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# HERMENEUTICS (WHAT THE PROPHET *MEANT*)

## I. Introduction

a. The word “hermeneutics” is derived from a Greek word meaning “to interpret.” The chief concern of hermeneutics is to discover “what the prophet meant by what the prophet said.”

i.) “Rightly dividing the Word...” (2 Tim. 2:15)

(a) “know what His Word says and means” (*The Living Bible*)

(i) Letters come to me entreating an answer; I know that many men take the testimonies the Lord has given, and apply them as they suppose they should be applied, 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 the purpose of misrepresenting Sister White, making her testify in favor of things that are not in accordance with her mind or judgment. This makes her work very trying. Reports fly from one to another regarding what Sister White has said. Each time the report is repeated, it grows larger. If Sister White has anything to say, leave her to say it. No one is called upon to be a mouthpiece for Sister White. – MS. 21, 1901. – *Selected Messages, Vol. 1*, p. 44.

(ii) I am now becoming convicted that I have made a mistake in specifying wrongs existing in my brethren. Many are so constituted that they will take these wrongs and deal so severely with the wrongdoer that he will have no courage or hope to set himself right, and this mismanagement will ruin a soul. They, knowing the things I know, treat the erring in altogether a different manner than I would. Hereafter I must exercise more caution... I wish that we had much more of the spirit of Christ and a great deal less of self and less of human opinions. If we err, let it be on the side of mercy rather than on the side of condemnation and harsh dealing. – *Letter #16, 1887: partially released in MR #449, pp. 28-30, quoted in Ty Gibson, Abandon Ship, pp. 107, 108.*

## II. Basic Rules of Interpretation – Internal:

a. Recognize that the Bible and the writings of Ellen White are the product of thought inspiration

b. Recognize the fact that word definitions change over time

i.) “nice” - Showing or requiring great precision or sensitive discernment

(a) To deal with human minds is the nicest job that was ever committed to mortal man. (Ev 347)

- ii.) “intercourse” - Dealings or communications between persons or groups
    - (a) The disciples prayed with intense earnestness for a fitness to meet men and in their daily intercourse to speak words that would lead sinners to Christ. (AA 37)
  - iii.) “gay” - Showing or characterized by cheerfulness and lighthearted excitement; merry
    - (a) Gay or expensive apparel is not becoming to those who profess to believe that we are living in the last days. . . . (CG 420)
  - iv.) “sanitarium” – (sanatorium) A health resort; an establishment for the care esp. of convalescents or the chronically ill
    - (a) We wish to build a sanitarium where maladies may be cured by nature's own provisions, and where the people may be taught how to treat themselves when sick; where they will learn to eat temperately of wholesome food, and be educated to refuse all narcotics – tea, coffee, fermented wines, and stimulants of all kinds – and to discard the flesh of dead animals. (CD 281)
- c. Understand the use of hyperbole
- i.) A figure of speech in which exaggeration is used for emphasis or effect, as in *I could sleep for a year* or *This book weighs a ton*.
    - (a) “one in twenty”
- d. Understand the meaning of a phrase
- i.) “phrenology, psychology and mesmerism”
    - (a) The sciences of phrenology, psychology, and mesmerism have been the channel through which Satan has come more directly to this generation, and wrought with that power which was to characterize his work near the close of probation. . . . (MYP 57)
    - (b) The true principles of psychology are found in the Holy Scriptures. (1MCP 10)
- e. Recognize the possibility of imprecise expressions
- i.) A general statement may utilize commonly used terms and expressions of which usage has changed over the course of time.
    - (a) 1861 – *Phrenology and mesmerism* are very much exalted. They are good in their place, but they are seized upon by Satan as his most powerful agents to deceive and destroy souls... Satan uses these very things to destroy virtue and lay the foundation of spiritualism. (1T 296.1)
    - (b) 1884 – *The sciences which treat of the human mind* are very much exalted. They are good in their place, but they are seized upon by Satan as his powerful agents to deceive and destroy souls.--ST, Nov 6, 1884. (2SM 351, 352.)



f. Look carefully at the immediate context

- i.) Never say or feel you are saved (COL 155)

g. Recognize that context can change the meaning of a word

- i.) “Christ came forth from the tomb glorified.” (DA 780)
- ii.) “Christ had not yet been glorified.” (DA 805)

h. Recognize the challenge of semantics

- i.) words mean different things to different people

- (a) There are many who interpret that which I write in the light of their own preconceived opinions. You know what this means. A division in understanding and diverse opinions is the sure result. How to write in a way to be understood by those to whom I address important matter, is a problem I cannot solve. But I will endeavor to write much less. Owing to the influence of mind upon mind, those who misunderstand can lead others to misunderstand, by the interpretation they place upon the subjects from my pen. One understands them as he thinks they should be, in accordance with his ideas. Another puts his construction upon the written matter, and confusion is the sure result. -- Letter 96, 1899 (3SM 79-80).

- (b) ***It seems impossible for me to be understood by those who have had the light but have not walked in it.*** What I might say in private conversations would be so repeated as to make it mean exactly opposite to what it would have meant had the hearers been sanctified in mind and spirit. I am afraid to speak even to my friends; for afterwards I hear, Sister White said this, or Sister White said that. My words are so wrested and misinterpreted that I am coming to the conclusion that the Lord desires me to keep out of large assemblies and refuse private interviews. What I say is reported in such a perverted light that it is ***new and strange to me.*** It is mixed with words spoken by men to sustain their own theories.--Letter 139, 1900 (3SM 82-3).

i. Moishe (moy'-sheh) the Tailor

Pope Leo IX, who lived in the 11th century, reportedly was urged by his cardinals to rid Rome of the Jews.

“Well,” said the pope, “I can’t just do it out of hand; I’ll have to give them a test first.” So he informed the Jewish community in the Holy City that they should send a representative who would be asked three questions. If the respondent did not answer each of the questions correctly, the Jews must leave.

Understandably, this caused great consternation as the Jews assembled in their local synagogue. One voice spoke up, “Rabbi, you’ll have to go.” But the rabbi protested, “I’m just the rabbi of this congregation, while the pope is the head of the whole civilized world.”

Someone else then said, “We’ll have to send a Talmudic scholar. They’re good at reasoning.” But a scholar protested: “What do you mean? The pope has been educated by the greatest scholars of all time.”

In the confusion a voice spoke from the back of the room. Moishe, a tailor, declared, “I’ll go. I’ve been answering foolish questions from Christians all my life. What’s three more?”

It was ridiculous, absurd; but in the confusion, Moishe did indeed go. The pope explained the ground rules. Moishe nodded impatiently and said, “OK; get started.”

The pope pointed a single finger at Moishe. Immediately, Moishe pointed two fingers back at the pope. The pope was impressed.

For the second question, the pope silently raised both of his arms above his head, forming a large circle. Moishe looked, then stabbed a finger toward the ground in a very determined way.

The pope, utterly astonished, said, “You know, that’s right, too! It’s most remarkable! But you’ve got to get the last question right, if your people are to be allowed to remain in Rome.”

So the pope reached under his robes and pulled out an apple. Moishe took it in at a glance, and promptly pulled out of his satchel some matzo – a flat piece of unleavened bread.

The pope responded, “You’re absolutely right! This is the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen! Your people may stay.”

As Moishe left by one door, the cardinals entered by another. “Why did you let them off?” they complained. “You had a chance to get rid of these pesky, troublesome people, and you let them stay!”

But the pope defended himself, saying, “What could I do? It was quite a remarkable performance, really. I put out one finger, meaning that there is but one God. And he put out two, meaning that the Father and Son are as one.

“Then I formed a circle in the air, meaning there is unity only in heaven. And he said, by pointing to the ground, Yes, but the Kingdom of God is on earth.

“Then I pulled out this apple, as an example of that terrible, pestilential heresy that the world is round. And he brought out a dull, flattened disc, proving that the world is flat!”

Meanwhile, Moishe returned to the temple, where all was in confusion. He cried, “Don’t get so excited. We’re staying.”

The people were incredulous: “You mean you beat the pope?”

“Of course,” Moishe responded. “You’ve got to know how to handle these Christians.”

“What happened?” they demanded to know.

“Well,” said Moishe, “He pointed one finger at me, meaning I’m going to poke out your right eye. So I pointed two fingers back at him, saying, I’m going to poke out both of yours.

“Then he made a circle with his arms, meaning We’re going to round up every one of you Jews, and get rid of you. And I said, We’re staying right here.

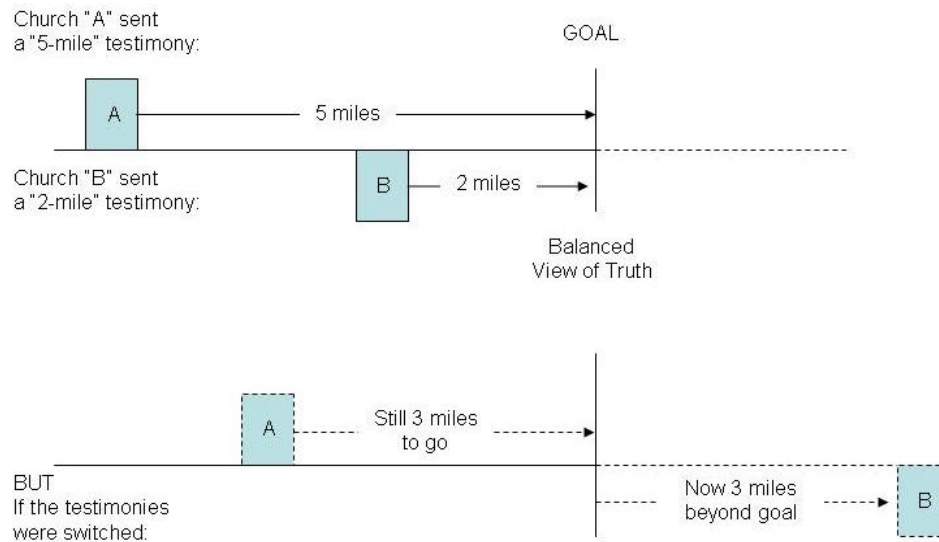
“Then he took out his lunch, so I took out mine.” – *The Story of Moishe the Tailor – A Parable, as told by Roger W. Coon, Lecture outline GSEM 534, p. 20.*

### III. Basic Rules of Interpretation – External:

- a. Include all that the prophet has said on the subject (Luke 24:25-27)
  - i.) “Line upon line, precept upon precept...” (Isa. 28:13)
    - (a) The testimonies themselves will be the key that will explain the messages given, as scripture is explained by scripture. -- Letter 73, 1903. (1SM 42)
  - ii.) An isolated statement may lead to very wrong conclusions
    - (a) “Eggs should not be placed upon your table. “ (2T 399)
    - (b) While warnings have been given against the use of these articles of diet in families where the children were addicted to, yes, steeped in, habits of self-abuse; yet we should not consider it a denial of principle to use eggs of hens which are well cared for and suitably fed. . . . (CD 204.4)
    - (c) “Put into your diet something you have left out. It is your duty to do this. Get eggs of healthy fowls. Use these eggs cooked or raw... Do not for a moment suppose that it will not be right to do this...” (CD 204)
- b. Every statement must be understood within its historical context
  - i.) “Regarding the testimonies, nothing is ignored; nothing is cast aside; but time and place must be considered.” (1SM 57)
  - ii.) Time
    - (a) Israel’s failure at Kadesh (Num. 14:30, 31, 40-45)
    - (b) When the judgment of the General Conference, which is the highest authority that God has upon the earth, is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be maintained, but surrendered. (1875) (3T 492)
    - (c) The voice from Battle Creek, which has been regarded as authority in counseling how the work should be done, is no longer the voice of God. (1896) (LDE 50)

iii.) Place

- (a) Letters to the churches in Revelation 2-3. Imagine the letters got “mixed up,” and the letter to Philadelphia, for instance, was sent to Pergamos, and vice-versa. What would be the outcome?



- (b) In the Review of March 17, 1868, James White commented on this difficulty saying “She works to this disadvantage, namely: she makes strong appeals to the people, which a few feel deeply, and take strong positions, and go to extremes. Then to save the cause from ruin in consequence of these extremes, she is obliged to come out with reproofs for extremists in a public manner. This is better than to have things go to pieces; but the influence of both the extremes and the reproofs are terrible on the cause, and brings upon Mrs. White a threefold burden. Here is the difficulty: What she may say to urge the tardy is taken by the prompt to urge them over the mark. And what she may say to caution the prompt, zealous, incautious ones is taken by the tardy as an excuse to remain too far behind.”

iv.) Circumstances

- (i) When I heard what the objections were, that the children could not go to school till they were ten years old, I wanted to tell you that *there was not a Sabbathkeeping school* when the light was given to me... My mind has been greatly stirred in regard to the idea, "Why, Sister White has said so and so, and Sister White has said so and so; and therefore we are going right up to it." God wants us all to have common sense, and He wants us to reason from common sense. ***Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things.*** Here is a Sanitarium, and that sanitarium must carry the highest possible influence inside and out. Then, if they see

children who come there--sharp-eyed, lynx-eyed, wandering about, with nothing to do, getting into mischief, and all these things--it is painful to the senses of those that want to keep the reputation of the school. Therefore, I, from the light that God has given me, [declare that] if there is a family that has not the capabilities of educating, nor discipline and government over their children, requiring obedience, the very best thing is to put them in some place where they will obey. Put them in some place where they will be required to obey, because obedience is better than sacrifice. (3SM 217)

c. Know the difference between policy and principle

- i.) Principle – an unerring, unchanging rule of human conduct or behavior
- ii.) Policy – the application of some eternal principle to a particular situation
  - (a) Every good policy has a solid principle behind it. When the policy changed due to changing circumstances, the principle must be reapplied in the new context.  
*Example: Ohio laws on the placement of horse watering troughs.*
    - (i) The bicycle craze
      - The exhibitions in the bicycle craze are an offense to God. His wrath is kindled against those who do such things. (CT 367)
      - Instead of investing one hundred dollars in a bicycle, you would consider the matter well, lest it might be at the price of souls for whom Christ died, and for whom he has made you responsible. (RH 8/21/1894)
    - (ii) Training for young women
      - If girls... could learn to harness and drive a horse, and to use the saw and the hammer, as well as to rake and the hoe, they would be better fitted to meet the emergencies of life. (ED 216-17)
    - (iii) A vegetarian diet
      - Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Cor. 10:31)
      - The diet reform should be progressive. As disease in animals increases, the use of milk and eggs will become more and more unsafe. An effort should be made to supply their place with other things that are healthful and inexpensive.
      - 470
      - The people everywhere should be taught how to cook without milk and eggs so far as possible, and yet have their food wholesome and palatable. (MH 320-21)



- Among those who are waiting for the coming of the Lord, meat eating will eventually be done away; flesh will cease to form a part of their diet... If we move from principle in these things... then we may exert an influence upon others in this matter, which will be pleasing to God. (CD 380)

(iv) Sabbath observance

- On Friday let the preparation for the Sabbath be completed. See that all the clothing is in readiness, and that all the cooking is done. Let the boots be blacked, and the baths be taken. (CG 528)
- The violation of the fourth commandment is not confined to the preparation of food. Many carelessly put off blacking their boots, and shaving, until after the beginning of the Sabbath. This should not be. If any neglect to do such work on a working day, they should have respect enough for God's holy time to let their beards remain unshaven, their boots rough and brown, until the Sabbath is past. This might help their memory, and make them more careful to do their own work on the six working days. (ST May 25, 1882)

d. Use common sense and sanctified reason

- i.) “God wants us all to have common sense, and He wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things.” (3SM 217)
- ii.) We are to be guided by true theology and common sense. (CT 257)

e. Know the difference between true and “apocryphal” statements

- i.) Apocryphal – of questionable authorship or authenticity; erroneous or fictitious
  - (a) Ark of the Covenant discovered in the last days
  - (b) Melchizedek is the Holy Spirit

f. Allow for maturing experience of prophets

- i.) NOT *contradictory*
  - (a) Expansion of books
    - (i) 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. (3SM 71)
    - (ii) When Mother was writing *Great Controversy, Volume IV*, in 1882-1884, she was instructed regarding the general plan of the book. It was revealed to her that she should present an outline of the controversy between Christ and Satan as it developed in the first centuries of the Christian era, and in

the great Reformation of the sixteenth century, in such a way as to prepare the mind of the reader to understand clearly the controversy as it is going on in our day. While Mother was writing this book, many of the scenes were presented to her over and over again in visions of the night. The vision of the deliverance of God's people, as given in Chapter XL, was repeated three times; and on two occasions, once at her home in Healdsburg and once at the St. Helena Sanitarium, members of her family, sleeping in nearby rooms, were awakened from sleep by her clear, musical cry, "They come! They come!" (See GC, page 636). Several times we thought that the manuscript of the book was all ready for the printer, and then a vision of some important feature of the controversy would be repeated, and Mother would again write upon the subject, bringing out the description more fully and clearly. Thus the publishing was delayed, and the book grew in size. – *Letter from W.C. White to the members of the Publication Committee, written from Sanitarium, California, July 25, 1911.*

- (iii) "Mother's contact with European people had brought to her mind scores of things that had been presented to her in vision during past years, some of them two or three times, and other scenes many times. Her seeing of historic places and her contact with the people refreshed her memory with reference to these things, and so she desired to add much material to the book. – *A statement made by W. C. White before the General Conference Council, October 30, 1911.*

g. Understand the value of experience

i.) Adventist pioneers

- (a) We met a very intelligent young man... who is altogether filled with the idea that *no one is quite as smart as himself*. He has been studying the messages in Revelation, and he thinks he has discovered wonderful light. But it is [not] that wonderful light which will flash forth all along the pathway till the end of time; [it is a] theory that **tears away** and **takes the vitals out** of all the **past experience** in the messages. To see such a youth, of a babe's experience, turning away the pillars of our faith seems just terrible.... **Those who had no experience in this are not the ones to be proper judges of it.** (1888 Materials, pp. 738-39)
- (b) Men will arise with interpretations of Scripture which are to them truth, but which are not truth. The truth for this time, God has given us as a foundation for our faith. He Himself has taught us what is truth. One will arise, and still another with **new light, which contradicts the light that God has given under the demonstration of His Holy Spirit.** A few are still alive who passed through the experience gained in the establishment of this truth. God has graciously spared their lives to repeat and repeat, till the close of their lives, the experience through which they passed, even as did John the apostle till the

very close of his life. And ***the standard-bearers who have fallen in death are to speak through the re-printing of their writings.*** I am instructed that ***thus their voices are to be heard. They are to bear their testimony as to what constitutes the truth for this time.*** (MR760 19)

- ii.) Not everything can be understood upon first (and maybe many subsequent) reading(s)
  - (a) True Christians practice the principle of “suspend judgment”

#### IV. Counsel Against Extremism

- a. Extreme – The greatest or utmost degree or point; either of the two things situated at opposite ends of a range.
  - i.) The “ice of indifference” and the “fire of fanaticism”
    - (a) We have found in our experience that if Satan cannot keep souls bound in the ice of indifference, he will try to push them into the fire of fanaticism. (5T 644)
  - ii.) Take the “middle path”
    - (a) You need not go into the water, or into the fire, but ***take the middle path***, avoiding all extremes. (CD 211-12)
    - (b) There is a *medium position* in these things. Oh, that we all might wisely ***find*** that position and keep it. (1T 425)
  - iii.) Don’t overstrain small points
    - (a) Narrow ideas and overstraining of small points have been a great injury to the cause of hygiene. There may be such an effort at economy in the preparation of food, that, instead of a healthful diet, it becomes a poverty-stricken diet. (CH 155)
    - (b) It is carrying that which is lawful to excess that makes it a grievous sin. (AH 122)
  - iv.) “Balance”
    - (a) Balance is NOT a teeter-totter
      - (i) “Truth (as principle) is not some kind of balance between two errors. Truth transcends errors of both extremes by recognizing the truths that each extreme wants to guard.” – Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord*, p. 401.
        - Assume one likes to go to McDonald’s for their favorite Big Mac sandwich. They read the counsel urging the benefits of a vegetarian diet. Yet wanting to avoid an “extreme” position of vegetarianism, they decide to opt for the McChicken sandwich instead.
        - Balance is NOT the difference between what God says and what our own carnal heart wants to do; neither is something extreme simply

because it is viewed as different by the world. **Balance is taking into consideration “all that the prophet has spoken”** so that we are following God’s counsel intelligently and soundly, whereas an extreme is where we tend to magnify one portion or aspect of the counsel against another, in effect making our own rules.

- (b) A balanced view will not be popular with either extreme
- (c) Be certain your “balance” is not simply spiritual laziness
  - (i) While we are not to strive to be extreme, and should even be careful to avoid extreme views, if we are truly pressing on toward the mark of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus, we will be labeled as extreme. *There can be no escaping it.*
    - When we reach the standard that the Lord would have us reach, worldlings will regard Seventh-day Adventists as odd, singular, straight-laced extremists. "We are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men." (RH, January 9, 1894)

b. The effect of people who advocate extreme views

- i.) They bring truth 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)

c. Areas in which extremism tends to be a problem:

- i.) Health reform / Diet
- ii.) Dress
- iii.) Theological viewpoints
  - (a) Nature of Christ
  - (b) Identity of the 144,000
  - (c) Godhead/Trinity
  - (d) Observing the Feast Days
  - (e) Stewardship/Tithe
  - (f) And the list goes on...and on... and on...
    - (i) And those who advocate these views can be ever so sincere in the positions they take.