

ELLEN WHITE AND HEALTH

I. The Prophet and Her Contemporaries

Review by W. Frederick Norwood

Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White
by Ronald L. Numbers
Harper and Row, 271 pp., \$10.00

The lead article in the April 1976 number of SPECTRUM, written by Gary Land, offers some wisdom for this review. Land draws a distinction between the work of a historian and that of a theologian or theologian of history. "The historian," he declares, "interprets history at a different level than the theologian." He then quotes from Richard H. Bube, *The Human Quest: A New Look at Science and the Christian Faith*: "There are many levels at which a given situation can be described. An exhaustive description on one level does not preclude meaningful descriptions on other levels."

It should therefore be apparent, Land writes, that when a historian interprets the actions of

William Frederick Norwood, retired professor of medical history at Loma Linda University, is at work on a book about military medicine during the Civil War.

persons in terms of the documentary evidence and the critical method "he does not thereby invalidate theological statements about their action." Land concedes that the historian and the theologian can be the same person; still, he "should make clear both to himself and to his audience the role he is playing."

Ronald Numbers, who took a doctorate in the history of science at the University of California at Berkeley, has done precisely this in his study of Ellen White. His first intention, he writes, was "to look at Mrs. White's major writings within the context of nineteenth-century health reform." He states that he has refrained from using "the concept of divine inspiration as an historical explanation," thereby clearly distinguishing his work from that of the apologist. But this does not preclude description of Ellen White at another level, that of inspiration. As Numbers himself recently said before a large audience at the San Bernardino County Museum:

I do not think that Ellen White was a pious fraud. I make no judgment regarding her inspiration, but I am not saying that Ellen

White was not inspired. This is a decision that each person must make on the basis of faith.

Numbers had two main objectives in his research: one, to discover whatever relationship, if any, existed between Ellen White's writings on health and the publications of her contemporary writers in the field of health reform. Two, to find out to what extent, if any, Ellen White modified or changed her health reform views between 1863 and her late years.

Although Mrs. White had some visions prior to 1863 that touched on limited aspects of health reform, the theme of this book revolves around the comprehensive revelation of health reform given her on Friday evening, June 5, 1863, in the home of Aaron Hilliard, near Otsego, Michigan. She had subsequent visions touching on health reform but the June 5, 1863 vision brought her the information on which she based her health writings. First published as "Health," a 32-page chapter in Volume 4 of *Spiritual Gifts* in 1864, it became the central core of the health reform message, though it was not as comprehensive as the very busy writer would have liked to make it.

In his book, Numbers notes similarities between her chapter on health and the writings of several reformers. Yet, when Adventists to whom she lectured on health in 1863 inquired if she had read *Laws of Life*, the *Water-Cure Journal* or the writings of Doctors James C. Jackson and R. T. Trall, she replied that she had not and would not until she had fully written out her views and attributed all her knowledge to her visions. She had, however, read Jackson's essay on the treatment of diphtheria, which opened with a very brief general presentation of the principles of healthful living. Also, she must have had access to the series of health reform papers which her editor husband reprinted in the *Review* prior to June 1863.

Perhaps Ellen White's denial only meant that she had not yet made any real study of the subject. Or possibly in her effort to rule out any and all influences apart from the vision as she wrote her account, her memory played a trick on her as memories are prone to do. It seems very probable that James White, who edited his wife's manuscripts in their earlier years, became very familiar with health reform literature and the language of the writers. He familiarized himself with the literature before she did and

naturally adopted some of the vocabulary and physiological expressions which he found more clearly descriptive than his and Ellen's ordinary lay language. From Numbers' own language, I conclude that he does not and has never believed Ellen White guilty of deliberate misrepresentation. How much James modified Ellen's prose without distorting her meaning in the six essays in *How to Live* (1865) can be contemplated but not fully known.

There is no doubt that Ellen herself in time became well acquainted with the principal writings of leading health reformers. She did not live in a vacuum. She must have habitually compared what she read with what she had been shown to keep her message clear and free from spurious concepts.

That Mrs. White was in many respects a very practical reformer was demonstrated in the decades of the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s during which some of her ideas were modified. Because of extensive traveling, she found it wise to depart from rigid dietary restrictions in order to maintain herself on the less than ideal food that was available. At any rate, as Numbers probably discovered, one who has difficulty living up to a regimen is not so likely to emphasize it as much as when happily living by it.

Another variation in her views had to do with dress reform. When Ellen White endorsed and recommended such a reform, the sisters of the church were divided, some dutifully adopting it while others rebelled against it. She had suggested at one time a skirt two or three inches above the heel; at another two inches below the boot-top. Some concerned sisters could not accept both instructions as inspired, failing to appreciate the few inches of latitude as an opportunity to express one's taste. Rather than let her testimony be dragged through a degrading turmoil, Ellen White urged that the entire subject be abandoned, and it was.

In her earlier writings she spoke of "poisonous miasmas" coming from unkempt premises producing fever, argue, sore throat, lung diseases and fevers; she also wrote of "cancerous tumors" found in flesh foods, causing various diseases including cancer. Later, she adopted the term "germ." Meanwhile, the germ theory had been confirmed in Europe and reported in America. That she chose to keep up with medical progress is highly complimentary of her

sense of duty. Her reasons for avoiding flesh foods also were modified.

In a way, it is not strange that Ellen White in 1849 condemned consultation with physicians. Faith healing was at that time her only recommendation. American medicine was in the 1850s at its lowest ebb in quality and Mrs. White seemed to know it. But, by the 1860s, she was articulating a new view, declaring that “some have carried this matter [the prayer of faith] too far, especially those who have been affected with fanaticism.”

Mrs. White’s first published book on health, *An Appeal to Mothers*, was a forceful assault on social impurity with the focus on the baleful effects of masturbation and marital sexual excesses. In it she quoted extensively from contemporary reformers who, along with her, emphasized F. J. V. Broussais’s “vital force” theory. Thereafter, she wrote less and less about sex until her *Ministry of Healing* (1905) was silent on the subject. J. H. Kellogg supplied the lack in his publications.

In *Prophetess of Health*, Numbers also describes the early history of Adventist medical

institutions, including the relationship between church leadership and Dr. J. H. Kellogg. In his discussion of the beginnings of the medical school at Loma Linda, he unfortunately fails to mention the name of Newton Evans, a distinguished pathologist who, more than anyone else, stimulated the faculty of the new school to emphasize scientific character in their work.

It is rumored that this book will be disturbing, even upsetting to many Adventist readers. I would suggest that the book need be disturbing only to those who have come to exalt Ellen White to a pedestal of inerrancy or infallibility, a position she did not claim for herself or even for the Bible writers.

I note in closing that Numbers utilized some of the most competent medical historians in his description of the state of American society and the delineation of the health reform movement in the nineteenth century, particularly Richard Shyrock and John Blake. It is hoped that he will be judged by his performance as a historian of medicine. The author’s thoughtful treatment of this delicate subject may mark the beginning of a new approach to Adventist history.

II. A Biased, Disappointing Book

Review by the Staff of the Ellen G. White Estate

Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White, while skillfully written and profusely documented, comes far short of the promise of its broad title. Rather than presenting a full portrayal of Ellen White’s participation in the successful development of the health work of Seventh-day Adventists, the book focuses on limited and sometimes relatively insignificant experiences and episodes. By failing to cite many of the relevant facts in connection with the history which is recounted, the author has

The office of the Ellen G. White Estate is at the headquarters of the General Conference in Washington, D.C.

developed his account in such a way as to put Ellen White in an unflattering light and often portrays the views she advocated as ridiculous and having their origins in the teachings of contemporary health reformers.

Throughout its history, the Seventh-day Adventist church has accepted the proposition that Ellen G. White served as a prophetic messenger through whom God communicated His will, counseled and instructed its members, and guided its activities, and in many instances, as in the case of the health work, initiated them.

George I. Butler, longtime president of the General Conference, observed concerning the visions of Ellen White: