

## ***The Prophetic Gift***

# ***Interpreting the Prophetic Writings***

Lesson #11 for March 14, 2009

Scriptures: Isaiah 65:17; Mark 1:15; Romans 2:14-16; Ephesians 2:8,9; James 2:14-26; 1 John 5:12,13.

1. This lesson is about the science of hermeneutics (interpretation)—how to interpret what we read. We must always remember that the first law of interpretation is context. Only a small percentage of what we communicate in ordinary conversation is the words. The expression on the face and the tone of the voice often speak much “louder” than the words themselves. The written context is divided into two parts: 1) The “immediate context,” that is, the words surrounding the passage in question; and 2) The “larger context” which refers to what was going on surrounding the events of the original writing. Who wrote it? To whom was it written? What was it that the original author had in mind? What did his audience think when they read the passage for the first time? The more carefully and accurately we can reconstruct the original context, the better we can understand the true original meaning. Probably without recognizing it, this is something that we do all the time. When talking with friends, we interpret their words based in the context that we are familiar with.
2. Traditionally, when reading the Bible, these questions have been divided into 2 groups: 1) What was the exact wording that the original writer used? That is the field of “textual criticism” or “lower criticism” as it has been called. And 2) What was the original intent or meaning from the original author? This question involves the Who? What? When? Why? And How?—the newspaper reporter’s questions—which have traditionally been included in what has been described as “higher criticism.” Our lesson for this week is asking ordinary Christians to take a look at this very controversial issue.
3. The area of textual criticism—hopefully guided by the best possible documentation from the ancient documents and careful scholarship—seeks to reconstruct the original text. We are not going to spend a lot of time on “textual criticism” because that is an area for linguistic scholars. We will assume that the scholars have done their best to reconstruct the original language for us. The area of “higher criticism” focuses on asking what the original writer had in mind when he wrote the words he wrote. The process known as “exegesis” is the attempt by scholars and anyone who reads Scripture to correctly interpret what he/she is reading and to determine the exact meaning of the words that were spoken or written by the original author.
4. Let us consider some examples. Read Romans 2:14-16; Ezekiel 3:17-19; Romans 10:12-17. What was God, through Ezekiel and Paul, trying to tell us about our personal responsibility to those around us? These passages focus on the question of “general revelation” versus “special revelation.” If one reads a passage such as Romans 1:20, it would appear that nature itself reveals enough for one to “obtain” salvation. By contrast, Acts 4:12 would seem to suggest that only through specific knowledge about Jesus Christ can one be saved. Does that mean that only Christians will be saved? While it is clear that Scripture states that we can be saved only by faith in Jesus Christ, (Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:16; Acts 16:31) it is also true

that:

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. 638.2.

So, what is it that makes some heathen “savable”? Certainly, it cannot be by observing some “law” or “set of laws” that they are seeking to keep. If we, who have the “Law” cannot keep it, surely those who do not have the “Law” will not be able to keep it!

5. Does that suggest that people will be admitted to heaven based on different sets of criteria? Are there different standards for admission? We know that we are all sinners. (Romans 3:10,23) So, what must take place for us to be “safe to admit” to the kingdom of heaven? If a person responds to any impulse sent from the Holy Spirit and does—as far as he is aware and able—what he believes is right, is that sufficient basis on which to be saved? We have suggested that the highest moral value is to do what is right because it is right. What if one has had limited information available about what is right? What if one grew up in a remote tribal village? Does every person have a reliable “conscience” in his head? Have some people damaged their consciences? We sometimes suggest that there are two little “voices” in our heads: the Devil is trying constantly to tempt us to do wrong while the Holy Spirit is constantly trying to encourage us to do what is right. Is our conscience a “third voice”? If we grow very accustomed to listening to a certain one of those voices, do the other voices lose their influence? Are you tempted when you walk past a bar to have a drink? When passing a bank to rob it?
6. What is it that happens which fulfills the statement in Romans 2:15, *GNB*, “Their conduct shows that what the law commands is written in their hearts”? What does the word “law” refer to in that context? Is it the “law” of love? Why did Paul call it a law? Why doesn’t God send one of His angels to give us direct instruction about what we personally are to do? Wouldn’t the Devil demand equal time? How would you like to spend a period of time each week under the direct influence of one of the Devil’s angels?
7. Returning to the passages in Romans 2, Romans 10, and Ezekiel 3, is it clear that these texts refer to the responsibility of the individual who knows what is right? If one knows what is right to do and still refuses to do it, then he is personally responsible. (Numbers 15:30-36)
8. Sometimes, preachers or writers of articles use expressions, even entire verses, from Scripture to support the idea that they are trying to build up without using the material in its original context. Let us consider a couple of easy examples. Read Mark 1:15. In the original context, Jesus was calling some of His early disciples to join Him in His earthly ministry. But as we all most certainly know, often the expression “the kingdom of God is at hand” has been used by modern preachers to refer to the second coming.
9. The original context or meaning of this verse—referred to as the “exegetical”

interpretation—refers to Christ’s first coming. The second use is “homiletical.” There, the preacher uses an expression which suits his theme to talk about a separate context or situation. Ellen White spent an entire lifetime reading especially the *King James Version* of the Bible. Her language became permeated with “biblical expressions.” Sometimes she used those “expressions” in ordinary conversation completely separate from their “biblical” context. We do this all the time in our use of language. That is how vocabulary grows.

10. Ecclesiastes 7:29 in the *King James Version* and the *New King James Version* speaks of God “making man upright.” In the context that is referring to moral correctness. Ellen G. White on more than one occasion used the expression in another way.

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.

In this homiletical use of the expression, Ellen White was writing about posture. Was she misusing Scripture? She did not try to suggest that she was quoting Solomon! Is it all right to use a word or a set of words in a different way from what someone else has used them—even an inspired writer? We do that all the time.

11. Read 1 Corinthians 6:18-20 and 1 Corinthians 3:9-17. In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul was referring to the human body as God’s temple. Earlier, in 1 Corinthians 3, he referred to the church—the body of believers—as God’s temple. On occasion, preachers have put these two texts together suggesting that if we destroy God’s temple—implying it is referring to the human body—God will destroy us. Does it make sense to believe that after we have destroyed our bodies, God will destroy them again? The temple is sometimes used to mean the human body, and it is sometimes used to mean the church.
12. The science of interpretation, called “hermeneutics,” can be affected by many factors. We have all had experiences where someone will say something and by the tone of his voice and the sarcasm with which he says it, we know that his point is exactly opposite to what the words taken simply would mean. That is true even in some places in Scripture. (See 1 Kings 22:15,16) What do you think was the tone of voice and the expression on Micaiah’s face as he told King Ahab to go into battle? That is sarcasm in the Bible! To interpret the meaning of the author in such a case, we must, of course, understand these other factors. When done correctly, exegesis would be the practical and correct use of hermeneutics.
13. Read Jeremiah 4:23-26. In its original context, this passage was referring to the ruins and total waste that would be left in the land of Palestine after the destruction of Jerusalem at the time of the Babylonian exile. Taken out of context and read to a modern audience with Christian backgrounds, it is often used to describe the millennium on this earth. Ellen White used Jeremiah 4:23-26 in that way in *Great Controversy* p. 659.
14. Time, place, and circumstances **must** be clearly understood in order to interpret passages correctly. In 1897 the use of bicycles became a great fad. Nice bicycles were being sold for

up to \$150. At that time that was enough money to buy the furnishings for an entire house. Under the circumstances, Ellen White warned that “the money expended in bicycles and dress and other needless things must be accounted for.”—*Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 398. Such expressions must be understood in their original context. Today, no doubt, Ellen White would say that a reasonable expenditure for a bicycle to be used for transportation or exercise would be a very sensible thing to do. In the days when a bicycle might cost several months wages, Christians should not have been purchasing them just to show off!

15. Another simple example is Jeremiah 10:3,4. Some have read those verses and implied that we should never have a Christmas tree. But, in context, those verses are clearly referring to the making of idols. Is it wrong for us to take Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 and interpret them to mean Lucifer/Satan rather than the prince of Tyre or the King of Babylon? Some biblical passages obviously have dual applications. Read Isaiah 7-9. Clearly, in the original context, the “immanuel” was Isaiah’s baby born to Isaiah’s wife. But that baby is certainly not the Baby being referred to in Isaiah 9:6! Do we have two virgin births in the Bible? In the same way, Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 say things about the prince of Tyre and the King of Babylon which clearly were not true about those individuals. Therefore, we must look to someone else behind the scenes as the ultimate fulfillment of those verses. (Compare Matthew 16:23)
16. Read Isaiah 65:17-20. By carefully considering the larger context and the immediate textual setting of Isaiah 65:17, it is clear that the prophet was referring to the restoration of the children of Israel to Palestine from exile in Babylon. But, that is a favorite passage for pastors and preachers to use when referring to “the new heaven and new earth” which God will construct after the millennium. (Compare Revelation 21) Certainly, we do not think people will continue to die in the new earth! Will there be sinners there to be accursed? Clearly, Israel did not fulfill the conditions under which the prophecy might have been fulfilled in their day, (Isaiah 42:6) but we know from other passages (Matthew 22:30; Revelation 21:4) that the details that Isaiah was referring to will not take place in the new heaven and the new earth that we look forward to.
17. Look at 1 John 5:12,13. Is this passage referring to the assurance of salvation? How does that fit with *Christ’s Object Lessons*, page 155, “Those who accept the Savior, however sincere their conversion, should never be taught to say or to feel that they are saved.” Once again, by looking at the larger context, it is clear that Ellen White was referring to those who are boastful and proud about their spiritual condition after conversion. As long as we live here on this earth, we are never above temptation. Remember the story of Moses striking the rock! (Numbers 20:7-12)
18. Finally, the scholar or even the “ordinary” Bible student must always keep in his mind the context of the book that he is reading in the larger setting of Scripture and hopefully even in the context of the issues in the great controversy which are “behind” the writing of all of Scripture.
19. Read Ephesians 2:8,9 and James 2:14-26. Is this a case of two Bible writers contradicting each other? Not at all! In Romans 2:13, Paul agreed with James. (Compare Romans 3:21-28; Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:6-12) Both Paul and James recognized that a profession of faith

without the accompanying actions are deceptive theology.

20. Ellen White wrote:

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.—*Councils on Diet and Foods*, p 380.

But in the larger context considering other passages which Ellen White wrote, she did not intend for that to be applicable to all situations at all times. She wrote:

A meat diet is not the most wholesome of diets, and yet I would not take the position that meat should be discarded by everyone. Those who have feeble digestive organs can often use meat, when they cannot eat vegetables, fruit, or porridge. *ibid*, pages 394,395.

21. Clearly, the business of interpretation can be fraught with many dangers. But every one of us practices that in our daily activities whether we are listening to television, or to our friends, or to a pastor preaching a sermon. Our minds develop the skill of constantly comparing what is being said with what we believe to be true from prior experiences. This really worries me. With all of their television viewing, and all the “special effects” which are being used now, are our children blurring in their minds the line between what is real and what is “make-believe”? We must be very careful not to load our minds with trash that might corrupt our understanding of what is truth.

22. **Those of us who understand and believe in the great controversy over God's character and government realize that in order to understand Scripture correctly, a much “larger view” needs to be taken of the whole plan of salvation. Often, such as in the story of Job, it is the context going on behind the scenes in the “battle” between Satan and God over Satan's misrepresentation of God's character and government that determines why certain things were said and done in Scripture. Without that larger understanding, many passages of Scripture are frequently misinterpreted. The more fully we understand and comprehend Scripture, the more able we can be to interpret each individual passage correctly. Therefore, Bible study is not only useful but it is essential if we are going to become correct interpreters of Scripture and, in the larger context, become “the friends of God.”**

© 2009, Kenneth Hart, MD. ***Permission is hereby granted for any noncommercial use of these materials. Free distribution is encouraged. It is our goal to see them spread as widely and freely as possible. If you would like to use them for your class or even make copies of portions of them, feel free to do so. We always enjoy hearing about how you might be using the materials and we might even want to share good ideas with others, so let us know.***

[Info@theox.org](mailto:Info@theox.org)

Last modified: February 14, 2009

C:\My Documents\WPISSTG-Hart\Prophetic Gift\GPR-KH-Added SS-11-PropheticGift-2009\_01\_24-2009\_03\_14-Fin.wpd