

GC Committee Studies

Ellen White's Sources

by Douglas Hackleman

On an otherwise ordinary February morning in Takoma Park, Neal C. Wilson, president of the General Conference, called the available members of the General Conference Committee to a special meeting to listen to a report by six members, plus two unofficial observers, of an *ad hoc* committee that had convened in Glendale, California, two weeks before (January 28-29). Wilson had appointed the committee to hear Elder Walter Rea, pastor of the Long Beach, California, Seventh-day Adventist Church, present the results of several years' research in the writings of Ellen White, specifically on her use of literary sources.

The eight-person report was informal but significant — and perhaps historic — because of its theological and practical implications for the church. As speaker after speaker related his observations, impressions and reflections, three points became unmistakably clear. In the first place, the amount of evident borrowing — including facts, ideas and

wording — in the Ellen White writings is much greater than has been generally recognized by the church. In the second place, the church must come to terms with this fact; it will be impossible to ignore it or evade it, and it would be undesirable to try. And therefore, in the third place, the church should undertake a major program of education (or re-education) regarding the way(s) in which the Ellen White books were produced.

The account of the two-day session in Glendale began with the comments of G. Ralph Thompson, a General Conference vice president, who had been chairman of the *ad hoc* committee and who told his Takoma Park colleagues that many Adventists have used Ellen White wrongly, and that a “verbal inerrancy” view of inspiration is untenable. The report was concluded an hour and a half later by Robert Olson, secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate, who as the secretary of the *ad hoc* committee had prepared its unanimous formal recommendations to the administrative leadership of the church.

The other committee members who made additional comments were Fred Harder, executive secretary of the General Conference Board of Higher Education; Richard Leshner, director of the Biblical Research In-

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stitute; William Johnsson, associate dean of the theological seminary at Andrews University; and Herbert Douglass, book editor of the Pacific Press Publishing Association. The observers were Ron Graybill, assistant secretary of the White Estate; and Fred Veltman, chairman of the department of religion at Pacific Union College.

The comments were even-handed and candid, both about the proceedings in Glendale and about their significance. And they were in substantial agreement that in spite of various problems of organization and scholarship, the materials collected and presented by Elder Rea conclusively demonstrated Ellen White's extensive use of literary sources.

Who is Walter Rea, and what specifically has his extensive research shown? Described in a letter by Elder Wilson as one who "has been a strong promoter of the blessing that comes to each of us. . . [through] the ministry of Ellen White," Pastor Rea has had a deep

appreciation for Ellen White's writings since his youth, when he compiled and published three exhaustive volumes of Mrs. White's quotations, one about Daniel and Revelation, the others on Old and New Testament personages.¹ In the last few years, however, Elder Rea has been finding widespread paraphrasing from other nineteenth century writers throughout Mrs. White's writings, a situation which, President Wilson continued in his letter, "is not entirely new to us as a people, because Ellen White herself acknowledges that she used various sources. She used descriptive, biographical, historical, spiritual and scientific information from other authors. We have never emphasized this fact, but neither has this been something we have tried to cover up." Rea, however, had discovered far more unacknowledged than acknowledged borrowing, and felt, as Wilson wrote, "that the degree of borrowed material and literary dependency is of alarming proportions."

JOHN HARRIS, D.D.

THE GREAT TEACHER: 1842 158-60 His Originality

But the church of Christ, enfeebled and defective as it may be, is that only object on earth on which he bestows his supreme regard.

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. . . stimulated by implacable hatred against God, he no sooner found our world created, than he came to efface from it the image of God, and to stamp his own on its breast. . . . Unable to expel God from his throne, and thus succeed to the homage of man, he had, by a universal system of idolatry, planted his throne between the human worshipper and the Divine Being, intercepting and appropriating the adoration which belonged to God alone.

32 His Authority

His name was to be their watchword, their badge of distinction, the principle of their piety, the bond of their union, the end of their action, the authority of their conduct, and the source of their success. Nothing was to be recognized or received in his kingdom which did not bear the superscription of his name. . . .

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. . . in perfect harmony with our free volitions, can so identify it with our thoughts and aims, so blend it with the stream and current of our consciousness, that in yielding obedience to his word we are only obeying the actings and impulses of our own minds.

ELLEN G. WHITE

TO MINISTERS AND WORKERS 15-17 The Object of His Supreme Regard

I testify to my brethren and sisters that the church of Christ, enfeebled and defective as it may be, is the only object on earth on which He bestows His supreme regard.

SDA BIBLE COMMENTARY, Volume 6 1119 Ellen White Comment—Ephesians

No sooner was man created than Satan resolved to efface in him the image of God, and to place his stamp where God's should be. . . . He desired to usurp the throne of God. Failing in this, he has worked in darkness, in crookedness, in deception, to usurp his place in the hearts of men. He has set up his throne between God and man, to appropriate the adoration that belongs to God alone (MS 33, 1911).

THE DESIRE OF AGES 826 Go Teach All Nations

Christ's name is their watchword, their badge of distinction, their bond of union, the authority for their course of action, and the source of their success. Nothing that does not bear His superscription is to be recognized in His kingdom.

668 Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled

All true obedience comes from the heart. It was heart work with Christ. And if we consent, He will so identify Himself with our thoughts and aims, so blend our hearts and minds into conformity to His will, that when obeying Him we shall be but carrying out our own impulses.

Elder Wilson noted in his letter, “We have had several scholarly studies done by men such as Dr. Walter Specht and Elder Raymond Cottrell in connection with the book, *The Desire of Ages*.” Before returning to Elder Wilson’s letter to the Glendale committee of 17, we should look briefly at the conclusions of the Cottrell-Specht studies.

At the end of 1979, the two scholars completed their careful, scholarly comparisons of Ellen White’s *The Desire of Ages* with *The Life of Christ* by William Hanna, D. D., LL. D., published in 1863. Each took half of *The Desire of Ages* and compared it with Hanna’s *The Life of Christ* to establish the extent of literary dependency and came to similar conclusions. Dr. Specht announced “a small amount of actual literary dependence by Ellen White on the work of William Hanna.” Elder Cottrell discovered roughly 2.6 per-

cent literary indebtedness to Hanna. Specht and Cottrell, it must be remembered, compared White only with Hanna, whereas Rea has demonstrated the utilization of more than eight nineteenth-century authors in *The Desire of Ages*.

Cottrell, noticing the use — some credited, more uncredited — of various other authors in Ellen White’s books, deduced that “evidently, originality is not essential to inspiration.” It is the “grand theme that runs, unbroken, like the proverbial thread of gold, from the very first sentence in *The Desire of Ages*,” that for Cottrell “relegates attention to her use of these [other] authors to a simple matter of purely academic interest.”

One curious example of this “academic interest” is Cottrell’s claim that the first three chapters of the *The Desire of Ages* “have no parallel in Hanna; they are basically original with Ellen White.” He proceeds to quote a winsome passage from the first chapter of *The Desire of Ages* to explain Ellen White’s

JOHN HARRIS, D.D.
THE GREAT TEACHER: 1842
88 His Originality

The office of revealing and representing the character of the Deity was reserved for Him who had been from eternity in the bosom of the Father — the image of the invisible God.

71 His Originality

He came to demolish every wall of partition, to throw open every compartment in the temple of creation, that every worshipper might have free and equal access to the God of the temple.

110 His Originality

Justice moved from its high and awful position on Sinai; and, with all the armies of holiness, brightening and still brightening with complacency as it approached, bowed with reverence at the cross, and said, “It is enough.”

WILLIAM HANNA, D.D.LL.D.
THE LIFE OF CHRIST: 1863
34-35

How little did that Jewish priest, who took the infant Saviour and held him up before the altar, imagine that one greater than Moses, one greater than the temple, was in his arms. How little did he imagine, as he inscribed the new name of Jesus in the roll of the firstborn of Israel, that he was signing the death-warrant of the Mosaic economy.

ELLEN WHITE
THE MINISTRY OF HEALING
422 A True Knowledge of God

He who had been in the presence of the Father from the beginning, He who was the express image of the invisible God, was alone able to reveal the character of the Deity to mankind.

CHRIST’S OBJECT LESSONS
386 “Who Is My Neighbor?”

Christ came to demolish every wall of partition, to throw open every compartment of the temple, that every soul may have free access to God.

ADVENTIST COMMENTARY, Volume 7
936

Justice moved from its exalted throne, and with all the armies of heaven approached the cross. There it saw One equal with God bearing the penalty for all injustice and sin. With perfect satisfaction Justice bowed in reverence at the cross, saying, It is enough. (MS 94:1899)

THE DESIRE OF AGES
52 The Dedication

He did not think that this babe was He whose glory Moses had asked to see. But One greater than Moses lay in the priest’s arms; and when he enrolled the child’s name, he was enrolling the name of One who was the foundation of the whole Jewish economy. That name was to be its death warrant; . . .

purpose in writing: "He pitched His tent by the side of the tents of man, that He might dwell among us, and make us familiar with His Divine character and life" (p. 23). Interestingly, years before, in 1842, John Harris, D.D., had written in *The Great Teacher* (p. 90): "He came and set up His tabernacle in the midst of the human encampment, pitched His tent side by side with our tents, to attest the presence of God, to make us familiar with His character, and sensible of His love."

Dr. Specht, in his paper, makes much of the many instances where Hanna's extrabib-

lical speculations are paralleled by Ellen White but stated as fact. One example suffices: Hanna, describing the crucifixion scene and Jesus' cry, "I thirst," suggests that there "appears to have been [one] touched with momentary pity, *perhaps a Roman soldier*, . . . [who] took a stalk of hyssop" (*The Life of Christ*, p. 743). Ellen White seems certain: "*One of the Roman soldiers*, touched with pity, . . . took a sponge on a stalk of hyssop" (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 754f.).

Because of the Cottrell and Specht studies, President Wilson wrote: "We do not at this

DANIEL MARCH, D.D.

WALKS AND HOMES OF JESUS: 1867
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. . . We must consider more earnestly the shame and the glory, the life and the death, the justice and the mercy that so meet and harmonize in the cross.

WALKS AND HOMES OF JESUS: 1867
313

Nevertheless it will do us all good, frequently and solemnly to review the closing scenes in the Saviour's earthly life. Amid all the material and worldly passions, by which we are beset and tempted, we shall learn many salutary lessons, by going back in memory, and spending a thoughtful hour, in the endeavor to strengthen our faith and quicken our love at the foot of the cross. What then are the lessons which the divine passion, the infinite sacrifice, the true and redemptive cross of Christ is fitted to teach?

OUR FATHER'S HOUSE: 1871
254 The Fowls of the Air

. . . The eagle of the Alps is sometimes beaten down by the tempest into the narrow defiles of the mountains. The clouds in black and angry masses sweep between the mighty bird and the sunny heights where she builds her nests and basks in the full day. For a while she dashes to and fro, buffeting the storm with her strong wings and waking the echoes of the mountains with her wild cry, vainly endeavoring to find some way out of her dark and high-walled prison. At length she dashes upward with a scream of triumph into the midst of the black clouds, and in a moment she is above them in the calm sunshine, with the darkness and the tempest all beneath, the light of heaven shining in full blaze upon her conquering pinions, and her loved home on the lofty crag in full sight waiting to receive her. It is through the darkness that she rushes into the light. It is by a mighty effort to ascend that she leaves the clouds and the storms of earth beneath.

ELLEN WHITE

THE GREAT CONTROVERSY
651

. . . With our finite comprehension we may consider most earnestly the shame and the glory, the life and the death, the justice and the mercy, that meet in the cross; . . .

TESTIMONIES, Volume 4
374

It will do you good, and our ministers generally, to frequently review the closing scenes in the life of our Redeemer. Here, beset with temptations as He was, we may all learn lessons of the utmost importance to us. It would be well to spend a thoughtful hour each day reviewing the life of Christ from the manger to Calvary. We should take it point by point and let the imagination vividly grasp each scene, especially the closing ones of His earthly life. By thus contemplating His teachings and sufferings, and the infinite sacrifice made by Him for the redemption of the race, we may strengthen our faith, quicken our love, and become more deeply imbued with the spirit which sustained our Saviour.

MESSAGES TO YOUNG PEOPLE
102-103 The Fight of Faith

In her endeavors to reach her home, the eagle is often beaten down by the tempest to the narrow defiles of the mountains. The clouds, in black, angry masses sweep between her and the sunny heights where she secures her nest. For a while she seems bewildered, and dashes this way and that, beating her strong wings as if to sweep back the dense clouds. She awakens the doves of the mountains with her wild cry in her vain endeavors to find a way out of her prison. At last she dashes upward into the blackness, and gives a shrill scream of triumph as she emerges, a moment later, in the calm sunshine above. The darkness and tempest are all below her, and the light of heaven is shining about her. She reaches her loved home in the lofty crag, and is satisfied. It was through darkness that she reached the light. It cost her an effort to do this, but she is rewarded in gaining the object which she sought.

time feel that Elder Rea's alleged percentages of borrowed material in this specific book [*The Desire of Ages*] can be supported." Wilson continued candidly, "We do not really know, and I believe that we should know. I would like to be able to clearly face people, critics or friends, and say that we have looked at the evidence. . . . I have told Elder Rea that the burden of proof will be on him and that I have confidence in the committee that PREXAD (the President's Executive Advi-

“Rea presented parallels in . . . non-Adventist books for passages in many different works of Ellen White. He displayed a color-coded copy of *The Desire of Ages* showing parallels with six different non-Adventist books.”

sory Committee) has named to review his findings and evidence.”

Throughout 1979, the White Estate and Rea's Southern California Conference leadership felt he was overstating his findings. Rea, for his part, was concerned that the papers coming out of the White Estate, Arthur White's *Adventist Review* articles, the Cottrell-Specht papers (misleading to the extent that Hanna's *The Life of Christ* might be understood by readers to be the primary source of borrowing in the *The Desire of Ages*), and White Estate representatives on the lecture circuit, were all minimizing the extent of borrowing.

Rea's agitation led to a presentation of his findings at a Southern California Conference workers' meeting, a public presentation at his own Long Beach pastorate (both available on tape),² and finally, the meeting on January 18 of the General Conference-appointed committee. It is obvious from a quick glance at the list of members that the committee was not a credulous group, nor was it (apologies to Otilie Stafford) a collection of “company men.”

Rea's immediate concern at Glendale, in view of Wilson's letter stressing that the burden of proof rested on him, was to demonstrate to the committee the scope of Ellen

White's borrowing from the writings of her contemporaries. But Rea was also concerned with the larger question of “whether or not Mrs. White's extensive and continued use of other writers' thoughts and words over an extended period of her life, means that she gained her knowledge and insights by natural or supernatural means.”³

Just before Rea began his presentation, several committee members indicated casually that they had known about the borrowing for decades. Some seemed to be indicating that they were not in the dark, like many, while others seemed to be implying that Ellen White's borrowing was widely known, but did not create a problem. Several committee members had done their own scholarly research on her writings.

During the entire first day, Rea presented parallels in contemporary non-Adventist books for passages in many different works of Ellen White (see box). He displayed a color-coded copy of *The Desire of Ages* showing parallels with six different non-Adventist books. The committee did not have time to examine each passage, but they noted that Rea's copy was almost entirely colored.

Toward the end of the second afternoon, the committee was ready to acknowledge that the extent of borrowing surprised them. Although some objected to his emotive terms, one educator said that the evidence was of “alarming proportions.” He went on to list three facts that had emerged from Ellen White scholarship in the past decade: 1) Ellen White was a product of her times; 2) the extent of her literary dependency had been opened up and had been demonstrated to go beyond historical information; 3) she made mistakes and errors.

A theologian on the committee was “moved and also surprised how much more stuff is there,” and expressed “need [for] a broad-based approach for getting this out. . . to the laity.” The lone woman member concurred: “It would be sad if it were another ten years before this was shared with the laity.” One General Conference man pleaded, “G.C. brethren must understand what has happened here; also union and conference

men.” He recommended a “graded release,” but a “constant release,” to the laity, warning that the flow of information must not “stall.”

Another General Conference leader required that all “agree not to cover up,” and recommended that the Biblical Research Committee, under the leadership of Richard Leshner, “plan a first presentation with G.C. leaders as soon as possible after April.” His suggestion was followed immediately by someone’s qualifier, “We know enough *now* to take some steps.” A west coast administrator added, “Something in the *Review* before April.”

Although several committee members noted the amount of work obviously required for Rea to find the parallels from many different nineteenth-century writers throughout Ellen White’s writing, most of the committee also stressed the sloppiness of Rea’s methodology. One professor at the two-day discussion said that while he had amassed a large number of parallels, he had not effectively analyzed his data. However, the committee agreed that Rea’s method was a subsidiary issue. As one scholar put it, “The evidence is stronger than his presentation.”

As time for the voting of resolutions neared, suggestions about the importance and possible means of expanding the study of Ellen White’s writing methods were offered by Ron Graybill, joining Robert Olson from the White Estate for the second day. A participant opined that “PREXAD ought to spend as much time with this topic as with the closing of Southern Pub.” And, with the Geoscience Foundation’s \$150,000 yearly budget in mind, he continued, “I believe this topic is more important than that one.”

Dr. Olson, secretary of the White Estate and also of the committee, voiced a concern just before the group penned its formal recommendations: “I just want to make one brief recommendation, and that is that whatever study we do, I believe it must include a study of the sources used by Scripture writers. That’s my main defense. If I find a Bible parallel, it satisfies me.”

After the usual drafting and redrafting, the following formal recommendations emerged:

Voted:

1) That we recognize that Ellen White, in her writing, used various sources more extensively than we had previously believed. In a number of her books, the similarity between Ellen White and other authors is great enough to require the serious attention of our church leaders in order to determine the degree and significance of her dependence on other writers;

2) That, as soon as possible, a plan be developed for thoroughly informing our church administrators concerning the nature and extent of Ellen White’s use of sources;

3) That immediate study be given to a plan for educating the church in easily grasped steps on the subject of inspiration and Ellen White’s use of sources. Some means of accomplishing this could be inspiration seminars, articles in the *Adventist Review* and the *Ministry* magazine, and through the Sabbath School lessons;

4) That an in-depth study on the writing of *The Desire of Ages* be implemented, and that some suitable person, working under the supervision of a broad-based committee, be asked to foster the project. This detailed study should attempt to discover not only the similarities between Ellen White and other authors, but also the dissimilarities and the unique, positive contributions to be found in her works;

5) That a person trained in scholarly methodology be asked to work with Elder Rea. This individual, to be chosen from the Los Angeles area if possible, should be someone with whom Elder Rea would be pleased to work;

6) That this committee, or another similar committee, should continue to serve, and should meet at some future date to evaluate the results of further research.

Appreciation to Walter Rea

Voted:

To express our appreciation to Elder Rea for the enormous amount of work he has done in his research over the past several years, and also for the preparation of the material presented to the committee.

Appreciation to Elder Wilson and PREXAD

Voted:

To express our gratitude to Elder Neal Wilson and PREXAD for arranging for this

two-day committee meeting and for their readiness to consider our recommendations.

Tape Recordings

Voted:

That three copies of the taped record of the committee be made, and that these be given to Elder Walter Rea, Elder Neal Wilson and

the White Estate. Additional copies of any portion of the tapes are not to be made without the mutual concurrence of Elder Rea and PREXAD. The committee extends its gratitude to Elder Gayland Richardson, pastor of the Alhambra Church, for making the recordings.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Walter Rea, compiler, *Bible Biographies of the Old Testament, Bible Biographies of the New Testament, Daniel & Revelation* (self-published).

2. "Southern Cal. Conf. Workers' Meeting," Walter Rea presenting, Raymond Cottrell responding, two cassettes (\$6.50 per set, plus \$.75 shipping). "Ellen G. White and Her Contemporary Authors," Walter Rea

presenting, Robert Olson responding plus panel, Long Beach SDA Church, Sept. 15, 1979, two cassettes (price same as above). Tapes available through R. & L. Peifer, 4732 Rey Dr., Huntington Beach, CA 92649.

3. From Walter Rea correspondence to White Estate Secretary Robert Olson (Dec. 26, 1979).

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