

How Did Ellen White Choose and Use Historical Sources?

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION CHAPTER OF
THE GREAT CONTROVERSY

49

RONALD GRAYBILL

In an article on Ellen White's literary indebtedness, William S. Peterson remarked that any literary scholar will testify "that 'source studies' are among the most treacherous tasks to undertake."¹ By now perhaps some SPECTRUM readers, considering such articles the most tedious as well, may be weary of the drawn-out debate over Ellen White's treatment of the Bible and the French Revolution, chapter fifteen in *The Great Controversy*.

But some interesting evidence has come to light which can hardly be overlooked. One objective of the 1911 revision of *The Great Controversy* was to identify historical sources in which material quoted in *The Great Controversy* could be found by those who wished to verify the quotations. An examination of correspondence and other documents dealing with this revision has turned up significant data with a direct bearing on Ellen White's use of the historical sources appearing in chapter fifteen.

For readers who have not followed the discussion from its beginning, I will review some major points. In the Autumn 1970 issue of SPECTRUM appeared an article entitled "A Textual and Historical Study of Ellen G. White's Account of the French Revolution," by Peterson, then associate professor of English at Andrews University.² This article offered an evaluation of historians quoted by Ellen White in chapter fifteen of *The Great Controversy*, and concluded that "she appeared not to have been familiar with any of the important work that had been done on the Revolution in the latter half of the century and that she relied instead on older historical

treatments that were strong on moral fervor and weak on factual evidence."³ The historians Peterson evaluated — Scott, Wylie, Gleig, Alison, and Thiers — were judged to possess "strong antipathies against Catholicism and democracy."⁴ They generally belonged, Peterson said, "to an earlier 'romantic' historical school whose work had been largely discredited by the time Mrs. White was revising *The Great Controversy* in 1885."⁵

Peterson asserted that Ellen White followed her sources very closely and "drew most of her material from only a few pages of each." This observation led him to wonder how one should interpret her statement that the scenes were based primarily on visions. Peterson said that "except for a few broad generalizations about the Albigenses, Mrs. White provided no connected historical narrative in 1884; this appeared only after she had been reading in [J. N.] Andrews' library, and then every fact, every observation, came from printed sources."⁶ Peterson went on to cite a number of instances where Ellen White allegedly misread or misused the sources from which she did quote. In a sentence, then, Peterson seemed to be saying that Ellen White's sources for her treatment of the French Revolution were not the visions she received, but bad historians whom she used badly.

Peterson's article was followed by a series of replies over the next year and in each case Peterson himself was given an opportunity to respond. It is not my purpose to challenge the work of others, nor to attempt to answer all the questions that have been raised, but rather to correct a few misapprehensions.

I

A study of the notes left by Clarence C. Crisler (Ellen White's secretary who did much of the searching for the sources of quotations for the 1911 revision of *The Great Controversy*) disclosed Crisler's torn-out pages of chapter fifteen of the 1888 edition. Of course the 1888 edition did not carry references to the authors quoted, but these torn-out pages had Crisler's handwritten notations in the margins giving *the sources* of the quotations. But the interesting thing is that in many places Crisler made a double reference — one to an original source where the quotation could be found, and another to a secondary source: Uriah Smith's *Thoughts on Daniel and Revelation*.⁷

If one takes an 1884 edition of Smith's classic work (or even a current edition) and compares his exposition of Daniel 11:36-39 with Ellen White's treatment of the French Revolution, one quickly discovers clear evidence that Mrs. White did not quote Scott, Gleig, Thiers, or Alison directly. She drew the quotations entirely from Uriah Smith's work.

In fact, Smith had used all these same quotations in the 1873 edition of *Thoughts on Daniel* — and he himself may have taken them from secondary sources.

If one compares *The Great Controversy*, pages 269-270 and 273-276, with the 1873 edition of *Thoughts on Daniel*, pages 314-325, or the 1884 edition of *Daniel and Revelation*, pages 270-279 (either of which Ellen White could have used in her 1888 revision), one discovers that she used nothing from Scott, Gleig, Thiers, or Alison that Smith did not have. Every time Smith deleted material, she deleted the same material, although occasionally she deleted more. She even used the quotations in exactly the same order on pages 275 and 276. There can be no doubt that she drew the historical quotations from Smith, not from the original works.

51

Why is this significant? First of all, it changes our understanding of the way in which Ellen White selected the historical quotations she used in this chapter on the French Revolution. The impression that she sat down in the J. N. Andrews library in Basel and pulled this book and that one off the shelf, rejecting those that didn't agree with her biases, is not accurate. She did not, in any real sense, "select" these historians. She simply took over the historical references used in Smith's exposition.

Knowing the source from which Ellen White actually worked also helps explain the supposed suppression and distortion of evidence. She is said, for example, not to have given a "fair and accurate account" of the behavior of the bishop of Paris. Scott's account of the incident tells how the bishop renounced his faith, but it appeared that Ellen White had omitted several sentences which indicated that the bishop was forced to renounce his faith, and that he did it in tears and regretted it afterward.⁸

Why did Ellen White leave out the sentences in question? Was she deliberately misleading her readers in order to paint the bishop in an unfavorable light? No. Uriah Smith left out exactly the same sentences; and since she was quoting from Smith, not from Scott, she too left them out. She might be charged with poor scholarship by those who want her to conform to the canons of historical research, but certainly we can no longer entertain the suspicion that she practiced deliberate deception.

On the question of the comedian Monort and his blasphemous remarks, the fact that Ellen White was quoting Smith and not Alison again helps to explain the difficulty. She attributed the remarks to "one of the priests of the new order,"⁹ and Peterson points out that "a cleric he was not, except perhaps in some extravagantly metaphorical sense."¹⁰ But Smith refers to this speaker as "the comedian Monvel [sic] . . . a priest of Illuminism."¹¹ We

should doubtless admit that Ellen White's reference to a priest of the new order is liable to misinterpretation, but Smith's phrase clearly gave her her lead. The new order was illuminism, and Monort was an appropriate "priest." It is interesting that she followed the quotation about Monort with the scripture, "The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God."¹²

II

While no inflexible rule can be established, the preparation of chapter fifteen illustrates an important point to remember in attempting source studies on *The Great Controversy*: the references placed in the book in 1911 refer to sources *where the quotations can be found*, not necessarily to the sources where Ellen White found them.

52

Thus, when Philippe Buchez and Pierre Roux's *Collection of Parliamentary History* is cited, Peterson says: "I can find no information about the English translation which Mrs. White evidently used."¹³ The English translation she probably used was *Daniel and Revelation*, 1884 edition, pages 276-277.

Where does this leave us with the historians? Peterson treated and discredited five of the nine sources Ellen White quoted in her chapter on the French Revolution: Scott, Gleig, Wylie, Thiers, and Alison. We now see that except for Wylie, Ellen White cannot really be said to have selected any of these writers directly. Rather, she was accepting Uriah Smith's choices and expositions.

There were several historians Peterson did not treat — Buchez and Roux, White, d'Aubigné, and de Felice — saying that her quotations from them were brief and primarily factual. Certainly all would agree that the material from de Felice falls in that category.¹⁴ Wood subsequently treated the case of White,¹⁵ and Peterson did not challenge his favorable evaluation although he implied that it was too brief.¹⁶ It has been shown above that the quotation from Buchez and Roux was copied from Uriah Smith.

This leaves us with two historians: Wylie and d'Aubigné. I have nothing to add to the discussion of Wylie, but there are some more specific comments from Ellen White herself on d'Aubigné, in an article titled "Holiday Gifts":

For those who can procure it [d'Aubigné's *History of the Reformation*] will be both interesting and profitable. From this work we may gain some knowledge of what has been accomplished in the past in the great work of reform. We can see how God poured light into the minds of those who searched his word, how much the men ordained and sent forth by him were willing to suffer for the truth's sake, and how hard it is for the great mass of mankind to renounce their errors and to receive and obey the teachings of the Scriptures. During the winter evenings, when our children

were young, we read from this history with the deepest interest. We made it a practice to read instructive and interesting books, with the Bible, in the family circle, and our children were always happy as we thus entertained them.¹⁷

REFERENCES

- 1 William S. Peterson, Ellen White's literary indebtedness, *SPECTRUM* (Autumn 1971), p. 78.
 - 2 Peterson, A textual and historical study of Ellen G. White's account of the French Revolution, *SPECTRUM* (Autumn 1970), pp. 57-69.
 - 3 Peterson, *SPECTRUM* (Autumn 1970), p. 63.
 - 4 Peterson, *SPECTRUM* (Autumn 1970), p. 62.
 - 5 The work of revision should not, of course, be limited to 1885.
 - 6 Peterson, *SPECTRUM* (Autumn 1970), pp. 63-64.
 - 7 Uriah Smith, *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Daniel* (Battle Creek, Michigan: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association 1873). *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Books of Daniel and Revelation* (Battle Creek, Michigan: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1884). *The Prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1944).
- William C. White stated to the General Conference Council on October 30, 1911, that "much of the research for historical statements used in the new (1888) European and American editions of *The Great Controversy* was done in Basel, where we had access to Elder Andrews' large library, and where the translators had access to the university libraries." (*Notes and Papers Concerning Ellen G. White and the Spirit of Prophecy*, fifth edition (Washington, D. C.: Ellen G. White Publications 1971), p. 127. This statement must be emended by the internal evidence provided by *The Great Controversy* itself. It is obvious that neither the translators nor Ellen White felt any need of using these sources to any extent for this particular chapter. Further research is under way on the composition of the remainder of the historical sections of *The Great Controversy*.
- 8 Peterson, *SPECTRUM* (Autumn 1970), p. 66.
Peterson, Comments on Peterson study (Peterson's reply), *SPECTRUM* (Spring 1971), p. 71.
 - 9 Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1937), p. 274.
 - 10 Peterson, *SPECTRUM* (Autumn 1970), p. 65.
 - 11 Smith, *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Daniel*, p. 320. Smith, *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Books of Daniel and Revelation*, p. 274. Smith, *The Prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation*, p. 285.
 - 12 E. G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 275.
 - 13 Peterson, *SPECTRUM* (Autumn 1970), p. 68, footnote 11.
 - 14 E. G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 277.
 - 15 John W. Wood, The Bible and the French Revolution, an answer, *SPECTRUM* (Autumn 1971), p. 62.
 - 16 Peterson, *SPECTRUM* (Autumn 1971), p. 83, footnote 1-b.
 - 17 E. G. White, Holiday gifts, *The Review and Herald* (December 26, 1882), p. 789.