

THE PROPHET OF DESTINY?

Three reviews of a book written for the general reader

ELLEN G. WHITE: PROPHET OF DESTINY

By Rene Noorbergen

New Canaan, Connecticut: Keats Publishing, Inc., 1972 241 pp \$6.95

INGEMAR LINDÉN

106

One must understand from the beginning that *Prophet of Destiny*, like two books produced earlier by the same author, does not belong in the class of scientific treatment, something which the author nowhere insists on. With its easy style and light argument, this work on Ellen G. White is characteristic of the kind of journalism intended for sensational effect.

In the first chapter, "Psychics Versus Prophets," the author seeks to point out the difference between a prophet of Mrs. White's type and the visionaries and interpreters of signs that were contemporary to her time. For Adventists who know her life and writings, this is really unnecessary. In truth, one feels less than happy to have Ellen White compared with occult prophets and personalities. An orderly historical background on Millerism and Adventism would have added perspective.

Perhaps the publishing time schedule did not permit the use of a basic work such as *The Burned Over District* (Whitney Cross), in which there is a good explanation of the unusual religious movements that arose in upper New York state in the middle of the nineteenth century. Mormonism, Shakerism, and Millerism flourished side by side in this part of the United States, not to mention the new occult movement known as spiritism. There must be some explanation as to why these movements arose in this particular territory, although by no means do I insist that a true faith such as Adventism can be explained by contemporary categories of belief.

Noorbergen asserts that psychic and occult movements were the seedbed for Adventism, a new and interesting point of view that in part could explain William Miller's success. "While the uncommitted masses leaned heavily on the psychic predictions of Nostradamus (for the French), St. Odile (for the Germans), and those of St. Bearcan and Fionn Mac Cumhail Ceninit (for the Irish), Captain Miller's warning led to a religious awakening that was unequalled in American history" (p. 13). The last part of the quotation presents a fallacy. In absolute numbers, Miller's awakening was small compared with the massive movement led by Charles Grandison Finney. On the other hand, Millerism *was* the most inclusive *adventist* awakening of the premillennial movements, that is, of such as held that the Second Advent of Christ must precede the millennium.

The author's treatment of Mrs. White's biography lacks historical perspective and sound interpretation and use of sources. For example, it would be useful to know the place of visionaries in the radical left wing of Methodism. Furthermore, the entire section on early

Adventism after the disappointment in October 1844 is not clear, since the author did not take time to analyze the theological situation in Miller's unorganized left wing — the "shut-door" people who failed to accept the Albany conference program of preaching and evaluation of the events of October 1844. If the author had continued to read the letter from which he quotes (p. 20 ff.), he would have come straight into the "shut-door" debate and the strong vocal feelings it aroused in James and Ellen White after the disappointment. As these events are presented, the author can assert that such manifestations took place only in other groups (p. 31 ff.). In essence, Noorbergen shows us an Ellen White who never committed a single error — a treatment that does not differ from earlier judgments by the church organization.

This unawareness of historical context also appears in the section on religious psychology, where, for example, the author makes no reference to the Roman Catholic church, in which visionaries have been common since the Middle Ages. Nor are modern works on terminology consulted. The author is content with repeating personal reports by such as were present, creating the impression that the "bodily manifestations" seen in Mrs. White in vision were peculiar to her.

In the chapter most open to dispute, "Science Catches Up with a Prophet," the author presents aspects of Mrs. White's invaluable medical-dietary contribution, but without telling his readers how her views in essential parts were also those of health reformers whom she knew and whose works she had read after she had received the first principles of healthful living in her vision of June 6, 1865. Such a procedure is misleading and ethically questionable. It would have been more fortunate had the author used Doris Eugene Robinson's *Story of Our Health Message* (chapter eight) and learned that much of Mrs. White's advice on health had been stated by contemporary advocates of healthful living! Men like Sylvester Graham, Larkin B. Coles, and James C. Jackson had taken up the subject before she became the great advocate of healthful living. Such an acknowledgment would not remove an iota from her contribution, for she was both selective and creative in her health message. Both Adventists and millions of persons of other persuasions have been blessed by the counsel found in her writings.

The author discusses the relation between the use of flesh food and cancer, for example. The idea that there is a disastrous relation was stated back in the 1840s by Coles, to mention but one American health reformer. Today one should be aware of two facts. First, the origins of the disease have not yet been fully settled by science; hence categorical generalizations must be avoided in serious discussion. Second, cancer is known not to be derived exclusively from flesh foods. When science has advanced further, it will become clear how far statements by health reformers can be checked scientifically. What is already astonishing is how the sum of Mrs. White's teaching on healthful living has been supported by scientific research. Again and again the young science of health has upheld her and the advocates of healthful living.

In another section of the same chapter, the author discusses the mental and prenatal influence of the mother during pregnancy, as taught by Mrs. White and other health advocates. One should not react negatively to the fact that some of these advocates held such views before she did, for in the autumn of 1867 she explained what happened. Affirming that she had received the main principles of her health message from "above" before studying the works on the subject which she had in her home, Mrs. White was surprised to find

that the views of other health reformers agreed with those shown her in vision. Then she copied a good many statements that were sound. Noorbergen's presentation passes over all this in silence.

Another interesting observation in the author's chapter on medicine is the emphasis given Mrs. White's mention of electric currents in the brain and their importance in life functions. The author's subtitle, "Electricity — the Vital Force," reminds us at once of mesmerism but fails to inform us that most all health reformers emphasized the importance of electricity in brain functions. This fact in no wise lessens the importance of Mrs. White's handling of the subject in her works.

It should also be noted that a fairly large part of the work will not be understood by European readers, since it deals with conditions in the United States, especially the section on Sunday-keeping and Sunday laws. In his eagerness to show that the statements in *The Great Controversy* are in process of fulfillment, the author fails to present the overall picture of religious liberty that now obtains in the United States, where little impinges on the liberty of a seventh-day Sabbath observer to practice his faith. Religious liberty is more widespread in the United States than it is in any country in the world, with the possible exception of Sweden since its separation of church and state. (Of course, there is no absolute guarantee that this condition could not change quickly.)

Prophet of Destiny must be considered a link in the series of sensational books on the occult that Noorbergen has produced. One must regret the fact that the Lord's messenger has been delineated against this ghostlike background. The work may appeal to readers who have been captured by astrology, interpreters of signs, and all types of mystic messages from the spirit world. Perhaps a few readers will be induced to read the work as a better alternative than the literature of the occult. But what will be the gain? This road will not lead to the green fields of the gospel.

To the average Adventist reader, *Prophet of Destiny* will seem a sensational amputation of a sound prophet. In this volume there is little that portrays the orthodox, evangelical Ellen White. Here is where her strength lies. She herself was fascinated by Jesus of Nazareth and found rich wisdom and experience in his saving work and life.

What is called for is an honest, rational treatment of the genuine Ellen G. White, who had nothing in common with her contemporary visionaries and sign readers. Less sensational and more factual treatment would have resulted in a different picture of this woman who was the devoted disciple of Jesus the Christ. When may we expect such a treatment?

(Translation by William M. Landeen. EDITOR.)

NORVAL F. PEASE

Noorbergen's attempt to interpret Ellen White to the general public is a laudable venture. There are few criteria by which to evaluate an endeavor of this kind, because it has never been done before. Most readers will agree, however, that the author has mastered his subject well, that he has successfully projected an image of Ellen White as a gentle but very effective

prophetic voice, and that his style is readable. He avoids the pitfall of phony objectivity and puts his convictions on the line with clarity and decisiveness.

Although I appreciate Noorbergen's significant work, I would like to call attention to two areas in which . . . this book might have been strengthened. These suggestions are made humbly [in recognition of] the danger that every reviewer faces of becoming a "Monday morning quarterback."

First, Noorbergen almost completely overlooks Ellen White's leading theme — salvation through the grace of God and faith in Christ. (One exception to this generalization is found on pages 136-138.) Several of her books — notably *The Desire of Ages*, *Steps to Christ*, *Christ's Object Lessons*, and *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* — are largely devoted to this theme; yet the footnotes in Noorbergen's book do not include a single reference to any of these volumes. In the "tests of a true prophet" listed on pages 20-21 there is nothing specific about the gospel of salvation except a recognition of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Some of us are deeply convinced that Mrs. White should be presented to the world not merely as a successful predictor of events, not merely as an advocate of healthful living, not merely as a foe of spiritism and a friend of the Sabbath, *but as one of the most convincing preachers of Christ and his gospel of all time.*

Second, it seems that Noorbergen has not always been wise in his selection of material. Obviously, and rightly, the author is endeavoring to present evidence that will convince the contemporary reader that Ellen White was a genuine prophet of God. The effectiveness of this effort at persuasion will depend in part on the ability of the reader to understand and accept the arguments put forth in the book. To belabor the point that rigorous persecution of Sabbath-keepers is just around the corner in America seems so incredible to the average reader that he might be led to reject the entire book. Also, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century signs of the Second Coming of Jesus are not nearly as convincing as twentieth-century signs, of which there are plenty. The final chapter contains more than twenty-five pages of direct quotation from *The Great Controversy*, much of which is incomprehensible to the modern mind. The predictions regarding the San Francisco earthquake also seem to occupy more prominence than they deserve.

This is not to say that the author or Ellen White were incorrect in the areas listed above. Neither should we conclude that these subjects are unimportant. But in reaching people, every successful persuader begins with those things that are more easily understood and accepted. Some of us have hoped that the Noorbergen volume could be handed freely to our non-Adventist friends as a convincing presentation of an important tenet of the Adventist faith. In some respects the book is suited for this purpose. But some of the areas covered are likely to "turn off" the average reader before he really understands the issues.

This review should close on a positive note. Chapter four, "Science Catches Up with a Prophet," seems convincing and well-documented, although a more reliable evaluation should come from those trained in science and medicine. As a writer of biography, Noorbergen reveals great ability. His book will be valuable as enrichment reading for people who are already convinced that Ellen White had the prophetic gift. More important, the author has succeeded well in lifting Ellen White above the level of the ordinary psychic.

(Reprinted, with permission, from the June 27, 1972, issue of the Loma Linda *Pulse*. EDITOR.)

A journalist who has written *You Are Psychic*, David N. Bubar's story, and has coauthored with Jeane Dixon *My Life and Prophecies*, Noorbergen has not written a definitive biography of Ellen G. White. Instead, he has evaluated her prophetic career in the narrow sense of its relation to the occult world, both past and present. With an undisguised Seventh-day Adventist bias, Noorbergen disparages parapsychological phenomena in juxtaposition to biblical prophetism, in which he places Mrs. White (chapter one, "Psychics Versus Prophets"). Emphasizing the psychic aspect that Mrs. White herself underplayed, Noorbergen concludes that the "true prophet" is "someone who has no degree of freedom either in tuning in or controlling the prophetic impulses or prophetic recall." These impulses, he says, "are superimposed over the prophet's conscious mind by a supernatural personal being, having absolute knowledge of both past and future, making no allowance for error or human miscalculation" (p. 21). By assuming such an interpretative model, Noorbergen need not reckon with the cultural, social, political, or economic ambience of the prophet; he concentrates on the personal, moral, spiritual, and psychic. Thus his book fails as a *historical* biography.

The author devotes only a chapter to the biographical data of Mrs. White's nearly eighty-eight years (chapter two, "A Humble Life") — but, then, a chapter to the physical and psychic elements of her prophetic visions (chapter three, "The Enlightened Prophet"), and another chapter to her predictions on medicine, nutrition, hygiene, and ecology (chapter four, "Science Catches Up with a Prophet"). Noorbergen seems unaware that "health reform" in America was over a quarter of a century old by the time of her Otsego, Michigan, vision in 1863 and fails to recognize that Ellen White's eclectic facility must not be confused with originality. The fact that the prophetic comment on spiritualism (chapter five, "Unmasking the Mastermind") came after the spiritualists of 1870 numbered 11 million adepts in America must devalue Noorbergen's statement that "in her time it was a prophecy; yet today it is history" (p. 156). A similar point should be made on Mrs. White's concern with civil and religious intolerance (chapter six, "A Two-Pronged Controversy"), inasmuch as the 1880s were a peak period for American sabbatarianism and "blue-law" prejudice.

Although Ellen White's work was not derivative alone, it cannot be understood in isolation from late nineteenth-century concerns. The prophet cannot be understood apart from her people either. Noorbergen identifies her as a charismatic leader who (unlike the psychic) shapes, edifies, and counsels a community. Yet he does not explore Mrs. White's relationship to developing Seventh-day Adventism.

The author does provide a very readable glimpse into the mind of the Adventist prophet. But we are still awaiting a full-fledged biography of this inimitable woman.