

Ellen White, the Waldenses, and Historical Interpretation

by Donald Casebolt

Prior to Don McAdams' study of the relationship between *The Great Controversy* and Mrs. White's use of Protestant historians, the generally accepted Seventh-day Adventist view on this topic was that Mrs. White borrowed from historians *only* what had been *independently* corroborated by her visions.¹ This view has now been partially modified by the White Estate. In a paper entitled "Toward a Factual Concept of Inspiration II," released in 1978, Arthur White allows for a greater dependence on Protestant historians by pointing out that Mrs. White never claimed that her visions were the "sole source for all the details of history she presents" and by admitting that "some of the details of historical events apparently were not revealed to her." However, while in principle admitting that Mrs. White incorporated some inaccuracies from other historians, White would limit them to "a few apparent inconsistencies in matters of little

consequence." He further states that "we may be sure that whatever she [Mrs. White] drew into her writings from the various historians was substantially correct."

It is true that the problems which McAdams pointed out were mainly concerned with the proper sequence of events, their actual location and the correct identity of the persons involved in them. However, McAdams' main purpose was to document the close literary dependence of Mrs. White on Protestant historians, and only incidentally to point out some of the historical inaccuracies that her literary methods involved. Thus, it is the central purpose of this paper to explore the nature and extent of some of the inaccuracies to see if they are merely "apparent inconsistencies in matters of little consequence." It will show that, in fact, clear-cut, gross historical errors do exist in Ellen White's borrowings from historians.

One of the problems which McAdams might have discussed but did not involve the characterization of the Albigenses in *The Great Controversy*. Paraphrasing from Wylie, Mrs. White credits them, along with the Waldenses, with preserving the "true faith. . . from century to century" until the coming of

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Huss.² Again, in her discussion of the French Revolution, she pairs the Waldenses and the Albigenses as a group:

Century after century the blood of the saints had been shed. While the Waldenses laid down their lives upon the Piedmont “for the word of God” and for the testimony of Jesus Christ, “similar witness to the truth had been borne by their brethren” the Albigenses of France.³

But in actuality, the Waldenses were opponents of the Albigenses,⁴ because the Albigenses’ teachings were based on a dualism which sharply differentiated between an evil material world and the pure world of the spirit. This basic tenet led them to reject or reinterpret any part of the Bible which did not fit into this scheme.

Thus, the creation of a material world as presented in the Old Testament they held to be the work of an evil Demiurge whom they even characterized as the devil on some occasions. In harmony with this view, they also rejected all those parts of the Old Testament which present this being as an avenging, jealous God whom they compared unfavorably to the New Testament God of love. Jesus was not viewed as the Son of God nor as a real man, but rather as a celestial messenger who had come to give man the essential knowledge necessary to enable him to eventually escape his body and the physical world. They also taught that Christ’s sufferings on the cross were fictitious, because they could not conceive of a good spirit’s being connected with, and suffering with, an intrinsically evil fleshly body. This belief, of course, also meant a rejection of Christ’s bodily resurrection and incarnation. In addition, they condemned the sexual act in marriage because it risked the result of imprisoning more souls within carnal flesh. Similarly, they repudiated the eating of meat, since this might arouse sexual passions, and also because they believed in the transmigration of souls. Finally, also to avoid contact with the material world, they rejected baptism by water, for which they substituted a baptism of light.⁵ Thus, to state that a group which denied practically all the most essential doctrines of Christianity was responsible for preserving the “true faith” down through the centuries

is hardly a minor misunderstanding of the facts.

The inaccuracies to be discussed here come mainly from the chapter entitled “The Waldenses” in *The Great Controversy*, which is substantially identical to the same chapter found in the fourth volume of *The Spirit of Prophecy*. An exhaustive comparison of this chapter with its original sources shows that they are a consistent paraphrase of two historians: J. N. Andrews, *History of the Sabbath* and James A. Wylie, *History of Protestantism*.⁶

Along with some other Protestant historians of his time, Wylie attributed to the Waldenses a great antiquity, even extending to apostolic times. The erroneous attribution of ancient origin was based mainly upon an early dating given to certain Waldensian manuscripts as well as on the alleged purity of their doctrines. However, it is now recognized by Protestant and Catholic historians alike that the Waldensian antiquity is merely

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legendary, and that they did begin with Peter Waldo (ca. 1170), a fact which Wylie specifically denies. Even the Waldenses themselves now recognize this fact. One of their pastors has written on the alleged early manuscripts and has dated them to a period following Waldo.⁷ Mrs. White, of course, did not argue the details of dating these manuscripts. However, her statement in the *Spirit of Prophecy* that “behind the lofty bulwarks of the mountains. . . the Waldenses found a hiding-place. . . . Here for a thousand years they maintained their ancient faith. . .” is clearly dependent upon Wylie.

Related to the issue of their antiquity is the

matter of their doctrinal purity, Mrs. White's view being that the Waldenses, in contrast to contemporary Catholicism, represented the continuation of primitive Christian doctrine. Recent research has uncovered manuscripts in the Madrid National Library, including Peter Waldo's "Confession of Belief," which demonstrate that originally the Waldensian movement was not a schismatic sect, but rather a religious fraternity which stood *within* the Catholic Church. Waldo, a rich layman who experienced a dramatic conversion, wished to be permitted to preach, a right reserved to properly trained and certified clergy. Early sources disagree as to whether Waldo had an audience with the Pope, or whether he was examined in Lyon by a cardinal appointed by the Pope. In any case, about 1179/1180, Waldo signed a "Confession of Belief" in order to prove his orthodoxy and thereby gain permission to preach. As Antoine Dondaine has shown, the basic form of the "Confession" derives from a letter of Pope Leo IX to the Bishop of Antioch in 1053, and its redaction may even go back to the fifth or early sixth century.⁸ The "Confession" contains several doctrines that one might find surprising after having read Wylie's and White's descriptions of the Waldenses:

- 1) There is but one Church; catholic, holy, apostolic and without spot (*immaculatam*) outside of which there is no hope of salvation.
- 2) The baptism of infants is efficacious, if they should die before having sinned.
- 3) Alms, masses and other good works are able to benefit the dead.⁹

Though conflicts soon arose between Waldo's followers and the Catholic Church which led them away from some of the church's dogmas — the efficacy of good works for the dead, for example — these were secondary developments. And, even at the end of their existence as a separate body when they joined the Swiss Reformers in 1532, the Waldenses continued to believe in salvation by works. The Protestant writers recognize that they then did *not* hold a strong doctrine of righteousness by faith alone, but attempt to explain this by asserting that long persecution caused them to fall

away from their original purity of doctrine. This explanation, however, as is evident from an examination of Waldo's "Confession," is not viable. And the continued Waldensian emphasis on salvation by works is quite obvious in a question which they put to the reformers in 1532:¹⁰

If we recognize that Christ is our sole justification, and that we are saved only through His name and not by our own works, how are we to read so many passages of the Scripture which rate works so highly? The souls of the simple may easily be deceived thereby. Is it not written: "By thy words thou shalt be justified and by thy words thou shalt be condemned?" Do we not read: "Not everyone that crieth unto me: Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father, which is in Heaven?" And elsewhere: "Ye shall possess the kingdom for ye have given me to drink?" And again: "As water extinguishes the fire, thus do alms extinguish sin?" The alms and prayers of Cornelius seem to have had the effect of bringing about the appearance of the angel, and thus he may have been justified. We might think also that the publican who went up to the temple went away justified through his prayers. If Jesus loved John particularly, is it not because the latter loved him more than the other disciples? We read that Mary Magdalene experienced a better reception than Simon because she loved more. We should conclude from this that works count for something. Moreover, do we not read that on more than one occasion God revoked his chastisements upon seeing that the sinners repented? Is it not written that we shall be judged according to our works? And lastly it seems that there will be a difference, in paradise, between the just. We pray thee to enlighten us, especially on this point.

Thus, it is clear from Waldo's "Confession" and from the records of 1532 that during their 350-year existence, the Waldenses did not merit the glowing words of Mrs. White that they "saw the plan of salvation clearly revealed."¹¹

Nor is there any evidence that the Waldenses kept the Sabbath; rather, the contrary is true. This fact again can be documented by the records of 1532, by another question they asked of the reformers:¹² “Is it allowable on Sundays to occupy oneself with manual labour? Are there feast-days which we are bound to observe?” Given the nature of early Waldensian beliefs and this evidence 300 years later, it seems clear that the Waldenses did not keep the Sabbath, particularly when there is clear evidence that they kept Sunday during this period. For example, a Walden-

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sian ecclesiastical calendar dating to before the end of the fifteenth century, and probably earlier, divides the year into four sections of 13 Sundays each. And another work expositing the Ten Commandments, which may date even earlier, states: “Those who wish to keep and observe the Sabbath of the Christians, that is to sanctify Sunday [*le dimanche*], have need of taking care of regard to four things.”¹³

The appendix to *The Great Controversy* alleges the existence of a reference to the Waldenses’ keeping Sabbath as did the Jews in Moravia “in the middle of the fifteenth century.” In a church history syllabus commenting on this same source, Mervyn Maxwell says that the document is “apparently as old as A.D. 1500.” According to these statements, then, the document dates 300 years after the Waldensian movement began and just slightly prior to the Reformation. Furthermore, upon examination, this document actually refers to a group known as the Bohemian Brethren or *Unitas Fratrum*, which arose out of the Hussite movement. Joseph Theodore Müller, in his classic history of the

Bohemian Brethren, points out that, very early in their history, the Brethren were called Picards or Waldenses by their enemies either out of hate or ignorance, and that the members of the group constantly combated this tendency.¹⁴ In this light, it is interesting to note that the title of the work referred to by *The Great Controversy* appendix is “Summary of the Impious and Pharisaical Religion of the Picards.” But more significantly, *The Great Controversy* neglects to mention that the document, immediately prior to the statement that “some [of the Picards] indeed celebrate the Sabbath with the Jews (Nonnulli vero cum Judaeis sabbatum celebrant),” states that in place of celebrating certain saints’ days, some observe “only the Lord’s day.” Since the statement regarding the Sabbath is surrounded by other slanderous accusations, and given the long-standing anti-Semitic atmosphere in Europe, it is doubtful whether much reliance can be placed on it. However, even if the statement did refer to Waldenses and was accurate, which is doubtful, it would not indicate that Mrs. White was correct when she stated that the Waldenses kept the Sabbath. The clear import and intent of Mrs. White’s statement are that throughout a *very long* period there were Waldenses who kept the Sabbath *in the Piedmont mountain area!* And it is in this heartland of Waldensianism that we have evidence of Sundaykeeping.

The source for Mrs. White’s erroneous idea that the Waldenses kept the Sabbath is J. N. Andrews’ *History of the Sabbath*. Andrews believed that they kept the Sabbath and quoted secondary sources at great length in support. Mrs. White paraphrased quite closely the introductory part of his chapter on the Waldenses, and it is clear that he is the source for her conception of them as Sabbathkeepers, since Wylie is here silent. Andrews is also the source for Mrs. White’s belief that Columba, a British Christian who died in A.D. 597, was a Sabbathkeeper, and that through his influence this practice spread throughout England and beyond. Here dependence is perfectly clear, for her statement is a direct paraphrase of Andrews, leaving

out only Andrews' qualification that he had only "strong incidental evidence" to support his contention.

The "incidental evidence" upon which Andrews based his conclusion comes from a story told regarding Columba's prophecy of the time of his death. The primary source, evidently unread by Andrews, is Adomnan's *Life of Columba*, a saint's life, written about a century after Columba's death, and replete with fantastical tales testifying to the saint's prowess.¹⁵ Because of the significance of the citation, it will be given in full as Andrews used it:

"This day," he said to his servant, "in the sacred volume is called the Sabbath, that is rest; and will indeed be a Sabbath to me, for it is to me the last day of this toilsome life, the day on which I am to rest (*sabbatizo*), after all my labors and troubles, for on this coming sacred night of the Lord (*Dominica nocte*) at the midnight hour, I shall, as the Scriptures speak, go the way of my fathers."

Even should one accept this century-later source, filled as it is with legendary material, as accurately reflecting Columba's words, it appears fairly clear that even this isolated account is speaking of "sabbatizing" in a figurative sense, i.e., the rest from earthly labors that his approaching death is bringing about. Moreover, the phrase the "venerated Lord's night" (*venerabili dominica nocte*) reveals a reverence for Sunday, and the entire context of the book makes his veneration of the first day of the week even clearer. In it are at least four references to the mass's being celebrated on the Lord's Day.¹⁶ In fact, the last such reference is contained in the same story about Columba's approaching death only four paragraphs before the citation used by Andrews. Here it mentions "the rites of the Mass . . . being celebrated on a Lord's day according to the custom (*ex more*)."

The next inaccuracy that will be dealt with here falls outside of the chapter on the Waldenses. However, because it fits into a broad pattern showing how Mrs. White described the history of the Sabbath, it is vital that this passage be discussed. In the third chapter of *The Great Controversy*, Mrs. White states: "In the first centuries the true Sabbath had been

kept by *all* Christians" (emphasis added). That this was not the case has now virtually been conceded by C. M. Maxwell in a recent *Ministry* magazine article. Justin Martyr, for example, is cited as one who willingly "gave his life for Christ's sake and was beheaded by Roman authorities." Yet, Justin Martyr lived circa A.D. 150 and kept Sunday. Maxwell even states that "as a whole, the second- and third-century Christians whose writings have come down to us provided Christ-centered reasons for preferring the first day of the week to the seventh."¹⁷ Thus, we find that from her comments on the first centuries, through the British Christianity of the sixth century, down to the Waldenses of the twelfth through sixteenth centuries, Mrs. White has consistently mistaken the historicity of Sabbathkeeping groups. This does not prove that Sabbath is the incorrect day for worship, nor even that there were not small scattered groups somewhere that kept Sabbath. Historically, however, we know of no such groups, and it is clear that Mrs. White mistakenly identified certain groups as Sabbathkeepers when they were not, just as she mistook the Albigenses for preservers of the "true faith."

These and other errors in *The Great Controversy* must lead one to question the traditional Adventist position concerning Mrs. White's use of the historians. According to W. W. White, the Holy Spirit directed Mrs. White to "the most helpful books and to the most helpful passages contained in those books." This statement suggests that through such a selection process any significant errors in historical fact would have been eliminated. However, it has just been demonstrated that such was not the case. Furthermore, the long-standing assertion by Mrs. White and the White Estate that whatever material may have been borrowed was drawn from "conscientious historians" suggests that the historians Mrs. White used were more careful or honest in dealing with their material than was the average historian. Here the obvious inference is that any material which Mrs. White borrowed from them must be more reliable than would otherwise

be the case. Naturally, any measurement of the conscientiousness of a particular historian is a somewhat subjective judgment. Nevertheless, there is evidence that Léger and Perrin, important sources for the historians on whom Ellen White depended, distorted evidence from the Waldenses' own documents regarding their beliefs concerning transubstantiation, confession to a priest and the seven Catholic sacraments, when these documents indicated that the Waldenses were not very different from the Catholics in some of their beliefs.¹⁸ Also illustrative of how poor historical research has affected both Wylie and White is Samuel Maitland's indication in the early nineteenth century of how one source on the Waldenses was twisted to prove that the Waldenses originated in antiquity.¹⁹ Nor can it be said that more accurate histories of the Waldenses did not exist to which the Holy Spirit might have directed Mrs. White's attention. Maitland's book was published in 1832—well before Mrs. White wrote on the Waldenses. Thus, while her mind may have been directed to the “most helpful books,” these

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books were not the most accurate ones. Finally, the analysis of yet another chapter of *The Great Controversy* which again proves to be almost a total paraphrase of other historians raises the question of how to interpret W. C. White's statement that Mrs. White's borrowing was *not* done “in a wholesale way.” Her use of such books as William Hanna's *Life of Christ* for outlining and detailing her own *Desire of Ages* also brings this question to the fore. Certainly, however one wishes to use the word “wholesale,” it can no longer be denied that in the historical sections

of her writings, Mrs. White has paraphrased historians for pages and chapters at a time and included many inaccuracies which have become, thereby, “facts” to many Adventists.

Thus, two basic principles may be enunciated: 1) In the historical portions of her writings Mrs. White exhibits a strong literary indebtedness to various Adventist and Protestant historians. 2) Her own accuracy in describing events is in direct proportion to the degree of accuracy achieved by her sources. Whatever type of discrepancy appears in her sources—whether minor questions of date and place, or more fundamental inaccuracies concerning the overall significance of a religious movement and its fundamental beliefs—also appears in her writings. Where her sources have distorted historical reality in presenting Reformation precursors, their conclusions are generally accepted without correction or comment. Indeed, in the process of condensing their descriptions, Mrs. White has, on occasion, eliminated their more tentative and careful presentation of conflicting or inconclusive evidence.

It is, therefore, imperative that a different methodological approach be taken when evaluating the informational value of Mrs. White's writings on history or other areas where a literary dependency can be demonstrated. Previously, official church bodies have attempted to build models of how inspiration has functioned (and, therefore, also of how one ought to utilize the results of inspiration) almost solely by compiling all of Mrs. White's and W. C. White's statements relating to revelation, and then interpreting them anecdotically in accordance with certain presuppositions about how inspiration must have functioned. The conclusions of such studies have almost inevitably been identical with these preconceptions. In the future, it is clear that investigators must first acquaint themselves with the data which a literary and contextual analysis can provide *before* attempting an interpretation of these statements. This procedure will keep Adventist scholars from misconstruing actual historical documentation in attempting to reinterpret various events on the basis of what they thought was the more correct *Great Con-*

troverson information when that information originated not from Mrs. White but only from her sources. Finally, a recognition of these principles and an adoption of this methodology, long since applied to biblical studies, would save the church the embarrassment of having to assimilate each newly

discovered bit of information piecemeal into a theoretical framework which has proven inadequate. For the few examples presented in these pages are not the only ones of their kind, and the the church will, undoubtedly, have similar cases brought to its attention in the future.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Arthur White asserted that Mrs. White corroborated with "indisputable historical evidence that which had been revealed to her." A. White, "Ellen G. White as an Historian," p. 7.
2. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1911), p. 97.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 271.
4. For an excellent and well-documented history of the Waldenses until 1218, see Kurt-Victor Selge, *Die Ersten Waldenser* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter & Co., 1967), vol. 1. Volume 2 contains an excellent bibliography as well as the *Liber Antiheresis*, which includes the anti-Albigensian material.
5. George Schmitz-Valckenberg, *Grundlehren katharischer Sekten des 13. Jahrhunderts* (München: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1971), pp. 1-338. See also Jacques Madaule, *The Albigensian Crusade*, trans. Barbara Wall (London: Burns & Oates, 1967), pp. 32-38.
6. Andrews, *History of the Sabbath*, 2nd ed. (Battle Creek: SDA Publishing Assoc., 1873), pp. 398-403, 427, 430; Wylie, *History of Protestantism*, 3 vols. (London: Cassell, Peter & Dalpin, 1874-77), I, 23-32 and II, 431, 435.
7. Emilo Comba, *History of the Waldenses of Italy*, trans. Teofilo E. Comba (London: Truslove & Shirley, 1889), pp. 231-233. See note 826 in particular.
8. Antoine Dondaine, "Aux origines du Valdésisme: Une profession de foi de Valdes," *Archivum Fratrum Praedictorum*, 16 (1946), 202-203.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 194-201.
10. Comba, *History of the Waldenses*, p. 295.
11. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 72.
12. Comba, *History of the Waldenses*, p. 295.
13. Earle Hilgert, "The Religious Practices of the Waldenses and Their Doctrinal Implications to A.D. 1530," an unpublished M.A. Thesis presented to the SDA Theological Seminary in 1946, pp. 49-50. See also Pius Melia, *The Origin, Persecutions and Doctrines of the Waldenses* (London: James Toovey, 1870).
14. For example, in 1535 the following heading appeared in the preface of one of the Brethren's Confessions of Faith: "Preface of the Elders of the Brethren of Christ's Law, whose enemies out of hate in order to abuse call Picards, and whom many out of ignorance call Waldenses." According to Joseph Theodor Müller, the first time we find the appellation "Picards" in the mouth of their enemies is in 1461. *Geschichte der Böhmischen Brüder*, 2 vols. (Herrnhut: Verlag der Missionsbuchhandlung, 1922-31), I:34, 109-112. Much of the confusion between the Bohemian Brethren and the Waldenses/Picards has an early origin. Evidently, Flacius Illyricus tried to equate the two, but Alexander Patschovsky has shown by applying text-critical methods to recently discovered manuscripts, that Waldensian manuscripts which Flacius believed to have originated from Bohemia actually came from France. See *Die Anfänge einer Standigen Inquisition in Böhmen*, (New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1975), p. 4; and Edmund de Schweinitz, *The History of the Unitas Fratrum* (Bethlehem, Pa.: Moravian Publication Office, 1885), p. 17.
15. See Adomnan's *Life of Columba*, ed. and trans. Alan A. and Marjorie O. Anderson (London: Thomas Nelson, 1961).
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 293, 305, 501 and 519. See also p. 489 for a celebration of a mass which may imply that ordinary work was usually not done on Sunday.
17. C. Mervyn Maxwell, "Sabbath and Sunday Observance in the Early Church," *Ministry*, 50 (January 1977), p. 9.
18. Hilgert, "The Religious Practices," p. 13-21.
19. Samuel Roffery Maitland, *Facts and Documents Illustrative of the History, Doctrine, and Rites of the Ancient Albigenses & Waldenses* (London: C. J. G and F. Rivington, 1832), pp. 32-36.