

INSPIRATION OF ELLEN G. WHITE

**A full understanding of the role
of Ellen White's writings is vital to the mission of
the Seventh-day Adventist Church.**

The Paraná River is the second in size of the South American rivers, and it runs through Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina. Before emptying into the Río de la Plata and the Atlantic Ocean, the river splits into several tributaries and forms the Paraná Delta, with a length of some 320 km and a width varying between 18 and 60 km. When a foreign vessel arrives at Buenos Aires and has to sail through the delta, a national pilot is usually hired to guide it through the

navigable canal, avoiding the possibility of running aground in one of the lower tributaries.

The history of the world can be compared to a lengthy river that forms a huge ideological-religious delta before emptying into the ocean

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of eternity. Based on an analogy suggested by Uriah Smith, we can consider the Bible as “a book of directions” for the “whole journey,” and the prophetic gift of Ellen G. White as an additional “pilot” for the last part of the voyage. The mission of that pilot is not to replace the instructions of the book, but rather to assist in applying them to the complex end-time eschatological context.¹

Recognizing the devotional relevance of Ellen White’s writings for our days, some people place them on the same level as those of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley. But Seventh-day Adventists acknowledge her writings not only as devotionally *inspiring* but also as prophetically *inspired*.

Evidences of Inspiration

There are three basic evidences for the inspiration of Ellen White’s writings. One is her own supernatural experiences and prophetic claims. She began to report her first vision (December 1844) with the words, “As God has shown me in holy vision.”² Many of her other prophetic experiences were introduced with similar terms.

By claiming to have received prophetic visions, she placed herself under judgment in regard to their origin. In 1875, she wrote: “God is either teaching his church, reproving their wrongs and strengthening their faith, or he is not. This work is of

God, or it is not. God does nothing in partnership with Satan. My work, for the past thirty years, bears the stamp of God or the stamp of the enemy. There is no half-way work in the matter. The *Testimonies* are of the Spirit of God, or of the devil.”³ Undoubtedly, she was fully convinced about the genuineness of her prophetic gift.

Another basic evidence for the inspiration of Ellen White’s writings is the acknowledgment by many of her contemporaries. Already in August 1845, James White referred to her in following words: “There is one Sister in Maine who has had a clear vision of the Advent people traveling to the City of God.”⁴ In April 1846, Otis Nichols wrote to William Miller that “God called her and told her to go out and tell the flock what he had revealed to her.”⁵ Many other Seventh-day Adventist pioneers expressed their trust in the divine origin of her visions.⁶ More recently, even the famous archeologist William F. Albright qualified Ellen White as a true modern prophetess.⁷

As meaningful as both Ellen White’s personal conviction and the witnesses of her contemporaries are, however, they alone cannot *prove* the inspiration of her writings. Crucial for the whole discussion is, indeed, their inner witness to Scripture. Though many self-alleged prophets tend to replace the authority of

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Scripture by their own teachings, Ellen White uplifted consistently, throughout her writings, the Bible and its authority. Mrs. S. M. I. Henry compared those writings to a telescope, which does not add stars to the skies but only helps us to discern better the ones already in existence.⁸ It is only from such perspective that one can harmonize the prophetic relevance of Ellen White’s writings with her own statement that in the last days: “God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms.”⁹

Scope of Inspiration

Prophetic inspiration is a mysterious divine-human process, with the Holy Spirit providing the ideas and assisting the prophet in expressing them either in written or oral forms. Although the words are usually chosen by the prophet himself or herself, there are instances in

which they are provided by a divine agent. Reflecting on her own experience, Ellen White declared, “although I am as dependent upon the Spirit of the Lord in writing my views as I am in receiving them, yet the words I employ in describing what I have seen are my own, unless they be those spoken to me by an angel, which I always enclose in marks of quotation.”¹⁰ Such divine assistance makes all inspired writings fully trustworthy and authoritative.

Yet, there is a modern tendency to read the inspired writings from a dichotomous perspective, restraining their trustworthy range only to matters of salvation, and leaving outside that range all other themes. Unquestionably, the primary purpose of those writings is to build up faith for salvation (John 20:31). But salvation is so integrated into the overall thematic interrelationship of the inspired writings that it is almost impossible for someone to speak of

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them as reliable in some topics and not in others. Despite their selectiveness in some areas of human knowledge (John 16:12, 13; 20:30; 21:25), the inspired writings cannot be considered as untrustworthy in those areas.¹¹

With emphasis on plenary inspiration (2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Peter 1:19-21), Ellen White stated in 1882: “In these letters which I write, in the testimonies I bear, I am presenting to you that which the Lord has presented to me. I do not write one article in the paper expressing merely my own ideas. They are what God has opened before me in vision.”¹²

In regard to common, non-inspired matters, she added in 1909: “But 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. Questions are asked at times that are not upon religious subjects at all, and these

questions must be answered. We converse about houses and lands, trades to be made, and locations for our institutions, their advantages and disadvantages.”¹³ The balance between these two statements can be reached only by avoiding any confusion of the sacred and the common.

Enlightened by the Inspired Writings

There are many subtle ways one might confuse the faith-uplifting influence of the inspired writings (including Ellen White’s) in his or her life. One of the most common is to allow *form* (writing style) to replace *essence* (message). This is usually a temptation for those concerned with such issues as literary borrowings, grammatical mistakes, and secretarial assistance. Another way is to distort the overall thematic balance of the inspired writings by overemphasizing some teachings in detriment of others. A third way is to subordinate the inspired writings either to the prophet’s ancient surrounding culture or to the reader’s modern culture. Instead of being allowed to

judge culture, those writings become judged by culture, losing their normative function.

But the inspired writings are a “lamp” to the feet and a “light” to the path (Ps. 119:105) of all those who acknowledge them not only as devotionally *inspiring* but also as prophetically *inspired*. Aware of the existence of human pitfalls and technical difficulties in those writings, the sincere readers are not satisfied just with dry issue-focused analyses. They still have enough faith to discern, in the human person of the prophet, a divinely sent messenger; and, in the prophetic writings, the infallible message of the Lord.

While dealing with inspired writings, one should not overlook the contrasting experiences of John the apostle and Judas Iscariot. Under the influence of Christ and His teachings, the humble John was gradually transformed into the likeness of his Master, but the proud Judas was not. Unfortunately, “Many accept an intellectual religion, a form of godliness, when the heart is not cleansed.”¹⁴ In order to avoid the dryness of mere intellectual religion, one has to “read,” “hear,” and “take to heart” the inspired messages (Rev. 1:3, NIV). Only so a person can be genuinely sanctified “by the truth” (John 17:17, NIV). □

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