been made of their published works.”—Page 14.

Does this justify the charge of plagiarism? In 1981 the General Conference asked a non-Adventist copyright lawyer to study the matter. After spending more than three hundred hours researching, he concluded that “Ellen White was not a plagiarist, and her works did not constitute copyright infringement/piracy.”—*Adventist Review*, September 17, 1981. Among the reasons given were first, the fact that the books Ellen White used were not covered by copyright; and second, even if they had been covered by copyright, her use of phrases and sentences did not constitute an infringement of copyright.

Why was there always hostility among God’s professed people to the messages of the prophets? Look in your own heart; can you find, at least somewhat, part of the answer there? Explain.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God has provided us with biblical guidelines for determining what is true and what is false.

How do you determine if something is true? How can you tell if the source of what you believe is credible? Because we constantly are bombarded with information from all kinds of sources, it is crucial that we know whether or not those sources are trustworthy.

Each one of us is involved in an eternal battle. How can we be certain that the information on which we base eternal decisions is reliable? Read the following quotation: “Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. . . . Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist’s credibility.”—*Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics* (www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp).

Consider This: In the search for truth and justice, how important is the integrity of those who claim to speak for God? How is integrity related to credibility? How do we sort out the impostors from those who have a genuine message from God?

► **STEP 2**—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. The Integrity of the Prophet (*1 Kings 22:1–28*)

Micaiah’s initial prediction of victory (*vs. 15*) for the coalition forces of Ahab and Jehoshaphat surely was delivered in an ironic tone, as indicated by Ahab’s sharp reply (*vs. 16*). Note that Micaiah indicates in verse 28 that the fulfillment of prophecy is one test by which to determine the genuineness of a prophet. Although outnumbered 400 to 1 (*vs. 6*) by Ahab’s prophets, Micaiah was the only one who told the truth.

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“Thus Says the Lord”

What did the prophets often designate as the source of their messages? *Jer. 1:4, Ezek. 7:1, Hos. 1:1*. **Why** is this so important to what they have to say?

The prophets repeatedly pointed out that their messages came from God. Their position can be compared to that of earthly ambassadors who are sent out by an earthly ruler and who are commissioned to represent their sovereign. In that capacity they must adhere closely to the instructions they have received. The expression “the Word of the Lord came unto . . .” means that (a) their messages carry divine authority, (b) they received them by direct communication from the Lord, and (c) these messages are in their minds, ready to be presented.

The expression “thus says the Lord” appears more than four hundred times in the Old Testament—a powerful testimony to the fact that in Scripture, God is speaking directly to the reader. The prophet’s responsibility was to bring these messages before the people and apply them to the audience’s situation.

Ellen White strongly emphasized the inspiration of the Scriptures. “I take the Bible just as it is, as the Inspired Word,” she said.—*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 17. At the same time, she also claimed divine inspiration for her writings: “In these letters which I write, in the testimonies I bear, I am presenting to you that which the Lord has presented to me. . . . It is true concerning the articles in our papers and in the many volumes of my books.”—Page 29.

Ellen White called her writings the lesser light leading men and women to the greater light—the Bible. (See *Colporteur Ministry*, p. 125.) While both are light, their functions are different: (1) The Bible is God’s message for all time and for all people. The writings of Ellen G. White are God’s message for a particular time, the end time, and for a particular people, the remnant church. (2) Her writings are not a new or additional standard of doctrine but a help for the church in the time of the end. Her writings focus the reader’s attention on Scripture. They do not replace Scripture.

How can we avoid the trap of putting Ellen White’s writings on par with the Bible? Why is that so easy to do and such a big mistake?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Consider This: How solid is our personal integrity when we hold the minority opinion? How prone are we to give in to popular opinion for the sake of *peace*? How much trust would you invest in a prophet who was *on the king's payroll*?

Also, do you think it was easier or harder for Micaiah to oppose 400 prophets who claimed to speak for the Lord than it was for Elijah to oppose 850 prophets who admittedly weren't of the Lord? (*See also 1 Kings 18:1–40*).

II. The Integrity of the Message (*Jeremiah 43:1–7*)

Johanan had been loyal to Gedaliah, the governor appointed by the Babylonians. However, Ishmael had murdered Gedaliah, and Johanan and Hoshaiah feared that the Babylonians would punish all the Israelites (*see Jer. 40:13–41:15*). They had asked Jeremiah to seek God's guidance and pledged to follow the Lord's counsel. When God's guidance was different from what they expected, they turned against Jeremiah.

Consider This: How do we respond when God tells us to go against our own wisdom? What role did fear for their own personal safety play in the accusation of Johanan and Hoshaiah against Jeremiah? Can fear of retribution for sin cause us to find excuses for disobeying God's message?

III. "Thus Says the Lord" (*Jeremiah 1:4, Ezekiel 7:1, Hosea 1:1*)

Consider This: Read 2 Peter 1:20, 21. What does this say to the assertion that Jeremiah's literary assistant was the source of his inspiration? What danger are we in when we try to find excuses for not accepting God's will?

IV. Growth in Understanding (*Daniel 8:27, 9:2; Galatians 2:1–16, 1 Peter 1:10*)

Consider This: Read Acts 10:9–17, 24, 28, 34, 35. Peter, a man conditioned by his culture (as we all are), had many things to learn. If an apostle/prophet who was a member of Christ's inner circle for more

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Growth in Understanding

Prophets did not receive all of God's light at one time. As they faithfully ministered as the Lord's servants, they received more light and grew in their understanding.

What do the following texts tell us about the spiritual-growth experience of biblical prophets? *Dan. 8:27, 9:2, Gal. 2:11–16, 1 Pet. 1:10.*

The possession of the prophetic gift in biblical times did not imply immediate, full, and complete knowledge of spiritual and other matters. Prophets received increased light as history unfolded and as they were able to understand it. They also had to study Scripture, as the case of Daniel illustrates (*Dan. 9:2*). In Daniel 8:27 the prophet said, "I was appalled by the vision and did not understand it" (*RSV*). About ten years later the angel Gabriel came and explained to him the full import of the vision (*Dan. 9:20–23*).

The prophets knew only that which God had revealed to them, and only this were they permitted to set forth as a "Thus saith the Lord." Since the messages to one prophet often complemented those given to others, it became necessary to study and compare the various revelations in order to get a balanced and comprehensive view of the messages from Heaven.

It was the same with Ellen White: "For sixty years I have been in communication with heavenly messengers, and I have been constantly learning in reference to divine things, and in reference to the way in which God is constantly working to bring souls from the error of their ways to the light in God's light."—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 3, p. 71.

Hence, when we compare earlier writings of Ellen G. White with her later works, we sometimes find that her later writings modify or expand her earlier writings, reflecting a deeper insight into God's messages.

She was not a systematic theologian but more of an evangelist and communicator of what God showed her. Her understanding of theology, though founded on Scripture and informed by her visions, grew through the years as she continued to study Scripture and the writings of others and was open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We must be careful not to place the attributes of God, such as omniscience (knowing all things), on His messengers. What is the danger in seeing prophets as infallible and having full knowledge in all areas of life?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

than three years didn't understand everything, how can we expect prophets in other times suddenly to have all the right answers?

V. When Prophets Get It Wrong (*2 Samuel 7:1–7, 1 Chronicles 22:8*)

David's course of action is notable here. First, before moving ahead with his plans, he sought divine counsel. At first his prophetic consultant, Nathan, assured him that the Lord was with him (David) in the execution of his plans. When Nathan reversed himself, on the basis of a fresh word from the Lord, David did not question whether or not Nathan was inspired. Nor did he complain about not being allowed to move forward with his plans. Instead, he offered a prayer of thanksgiving!

Consider This: When my plans and dreams run counter to the Lord's will, do I accept His direction or do I look for faults in the Lord's messenger so that I can justify doing things my way?

► STEP 3—Practice

Thought Questions:

1 According to 2 Timothy 3:14–17, God's prophetic voice as expressed in Scripture will confront us with things that are wrong in our lives. It will correct us. How can I avoid the natural inclination to resist that corrective voice and resist the temptation to attack the messenger whom God uses to deliver the message?

2 Today there are many standards that claim to be the ultimate measure of what truth is. For some people the scientific method is the final measure of truth. For others personal experience is the standard by which everything is to be judged. Still others would say that the question is irrelevant—that there is no such thing as truth. For fewer and fewer people, even among professing Christians, the Bible is still the ultimate authority.

Which of the options above is closest to the one that directs your life, and

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When Prophets Get It Wrong

Read 2 Samuel 7:1–7. What was wrong with Nathan’s advice to David, and why would God not allow David to build Him a temple? 1 Chron. 22:8.

The prophet Nathan was a wise, thoughtful, and God-fearing man, but not everything a prophet says or does is done under inspiration. In giving his approval to David’s plan, Nathan had spoken as a friend of the king and not in his capacity as a prophet. A permanent dwelling for the God of Israel was probably something that most pious people desired. In a night vision (2 Sam. 7:4–17), however, God told Nathan that what he had told David was wrong and that he had to go and tell David.

Ellen White was not infallible, and she never claimed infallibility. She grew, changed her mind on issues, and was constantly open for more light.

In one instance, when the publishing house in the South was doing poorly, she supported making it merely a depository for the Review and Herald. “Go ahead,” she said, “God’s cause must not be left to reproach, no matter who is made sore by arranging matters on a right basis. Edson should give himself to the ministry and to writing. . . . Finance is not his forte at all.”—*Manuscript Releases*, vol. 17, p. 270. But within 24 hours Ellen G. White received a vision that caused her to reverse herself. “Let the Southern field have its own home-published books,” she told the General Conference.—Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Elmshaven Years*, p. 193.

We must remember that prophets are not always on duty—that is, they are not speaking constantly for God. “There are times when common things must be stated, common thoughts must occupy the mind, common letters must be written and information given that has passed from one to another of the workers. Such words, such information, are not given under the special inspiration of the Spirit of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 3, p. 58.

But as history has shown, if erroneous counsel has been given by a prophet, God will intervene to correct the mistake.

Some people love to focus on every perceived error in either the Bible or in the lesser light, which is the writings of Ellen G. White. What’s so dangerous and unhealthy about that kind of attitude? How can you protect yourself from falling into that trap?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

why did you choose it instead of the other available options?

Application Question:

Having a credible witness to truth makes no difference if I do not take the time to listen (*see Rom. 10:13–17*) to it. What practical steps can I take this week to avoid the distractions that make it so hard to listen?

Witnessing

To a heart enslaved by sin, the thought of submitting to the authority of God is completely foreign. To suggest that the messages of people now dead for centuries should govern our lives today is quite often alien to contemporary culture. Even the thought of prophetic contemporaries meets with a certain degree of hostility, for the modern mind often resists even the hint of submission to any type of moral authority. Given these realities, discuss with the class what you could share from your personal experience regarding what led you to believe that God speaks to you through credible, though not infallible, messengers. How would you tell nonbelievers that you believe in a God you cannot see and that you believe that He communicates with you through ordinary, fallible human beings like you?

► STEP 4—Apply

Consider This: Believing that God will use credible and reliable messengers to communicate truth to us means little if we do not act on the message delivered, for even demons “believe” (*see James 2:19–24*). Discuss the steps you could take this week to act on some truth you have discovered in the Bible.

■ *The integrity of the prophetic messenger is crucial to the credibility of the message. While no one in the class may be a prophet in the biblical sense, the integrity of each member is a crucial part of his or her proclamation of God’s message. Invite each member to spend time in the coming week reflecting on his or her personal integrity. Some areas for consideration may include financial accountability to God and others, sexual purity, charity and Christian service, care for our bodies as God’s temples, and observance of the Sabbath rest.*

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Question of Influence,” pp. 62–67, in *Selected Messages*, book 3.

“Ellen White made claims about her ministry that leave no room for compromise or ambivalence about those claims. She claimed to have seen things that could have come only from supernatural inspiration. Either her claims are true or she was a lunatic and/or a powerful liar who promulgated her insane ravings or amazing deceptions from the middle of the nineteenth into the second decade of the twentieth century.

“What rational options are there for someone who claimed to have seen, in vision, what she claimed to have seen? She claimed to have seen Jesus bring the redeemed into the Holy City. She claimed to have seen people living on other planets and angels protecting God’s people. She claimed to have seen, in vision, Jesus in the heavenly sanctuary or what Satan looked like in heaven before he sinned. She claimed to have seen angels visiting Adam and Eve in Eden. She said that she saw the look on Adam’s face when he realized that Eve had sinned. She claimed to have seen Jesus, in vision, and what His face was like after the wilderness fast. She claimed to have seen the Resurrection of Jesus from the tomb, as well as an angel release Paul and Silas from prison. She claimed to have seen Satan lead lost multitudes into the final rebellion against God after the second resurrection. She claimed to have seen, in vision, life in the new earth, and on and on. . . .

“What does one do with these claims? Those who place her ministry on the level, for instance, of Martin Luther, are living in a logical fantasy world. Either we take her for what she has claimed for herself (which, of course, leaves open a whole group of questions that we, as a church, haven’t always answered in the most fortuitous manner), or we have to reject her as [a] liar, a lunatic, or someone inspired by the devil. These are the only logical options.”—Clifford Goldstein, *Graffiti in the Holy of Holies* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 2003), pp. 172, 173.

Discussion Questions:

1 Read over the argument above. The point is simple: Ellen White, by her claims, doesn’t leave us many logical options regarding her ministry. From what we know of her life, her teachings, and the legacy of writings that she has left, what’s really the best and most logical explanation for her life and ministry? Defend your answer.

2 As with the Bible, some questions remain regarding Ellen White’s ministry. Should we focus on these few questions and miss the big picture of her work, or should we focus on the big picture, knowing that as with anything, some questions will remain?