

A Comparative Study of Ellen G. White's Interpretation of Selected Synoptic Gospels' Parables with those of Modern Biblical Scholars

Alfredo G. Agustin, Jr.¹, Asia-Pacific International University, Thailand

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Abstract

Seventh-day Adventist biblical scholars and theologians assert that Ellen G. White accepts and applies principles of biblical interpretation when she interprets Scripture. However, there seems to be a lack of academic research to support such a presupposition. One area that seems to be lacking is a comparison between White's interpretations of gospel parables with those of modern biblical scholars. The interpretations of four scholars of selected synoptic gospel parables are compared and contrasted with those provided by White. It is shown that White interpreted selected parables in context using sound principles of biblical interpretation. She agrees with the interpretations of some non-Adventist scholars, and also provides additional insights.

Keywords: *Synoptic gospels, parable interpretation, Ellen White's principles*

Introduction

Pfandl (2005) pointed out that Ellen G. White (EGW) espoused hermeneutical principles that are rooted in those used by Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century (pp. 309–326).

^a Furthermore, he asserted that EGW rejected the methods of Historical-Critical scholars, while at the same time she also rejected extreme literal interpretations of the Word of God. In fact, White explicitly expressed agreement with what were considered as foundational principles of biblical interpretation. One of these was "sola scriptura." She stated, "In our time there is a wide departure from their doctrines and precepts, and there is need of a return to the great Protestant principle—the Bible, and the Bible only, as the rule of faith and duty" (White, 1911, pp. 204–205). This foundational principle implies the primacy and sufficiency of the scripture. She also supported such principles as "tota scriptura," "analogia scriptura," and "spiritual things are spiritually discerned" (White, 1911; White, 2002a).

Aside from EGW's support of these foundational principles of biblical hermeneutics employed by Protestant reformers, which modern evangelical conservative scholars accept, she also seems to agree with the principles of interpreting parables as accepted and applied by modern biblical scholars. This means that a parable is not the truth in itself, but is just a vehicle used by Jesus to illustrate the truth. She remarked that

So wide was Christ's view of truth, so extended His teaching, that every phase of nature was employed in illustrating truth. The scenes upon which the eye daily rests were all connected with some spiritual truth, so that nature is clothed with the parables of the Master (White, 2002b, p. 20).

Modern biblical scholars have presented many studies on the interpretation of parables. However, there seems to be lack of studies comparing EGW's interpretations of gospel parables with those of such scholars. This study compares and contrasts EGW and four modern scholars' interpretations of selected synoptic gospel parables. Four scholars were selected because they represent major Protestant theological "veins" such as: Lutheran theology, Reformed theology, and

¹ Author's email address: dean.religion@apiu.edu

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Evangelicalism. Furthermore, these are well-known scholars in the field of gospel parable interpretation—i.e., Craig Blomberg (2012), Arland J. Hultgren (2000), Simon J. Kistemaker (1987), and Klyne R. Snodgrass (2008).

The selected parables were:

- (1) The ten virgins,
- (2) The prodigal son, and
- (3) The rich man and Lazarus.

This study will not deal with the issue of whether or not a parable has one or more points. Debate on this issue has occurred since the time of Adolf Julicher, who asserted that a parable has only one main point. However, other scholars have argued otherwise.

Biblical Scholars and EGW on the Interpretation of Ten Virgins (Matt 25:1–13)

Blomberg (2012) asserted that the entire parable of the ten virgins “was an allegory from its inception” (p. 241). But he also insisted that the “allegorical elements are limited to three main characters: the bridegroom as a natural symbol of God . . . and the wise and foolish virgins as those who, spiritually, are either prepared or unprepared for Judgment Day” (p. 241). Blomberg suggested that the main points of the parable were as follows:

- (1) Like the bridegroom, God may delay his coming longer than people expect;
- (2) Like the wise bridesmaids, His followers must be prepared for such a delay—discipleship may be more arduous than the novice suspects; and
- (3) Like the foolish bridesmaids, those who do not prepare adequately may discover a point beyond which there is no return—when the end comes, it will be too late to undo the damage.

Furthermore, he also emphasized that the injunction “keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour” (Matt 25:13) was simply a concluding command that epitomized the necessary response true disciples must make in light of all three points of the passage (Blomberg, 2012).

Snodgrass (2008) insisted that the parable is not an allegory. He pointed out that allegorical interpretations of the parable “are not demonstrable from the text, and do not further the analogy, which is concerned to promote preparedness” (p. 515). He also suggested that “in the analogy there is correspondence between the coming kingdom (and by implication the King) and the coming of the bridegroom and between those prepared or not prepared and the two groups of young women” (p. 515). Snodgrass pointed out that many other associations are not valid such as:

- (1) The virgins are not the bride or the church;
- (2) The two classes of virgins do not represent the Gentiles and Jews;
- (3) The number ten has no particular significance;
- (4) Sleep does not suggest lack of vigilance;
- (5) Sleep and rising from sleep do not mean death and resurrection; and
- (6) Oil does not refer to good works or the Holy Spirit.

Snodgrass concluded that this parable taught about the “wisdom needed in view of the eschaton” (Snodgrass, 2008, p. 517).

Hultgren (2000) also suggested that the parable

Signifies that the disciples of Jesus are to be wise, as the five maidens were, in some respect. That is that Jesus as the bridegroom may be delayed, even though his coming is certain. . . . the disciples of Jesus should be ready for the long haul (pp. 175–176).

He also asserted that the parable “contains a number of allegorical features” (p. 176). He showed that the allegorical features which are apparent, at the Matthean level, are as follows (pp. 176–77):

- (1) The marriage feast represents the gathering of the Messiah and His people;
- (2) The bridegroom represents Christ;
- (3) His delay and eventual coming represent the delay and yet the certainty of the parousia;
- (4) In the light of all that, the closing of the door represents the final judgment; and
- (5) The wise and the foolish women symbolize those who are prepared at the final judgment (true Christians), and those who are not.

He concluded that Jesus “sets forth the need for his disciples to be prepared, and therefore wise, at the coming of the kingdom in its fullness, a time that is associated with judgment, exclusion of some, and feasting by those who are admitted” (Hultgren, 2000, p. 177).

Kistemaker (1987) posited that the parable of the ten virgins is “intended to teach the pointed lesson of being prepared” (p. 129). He also suggested that Jesus is the bridegroom (see Matt 9:15) in the parable. He also noted that watchfulness “is not the outstanding characteristic that is taught. Rather, it is the quality of preparedness that is predominant” (p. 133). Kistemaker also pointed out that this parable was interpreted allegorically from the time of the early church up to the present. He insisted that such “interpretation leads to confusion and frequently ends in nonsense” (p. 134). For Kistemaker, the parable has a central message to convey, that is, the parable “clearly teaches his followers to be prepared for his (Jesus) return” (p. 135). The parable is directed at the followers of Jesus. The wise are constantly seeking to do the will of God, and the foolish ones seem to pay no attention to the imminent return of their Lord (p. 135).

White (2002b) seems also to suggest that the parable is an allegorical parable. She gave meanings to the features of the parable, as noted below in Table 1.

Table 1. The Meanings of the Features of the Parable

Features of the Parable	Meaning
1. Two classes of watchers	1. Two classes of professed followers waiting for their Lord
2. Virgins	2. They profess a pure faith
3. Lamps	3. The word of God (cf. Ps 119:105)
4. Oil	4. The Holy Spirit (cf. Zech 4:1–14)
5. 10 virgins	5. The church
6. Bridegroom	6. Jesus
7. The coming of the Bridegroom	7. The second coming of Jesus
8. The wise did not give oil to the foolish	8. In spiritual things, no man can make up for another’s deficiency
9. Midnight	9. The coming of Christ will be at the darkest part of earth’s history

In the parable of ten virgins, White (2002b) seemed to emphasize the idea that the wise, having oil in their vessels with their lamps, were to shed light into the darkness of the world. The Holy Spirit develops in men the attributes of God through the implanted word of God. As a result, they can shine forth the light of His glory—His character. She continued “the children of God are to manifest His glory. In their own life and character they are to reveal what the grace of God done for them” (p. 415). She also emphasized that the “class represented by the foolish virgins are not hypocrites. They have a regard for truth, they have the truth; but they have not yielded themselves to the Holy Spirit’s working” (p. 411). She also highlighted the fact that “both parties were taken unawares; but one was prepared for the emergency, and the other was found without preparation” (White, 2002b, p. 411).

Biblical Scholars and EGW in the Interpretation of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32)

At the outset of his essay on the interpretation of the prodigal son, Blomberg (2012) pointed out that the parable “poses special problems for the theory that parables can make only one main point” (p. 199). Furthermore, he insisted that the parable contained three episodes rather than two.

Consequently, the parable teaches three main points, one per character, and one per episode. These main points are as follows:

- (1) Even as the prodigal always had the option of repenting and returning home, so also all sinners, however wicked, may confess their sins and turn to God in contrition;
- (2) Even as the father went to elaborate lengths to offer reconciliation to the prodigal, so also God offers all people, however undeserving, lavish forgiveness of sins if they are willing to accept it; and
- (3) Even as the older brother should not have begrimed his brother's reinstatement but rather rejoiced in it, so those who claim to be God's people should be glad and not mad that He extends His grace to the most undeserving.

Blomberg (2012) also stressed that "the three main points of the parable also illustrate the impossibility of avoiding an allegorical interpretation. Each character stands for someone other than himself" (p. 201). Evidently, as Blomberg pointed out, every commentator has noticed the close correlation between the prodigal and the "tax collector and sinners," and the older brother as the "Pharisees and teachers of the law" (p. 201). The father in the parable represents God. The story, Blomberg concluded, was used by Jesus "to illustrate God's amazing patience and love for His ungrateful children" (p. 204).

Snodgrass (2008) also concurred with Blomberg's "three-point parable" by calling this parable a "triangle parable" "in which an authority figure relates to two subordinate and contrasted persons or group" (p. 124). However, he disagreed with Blomberg's "three-episode idea" by saying "that this was always a two-part parable as most scholars acknowledged" (p. 128). Like Blomberg, Snodgrass said that "nearly all admit or assume the straightforward associations of the parable with God, sinners, and the righteous. It is hard to avoid such connections" (p. 136). Furthermore, Snodgrass accepted that "parables to one degree or another are allegorical." But he does not see all the details of the parable with allegorical representations. He is quick to mention that

The specifics of the prodigal's plight do not stand for theological realities; they paint a picture of degradation and need, especially for Jewish hearers. The father's extravagant action in receiving the prodigal paints a picture of eager reception, but individual actions do not stand for theological ideas. Similarly, the description of the restoration of the prodigal with robe, ring, shoes, and fattened calf for celebration paints a picture of joy and full acceptance, but these items do not have individual referents (Snodgrass, 2008, p. 136).

He further warned about reading too much theology into the parable such as the Messianic banquet, atonement, mediator, and repentance. For him, the parable simply presented the powerful saving grace of God. Furthermore, Snodgrass stressed that the parable had several purposes, namely:

- (1) To emphasize compassion—the unquestioning love of the father mirrors the attitude of God. It is a demonstration of grace with which God reaches out to embrace sinful people;
- (2) To highlight God's invitation to celebrate and rejoice;
- (3) To defend Jesus' action of associating with sinners; and
- (4) It functions as an invitation for hearers to take the same attitude toward sinners.

Hultgren (2002) agreed with Blomberg's three-episode notion asserting that the parable had three main parts:

- (1) The departure of the younger son (15:11–19);
- (2) Home-coming of the son and his welcome by the father (15:20–24); and
- (3) The episode between the father and the older son (15:25–32) (p. 73).

He pointed out that the father in the parable represents God, the prodigal represents those who were despised with whom Jesus associated, and the elder brother represents the Pharisees (Hultgren, 2002, p. 84). He also suggested that the parable had three points:

- (1) Jesus sought to illustrate the loving character of God;
- (2) Jesus sought to vindicate His message and activities (fellowship with the outcasts) in reply to His critics; and
- (3) He sought to teach His opponents that the time had come for celebrating the ingathering of those repentant and who were responding to His message.

Kistemaker (1987) also asserted that the parable should be better described as “to speak of the two sons and their father” (p. 216). He insisted that “by means of these characters, Jesus reflected the composition of his audience. . . . The prodigal son portrayed the moral and social outcast, his brother the self-righteous Jew, and the father was a reflection of God” (p. 216). He further pointed out that the “parable vividly depicts God’s love toward His children, the wayward and the obedient” (p. 216). Kistemaker concluded that “It was Jesus’ intention to describe the attitude of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law toward tax collectors and prostitutes” (p. 225). He added “the father’s attitude in the parable is representative of God’s forgiving love toward a sinner who repents. As the father said to his servants, ‘let’s celebrate,’ so God with his angels rejoices over one sinner who repents” (p. 225).

It is interesting to note that White (2002b) also, as the scholars cited above, saw that the father in the parable represented God, the prodigal son represented the publicans and sinners, and the elder son represented the Pharisees and unrepentant Jews of Jesus’ day. Furthermore, White (2002b) stressed the love, mercy and compassion of God as represented by the father’s action of running and embracing his son when he was still “a great way off” (pp. 202–205). She also emphasized the rejoicing of heaven for the return of a wayward sinner (p. 207). At the same time, she took note that the elder brother’s attitude toward his brother, which represented the unrepentant Jews’ attitude of “contempt upon those whom they regard as publicans and sinners (p. 209). White concluded that “in the parable the father’s remonstrance with the elder son was Heaven’s tender appeal to the Pharisees. ‘All that I have is thine’—not as wages, but as a gift. Like the prodigal son, you can receive it only as the unmerited bestowal of the Father’s love” (p. 209).

Biblical Scholars and EGW Interpret the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31)

As for the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Blomberg (2012) asserted that it can be labeled as “example story” rather than a proper parable. He also suggested that the characters in the story “do not seem to symbolize ‘spiritual counterparts’ but simply represent other people in identical situations—certain rich men, certain poor men and those who dwell in the presence of God” (p. 257). Blomberg also ruled out the suggestion of some scholars^b that this story represented a real event that happened to real people in an intermediate state. On the other hand, he concurred that the “parable should most likely be seen as reflecting the final state of both individuals” (p. 260). Furthermore, he pointed out that the parable contains three main lessons (p. 261):

- (1) Like Lazarus, those whom God helps will be born after their death into God’s presence;
- (2) Like the rich man, the unrepentant, disclosed especially by their miserliness, will experience irreversible punishment; and
- (3) Through Abraham, Moses, and the prophets (and now through Jesus), God reveals himself and His will so that none who neglect it can legitimately protest their subsequent fate. He also argued that “it is impossible for a Christian to read this verse (Luke 16:31) without thinking of the resurrection of Christ”

For Snodgrass (2008), the parable is inappropriately labeled as an “example story,” because, as he pointed out, “we are not told enough about the actions of either the rich man or Lazarus for

either actually to be an example" (p. 419). He insisted that this was not a true story, as some preachers in the past asserted, but a parable. He also suggested (p. 426) that

The identification of the persons addressed with this parable is not crucial as elsewhere . . . we should probably think of a double audience of both disciples and Pharisees, but the absence of any indication of the audience may be intentional to make the parable universal in application.

Furthermore, he emphasized that the parable had two themes or foci: first, judgment for the wrong use of wealth. He stressed that the parable is

Specifically a warning to the wealthy for their neglect of the poor. As the reference to Moses and the prophecies indicates, the message of the parable was not limited to the time of the in-breaking of the kingdom. . . . Repentance in view of the kingdom means the right use of wealth and the repudiation of exploitation and injustice (Snodgrass, 2008, p. 433).

Second, the sufficiency of Scripture. He also highlighted the view of some scholars that the parable does not intend to give a description of life after death. However, he asserted that "the parable's eschatological relevance cannot be wiped away" (p. 432). He added,

The parable is a warning to the rich and emphasizes the importance of what humans do with the present, and it still teaches that humans will be judged for the way they lived and that the consequences will be serious (Snodgrass, 2008, p. 432).

Hultgren (2000), like the other scholars cited above, also insisted that it was not the purpose of the parable to reveal the condition of life after death. He asserted that the situation in the parable "appears to be permanent abode and a place of torment referring to eschatological punishment comparable to 'hell'" (p. 113). It seems that Hultgren (2000), like other scholars, also agrees with the idea that the "main point of the parable is to be found in the second part (16:27–31). That is to say, the parable is primarily a warning to persons who, like the five brothers of the Rich Man, still have time to repent and do the will of God" (p. 115). He added, "The will of God has been clearly revealed in the law and the prophets" (p. 115). He concluded that the

Teaching of the parable would then be not simply that there is a reversal of conditions at death for the rich and the poor, but rather that the teachings of God concerning care for the poor are clear in the law and the prophets (Hultgren, 2000, p. 115).

Kistemaker (1987) suggested that, based on the immediate context, "the content of the parable relates to the comments addressed to the Pharisees on such vices as love of money and self-righteousness" (p. 243). He stressed that "the Pharisees were able to recognize themselves in the Rich Man" (p. 243). Furthermore, he asserted that the Pharisees "were the ones depicted by the Rich Man in hell, and the outcasts were represented by Lazarus" (p. 244). Thus, he concluded that "the parable was addressed to them" due to this reason:

The Pharisees on more than one occasion had asked him to give them a sign from heaven. . . . Now these Pharisees heard the Rich Man in the parable ask Abraham for a sign from heaven. . . . In the Rich Man's request the Pharisees heard the echo of their own words (Kistemaker, 1987, p. 244).

Kistemaker pointed out (p. 245) that the parable teaches lessons that

(1) man should listen to God's word wisely and obediently; (2) It calls him to repentance and faith; (3) it tells him that he is living in a period of grace; (4) it instructs him to put aside self-righteousness; (5) it reminds him that man's destiny is irrevocably sealed at the time of death.

According to White (2002b), Lazarus represented the suffering poor who believed in Christ. It seems that the Rich Man in the parable represented the many rich men in the Jewish nation who used the Lord's goods for self-gratification. Christ also presented this picture before priests and rulers, scribes and Pharisees. Furthermore, White (2002b) pointed out that the story was a prevalent

preconceived opinion about the condition of man after death during the time of Jesus. He met people on their own ground. He used this as a parable to emphasize the truth that

No man is valued for his possessions; for all he has belongs to him only as lent by the Lord. A misuse of these gifts will place him below the poorest and most afflicted man who loves God and trusts in Him (White, 2002b, p. 263).

White (2002b) also stressed that “Christ desires his hearers to understand that it is impossible for men to secure salvation of the soul after death” (p. 263). She added, “Christ represented the hopelessness of looking for a second probation. This life is the only time given to man in which to prepare for eternity” (p. 263). She concluded that “the lesson to be gathered from it is that every man is given sufficient light for the discharge of the duties required of him. Man’s responsibilities are proportionate to his opportunities and privileges” (p. 265). She further suggested “those who refuse to be enlightened by Moses and the prophets and ask for some wonderful miracle to be performed would not be convinced if their wish were granted” (p. 265).

Comparison and Contrast between Biblical Scholars and EGW

When comparing biblical scholars and EGW on the parable of the ten virgins, it is now evident that these commentators are divided as to how the parable of ten virgins is to be interpreted. For Blomberg and Hultgren, the parable has allegorical features. But Blomberg (2012) insisted that the allegorical features were limited to three main points. This contrasts with Hultgren (2000), who went beyond the three-point emphasis. On the other hand, Snodgrass and Kistemaker agreed that the parable was not an allegory. When it comes to EGW, the way she interpreted the parable of ten virgins seems to suggest that this is an allegorical parable, although she did not explicitly state it. It is noted that all of the scholars emphasized that the main point of the parable is “preparedness.” However, as for EGW, it seems that this is only one of her points, since she also emphasized the idea that the believers, in view of the *parousia*, should shine forth into the darkened world revealing God’s glory.

In the parable of the prodigal son, it is evident that these scholars and EGW agree that the three characters in the parable represented three personages in real life. The father represents God, the prodigal son represents the publicans and sinners with whom Jesus was associated, and the elder son represented self-righteous Jews or the Pharisees. Both Blomberg and Snodgrass asserted that the parable was an allegorical parable. Furthermore, both Blomberg and Hultgren insisted that the parable had three main points, whereas Snodgrass saw a four-fold purpose. Both Snodgrass and Hultgren agreed that one of the points of the parable was to vindicate Jesus’ association with publicans and sinners. These scholars and EGW did not give meanings to every detail of the parable. It should also be highlighted that these commentators and EGW unanimously indicate that Jesus emphasized the love, compassion and grace of God towards repentant sinners. They also stressed that the father’s invitation to rejoice and celebrate in the parable is God’s invitation for the self-righteous Pharisees to rejoice with Him in the repentance of publicans and sinners. Uniquely, EGW stressed a point that was not emphasized by the scholars. She indicated that Jesus emphasized that the elder son’s inheritance could not be received as wages, but only as a gift—it is the unmerited bestowal of the father’s love.

Analyzing the comparison between the scholars and EGW on the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, they unanimously agreed that the parable does not teach about man’s condition after death, although they believed, except for EGW, in the consciousness of souls after death. Both Blomberg and Snodgrass agreed that this parable was not a true story. Both of them also asserted that this was an “example story,” which means that the characters did not symbolize spiritual counterparts in the audience of Jesus. Blomberg and Hultgren agreed with each other that the situation of both men in the parable may have reflected the final state of the individuals—suffering in hell, and enjoying a blissful heaven for eternity. Contrary to Blomberg, Snodgrass and Hultgren did not see spiritual counterparts of the rich man and Lazarus in Jesus’ audience. Kistemaker and EGW asserted that Lazarus in the parable represented the suffering poor (EGW) or the social outcasts (Kistemaker) in Jesus’ day. Furthermore, the Rich Man represented the Pharisees (Kistemaker), or those Jews (including the priests, rulers, scribes, and Pharisees) who used the Lord’s goods for self-gratification

(EGW). It might also be highlighted that the scholars and EGW agreed that the parable stressed the importance of scripture over signs and miracles in convicting men to repentance and obedience to God's will. It is also evident that the commentators and EGW agreed that the present is the time for repentance and obedience to God's word concerning the proper use of wealth—care for the poor—because at death, man's destiny is fixed.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, it is clearly evident that EGW did not interpret the three parables irresponsibly or out of context. She followed sound principles of biblical interpretation. When she viewed a parable as allegorical, some biblical scholars have also done the same. Her view of the character of the parables in relation to their spiritual correspondence was not off-tangent with that of other scholars. The spiritual truths that she drew from these parables were usually similar to those of the commentators highlighted. However, in a few instances, she had additional truths which they did not see.

A further fruitful study might deal with the interpretation of the synoptic parables by scholars who were contemporaries of White.

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Endnotes

^a For more details of Historical-Critical methods, see Hasel, G. (1985); *Biblical interpretation today*, (pp. 7–99). Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute. For Historical Grammatical Methods (HGM), see pp. 100–113. For a detailed discussion of HGM, see also Hasel, G. (1980); *Understanding the living word of God* (pp. 13–228). Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press. For a conservative Protestant hermeneutics, see Berkof, L. (1950), *Principles of biblical interpretation* (pp. 11–166). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House; Ramm, B. (1999), *Protestant biblical interpretation* (pp. 1–287). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group; Sider, J. (1995), *Interpreting the parables* (pp. 13–246). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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