

Faith, History and Ellen White

Review by Gary Land

The Staff of the Ellen G. White Estate, *A Critique of the Book Prophetess of Health* (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1976), 127 pp., Appendix, Index.

Ronald L. Numbers' *Prophetess of Health* has prompted more debate, both before and after publication, than any recent book touching Adventism. Part of this discussion appeared in SPECTRUM (January 1977). Of the Adventist historians writing there, Richard Schwarz was uncomfortable with Numbers' naturalistic methodology, although at the same time he stated that the volume should lead the reader to a thoughtful and prayerful reconsideration of Ellen White. W. Frederick Norwood, on the other hand, endorsed Numbers' approach, arguing that his findings need not disturb Adventist readers.

The White Estate has carried on another part of the argument. Through public presentations and a small document, "A Discussion and Review of *Prophetess of Health*," part of which appeared in SPECTRUM, it took issue with Numbers. An expanded and fully documented expression of the Estate's viewpoint appeared late in 1976 as *A Critique of the*

Book Prophetess of Health, a publication largely including the material earlier presented to Numbers when the Estate was encouraging him to revise his manuscript. The *Critique's* appearance in print offers the opportunity for a serious reexamination of the issues involved, particularly the philosophical questions regarding the relationship of faith to history.

Reviewing this document is not easy. The *Critique* is tedious, necessitating close analysis and continual reference back to *Prophetess of Health*. Besides, the subject itself makes intellectual honesty difficult. For a denominational employee, whose job may depend on adhering to orthodoxy, the problem is doubly complicated.

Nevertheless, an evaluation must be made. The *Critique* represents the denomination's major response to Numbers' book and was sent free to all theology and history teachers in the church's colleges and universities in the United States. Furthermore, the *Critique* represents what is probably one of the most thorough examinations of any historical work written. And because it seeks to correct the inaccurate and distorted view of Ellen White that allegedly appears in *Prophetess of Health*, it lays claim to our attention.

The first seven chapters discuss a variety of topics: whether Ellen White learned the health teachings in her 1863 vision from God, as she claimed, or from her intellectual environment, as Numbers argues; the veracity of

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several hostile witnesses, none of whom plays a major role in the remainder of *Critique*; the omission of additional evidence, called “missing exhibits,” that would have presented a more balanced view; the work of a prophet; the problem of plagiarism; and the denomination’s involvement in the book’s preparation. Finally, the Estate regards *Prophetess of Health* as significant because “it will no doubt be used by some to undermine confidence in the work of Ellen White” (32). A chapter-by-chapter critique and several appendices follow this introductory material. According to the Estate, the *Critique* equals the text of a 300-page book.

The Estate identifies the question of whether Ellen White’s health teachings originated with earthly sources or the Lord as the crux of the issue (11). This argument presupposes that any attempt to identify a causal relationship between White’s ideas and her environment is necessarily a challenge to belief in her inspiration. As a result, the Estate seeks to place as much distance between itself and Numbers as possible. Much of this is unnecessary, however, for as I have sought to explain elsewhere¹, historical and theological explanations of phenomena do not exclude one another. Rather, they are complementary levels of analysis, both necessary to full understanding.

In its critical approach, however, the Estate addresses the questions at hand on the basis of evidence. In doing so, it presents additional information on several issues that helps fill out and balance the accounts that Numbers gives. It makes clear that financial circumstances played a major role, perhaps the only one, in James White’s departure as editor of the *Review* in 1855 and that his speculations during the Civil War were not crass profiteering. Developments at the Western Health Reform Institute in the late 1860s and Ellen White’s attitude toward the institution also receive a more detailed description that increases our understanding of the situation. And the Estate shows that Ellen White ate more than vermicelli-tomato soup and thistle greens during her later years. The *Critique* also reprints valuable source mate-

rial, including letters of Ellen White and her *Appeal to Mothers*. All of these make more widely available necessary information.

But in its effort to distinguish its viewpoint from Numbers’, the Estate exaggerates the differences in a number of cases. For example, it objects to Numbers’ observation that Ellen White was an exile among her people in the mid-1850s, but then states that her ministry was so little appreciated at that time that she was ready to quit (39-40). In another place, the Estate criticizes Numbers’ statement that Ellen White revised Harriet Aus-

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tin’s costume to “accord perfectly” with what she had seen in vision, but then admits that “the Dansville experience helped her to implement them [the dress reform principles]” (65). Finally, the Estate argues that there is no evidence to support Numbers’ claim that Ellen White’s public visions occurred less frequently after menopause, but then states that there was a “gradual shift” from public visions to night dreams (85-86). In this case, the Estate, out of its concern to deny any relationship between her visions and menopause (an unprovable argument that Numbers mentions but does not himself make), flatly contradicts Numbers and yet a few lines farther on, backtracks without apparently realizing it. This pattern appears elsewhere in the *Critique*², with the Estate substituting milder language than Numbers’ but seldom differing in substance.

Even when the differences between the Estate and Numbers are substantial, the Estate’s arguments are often unpersuasive. Although the Estate rejects the inerrancy view of inspiration (116-117), its criticisms often appear to be based on such a concept. It seems to regard virtually any implication that Ellen White was wrong or did not live up to what she had been shown as a threat to her inspiration and authority. Therefore, it often goes to considerable lengths to deny what a broader view of

inspiration could accept with little or no trouble. Ellen White herself stressed that while the Bible is written by inspired men, the words are neither inspired nor perfect. Nevertheless she stated they contain a spiritual unity.³ The Estate, however, does not take this approach. A few examples will illustrate:

- 1) It cannot accept Numbers' interpretation of Ellen White's statement, "Let us not dishonor God by applying to earthly physicians," as meaning Adventists should never go to doctors. While Numbers' reading of the phrase seems historically sound, the Estate casts around for several paragraphs seeking contrary evidence, which it recognizes as weak. Finally, it asks, "Could it be that the statements imperfectly expressed her views?" and expresses the wish that it had more facts (42-44).
- 2) The Estate, seeking to remove Ellen White from the controversy surrounding dress reform at the Western Health Reform Institute, argues that physicians there did not promote the reform dress on the basis of God's command, as Numbers states (67). Ellen White, however, wrote in 1867, "The physicians having full confidence in my testimonies, stated to them [opposers of dress reform] that the style of dress they recommended for their patients was the same as I had seen would be adopted by our people" (96).
- 3) Concerned with the implication that Ellen White did not always live up to what she had seen in vision, the Estate says that Numbers errs when he describes Ellen White as postponing wearing of the reform dress "month after month." It bases its argument on the fact that she wrote publicly about the dress for the first time in June 1865, and wore it the following September. In so arguing, the Estate minimizes the significance of the facts that she had her vision on the dress in June 1863 and committed herself to it in a letter in September 1864, both of which lend credence to Numbers' view (67, 109).
- 4) An interest in protecting Ellen White from the alleged influence of wrong ideas leads the Estate to downplay, beyond what the facts support, her relationship to phrenology. The Estate emphasizes that Ellen White took her sons for physical examinations in 1864 that *happened* to include phrenological analysis (55-56, 70). But Numbers' description of this episode as involving "head readings and physical examinations" seems an accurate enough description of what took place. In reporting the examinations to friends, Ellen White spoke almost exclusively of the phrenological parts, and with enthusiasm (55, 109). In another place, it is true, as the Estate points out, that Numbers supplies the word "bumps" when Ellen White described her husband by saying that "his cautiousness, conscientiousness and benevolence, have been large and active. . ." (70), but her phrase certainly sounds phrenological. Although Ellen White was no phrenologist, it is clear that she was temporarily interested in phrenology and that it affected some of her writing.
- 5) One of the most important — at least talked about — of the differences between the Estate and Numbers is Ellen White's *Appeal to Mothers*. Again seeking to protect Ellen White from the claim that she taught wrong ideas, the Estate argues that the phrase "sins and crimes, and the violation of nature's laws, were shown me as the cause of this accumulation of human woe and suffering," which Numbers does not include in his quotation on masturbation, indicates that other causes besides masturbation were behind the deformities she had seen. Although in other writings Ellen White viewed intemperance and drugs as also causing these problems, in *Appeal to Mothers*, masturbation is clearly the cause she had in mind, as Numbers states. For one thing, the entire pamphlet is about masturbation. Then, in the following two paragraphs after the disputed statement, she identifies the "violation of

nature's laws" as "self-indulgence" (104). In the same paragraph where the disputed statement appears, she refers to "a second great burden" which doctors add to the first — masturbation. She later identifies the practice as a sin (105) and connects it with an "imbecile influence" (106). Except for the word "crimes," which is nowhere explained, all of the words in the omitted phrase are used in connection with masturbation throughout the pamphlet. Numbers' "significant omission" really changes nothing.

The foregoing have been examples of how the White Estate's adoption in practice, although not in theory, of the inerrancy approach to inspiration has led it to make arguments that do not fit the facts. Its real concern on these points is probably not so much in protecting Ellen White's inspiration as it is in maintaining her authority. Implicit in its approach seems to be the belief that if Ellen White is shown to be wrong on one subject there is no limit to the erosion of her authority on other subjects as well. The problem deserves discussion and Joseph Battistone's emphasis upon the homiletic nature of Ellen White's writings may offer a means of reconciling the demands of faith and history.⁴

But beneath authority lies the question of inspiration which, as previously indicated, the Estate believes to be the crux of the issue, for it assumes if one can find environmental sources of Ellen White's teachings then she cannot be inspired. This presupposition, similar to the "God of the gaps" approach which Christian scientists have for some time rejected, again forces the Estate to deny very strong evidence. The effort is unnecessary if one regards history and theology as complementary rather than opposing explanations.

To begin with, the Estate objects to Numbers' description of Adventists as possessing "the main outlines of the health reform message" by 1863 (48). The *Random House Dictionary* defines "outlines" as "the essential features or main aspects of something under discussion," an accurate description of health reform knowledge among Adventists in the

early 1860s. Joseph Bates, like Sylvester Graham himself, avoided alcoholic beverages, tobacco, tea and coffee, meat, butter, cheese, pies and cakes. John Loughborough adopted graham bread and cold water treatments, the latter also being accepted by the Kellogg and Andrews families. By mid-1863, the *Review* had published material on dress reform, vegetarianism and the two-meal-a-day plan. Evidence that these ideas circulated more widely among Adventists is Ellen White's statement that when she published information from her visions some Adventists asked if she had been reading other health reformers (95).

The White Estate recognizes these facts but, emphasizing their fragmentary nature, views them as unimportant. The significant point, however, is that Ellen White lived in an environment where health reform was being discussed — even if to a limited extent. The individuals named above were not obscure Adventists but prominent people with whom she had direct contact. And it is surely likely that she read the material published in the *Review*. Furthermore, the very ideas she later espoused on the basis of vision were those circulating within Adventism prior to 1863. Although one cannot *prove* that Ellen White's ideas came from these sources, a historian with no prior commitment to establishing Ellen White's independence would have excellent grounds for concluding that her environment was the source of her ideas.

There is another line of evidence, however, that both Numbers and the Estate overlook. Ellen White's visions, particularly those on doctrine, had always followed a pattern of appearing *after* an issue was discussed, either confirming a position already taken or identifying one of several debated opinions as the correct one.⁵ If Ellen White's 1863 vision was independent of her environment, it departed from the pattern that her visions had already established. In light of the above evidence, such a departure is extremely unlikely.

One reason the White Estate insists that Ellen White's ideas came independently of her environment is her own claim that she

was not dependent upon men. However, Richard Schwarz, in a preface to the *Critique* entitled "On Reading and Writing History," suggests that Ellen White may simply have been resorting to literary hyperbole in denying that her health teachings were derived from others (9). Schwarz's observation fits the facts much better than does the White Estate argument.

Because the Estate believes that Ellen White's ideas must have come from *either* God *or* man, it cannot accept anything but a supernaturalist approach to Ellen White. In his postscript, W. P. Bradley implies that *Prophetess of Health* is a secular attack upon the work of Ellen White (93). And the Estate writes, "If divine inspiration is excluded *a priori*, then one is left with nothing but a secularist-historicist interpretation of Ellen White's life and with the implicit denial of the validity of truthfulness of her claim to divine inspiration (10)."

One member of the Estate's staff has told me that this latter statement was intended to mean that if one is not open to the possibility of inspiration at the beginning of a study of Ellen White, then there is no possibility of concluding that she was inspired. If that is the meaning, then I have no disagreement, but if it means that one must assume inspiration at the start, an assumption that seems to lie behind at least parts of this multiauthored publication, there is no way of determining who is inspired and who is not. The claims of Ann Lee, Joseph Smith and Mary Baker Eddy, then, become equal to Ellen White, if one must assume inspiration in studying the individual who is claiming to be so inspired. One must be open to the possibility of inspiration but belief in it as a fact can only be a

conclusion, though a conclusion based on more than historical evidence.

Nor, as I have stated above, is there necessarily a conflict between explanations that do not rely on the supernatural and those that do. The real question is whether the non-supernatural interpretation gives an exhaustive account of the phenomena being studied, *i.e.* "is that all there is to say about it?" That is the point at which theology enters and where the debate about the supernatural begins. To say that Ellen White's ideas were influenced by her environment is only a problem to the Adventist when one believes either that they have no significance beyond that influence or that inspired ideas cannot be so influenced. In reality, theology and history are different levels of interpretation of the same phenomena, each with its own evidential grounds. A full understanding of Ellen White among Adventists must involve a dialogue between the historian and theologian.

Such an approach is necessary, for the sort of evidence that Numbers has found in Ellen White's teaching on health reform has also been discovered by other scholars in her writings on history, literature, science, education and social attitudes. Although these discoveries may require a reexamination of our understanding of inspiration and authority, the issues basic to all of these discussions, they also indicate that Ellen White did not simply borrow from her contemporaries. She molded the material into an Adventist pattern. As the Estate writes, "The outstanding contribution of the vision was that its instruction was presented as a part of religious duty, not merely as interesting ideas on health" (13). Perhaps it is at this point, rather than on the sources, development or even validity of her ideas, that history and theology meet.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Gary Land, "Providence and Earthly Affairs: The Christian and the Study of History," *SPECTRUM*, April, 1976, pp.2-6.

2. Compare Numbers' accounts with the White Estate on the following: White's enthusiasm for health reform (57), Ellen White and the reputation of Western Health Reform Institute (62-63), discussion of different styles of dress at Dansville (68), extremism and Ellen White (74-75), use of domestic wine (77), Ellen White's eating of meat (78-79), Ellen White's

reluctance to pray for the sick (86).

3. *Selected Messages from the Writings of Ellen G. White* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1958), I, 19-22.

4. "Ellen White's Authority as Bible Commentator," *SPECTRUM*, January 1977, pp. 37-40.

5. See Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: Messenger to the Remnant* (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1959), pp. 34-37.