Scripture Faces Current Issues

P. Gerard Damsteegt, Andrews University

Available at: http://works.bepress.com/p_gerard_damsteegt/23/
Adventists, people of the Book? Perhaps “peoples” of the Book would be more appropriate, because different approaches to the Bible have been introduced in Adventism that significantly affect belief and lifestyle. The Bible still reads the same; the conflict comes in how it is interpreted and applied.

“Hermeneutics”—the method of interpreting the Scriptures—was once an abstract subject confined to the seminary. No longer so. It has moved from the classroom and the scholar so as to affect the lifestyle of the member and the decisions of the church. Time was when Adventists learned in the evangelistic tent that if the Lord said it, we should have courage to believe it and act on it. End of argument. People gave up jobs and risked family division because of what Scripture said.

Of course, we have always had to interpret Scripture, but over the years our hermeneutic has become more complex. After the 1995 General Conference at Utrecht, hermeneutics became a particularly hot issue in the Seventh-day Adventist church. Why? Because the way one reads Scripture was seen to result in opposite outcomes — results which produced heat under the collar and the rolling up of sleeves!

Some articles in our periodicals are suggesting that it is time for Adventists to adopt a “mature” approach to the Bible. They say that instead of a “literalistic” view of Scripture, Adventists need a “principled approach.”

If there is an approach that will help us improve our interpretations of the Bible, we should welcome it. However, every new insight we accept should pass the test “To the law and to the
testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them” (Isa. 8:20).

**Adventist approach to Scripture**

The early Adventist approach to Scripture, the one that has guided us for more than one hundred and fifty years, was most clearly expressed by William Miller, who came to conclusions similar to those of the sixteenth-century reformers. Miller attributed the discovery of his principles simply to “studying the Bible.”

Of Miller's fourteen rules, those most often cited by Adventists are: (a) “every word must have its proper bearing on the subject presented in the Bible”; (b) look at “all Scripture”; (c) “to understand doctrine” “bring all the Scriptures together on the subject you wish to know, then let every word have its proper influence”; and (d) “Scripture must be its own expositor, since it is a rule of itself.”

In the history of the Seventh-day Adventist church, Ellen White highly recommended Miller's rules of interpretation, calling them “simple but intelligent and important rules for Bible study and interpretation.” She added that “those who are engaged in proclaiming the third angel's message are searching the Scriptures upon the same plan” that Miller adopted. Consistent with this thinking Adventists have stressed the importance of upholding the Bible as the “standard of every doctrine and practice,” urging that it must be the decisive factor in settling “all controversies” and recommending a clear focus on the plain reading of scripture, for “the Word of God is infallible; accept it as it reads.”

Following these guidelines, Adventists have historically sought to establish our teachings in harmony with all the biblical evidence on a particular subject. The result has been a array of beliefs based on the Bible, and the Bible only, which gave Adventists the reputation of being truly a people of the Book.

This way of viewing and coming to the Bible is now being questioned within the Church. The questioning is notable as it relates to questions such as adornment and the role of men and
women in the church. Does this illustrate that our well-established methods of biblical interpretation are faulty? Should we replace them with a more “mature” approach to scripture which considers the tendency or direction of the Bible versus what the Bible actually says?

**The case of jewelry**

“Old-time” Adventists remove their earrings, necklaces, and rings on the basis of New Testament injunctions to a life of simplicity (I Tim. 2:9, 10; 1 Pet. 3:3,4). “Not wearing gold” meant just that. Adventist pioneer, S. N. Haskell would not even wear a gold watch so as to not confuse the weaker believers (I Corinthians 8:7-13).

Newer studies have added an auxiliary argument to the basic ones. The new suggestion is that living in the antitypical day of atonement implies that we should not wear jewelry. Israelites were required to “afflict themselves on the Day of Atonement; similarly, it is suggested, spiritual Israel is called upon to do the same during the antitypical Day of Atonement. One way of afflicting ourselves could be through a lifestyle of humility characterized by plainness of dress and the putting aside of jewelry.

Not everyone is comfortable with this view. Objectors say that such an antijewelry position has not seriously considered the implications of the type. Because the children of Israel, on the Day of Atonement, were required to abstain from sex and from all work—while nothing is said about the wearing of jewelry—it could be argued that in the antitype, spiritual Israel ought to abstain from sex and work. Because Adventists do not abstain from sex and work on the antitypical Day of Atonement, it does not make sense to employ Day of Atonement reasoning against the use of jewelry.

This is a type-antitype misunderstanding. We need to determine which part of the type is still relevant for the Christian and which is not. Adventists have always emphasized the rule of interpretation that we first consider the whole teaching of Scripture
on a particular subject before coming to a conclusion. The question is: What does the Bible say about behavior on the ancient Day of Atonement that is relevant for today?

It is widely recognized that the Day of Atonement was a type of the final judgment. On it believers were required to “afflict” themselves (Lev. 16:31; 23:27, 32), that is, to humble themselves. This is clear from Psalm 35:13, where the same Hebrew verb is translated “humble.” There was no place for pride—hence, for the display of jewelry.

When God called His people to judgment after the golden-calf episode, He explicitly commanded them “to 'take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do to you’” (Exod. 33:5). The literal rendering of the text describing the Israelites' response was that they “stripped themselves of their ornaments from Mount Horeb onward” (Exod. 33:6, NASB). The removal of jewelry symbolizes a change of heart. Nowhere in the Old Testament did God grant Israel permission to put their jewelry back on.

In a later period of apostasy, they again wore jewelry, but Isaiah 3 portrays God's judgment against their doing so. It was the “proud” who were wearing jewelry, and God in judgment announced that he would strip off their ornaments.

The New Testament says that in a certain sense the last days had arrived even in apostolic times (Heb. 1:2). It is notable that the New Testament gives no encouragement to the wearing of jewelry. On the contrary, Paul and Peter condemn it and urge believers instead to be modest in dress, professing the “incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit” and “good works” (I Tim. 2:9, 10; 1 Pet. 3:3, 4).

Scripture teaches that the antitypical Day of Atonement was to take place toward the end of the Christian era. Daniel 8 shows that it was to begin in 1844, when Christ would inaugurate the final judgment.

Adventists are exhorted to contemplate the pre-Advent judgment “often.” Christ's judgment since 1844, Ellen White states, is investigating the use of “our time, our pen, our voice, our money,
our influence.” The destiny of God's people is being determined by the heavenly records, which reveal every aspect of our behavior, including our use of money “sacrificed for display and self-indulgence.” “All who would have their names retained in the book of life should now, in the few remaining days of their probation, afflict their souls before God by sorrow for sin and true repentance. There must be deep, faithful searching of heart.”

The well-established Adventist practice of viewing all teachings in the light of the whole Bible reveals that it is indeed proper to appeal to the antitypical Day of Atonement as one argument against the wearing of jewelry.

**The male and female roles in church leadership**

In the past, Adventists have opposed the appointing of women to the office of elder and pastor because it is contrary to the biblical teachings on church leadership. The representatives of the world church, convened at Utrecht in the 1995 General Conference Session, voted not to grant the North American Division's request to allow each division to set its own policies with regard to the ordination of women.

Before the vote, one designated speaker set forth the hermeneutic that Adventists have maintained since their beginning. Summarized, it was as follows:

Ellen White contends that “the Scriptures are plain upon the relations and rights of men and women.” The Bible teaches the equality of men and women and also the existence of unique differences between them that are responsible for the unique roles the Lord has intended for them.

From the moment of creation, men and women have equality of being, both having been created in “the image of God” (Gen. 1:27). Similarly, they have shared equality in worth. God “shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34), for all are “one in Christ Jesus.” “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female” (Gal. 3:28).

While preserving their equality, the Bible reveals that God
created men and women to be complementary in nature but with different roles. Fulfillment of these distinctive roles is indispensable for both healthy families and healthy churches.

The universal thrust of I Timothy's direct injunctions was intended to reveal instructions for the successful operation of the church throughout the Christian era. Says the apostle, “I am writing these instructions to you so that . . . you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (I Tim. 3:14, 15, RSV).

What were these special instructions for God's church? For one thing, Paul taught that a woman should not usurp “authority over a man” (I Tim. 2:12). As God's inspired apostle, he gave two reasons. First: “Adam was formed first, then Eve” (I Tim. 2:13). Paul reveals here that there were differences in roles even before sin entered and long before variant cultures developed. He points out that the order in which the first man and woman were created teaches an important leadership principle. God's act of creating the man first was not an incidental event but one that illustrated the divine plan that the man is called to fulfill the leadership role.

Paul's second reason for denying full authority to women is derived from the origin of sin: “Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression” (I Tim. 2:14). This reason, like the first one, was based on a biblical event that had no relationship to culture.

Contrary to those who say that Paul was merely a man of his culture, with his own biases and prejudices, Ellen White has said that the inspired Scripture is not affected “by human prejudice or human pride.” 12

**Biblical qualifications**

In this context, Scripture states expressly that an elder or minister must be the “husband of one wife” (I Tim. 3:2). The word husband in Greek is aner, a term that always refers to the male
gender when used, as here, alongside the Greek word for woman.

But being a man is not alone sufficient qualification! The passage requires an elder not only to be male but also to be blameless, hospitable, temperate, and a good father, among several other qualifications. If it is true that no woman can be an elder, it is also true that very few men can be.

Why does the Bible call for an elder to be “husband of one wife”? The prosperity of a church depends on the stability of its families. An elder with a stable family provides a model in the church for all fathers. This is why an elder must be “one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence” (I Tim. 3:4).

Scripture adds, “For if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?” (I Tim. 3:5). It shows that God wants experienced spiritual leaders to lead His church.

Are there not capable women who are good administrators? Yes, indeed; but the Bible does not call simply for able administrators to lead God's church. It calls for men who have been successful husbands and priests in their own families.

Was Ellen White a false prophet?

I Timothy 2:12 says, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man but to be in silence.” Would a literal application of this instruction imply that “Ellen White must be a false prophet of the most serious type,” as someone has asserted? After all, Ellen White taught authoritatively throughout her career.

If a literal application of I Timothy 2:12 would make Mrs. White a false prophet, many of our Adventist pioneers were guilty of making her a false prophet—for they did indeed apply this instruction literally. In fact, in the early days of our church, non-Adventist critics repeatedly tried to prove that Mrs. White was a false prophet. Their criticism forced our pioneers to publish articles on what Scripture really teaches on the role of women in the
For one thing, our pioneers warned people not to come to conclusions that are based only on one or two texts in Timothy. As William Miller taught, Scripture must be compared with Scripture until an explanation emerges that harmonizes all passages on a subject.14

Using this hermeneutic, early Adventists concluded that Paul in fact wanted women to participate actively in church life. Women could exercise their gifts, pray, prophesy, edify, exhort, and comfort (I Cor. 11:5 and 14:3). Our pioneers pointed out that Paul greatly appreciated women who were actively involved in ministry, naming Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis (Rom. 16:1-3, 6, 12; Acts 18:26).”15 Thus our pioneers encouraged women to pray, sing, and testify in religious meetings—so long as they did not usurp authority over men (I Tim. 2:12).16

Because our pioneers took note of prominent Bible women who had the gift of prophecy—Miriam, Deborah, Hulda, and Anna17—they looked with approval on Ellen White also, whose prophetic authority, like that of the Bible prophetesses, embraced messages to men and women. However, while Adventist women were encouraged to participate fully in worship, no one intimated that the prophetic gift gave Old Testament women the prerogative to be priests or that it made Ellen White an elder. Although as prophetess Mrs. White bore distinct messages to our leaders directly from the Lord, she was personally submissive to church leadership “as to the Lord.”

Despite our church's openness to women participating fully in worship, early Adventists were careful to distinguish specific roles for men and women. An editorial, “Woman's Place in the Gospel,” commenting on I Timothy 2:12, said “that a woman is not allowed to teach nor usurp authority over the man.” “The divine arrangement, even from the beginning, is this, that the man is the head of the woman” (Eph. 5:23). The editorial went on to say, “Man is entitled to certain privileges which are not given to
woman; and he is subjected to some duties and burdens from which the woman is exempt. A woman may pray, prophesy, exhort, and comfort the church, but she cannot occupy the position of a pastor or a ruling elder. This would be looked upon as usurping authority over the man, which is here [I Tim. 2:12] prohibited. 18

In the early Adventist articles dealing with 1 Timothy 2:12 it is clear that the “teaching” that was forbidden to women was not every type of teaching. Paul actually exhorted women to be “teachers of good things” (Titus 2:3). 19 “What was prohibited to women was the teaching authority associated with the office of an elder, as the context of I Timothy 3 makes clear.

Early Adventists found the Bible's balance in the midst of their milieu. They discovered that Paul did not forbid women to participate in gospel work or in worship, but they did not follow the trend emerging among some nineteenth-century Christians of establishing women as elders/ministers of congregations. Thus the pioneer teaching and practice confirmed Ellen White's assertion that “the Scriptures are plain upon the relationship and rights of men and women.”

**Conclusion**

Not wearing jewelry during the antitypical Day of Atonement and not permitting women to be ordained as elders/ministers are practices built on sound biblical principles. To denounce these principles as “literalistic” is to fail to understand the nature of the Day of Atonement and the kind of biblical leadership that Christ instituted at Creation and upheld in the New Testament as a model for His church in the last days. Surely the “people of the Book” can do no better than follow the Book.

* All Scripture passages in this article are from the New King James Version, except as otherwise stated.

**Endnotes**

1”Miller's Rules of Bible Interpretation,” in P. G. Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission,*
299.

2 Ibid.
3 Ellen G. White, *Notes of Travel*, Review and Herald, Nov. 25, 1884.
13 Knight, 27.
16 See U. Smith, *Review and Herald*, June 26, 1866. The article was reprinted in *Signs of the Times*, Aug. 26, 1875.
18 *Signs of the Times*, Dec. 19, 1878, 380. J. White, J. N.
Andrews, and U. Smith are listed as editors and J. H. Waggoner as resident editor. See also N. J. Bowers, “May Women Publicly Labor in the Cause of Christ?” *Review and Herald*, June 14, 1881.