

THE PROPHET and Her Critics

A striking new
analysis refutes the
charges that
Ellen G. White
“borrowed” the
health message

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1	Reasons for a New Response	11
Chapter 2	<i>The White Lie</i> , by Walter Rea	15
Chapter 3	A Failed Prophecy?	29
Chapter 4	<i>Prophetess of Health</i> , by Ronald Numbers	34
Chapter 5	The Test	48
Chapter 6	Ellen G. White and Principles of Sexual Relationships ...	80
Chapter 7	Conclusions	87
Appendix	<i>Prophets and Kings</i> and <i>Night Scenes in the Bible</i>	91
Bibliography	125

1 CHAPTER

Reasons for a New Response

Ellen G. White was one of the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Her inspired counsels were important to the development of the denomination and its institutions and gave the church confidence in its belief system. Throughout the years, however, several people have written articles or books that claim they've found evidence that her writings do not represent God's revelation to us, but rather were copied from the writings of other persons. They claim to have evidence that discredits her as a spokeswoman for God.

How should we respond to these critics? One response has been to ignore them and hope they go away. Another is to condemn them for questioning her work. But if someone has doubts about the work of a prophet, is it inappropriate for them to study the matter—to research the reliability of the claim of the prophetic gift? What about 1 Thessalonians 5:20, 21: “Do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good”? God has put Himself and His character on trial before the universe so that His created beings will worship Him out of confidence and trust, not because He has commanded them to. Certainly, then, human prophets are subject to the same type of open investigation of their claims that God has invited regarding Himself.

Of course, in addition to investigating the message of those who claim to speak for God, we must also investigate carefully the claims of those who challenge the prophet's validity. That's

The Prophet and Her Critics

what we'll do in the following pages. As we do this, it is of utmost importance that our research be of the highest quality and that we be honestly seeking for truth.

To some readers, it may seem that we are examining criticisms of Ellen White that were answered long ago. People have written responses to the criticisms of her work that we will discuss in this book. However, we find that many people are not familiar with these responses or are not convinced that the responses are adequate. Thus, we offer a new evaluation of several representative critics of Mrs. White's writings.

Christians recognize that in this confusing world we need the guidance of the Holy Spirit if we are to find truth. Someone could charge that our claim to be following the Holy Spirit is really just an excuse to believe what we want to believe. That could happen. However, we believe that we are praying with the right attitude if we pray for the Holy Spirit to give us an open mind that can think clearly, a mind that will deal honestly and fairly with the evidence.

We will not comment on some of the authors' criticisms regarding how the church has handled questions about Mrs. White and those who have criticized her. After all, the church is not infallible, and whether those who have spoken for it have ever made mistakes is another issue. Instead, we'll focus on Mrs. White's work and the question of whether the evidence discredits or supports the claim that she was a divinely inspired prophet who received specific communications from God.

Characteristics of Valid Research

In analyzing the research of Ellen White's critics, we need first to examine the quality of the scholarship represented. Valid research must follow appropriate principles of design. The researchers must have collected the data as carefully and as objectively as humanly possible (although no research is totally objective). The data must be the type that can answer the question that is being asked, and the researcher must use sound logic in interpreting the data.

Reasons for a New Response

Sound logic is indispensable. Data never directly dictate the conclusion—the answer to our question. We must use logic to relate data and assumptions or generalizations and then reason to a conclusion. We're well able to do this, especially if we've been trained in the process of logical thought. However, as someone has said, logic can become an organized way of going wrong with confidence. Indeed it can be, if we don't examine our logic carefully. We must recognize the many pitfalls that can trap us into conclusions that the available evidence doesn't support. In fact, we may become discouraged when we realize how much mental effort we must exert to see through the errors of logic in a written work that at first reading seemed well documented and trustworthy.

Here's an example of one common error of logic:

- If a car's spark plug wires are disconnected, the car won't start.
- My car won't start.
- Therefore, someone has disconnected the spark plugs.

The first statement is correct, and so is the observation that the car won't start. What then is the weakness in the conclusion? It could be correct, but we don't know because there are other things that could prevent the car from starting: It could be out of gas, or the distributor could be broken, or any number of other problems. The error is in considering only one possible cause for the observed phenomenon when there are other causes that could be producing it. Other types of errors of logic can also result in faulty interpretation of evidence. We'll encounter several of them in the coming chapters.

Research must be based on a carefully crafted research design—a plan that considers all the hypotheses that are relevant and that identifies what type of data are needed to test these hypotheses and how to gather that data in an objective, unbiased way. Researchers must be very alert to avoid errors in logic as

The Prophet and Her Critics

they develop their research design. Yet even the best researcher will not always have a perfect research design; we can't foresee all pitfalls and will recognize some only after we've done the research. In addition, when we've completed and analyzed the initial research, we may realize we need to ask other questions. Then we must improve the design to correct the problem, ask the right questions, repeat the research, and collect the data that can reliably answer those questions.

The first part of this book is primarily an analysis of the research designs used by Ellen White's critics. We won't focus on the spiritual values or religious concepts these authors espouse, but only on the quality of their research. We'll examine their work to see: (1) whether their logic meets an acceptable scholarly standard, avoiding serious logical errors; (2) whether their data support the conclusions they reach; and (3) whether their research design adequately supports their conclusions. In effect, we'll ask if they had submitted their publications as theses in a graduate program, would a team of careful scholars have given them a passing grade?

Then we'll examine new research data that offer a better way to evaluate the source and reliability of Mrs. White's health principles. This new evidence holds promise of yielding solid insights into an area that has been the subject of much speculation: the nature of inspiration. And, finally, we'll look at what she had to say about sexual relationships within marriage.