

Who Owns the Truth? Another Look at The Plagiarism Debate

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Introduction: The charge that Ellen White’s literary borrowing from other authors constituted plagiarism was first made about 1889 by D. M. Canright,¹ and repeated and expanded in 1980 by Walter Rea, who alleged to the *Los Angeles Times* that the true source of Ellen White’s writings was not inspiration, but the writings of others; that she produced most of her writings by plagiarizing other authors; and that by denying her literary borrowing she showed herself to be a liar as well.² Over the years, but especially since 1980, thousands of pages have been written on this issue,³ and scholars of Ellen White studies are familiar with its general contours.

My justification for extending this discussion includes two reasons: (1) The issue of Ellen White’s literary borrowing is still seen by some sincere people as contradictory to the larger weight of evidence that supports her claim to the gift of prophecy, and I think that is a faulty conclusion. (2) Some significant dimensions of the debate have been underestimated,⁴ misunderstood,⁵ or largely ignored by those supporting Ellen White.⁶ The purpose of this presentation is to consider the following issues:

1. Intellectual property rights: What is and is not permissible in literary borrowing? How have those standards changed over time? How did Ellen White’s actual practice of literary borrowing compare to those standards?

2. Honesty: Was Ellen White honest in her reporting of her literary practices?

3. Inspiration: Does the need for research disprove inspiration? Uninspired authors learn by research, but why should that be necessary for an inspired writer? How do research, literary borrowing, editing, and the use of literary assistants have to do with inspired writings?

4. Roger Coon’s Paradigm for Literary Borrowing under Inspiration.

5. The Ownership and Stewardship of Truth.

6. Practical Implications and Conclusion

I. The Issue of Intellectual Property Rights requires definitions of three key terms:

“**Plagiarism,**” from Latin *plagiarius*, kidnapper, means copying or imitating the language, ideas, and thoughts of another author, while representing them as one’s original work.

Proper literary borrowing is like using apples grown by someone else to make pies that are my own. Because the borrowed material is improved and adapted to a new purpose, and provides “further material from which later authors w[ill] draw,” the new work is seen as making a “contribution,” a ‘return’ if you like, that “ethically justif[ies]” the borrowing.⁷

Books about proper literary borrowing “cite numerous instances where a poet, for example, has taken couplets from an earlier poet’s work, turning the phrases, embellishing the thought, changing the literary figure. Then another poet, and still another, down through the years has continued the changing. There is newness, yet there is no doubt that the original couplets are the substratum of their work. Many,

¹Ron Graybill, “D. M. Canright in Healdsburg, 1889: The Genesis of the Plagiarism Charge,” *Insight*, Oct. 21, 1980, 7-10.

²Walter Rea, quoted in *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 23, 1980; article reprinted in the *Washington Post*, Nov. 7, 1980, page C-1; cited in Roger W. Coon, “Ellen G. White and the So-Called “Plagiarism” Charge: An Examination of Five Issues,” GSEM534 Lecture Outline, Andrews University, April 30, 1999, p. 1. Unless otherwise indicated, all **boldface** emphasis is my own.

³One study alone exceeds 2500 pages (Fred Veltman, *Full Report of the Life of Christ Research Project*, 4 vols. [n.p.: Life of Christ Research Project Review Committee, 1988]),

⁴The historical context of nineteenth-century literary practice.

⁵Statistical analysis of literary dependency in *Desire of Ages*.

⁶Implications of Ellen White’s practices for today’s students, preachers, teachers, and authors.

⁷Francis D. Nichol, *Ellen G. White and Her Critics: An Answer to the Major Charges that Critics Have Brought against Mrs. Ellen G. White* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1951), 407.

we might say most, of the great poets have thus drawn, at times, on the past.”⁸ W. A. Edwards, in *Plagiarism, An Essay on Good and Bad Borrowing*, writes: “The great [literary] artist is only one of a long chain of borrowers and adapters.” As one poet put it, “Though old the thought and oft exprest, / ‘Tis his at last who says it best.”⁹ Thus the finished product can be one’s own, even if it uses components that were once part of another’s work.

“**Fair use**” is the legal doctrine that distinguishes appropriate literary borrowing from plagiarism. In *Emerson v. Davies*, a famous 1845 legal case, Massachusetts Circuit Justice Story (recognized as the most influential judge of copyright law in his era)¹⁰ wrote that the “true test of piracy” (infringement of copyright) is “whether the defendant’s book is . . . a servile or evasive imitation of the plaintiff’s work, or a bona fide original compilation from other common or independent sources.”¹¹ Justice Story’s ruling at this point supports the common saying that “If you borrow from one author it’s plagiarism, but if you borrow from many authors it’s research.” He further defined that the author “may have borrowed much of his materials from others, but if they are combined in a different manner from what was in use before, and *a fortiori* [for a still stronger reason; all the more], if his plan and arrangements are real improvements upon the existing modes, he is entitled to a copyright in the book embodying such improvement.”¹² Thus the issues of the author’s *motive* for borrowing, the *proportion and/or structural relation of the material borrowed to the whole of the work borrowed from*, and the *proportion of borrowed material to the borrower’s new work*, are all relevant to the question of whether the borrowing is proper or not.

Thus “the moral and the legal angles of literary borrowing have provoked endless dispute and revealed every shade of opinion. Authors who have devoted books to the subject confess the difficulty in framing a wholly satisfactory definition of plagiarism.”¹³ For example, A twentieth-century author on *Literary Ethics* wrote, “I am fully aware of the difficulty of deciding what is plagiarism and what is legitimate borrowing. This very chapter is plagiarism of a sort. If I had indicated the source of every statement made, the notes would have been so numerous as to interfere with the continuity of the letterpress: I have, therefore, confined myself to occasional references, and have indicated the quotations I have made; but I must bear the blame of having sometimes used the investigations of others with only a general acknowledgment of indebtedness.”¹⁴ Mark Twain is supposed to have remarked that “Adam was the only man who, when he said a good thing, knew that nobody had said it before him.”¹⁵

It is well known, but little thought of, that even in the twenty-first century, different genres of writing have widely varying standards of proper documentation (see Table 1).

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| <p>Literary Theft</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Literary Borrowing (“Fair Use”) Continuum Definition: Learning from others; getting ideas, insights, information, and words from others, but synthesizing them in ways that are new and unique and thus giving back some “added value” which is a return on the borrowing. Forms of acknowledgment vary with the genre of writing.</p> | <p>Myth of Absolute Originality</p> |
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⁸Nichol, 405.

⁹W. A. Edwards, *Plagiarism, An Essay on Good and Bad Borrowing* (114); quoted by Nichol, 405.

¹⁰From 1811 to 1845, Justice Story served on the United States Supreme Court, while also serving as a federal Circuit Judge on the New England Circuit. From 1829-1845 he also served as the founding professor of the Harvard university School of Law.

http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/amistad/AMI_BSTO.HTM.

¹¹Quoted by Kenneth H. Wood, *Adventist Review*, September 17, 1981, p. 13.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Nichol, 409.

¹⁴H. M. Paull, *Literary Ethics* (London: T. Butterworth, 1928), 126-127; quoted in Nichol, 409.

¹⁵Mark Twain, quoted by Eutyclus X [pseudonym], “Eutyclus & His Kin,” *Christianity Today*, Feb. 1977, p. 8 [144].

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|---|---|--|---|---|--|--|---|--|
| <p>Plagiarism</p> <p>Taking credit for another's work and/or actually harming the previous author by depriving of income or due recognition.</p> | <p>Informal Oral Speech</p> <p>Jokes, stories, news. Source may be given if needed to enhance credibility (e.g., "I heard it last night on CNN"), but NOT as a matter of honesty or obligation. Often involves information that is or will soon be common knowledge. No commercial value or financial profit motive.</p> | <p>Popular Writing</p> <p>Fiction, how-to-assemble manuals, children's literature. Most of this genre includes little or no information that is not common knowledge to experts in the field. Occasional documentation to enhance credibility, but not as a matter of obligation, since purpose is not to prove so much as to entertain or explain.</p> | <p>Serious Writing</p> <p>Reliable and influential but not in academic style. Examples: sermons, political writing, and other media of persuasion and informal education. Documentation often omitted because the actual data is considered common knowledge. Purpose: to persuade, convince, convert. This category describes most of EGW's published writings.</p> | <p>Light Academic</p> <p>School assignments such as essays and reports that do not require formal documentation.</p> | <p>"Best-selling" Academic / Scholarly</p> <p>Thoroughly documented, but in less obtrusive ways; designed for popular reading by educated audience.</p> | <p>Proper Academic</p> <p>These and Dissertations</p> | <p>Academic "Scaffolding"</p> <p>Excessive or unnecessary documentation. May include (1) excessively documenting information that's common knowledge; (2) documenting words that are common or generic expressions; and especially (3) including in "content" foot-notes material that does not advance the purpose, simply because the author does not wish to delete it.</p> | <p>There's arguably no such thing as absolute originality. Every communicator owes a debt to those who went before. Those who think they are being absolutely original are either (like column 2 to left) simply unaware of their indebtedness, or (like col. 1), do not wish to acknowledge it.</p> |
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Table 1. Literary Borrowing ("Fair Use") Continuum, and Documentation Comparison by Genre.

Historical survey of literary borrowing, documentation, and their legal standards. In ancient times all books were written by hand. Because of the dearth of written records, historians were forced to rely on a very few sources. Few books survived unless they were copied by a later author, and to have one's work copied was considered a compliment, not a crime.

Standards of documentation have changed dramatically in response to changes in education, economics, and technology. The two primary purposes of documentation are to enhance authority, credibility, and to acknowledge the contributions of others. *Neither of these purposes requires precise or detailed documentation.* A third purpose of documentation—to facilitate further research by enabling the reader to personally consult the cited authorities—is of real value primarily to people who have the possibility of doing further reading on the topic. Thus the demand for very precise, detailed, and thorough documentation has risen in proportion to rising (1) levels of education, (2) affluence, which affords both time and money for reading and owning sources, and (3) increasing access to sources, through the development of publishing, libraries, and communication technologies. Notice the progression:

15th century: After Gutenberg, mass production gradually became possible, but because of the amount of work involved, the commercial value of the manuscript was still seen as residing primarily in the physical copy, not in the intellectual content.

16th century: Luther's works were printed and spread all over Europe by a multitude of small printers, without any copyright laws to hinder them. Luther received no royalties; his motive was to get the message out.

18th century, England: John Wesley condensed and popularized many books about the Bible for the benefit and spiritual growth of the Methodists. Explaining his lack of documentation, he wrote, "It was a doubt with me for some time, whether I should not subjoin to every note I received from them the name of the author from whom it was taken; especially considering I had transcribed [copied] some, and abridged many more, almost in the words of the author. But upon further consideration, I resolved to name none, that nothing might divert the mind of the reader from keeping close to the point of view, and receiving what was spoke[n] only according to its own intrinsic value."¹⁶

Wesley's practice is particularly relevant for two reasons: (1) He died in 1792, only 35 years before the birth of Ellen White. (2) Growing up Methodist, Ellen White was not only familiar with his writings, but saw him as a Reformer who had been used by God to initiate significant theological advances over Luther and Calvin. Thus she would naturally regard him as a worthy example to imitate.

Albert C. Outler, one of the foremost Wesley scholars of the twentieth century, described Wesley's literary borrowing as follows: "In 1774 Wesley published a tract entitled *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (*Works*, XI, 59-79), which was reprinted and widely distributed in England and America. It was represented to be his own production (*cf. Letters*, VIII, 6, 7, 276) — and its vivid sentiments certainly are. Actually, however, it was an abridgment of *Some Historical Account of Guinea*, which had been published in Philadelphia in 1771 by Anthony Benezet, an American Quaker. In judging such a literary 'borrowing,' it is useful to realize that Wesley and his eighteenth-century colleagues generally understood this as a form of *endorsement* [italics Outler's]. When he [Wesley] found something that said what he wanted to say, he felt free to make it available to those who might not otherwise have seen it. This is the case, for example, with his *Calm Address to Our American Colonies* (1775), borrowed from Samuel Johnson, *Taxation No Tyranny*; [Wesley's] *A Treatise on Baptism* (see below, p. 317 ff.), and *A Roman Catechism* (1756), abridged from a treatise of a similar title by Bishop John Williams of Chichester (1686), in *Works*, X, 86-128."¹⁷

18th century, America: Thomas Jefferson wrote, "He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me."¹⁸ While America soon enacted copyright laws, the accent in intellectual property was still on the material document that embodied the ideas, and less on the ideas themselves.

19th century, America: By this time there were copyright laws, but there remained a vestigial

¹⁶John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* [reprint, London: Epworth, 1948 ed.], 8; earlier edition quoted in Nichol, 406).

¹⁷Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 85-86, n. 1.

¹⁸Quoted in editorial, "Who Owns the Knowledge Economy?" *The Economist*, April 8, 2000, 17.

attitude of informality toward documentation. It was common for writers, religious or secular, “to borrow from one another without giving specific credit.”¹⁹ Calcott’s *History in the United States 1800-1860* gives examples: “The second major assault by modern scholars on the historians of the early nineteenth century centered about plagiarism, the practice of using in their own works the same phraseology as someone else had used. The early nineteenth-century historian would have been dismayed by the attack, would have pleaded *nolo contendere*, and would simply have pointed out that he had never pretended to be original when he could find someone else who had satisfactorily said what he had in mind.”²⁰

“One of the first to be attacked was William Gordon for using material from the *Annual Register* without quotation marks. . . . After citing his sources, a typical writer stated that he ‘would here publicly acknowledge that he has often copied their language as well as their facts, and has not been particular to disfigure his page with quotation marks.’ Another glibly explained that his ‘first five chapters . . . are from the admirably written historical sketch in *Martin’s Gazetteer*.’ Others openly stated that they ‘had not scrupled’ to copy a well-written previous study; that they ‘used substantially another’s language’; that they utilized the work of others ‘without introducing my authorities’; that if a good source was found they had ‘adopted the phraseology of the author entire’; and that they had ‘made use of them as public property.’”²¹

“The early nineteenth-century historian felt no need to argue for originality, and he would not have understood why he should make a fetish of reworking material when what he wanted to say already had been better said by another. . . . Historians usually felt flattered rather than insulted when their words were used by another. The period is remarkable for the lack of scholarly rivalry, and writers who borrowed from each other remained on the warmest terms.”²²

Religious writers in the same time period were even less scrupulous about crediting quotations, because their goal was not for personal profit, but to advance the kingdom of God, and they felt that excess documentation would distract the reader from the spiritual purpose of the publication. Noted above was Wesley’s reason for naming none of his sources: “that nothing might divert the mind of the reader from keeping close to the point of view, and receiving what was spoke[n] only according to its own intrinsic value.”²³

Ingram Cobbin wrote in 1863, “All the commentators have drawn largely from the fathers, especially from St. Augustine; and most of them have made general property of Patrick, Lowth, and Whitby. Poole has exhausted the old continental writers; Henry has made very free with Bishop Hall and others; Scott and Benson have enriched their pages abundantly from Henry; Gill has translated the spirit of Poole’s ‘Synopsis,’ but he most generally gives his authorities; Adam Clarke and Davidson have been much indebted to all the best critics, though the former does not always mention his obligations, and the latter never; but his preface to his admirable ‘Pocket Commentary’ is an honest confession that he pretends to be no more than a compiler.”²⁴

In 1873 W. F. P. Noble prefaced his book *The Prophets of the Bible*: “In preparing these sketches, the writer has freely used any material suited to his object. He acknowledges his indebtedness to various writers who have touched the same great theme in any of its parts. The works of many leading authors have been before him, and used so far as they could be made available for his purpose. It has been his effort to bring the substance of a number of books before a class of readers to whom these authorities are not accessible; and with this end in view, anything in other writers that seemed likely to impart additional interest to the reading of the Scriptures has been incorporated, so far as space permitted. In carrying out his plan, he has not thought it necessary to load the pages with foot-notes, or the letter-press with

¹⁹Robert W. Olson, *One Hundred and One Questions on the Sanctuary and on Ellen White* (Washington, DC: Ellen G. White Estate, 1981), 66.

²⁰George Callcott, *History in the United States, 1800-1860* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), 134-136; quoted by Olson, *101 Questions*, 66.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*

²³John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, 8.

²⁴Ingram Cobbin, *The Condensed Commentary and Family Exposition of the Holy Bible* (London: William Tegg, 1863), Preface, iv; quoted by Nichol, 406-407.

quotation marks, but deems it sufficient to give this general credit at the outset.”²⁵

“While editing the *SDA Bible Commentary*,” wrote R. F. Cottrell, “I had occasion to compare thirty nineteenth-century Bible commentaries on the Book of 1 Corinthians. The first thing I noticed was the extent to which these nineteenth-century writers, many of them well known and respected, copied significant amounts of material from one another without once giving credit. I concluded that nineteenth-century literary ethics, even among the best writers, approved of, or at least did not seriously question, generous literary borrowing without giving credit. Ellen White frankly acknowledged borrowing from various historical writers in the process of writing *The Great Controversy*, sometimes with and sometimes without credit. It is not fair to a nineteenth-century writer to judge him (or her) by our standards today. We must judge them by their standards and [the] accepted practice of their own days.”²⁶

This is the historical context in which Ellen White was living and writing. *Judged by the accepted standards of the day, her use of other authors was well within the boundaries of “fair use” as defined by Judge Story.*

The amount of Ellen White’s borrowing as a percentage of her writing deserves attention for two reasons: (1) Walter Rea’s estimate of the amount of Ellen White’s borrowing as a percentage of her total writing was grossly exaggerated. (2) Later research on the question was conducted with impeccable precision, but its findings have been often misunderstood. Fred Veltman’s study, based on 15 chapters of *Desire of Ages*, used “the sentence as the unit of comparison. The 15 chapters of the *DA* text contained 2,624 sentences.”²⁷ The study also established a scale of seven levels of literary dependency, from “strict verbatim” to “independence” (see Table 2-A). The data is commonly cited as concluding that “30 percent of *Desire of Ages* is to some degree dependent.” As Robert Olson points out more accurately, “In 31 percent of the sentences *one word* or more shows some degree of dependency”²⁸ (see Table 2-B).

²⁵Quoted in Olson, *101 Questions*, 66-67.

²⁶Raymond F. Cottrell, “The Literary Relationship between *The Desire of Ages*, by Ellen G. White, and *The Life of Christ*, by William Hanna” (White Estate: 1979), 6.

²⁷Fred Veltman, “The *Desire of Ages* Project: The Data,” *Ministry*, October 1990, 5. See also idem, “The *Desire of Ages* Project: The Conclusions,” *Ministry*, December 1990, 11-15.

²⁸Robert W. Olson with David C. James, “Olson Discusses the Veltman Study,” *Ministry*, Dec. 1990, 16.

| Table 2-A. Dependency Values ²⁹ | Table 2-B. Percentages of Borrowing. |
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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Strict Verbatim; exact duplication of all words and syntax. 6. Verbatim; slight modification of words or punctuation 5. Strict Paraphrase 4. Simple Paraphrase 3. Loose Paraphrase 2. Source Bible; Scripture follows the secondary source, but is not a Scripture usually associated with this story. 1. Partial Independence; part of the sentence shows strong parallelism, but a significant part of the sentence shows clearly independent wording. 0. Strict Independence; no clear indication of literary dependency 0. Bible Quotation; EGW text and source text are identical, because both are depending on a Bible text that is integral to the story. | <p>10 lines of 10 characters per line makes each character 1% of the total.</p> <pre style="font-family: monospace; font-size: 0.8em;"> -----• -- X -----• -----• -----• ----- X -----• -----• -----• -- X -----• -----• -----• -----• </pre> <p>The rows ending in periods represent <i>sentences</i>, the <u>underlines</u> represent <i>words</i>, and the Xs represent <i>borrowed words</i>, illustrating that dependency in 30% of the <i>sentences</i> could involve as few as 3% of the words. (I'm not saying this represents the percentage of borrowing in <i>Desire of Ages</i>, but I am pointing out the statistical limitations of the methodology).</p> |

Table 2. Fred Veltman’s Study of Literary Borrowing in Ellen White’s *Desire of Ages*.

While *percentage* of borrowing, as such, is not a determinative issue in the finding of “fair use,” an accurate estimate supports the finding that her borrowing was within “fair use.”

II. The Honesty Issue. Did she acknowledge her borrowing? Yes, in much the same way as the works noted above. In her Introduction to the 1888 edition of *Great Controversy*, she wrote, “This history I have presented briefly, in accordance with the scope of the book, and the brevity which must necessarily be observed, the facts having been condensed into as little space as seemed consistent with a proper understanding of their application. *In some cases where a historian has so grouped together events as to afford, in brief, a comprehensive view of the subject, or has summarized details in a convenient manner, his words have been quoted; but except in a few instances* [1911 ed. has “in some instances”] *no specific credit has been given, since they are not quoted for the purpose of citing that writer as authority, but because his statement affords a ready and forcible presentation of the subject. In narrating the experience and views of those carrying forward the work of reform in our own time, similar use has occasionally been made of their published works.*”³⁰

III. The Issue of Inspiration. The first two charges—plagiarism and dishonesty—would likely never have been raised against Ellen White were it not for her claim to divine inspiration. When Canright initiated the plagiarism charge, in *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced* (1889), his reason for raising the issue was his belief that literary borrowing disproves inspiration. He also claimed that for Ellen White to revise her own writings disproved inspiration—because he professed a dictational concept of inspiration. Canright argued that God gave messages to the prophets pre-formed word-for-word. If that were true, there would be no such thing as a rough draft of inspired writings, and the handwritten pages could be sent directly to the typesetters. To Canright’s way of thinking, Ellen White’s revising, rewriting, and

²⁹Fred Veltman, *Full Report of the Life of Christ Research Project*, 4 vols. [n.p.: Life of Christ Research Project Review Committee, 1988]), 1:61-63.

³⁰E. G. White, Preface to *Great Controversy* (1888 edition, page h; 1911 edition, page xi).

editing her writings constituted proof that they had no higher source than herself. His obsession to discredit her apparently blinded him to the fact that many of the Bible writers borrowed from each other and from uninspired sources.³¹

Ellen White had much to say on the issue of inspiration. Her classic definition was written in 1886: “It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man’s words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God” (Ms 24, 1886, in 1SM 21.2).

In an earlier statement (RH Oct. 8, 1867), she wrote: “Although I am as dependent upon the Spirit of the Lord in writing my views as I am in receiving them, *yet the words I employ in describing what I have seen are my own*, unless they be those spoken to me by an angel, which I always enclose in marks of quotation” (1SM 37). By lifting the phrase “the words . . . are my own” out of context, critics have represented it as a statement denying that she borrowed words from other authors. But the context is clear: she is responding to a question about testimonies on skirt length. In vision she saw “three companies of females” pass before her, with three different skirt lengths. The first group had skirts that were too long. They were modest, but not healthful, because they dragged in the filth of the streets. The second group had skirts that were too short. They were dressed healthfully, but not modestly. The third group had skirts of a length that was “proper, modest, and healthful.” In attempting to describe the skirt length of the third group, she had in one place spoken of it as about nine inches from the floor, in another place “somewhat below the top of a lady’s gaiter boot,” and in a third place as clearing the filth of the street by an inch or two without having to raise it by the hand.” “As I wrote upon the subject of dress the view of those three companies revived in my mind as plain as when I was viewing them in vision; *but I was left to describe the length of the proper dress in my own language the best I could.*” Thus on different occasions she had used different expressions to describe the same idea.

Ellen White’s practice. Putting God’s revelation in her “own language” was a daunting task, for which she had little formal education. But she had a divine tutor, who gave advice similar to what a human writing teacher might have told her: (1) Start reading, and as you read you will discover “gems of truth” that you can modify and improve to express what God is showing you. (2) Begin writing and your skills will gradually improve. Through her visions she became educated, and as she read and wrote, she was led to books and articles that were of help to her.

“In her early experience when she was sorely distressed over the difficulty of putting into human language the revelations of truths that had been imparted to her, she was reminded of the fact that all wisdom and knowledge comes from God and she was assured that God would bestow grace and guidance. She was told in the reading of religious books and journals, she would find precious gems of truth expressed in acceptable language, and that she would be given help from heaven to recognize these and to separate them from the rubbish of error with which she would sometimes find them associated.”³² Roger Coon has developed in some detail a rationale for literary borrowing guided by inspiration.

IV. Roger Coon’s Paradigm for Literary Borrowing under Inspiration.³³

1. “There is no basis for human preeminence, because—ultimately—there is nothing totally original in the world” (Eccl. 1:9).³⁴ This is as true of ideas and “truth” as it is of material things. As Paul demanded of the Corinthians, “What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?” (1 Cor 4:7).

2. Christ was the Originator of all truth. Wrote Ellen White, “We can trace the line of the

³¹Robert W. Olson, *101 Questions on the Sanctuary and on Ellen White* (Washington, DC: White Estate, 1981), 105-108. See also Appendix A, below, for the resolution of the 1883 General Conference.

³²W. C. White and D. E. Robinson, *Brief Statements*, 6; quoted in Olson, *101 Questions*, 72).

³³Adapted from Roger W. Coon, “Ellen White’s Philosophy of Sacred Composition: Subsumed in Four Propositions,” in “Ellen G. White and the So-Called ‘Plagiarism’ Charge: An Examination of Five Issues,” by Roger W. Coon, GSEM534 Lecture Outline, Andrews University, April 30, 1999, pp. 34-36.

³⁴*Ibid.*

world's great teachers as far back as human records extend; but the Light [Christ] was before them. As the moon and the stars of the solar system shine by the reflected light of the sun, so, as far as their teaching is true, do the world's great thinkers reflect the rays of the Sun of Righteousness. Every gem of thought, every flash of the intellect, is from the Light of the world.³⁵ Elsewhere she explained that

“Christ was the originator of all the ancient gems of truth. Through the work of the enemy these truths had been . . . disconnected from their true position, and placed in the framework of error. Christ’s work was to readjust and establish the precious gems in the framework of truth. . . .

“Christ Himself could use any of these old truths without borrowing the smallest particle, for He had originated them all. He had cast them into the minds and thought of each generation, and when He came to our world, He rearranged and vitalized the truths which had become dead, making them more forcible for the benefit of future generations. It was Jesus Christ who had the power of rescuing the truths from the rubbish, and again giving them to the world with more than their original freshness and power.”³⁶

3. “Because Christ is the *Originator* of all true ideas, He is also the *Owner* of them.”³⁷ In the parable of the householder, the owner says: “Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with my own?” (Matt 20:15). So **Christ “is at perfect liberty to determine by what process He will communicate truth: how, when, and by whom.”**³⁸

When Fannie Bolton, one of Ellen White’s literary assistants, was chafing because she felt she was not receiving sufficient “credit and recognition” for her editorial and literary work, Ellen White related to Fannie a pertinent vision. “An illustration was given me of a tree full of beautiful fruit. I was shown Fannie gathering the fruit, some ripe, the best, some unripe. She put it in her apron, and said, ‘This is mine. It is mine.’ I said, ‘Fannie, you are certainly claiming that which is not yours. That fruit belongs to that tree. Any one may pluck and enjoy it, but it belongs to that tree.’”³⁹

“4. Ellen White saw herself as “the special agent chosen by God to convey ancient truths to her generation (and ours); and it is *this truth—not the vehicle in which it is carried—that is the only truly important issue.*”⁴⁰ In 1900, S. N. Haskell questioned Ellen White about other leaders (A. T. Jones and W. W. Prescott) who were apparently writing perspectives different from his own on certain Adventist doctrines. Ellen White replied to Haskell,

“In regard to our brethren writing on the third angel's message. Let them write. Bear in mind that in the branches of the vine there is diversity in unity. . . . There is an unseen, conscious, indivisible unity, keeping the bodily machinery in action, each part working in harmony with every other. . . .

“We are not to feel that we must speak the very same things, giving the same representation in the same words, and yet there is to be unity in the diversity. All the different testimonies unite to form one whole, as the books of the Bible are brought together, and bound under one cover. But should Matthew, Mark, Luke and John go off on some tangent, contradicting each other's testimony, then there would be confusion. In all the presentation of truth by different minds, there is to be unity in diversity. **One must not labor to have everything that comes from his mind entirely different from that which comes from another man's mind. But he is to follow in the line where the Spirit of the Lord shall direct, then there will be different figures and different ways of presentation, that will interest and educate different minds. Some are always straining to get something original; this places them in great danger. They produce something new, that is not according to the Word of God, and they have not the discernment to see the real harm that results from their ambition to excel some other one in new and strange productions.** Thus error comes to appear to them as truth, and they present it as wonderful new light, when it is an innovation that makes of none effect a “Thus saith the Lord.”

³⁵E. G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 464-465.

³⁶E. G. White, Ms 25, 1890, in *Manuscript Releases*, 13:241-242; cf. *Desire of Ages*, 287-288; emphasis added.

³⁷Coon, “Ellen White’s Philosophy of Sacred Composition,” 35 (italics his).

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹E. G. White to Fannie Bolton, February 6, 1894 (Letter 7, 1894, in “The Fannie Bolton Story,” Manuscript Release No. 926 [E. G. White Estate Shelf Document, 1982], 26).

⁴⁰Coon, “Ellen White’s Philosophy of Sacred Composition,” 35 (italics his).

“Let all be under the controlling influence of the Holy Spirit of God. **Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, one may use the same expressions used by a fellow-worker under the same guidance. He should not make an effort to do this, nor not to do it, but leave the mind to be acted upon by the Holy Spirit.** There is one thing all should do, “Endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit, in the bonds of peace.” . . .⁴¹

“I think I have answered your question. Although Elder Jones or Elder Prescott may write, your individuality remains the same. **You are to write, as God shall lead your mind. Your individuality cannot be submerged in that of any man.** You can, if you will, place yourself under the direct beams of the Son of Righteousness, and catch the heavenly glow. Then the softening, subduing love of Christ will come into your heart, and the grace of the tenderness of Christ will mellow your spirit and reveal the same in words and utterances. . . .⁴²

“**The Creator of all ideas may impress different minds with the same thought, but each may express it in a different way, yet without contradiction.** The fact that this difference exists should not perplex or confuse us. It is seldom that two persons will view and express truth in the very same way. Each dwells on particular points which his constitution and education have fitted him to appreciate. The sunlight falling upon different objects gives those objects a different hue.”⁴³

V. The Ownership and Stewardship of Truth.⁴⁴

1. If, as Scripture teaches, **God is the Owner of everything** (Ps 24:1; 50:10-12), and all truth is “His truth” (Ps 91:4; 100:5; 117:2), then ultimately, **all human ownership is actually stewardship.** In a secondary sense, humans do own private property, including intellectual property, and God defends such ownership (Exod 20:15), but in the ultimate sense, the human managers of God’s intellectual property are merely stewards. “In our relation to our fellowmen we are owners of our entrusted mental and physical capabilities. In our relation to God we are borrowers, stewards of His grace” (2MCP 797).

2. **The source of a steward’s reward** is the Owner whom he serves, not the human beneficiaries of the steward’s service. Two biblical cases come to mind. In the OT story of Naaman’s healing from leprosy, the riches of the Owner passed through the management of the steward (Elisha) to meet the need of the seeker (Naaman). When the understeward (Gehazi) sought to turn the gratitude and generosity of Naaman to his own profit, he was judged unfaithful. Gehazi’s unfaithfulness as a steward consisted in (1) ingratitude for the privilege of being a steward; (2) discontent with the Owner’s provision for his needs; which led him to (3) covetousness, probably long cherished and secretly indulged, either consciously or unconsciously. (4) When Naaman’s wealth and his willingness to give it away, appeared to Gehazi’s coveting-blinded heart as a financial opportunity, Gehazi’s long-held unfaithfulness of heart became public unfaithfulness of action. He got Naaman’s gifts, but lost his own stewardship, with lifelong leprosy as severance pay (2 Kings 5). In a NT parable, the steward who used his master’s property to obtain personal benefits directly from the “customers” was labeled “unjust” or unfaithful (Luke 16:1-12).

4. **The certainty of the steward’s reward.** Some stewards are more skilled than others, but all who are faithful will receive from the Owner a reward (Matt 25:21-23; Luke 12:42-44; 19:17-19).

5. **The basis of reward** for biblical stewards is essentially only one criterion: comprehensive faithfulness to the Owner’s directions (1 Cor 4:2).

6. **The content of the steward’s reward** does not consist in present profits or any kind of personal gain. The steward’s reward is twofold—the Master’s approval and increased responsibility. “He will make him ruler over all that he has” (Luke 12:42-44). To the five-talent servant, the reward was the accolade, “Well done, good and faithful servant;” followed by the promotion, “I will make you ruler over many things” (Matt 25:21). In Luke’s parable of the minas (a mina was about three months’ wages), the servant who earned ten minas likewise received approval and increased responsibility: “Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities” (Luke 19:17).

⁴¹E. G. White to S. N. Haskell, Letter 53, 1900, in *Manuscript Releases*, 8:66-67, emphasis added.

⁴²Ibid., 69, emphasis added.

⁴³E. G. White to S. N. Haskell, Letter 53, 1900, in *The Publishing Ministry* (1983), 100, emphasis added.

⁴⁴After writing this section I realized that the essential motivation of what I have called “stewardship” is virtually identical to the classical analysis of the Protestant work ethic.

7. Even though the steward’s ultimate reward is the Master’s approval and promotion, there are also **legitimate “fruits of labor” in the present** which the faithful steward should not be deprived of (1 Cor 9:9-18; 2 Tim 2:6).

8. **The contrasting self-perceptions** of those who see themselves as stewards and those who see themselves as owners, lead to widely different expectations about rewards.⁴⁵ Self-perceived “owners” are jealously possessive of their work because they see their ownership as entitling them to whatever profits they can secure through the shrewd use of the talents they think they “own.” Primary motivations for their labor are personal recognition, financial profit, and other benefits such as influence, power, and position. The natural tendency of selfish human nature is to seek to extend legitimate legal protections further and further in an effort to maximize personal profit, regardless of whether that profit exceeds the proportion of “added value” actually contributed by the individual innovator. Rampant greed and arrogance seek to monopolize assets far beyond the legitimate fruits of labor to the point of infringing on others’ claims to the fruits of their labor.⁴⁶

The purpose of copyright and patent laws is to encourage innovation by (1) protecting legitimate fruits of labor, while (2) not overprotecting to the point that an idea or product cannot be improved on by anyone other than its originator. **No protection** leads to literary theft and intellectual piracy. **Overprotection** tends to suppress innovation and encourage monopoly (see Table 3).

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| <p>No protection allows piracy</p> | <p>Legal Protection of Legitimate Innovation (1) Protects inventors’ fruits of labor, and (2) Preserves inventors’ freedom to build on the work of others.</p> | <p>Overprotecti on tends to enable monopoly</p> |
|---|---|--|

Table 3. Balancing Protections in Copyright and Patent Law

Where was Ellen White’s practice? Right in the middle, in the area of legal protection under the laws of her day. Further, Attorney Vincent Ramik’s research produced the finding that her practice would be both legal and protected under today’s laws as well.⁴⁷

VI. Practical Implications. The position taken in this paper could prompt questions such as: “If it was permissible for Ellen White to use sources freely with minimal or no documentation, why can’t students today do the same? On the other hand, if it’s wrong for students today, how could it be right for her? What about preaching sermons, giving Bible studies, or doing door-to-door work using words composed by others?” These questions are clarified in light of the ownership and stewardship of truth.

Literary Stewardship under Law. The steward is bound to honor the Owner in all things, including the observance of human laws as far as they do not contradict allegiance to God and His laws. Before copyright laws there were no legal strictures on literary borrowing. When those laws were made, Ellen White was obligated to follow them. She did, and we should, too.

Literary Stewardship and Academic Writing. Rules governing literary stewardship in academic situations are a function of the institution. For example, it is perfectly all right for me to buy egg rolls from the local deli and take them to a potluck. But a chef in a gourmet cooking competition would have to make his or her own egg rolls, and introducing egg rolls purchased from the deli would violate the most basic rules of the competition and disqualify the offender. Likewise, strict enforcement of proper academic borrowing procedures is essential to the academic training process.

⁴⁵I realized after writing this section that what I have described as the attitude of the steward is the essential motivation of the Protestant work ethic.

⁴⁶Editorial, “Who Owns the Knowledge Economy?” *The Economist*, April 8, 2000, 17.

⁴⁷“‘There Simply Is No Case’: Interview about Ellen White and her writings with Attorney Vincent L. Ramik, senior partner of Diller, Ramik, and Wight, Ltd., specialists in patent, trademark, and copyright cases, Washington, D.C.,” *Adventist Review*, Sept. 17, 1981, 4-6. Three related articles are found in the same issue.

Literary Stewardship and the Pastor/Preacher/Evangelist. In my opinion, personal Bible studies belong to informal speech (see Table 1, col. 2), as do canvassing speeches of literature evangelists. To attempt to give credit would ruin the presentation. Copying the example, methods, and even words of a skilled trainer is one of the most effective ways to learn. **“In the training of the disciples the example of the Saviour’s life was far more effective than any mere doctrinal instruction.** When they were separated from Him, **every look and tone and word** came back to them. Often when in conflict with the enemies of the gospel, **they repeated His words,** and as they saw their effect upon the people, they rejoiced greatly.”⁴⁸

My first homiletics teacher extended the same allowance to preaching. “If you come up to Friday night without a sermon,” he counseled, “it’s better to preach a good sermon by someone else than a bad one of your own.” “It’s better to serve your children a TV dinner than to send them away hungry,” he maintained. But he also quoted H.M.S. Richards Sr., that if you are ever going to amount to anything as a preacher, you need to “be a voice, not an echo.” You only develop a “voice” by doing your own work. Therefore, **“Let your preaching be with power and spirit--not the repetition of old discourses, but let fresh, new manna be given to the hungry sheep.** You must draw daily from the living fountain of the waters of life.”⁴⁹

Conclusion: Critics attack Ellen White’s literary borrowing, not because they have a legitimate complaint, but because of an intense desire to discredit her and her writings. Ellen White’s own diagnosis as to the source of such hostility is the misuse of authority that “stirred up the worst passions of the human heart” and caused a response of rebellion.⁵⁰ Tragic as may be their motivation, the allegations that Ellen White committed plagiarism are a trumped-up charge, a straw man, and an *ad hominem* attack.

(1) If she had not claimed prophetic inspiration, there would be no basis for criticizing her practice of literary borrowing. Yet the concept of inspiration that forms the basis of such criticism is founded on traditional presuppositions and a selective reading of Scripture, not on the whole testimony of Scripture. The biblical concept of inspiration does not preclude literary borrowing, for the Bible writers freely borrowed from each other and from noncanonical sources. The case for Ellen White’s inspiration rests directly on the *biblical* evidence of what prophets did and how they worked.⁵¹

(2) If there were not a growing, global movement of the Spirit of God in people who accept her writings as inspired, there would be little motivation to even notice her literary borrowing. Hundreds of writers from the nineteenth century and earlier, borrowed as freely than she did, but merit no notice today.

(3) But she *did* claim the gift of prophecy; there *is* a burgeoning global movement of people who recognize the authority of her claim, and from that point of view, these allegations simply confirm what she predicted more than a century ago. **“There will be a hatred kindled against the testimonies which is satanic,”** she wrote in 1890. “The workings of Satan will be to unsettle the faith of the churches in them, for this reason: Satan cannot have so clear a track to bring in his deceptions and bind up souls in his

⁴⁸E. G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 349-350.

⁴⁹E. G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, 8:105.

⁵⁰She herself identifies the most common cause of such implacable hostility: “Parents who exercise a spirit of dominion [domination] and authority,” who are “exacting in their discipline and instruction,” by “their severity in dealing with their [children’s] errors, they stir up the worst passions of the human heart and leave their children with a sense of injustice and wrong. They meet in their children the very disposition that they themselves have imparted to them. Such parents drive their children away from God, by talking to them on religious subjects; for the Christian religion is made unattractive and even repulsive by this misrepresentation of truth. Children will say, ‘Well, if that is religion, I do not want anything of it.’ It is thus that enmity is often created in the heart against religion; and because of an arbitrary enforcement of authority, children are led to despise the law and the government of heaven” (*Child Guidance* [1954], 286). “Be not hasty and agitated and approach your children with censure. Such a course would only cause rebellion in them” (ibid., 458). For a further discussion of the role of anger in religious criticism, see Alden Thompson, *Escape from the Flames: How Ellen White Grew from Fear to Joy—and Helped Me to Do It Too* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), 40, 43-44, 60.

⁵¹See Thompson, *Escape from the Flames*, 44.

delusions if the warnings and reproofs and counsels of the Spirit of God are heeded.”⁵² Another letter from the same year links this hostile criticism with the end-time climax. “**The very last deception of Satan will be to make of none effect the testimony of the Spirit of God.** ‘Where there is no vision, the people perish’ (Prov. 29:18). Satan will work ingeniously, in different ways and through different agencies, to unsettle the confidence of God’s remnant people in the true testimony.”⁵³

Finally, she describes the motivation of her critics, while reaffirming the clear distinction in function that she maintained between Scripture and her writings. “Doubt and unbelief are cherished by those who do not walk circumspectly. They have a painful consciousness that their life will not abide the test of the Spirit of God, *whether speaking through His Word or through the testimonies of His Spirit that would bring them to His Word.* Instead of beginning with their own hearts and coming into harmony with the pure principles of the gospel, they find fault and condemn the very means that God has chosen to fit up a people to stand in the day of the Lord.”⁵⁴

It seems clear that the conclusions of Ellen White’s critics and those of her defenders are founded on mutually exclusive presuppositions. Whichever set of presuppositions one chooses will inevitably determine not only corresponding intellectual convictions, but a wide array of intellectual, psychological, and spiritual consequences. The onward march of history will eventually reveal which presuppositions were correct and which were mistaken. But by the time that historical confirmation is complete, it will be, for many, too late to change the main course of their lives. All make choices in the present that determine their future. But no choices made in the future can undo the past. For this reason one cannot wait for final proof before choosing. The choices made, based on the weight of evidence, will determine the course of the life. The truly wise person will consider carefully, not which set of presuppositions is more popular now, but which set of presuppositions, with its inevitable ramifications and consequences, does one wish to have determine one’s future.

APPENDIX A

General Conference resolution (1883), framed with Ellen White’s counsel: “*Whereas*, Some of the bound volumes of the “Testimonies to [*sic*] the Church” are out of print, so that full sets cannot be obtained at the Office; and—

Whereas, There is a constant and urgent call for the re-printing of these volumes; therefore—
Resolved, That we recommend their re-publication in such a form as to make four volumes of seven or eight hundred pages each.

33. *Whereas*, Many of these testimonies were written under the most unfavorable circumstances, the writer being too heavily pressed with anxiety and labor to devote critical thought to the grammatical perfection of the writings, and they were printed in such haste as to allow these imperfections to pass uncorrected; and--

Whereas, We believe the light given by God to his servants is by the enlightenment of the mind, thus imparting the thoughts, and not (except in rare cases) the very words in which the ideas should be expressed”; therefore--

Resolved, That in the re-publication of these volumes such verbal changes be made as to remove the above-mentioned imperfections, as far as possible, without in any measure changing the thought; and, further--

34. *Resolved*, That this body appoint a committee of five to take charge of the re-publication of these volumes according to the above preambles and resolutions” (G. I. Butler and O. B. Oyen, “General Conference Proceedings [Concluded],” RH, Nov. 27, 1883, 741-42).

APPENDIX B

Conybeare and Howson’s *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* was originally published in England in 1851-1852, but Britain and the USA had “no copyright relations” before July 1, 1891, and British works

⁵²E. G. White, Letter 40, 1890, in *1888 Materials*, 797-798, emphasis added; quoted in *Selected Messages*, 1:48; related statements are found in *Great Controversy*, 608; and *Testimonies*, 5:463.

⁵³E. G. White, Letter 12, 1890, emphasis added; quoted in *Selected Messages*, 1:48.

⁵⁴E. G. White, Ms 1, 1883, emphasis added; quoted in *Selected Messages*, 1:45.

published before that date were in the public domain as far as US publishers were concerned (Nichol, 454). Thus the T. Y. Crowell Company could legally republish the entire book without any compensation to either the authors or the British publisher. The book was widely circulated in the USA. In January 1883 both the *Review and Herald* and the *Signs of the Times* offered it for sale or as a premium to new subscribers. An advertisement in the *Signs* carried a personal endorsement from Ellen White: "The Life of St. Paul by Conybeare and Howson, I regard as a book of great merit, and one of rare usefulness to the earnest student of the New Testament history" (ST Feb. 22, 1883, p. 96). The reason she could recommend it so heartily was that she had just completed a careful study of that book. It was one of the sources she consulted for historical and geographical backgrounds in her book *Sketches from the Life of Paul* which came out in June 1883.

EXAM QUESTIONS

1. Define and distinguish among "literary borrowing," "plagiarism," and "fair use."
2. What was the common practice of 19th-century American writers regarding source credits and documentation?
3. In what year did the General Conference pass a resolution endorsing a particular view of inspiration? What was the proposal before the conference that provided the context for this resolution?