



# **Interpretation of Selected Parables in the Synoptic Gospels (SG): A Comparative Study of Ellen G. White's Interpretation of Selected Synoptic Gospels' Parables and Some Biblical Scholars**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Biblical Scholars (BS) and Theologians assert that EGW accepts and applies principles of biblical interpretation when she interprets the Scripture. However, there seems to be lack of academic research to prove such presupposition.

One area that seems to be lacking is the comparison between EGW's interpretation of gospel parables with that of modern biblical scholars. Their interpretations of selected SG parables will be compared and contrasted with that of EGW. The purpose of this study is to prove that EGW's interpretation of gospel parables are in harmony with sound principles of interpreting biblical parables.

This study compares and contrasts EGW and selected modern BS's interpretations of selected synoptic gospel parables. After comparing EGW and selected BS's interpretation of selected parables in the SG, evaluation will follow.

This paper concludes that EGW interprets the selected parables of the SG appropriately. The comparative study shows that she is not out of context in her interpretation of the parables. This means that she applies sound principles of biblical interpretation. It also shows that she agrees with the interpretation of some non-SDA BS. However, she has additional insights which were not found in BS.

**Keywords:** Synoptic Gospels; Interpretation of Parables; Biblical Scholars' Interpretation of Parables; Ellen G. White's Interpretation of Parables.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In his essay, Gerhard Pfandl (2005) pointed out that Ellen G. White (EGW) already espouses hermeneutical principles which are rooted on Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century (p. 309-26). In fact, EGW herself explicitly expresses her agreement with what were considered as foundation principles of Biblical interpretation. One of those principles that she upholds is the "Sola Scriptura." She states, "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, Great Controversy, 1911, 2002, p. 204-05). Aside from EGW's support of these foundational principles of Biblical Hermeneutics of the protestant reformers which the modern evangelical conservative scholars accept, she also seems to agree with the principles of interpreting parables as accepted and applied by the modern biblical scholars that the parable is not the truth in itself, but is just a vehicle used by Jesus to illustrate the truth (White, Christ Object Lesson, 1900; 2002, p. 20).

Modern BS present a lot of studies on the interpretation of parables. However, there seems to be lack of studies comparing EGW's interpretation of gospel parables with that of modern biblical scholars. This study compares and contrasts EGW and selected modern BS's interpretations of selected synoptic gospel parables. Their interpretations of selected SG parables will be compared and contrasted. This study tries to establish that EGW's interpretation of gospel parable is in harmony with today's BS who seemed to adhere to sound principles of interpreting biblical parables.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

BS and EGW on the Interpretation of Ten Virgins (Matt 25:1-13). Craig Blomberg (2012) asserts that the entire parable of the ten virgins "was an allegory from its inception" (p. 241). But he also insists 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 suggests that the main points of the parable are 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,
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 (p. 241).

Furthermore, he also emphasizes that the injunction "keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour" (Matt 25:13) "is simply a concluding command that epitomizes the necessary response true disciples must make in light of all three points of the passage (p. 241).

Klyne Snodgrass (2008) insists 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 suggests 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). He pointed out that the 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,
6. and oil does not refer to good works or Holy Spirit (*Ibid*).

Snodgrass concludes that this parable taught that “wisdom needed in view of the eschaton” (p. 517). Arland J. Hultgren (2000) also suggests 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. 175-76). He also asserts that the parable “contains a number of allegorical features” (p. 176). He concludes 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” (p. 177).

Simon J. Kistemaker (1987) posits that the parable of the ten virgins is “intended to teach the pointed lesson of being prepared” (p. 129). He also suggests that Jesus is the bridegroom (see Matt 9:15) in the parable (p. 132). He also noted that watchfulness “is not the outstanding characteristic that is taught in this parable. 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 (p. 134). He insists 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).

EGW (1900; 2002) seems also to suggest that the parable is an allegorical parable. She gave meanings to the features of the parable [see table 1] (White, COL, 405-21).

**Table 1. The Meanings of the Features of the Parable**

<b>Features of the Parable</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
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 (Ps 119:105)
4. Oil	4. Holy Spirit (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 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, EGW seems to emphasize the idea that the wise, having oil in their vessels with their lamps, are 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 (p. 414). She continues, “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 emphasizes 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 highlights the fact that “both parties were taken unawares; but one was prepared for the emergency, and the other was found without preparation” (p. 411).

BS 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 right away pointed out that the parable “poses special problems for the theory that parables can make only one main point” (p. 199). Furthermore, he insists that the parable has three episodes rather than two. Consequently, the parable teaches three main points, one per character, and one per episode (p. 200). These three main points are the ff:

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" (pp. 200-01).

He 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 notices the close correlation between the prodigal and the "tax collector and sinners," and the older brother as the "Pharisees and teachers of the law" (*Ibid.*). The father in the parable represents God (p. 203). The story, Blomberg concludes, was used by Jesus "to illustrate God's amazing patience and love for His ungrateful children" (p. 204).

Snodgrass also concurs 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 disagrees 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 admits 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 accepts that "parables to one degree or another are allegorical" (*Ibid.*). But for him, he does not see all the details of the parable with allegorical representations. He further warns about reading too much theology on the parable such as:

1. messianic banquet,
2. atonement,
3. mediator, and
4. repentance (pp.138-39).

For him, the parable just presents the powerful saving grace of God (p. 137). Furthermore, he stresses that the parable has 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. second purpose is God's invitation to celebrate and rejoice;

3. third purpose is to defend Jesus' action of associating with sinners;
4. lastly, it functions as an invitation for the hearers to take the same attitude toward sinners (pp. 140-41).

Hultgren agrees with Blomberg's three-episode notion asserting that the parable has 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);
3. the episode
4. between the father and the older son (15:25-32) (p. 73).

He point out that the father in the parable represents God, the prodigal represents those who were despised that Jesus associated with, and the elder brother represents the Pharisees (p. 84).

He also evidently suggests that the parable has 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;
3. He sought to teach his opponents that time has come for celebrating the ingathering of those repentant and are responding to his message (p. 85).

Kistemaker also asserts that the parable should be better described as "to speak of the two sons and their father" (p. 216). He insists 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" (*Ibid.*). He further pointed out that the "parable vividly depicts God's love toward His children, the wayward and the obedient" (*Ibid.*). Kistemaker concludes 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 adds, "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" (*Ibid.*).

It is interesting to note that EGW also, as the BS cited above, sees the father in the parable as represented by God, the prodigal son represented the publicans and sinners, and the elder son represented the Pharisees and unrepenting Jews in Jesus' day (White, COL, pp. 198-211)). Furthermore, EGW 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' (p. 202-

205). She also emphasized the rejoicing of heaven for the return of a wayward sinner (p. 207). At the same time, she takes note that the elder brother's attitude toward his brother, represents the unrepenting Jew's attitude of "contempt upon those whom they regard as publicans and sinners (p. 209). EGW concludes 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 gift. Like the prodigal son, you can receive it only as the unmerited bestowal of the Father's love" (*Ibid.*).

BS and EGW in the Interpretation of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). As for the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Blomberg asserts that the parable can be labeled as "example story" rather than a parable proper (p. 257). He also suggests 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" (*Ibid.*). Blomberg also ruled out the suggestion of some BS that this story is a real event happened to real people in the intermediate state (p. 257). On the other hand, he concurs that the "parable should most likely be seen as reflecting the final state of both individuals" (p. 260). Furthermore, Blomberg pointed out that the parable has three main lessons:

1. Like Lazarus, those whom God helps will be borne after their death into God's presence,
2. Like the rich man, the unrepentant, disclosed especially by their
3. miserliness, will experience irreversible punishment, 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 (p. 259). He also argues that "it is impossible for a Christian to read this verse (Luke 16:31) without thinking of the resurrection of Christ" (p. 261).

For Snodgrass, this parable which was traditionally labeled as an "example story" presents inappropriateness for this label 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 insists that this is not a true story, as some preachers in the past asserted, but a parable (p. 426). He also suggests 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” (*Ibid.*). Furthermore, he emphasized that the parable has two themes or focus:

1. judgment for the use of wealth, and
2. the sufficiency of Scripture (p. 429).

He also highlights the view of some BS that the parable does not intend to give a description of life after death (p. 430). However, he asserts that “the parable’s eschatological relevance cannot be wiped away (p. 432). He adds, “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” (*Ibid.*).

Hultgren, like other BS cited above, also insists that it is not the purpose of the parable to reveal the condition of the after death (p. 113). He asserts that the situation in the parable “appears to be permanent abode and a place of torment referring to eschatological punishment comparable to ‘hell.’” (*Ibid.*). It seems that Hultgren, like other BS, 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 concludes 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” (p. 115).

Kistemaker suggests 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 stresses that “the Pharisees were able to recognize themselves in the rich man” (*Ibid.*). Furthermore, he asserts that the Pharisees “were the ones depicted by the rich man in hell, and the outcasts were represented by Lazarus” (p. 244). Thus, he concludes 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” (*Ibid.*). The parable, Kistemaker pointed out, 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” (p. 245).

According to EGW, Lazarus represents the suffering poor who believe in Christ (White, COL, p. 262). It seems that the rich man in the parable represents 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 (*Ibid.*, p. 267). Furthermore, EGW points 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" (p. 263). She also stresses that "Christ desires his hearers to understand that it is impossible for men to secure salvation of the soul after death" (*Ibid.*). She adds, "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" (*Ibid.*). She concludes 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).

**Comparison and Contrast Between BS and EGW.** When comparing BS and EGW on the parable of the ten virgins, it is now evident that BS 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 insists that the allegorical features is only limited to three main points. Whereas for Hultgren, unlike Blomberg goes beyond the three-point emphasis. On the other hand, Snodgrass and Kistemaker agree that the parable is not an allegory. When it comes to EGW, the way she interprets the parable of ten virgins seems to suggest that this is an allegorical parable, although she did not have an explicit statement about the type of the parable. It should be conspicuously pointed out that all of the BS 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 His glory.

In the parable of the prodigal son, it is evident that BS and EGW agree that the three characters in the parable represent three personages in real life. The father represents God, the prodigal son represents the publicans and sinners that Jesus associated with, the elder son represents self-righteous Jews or the Pharisees. Both Blomberg and Snodgrass assert that the parable is an allegorical parable. Furthermore, both Blomberg and Hultgren insist that the parable has three main points. Whereas, Snodgrass sees a four-fold purpose or points. Both

Snodgrass and Hultgren agree that one of the points of the parable is to vindicate Jesus' association with publicans and sinners. It should also be pointed like the BS, EGW did not give meanings to every detail of the parable. It should also be highlighted that BS mentioned above and EGW unanimously pointed out that in the parable, Jesus emphasized the love, compassion and grace of God toward repentant sinners. They also stressed that father's invitation to rejoice and celebrate in the parable is God's invitation for the self-righteous Pharisees to rejoice with him for the repentance of publicans and sinners. Uniquely, EGW stressed a point that was not emphasized by the BS. She stressed that in the parable, Jesus emphasized that the inheritance for the elder son can be received not as a wages but as a gift—it is an unmerited bestowal of the father's love.

Analyzing the comparison between BS and EGW on the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, unanimously they agree that the parable does not teach about the condition of man after death, although they believed, except EGW, the consciousness of soul after death. Both Blomberg and Snodgrass agree that this parable is not a true story. Both of them also assert that this is an "example story" which means that the characters do not symbolize spiritual counterparts in the audience of Jesus. Blomberg and Hultgren concur with each other that the situation of both men in the parable may reflect the final state of these individuals—suffering in hell, and enjoying in blissful heaven for eternity. Contrary to Blomberg, Snodgrass and Hultgren do not see spiritual counterparts of the rich man and Lazarus in Jesus' audience. Kistemaker and EGW assert that Lazarus in the parable represents the suffering poor (EGW) or the social outcasts (Kistemaker) in Jesus' day. Furthermore, the rich man represents the Pharisees (Kistemaker), or those Jews (including the priests, rulers, scribes, and Pharisees) who used the Lord's goods for self-gratification (EGW). It should also be highlighted that the BS and EGW agree that the parable stresses the importance of the Scripture over signs and miracles in convicting men to repentance and obedience to God's will. It is also evident that BS and EGW agree 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.

## METHODS

## RESULTS

## DISCUSSION

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clearly evident that EGW does not interpret the three parables irresponsibly or out of context. She followed the principles of Biblical Interpretation. When she views a parable as allegorical parable, some Biblical Scholars also do the same. Her view of the characters of the parables in relation to their spiritual correspondences was not off-tangent with BS. The spiritual truths she drew out from these parables were usually similar to that of the BS. However, in few instances, she has additional truths which were not seen by BS.

### Recommendation

For further study, this research recommends a topic that deals with the interpretation of the Synoptic Parables by the BS contemporary to EGW. So, the topic would be: "A Comparative Study of the Interpretation of Synoptic Parables by EGW and her Contemporary Biblical Scholars."

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