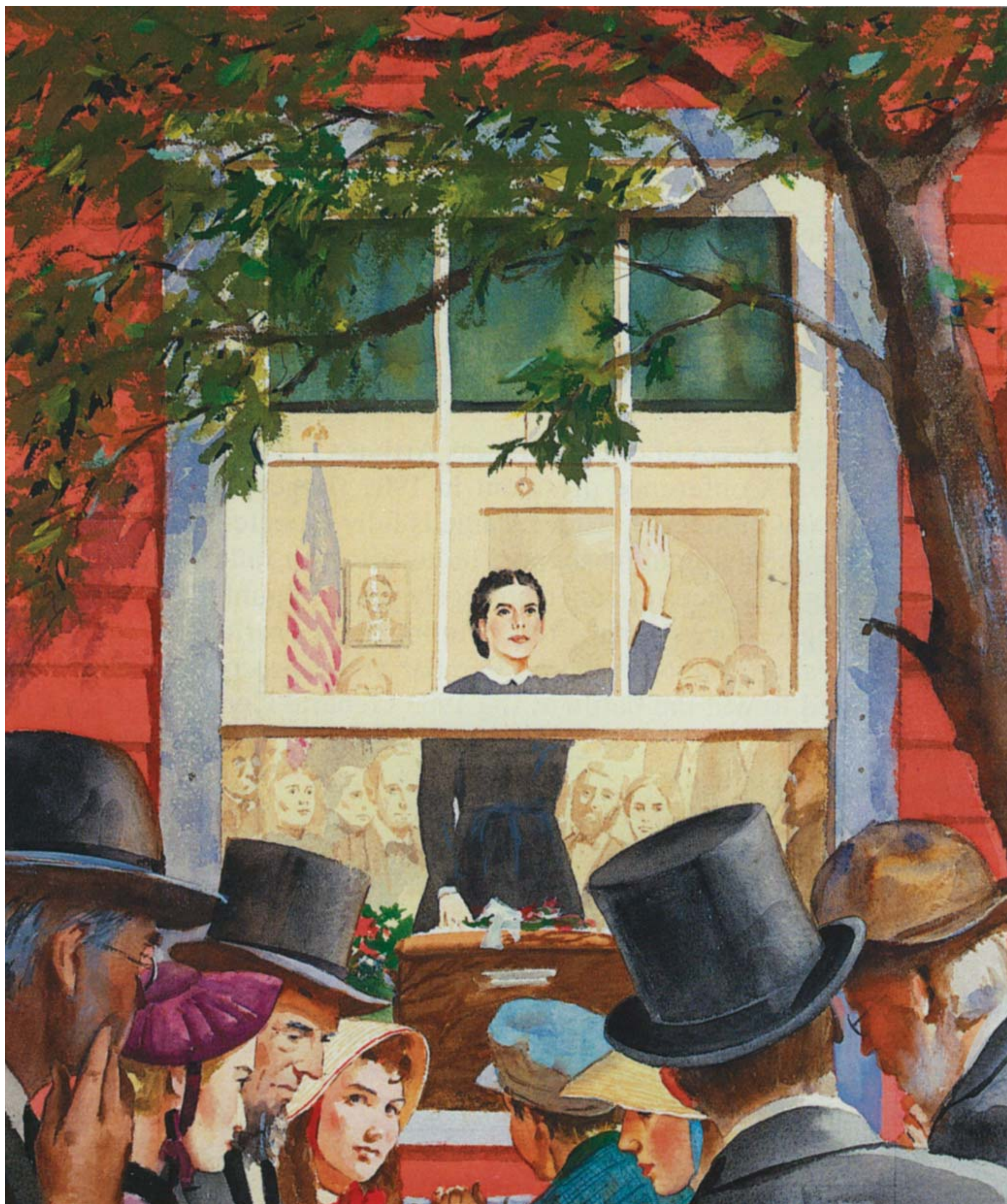
New Books and Reports on

ELLEN WHITE



THE GREAT CONTROVERSY VISION *by Vernon Nye, 1990* | ELLEN G. WHITE ESTATE, INC.

DISCUSSED | Ellen G. White, testimonies, Millerite movement, vision, Spiritualism, early Adventism, the White family, community

Testimonies: *An Excerpt from* Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet (OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2014) | BY GRAEME SHARROCK

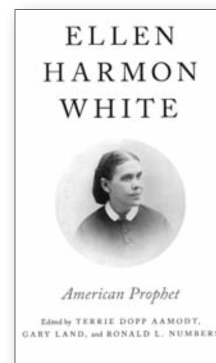
On Thursday, October 8, 1857, James and Ellen White traveled by wagon from Caledonia, Michigan, south to the village of Monterey for a preaching appointment. Arriving at the schoolhouse where local Adventists were gathering, the Whites were unsure what theme to speak on, so they encouraged the believers to fill the time by singing and praying, and waited for inspiration.

Then, unexpectedly, because her husband usually preached first, Ellen, not yet thirty years old, stood to speak and soon the meeting was "filled with the Spirit of the Lord." The feelings of the faithful quickly intensified; some were joyful, others wept. When seated again, Ellen continued to pray aloud, "higher and higher in perfect triumph in the Lord, till her voice changed, and the deep, clear shouts of Glory! Hallelujah! thrilled every heart." Ellen was in vision.

In her audience sat Victor Jones, a poor farmer and heavy drinker trying to reform his life and better care for his wife and young son. As James wrote for the church paper a few days later, Ellen delivered a "most touching and encouraging message." The man "raised his head that very evening, and he and his good wife are again happy in hope. Monterey church will never forget that evening. At least they never should."[1]

Yet Ellen did not disclose all of her vision in the meeting. Next morning she walked a mile to the nearby home of Brother Rumery, a local church leader and community pioneer present the previous evening, hoping to "speak plainly" to him. Nearing the house, she stopped and instead returned and wrote him a letter. Confident she had kept the vision confidential, she concluded with the following paragraph and sent the letter off:

> *Dear Brother Rumery, I came to your house purposely to tell you the vision but my heart sank within me. I knew my weakness and knew I should feel the deepest distress for you while relating it to you, and I was afraid I should not have the strength to do it, and should mar the work. Now brother, I am afflicted and distressed for you, and when at your house was* so burdened *I could not stay. I send this communication to you with much trembling. I fear from what I have seen that your efforts will be too weak. You will make no change. Oh, will you get ready for Jesus' coming?* I kept the vision from every one, *even my husband, but I must speak plainly to you. You must have a thorough work done for you or you will fail of heaven. Said the angel, "It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:25).*[2]



The testimony letter remains Ellen White's distinctive literary signature.

Starting in the late 1840s, Ellen—or "Mrs. E. G. White" as readers came to know her—wrote hundreds of such personal letters, known as "testimonies," to individuals, families, and churches. From these intimate epistles, she forged an extraordinary career as a religious leader and writer of pamphlets, periodical articles, and books on topics ranging from biblical interpretation to health care, organizational development, and Christian spirituality. Although few expected to ever receive one, her testimony letters helped mold the fragmented Millerite movement into a new American religion denomina-

tion. The testimony letter remains Ellen White's distinctive literary signature.

Modern readers encounter these letters in nine red or black hard-bound volumes known as *Testimonies for the Church*—elegant cloth editions with corrected spelling, improved grammar, and the identities of the original recipients disguised by editors. Largely stripped of places and dates of writing, they have been read for 150 years in a deepening social and historical void. Some readers project special religious powers upon them while others have denigrated them as relics of an outmoded worldview. Clearly, the testimonies are no ordinary letters, but what are they?[3] Fortunately, more than a hundred of White's antebellum letters and manuscripts have been preserved, along with a few printed editions, accommodating research into their origins and role in early Adventism.[4]

Testimonies: Evangelical, Millerite, Adventist

In her testimony letters, Ellen White adapted a literary and rhetorical standby familiar to the Anglo-American legal and religious traditions and rich in cultural resonances. As discourses presenting an eyewitness viewpoint, secular and religious testimonies emerged after the American Revolution as important tools of public persuasion. Whether delivered as "exhortations" in a Methodist social meeting or proclaimed in a court of law, they were customarily transcribed from oral discourses and verified by the signature of the speaker or other witnesses. Religious examples reflected the Puritan emphasis on individual experience—personal narratives, confessions of faith, signs of divine workings in the soul—linking their authority to that of the Spirit through visions, voices, dreams, and providences. Whether published as broadsides or pamphlets or in denominational periodicals, the testimonies of emerging spiritual leaders harmonized their life experience with the core narratives of Christianity.[5]

Among the Millerites of the 1840s, *testimony* carried the common evangelical meanings, along with expressions of confidence in the imminent second coming of Christ. Even finer theological nuances arose among those who followed the revisions of Millerism advocated by James and Ellen White and their circle, known as Bridegroom and later Sabbatarian Adventists. Their solution to the problem of the "Great Disappointment" (the failed prediction of the second coming of Christ, on October 22, 1844) proposed that Miller was right as to the date, but wrong regarding the event. The fateful day instead marked the start of Judgment Day—a complex event centered not on earth but in heaven. With a dramatic cast of adjudicating Father, advocating Son, accusing Satan, and angelic clerks writing names and deeds in a book, this apocalyptic scene provided an ordering framework for all aspects of human life, especially for the faithful. The very first rule for reading the Bible, claimed a writer in the church paper, was "NEVER open the Book of God, without remembering that you must be tried by it at the judgment seat of Christ." Separated from unbelieving society and formed into small "bands" as they waited for the End of the World, they "carefully examined every thought and emotion" while experiencing deep raptures of hope and love—a scene that crystallized the ideals of community found in her subsequent testimonies. With the grand audit or "cleansing" of the heavenly realm already under way, White's early testimonies reported on the progress of "cases" in the proceedings and outlined the purification of heart and life expected of earthly believers.[6]

Within a few weeks of the Great Disappointment, White experienced her first "holy vision" in which she visited heaven, talked with Jesus, and saw "events all in the future" before returning to the earth. At meetings throughout New England, she fell into trances and analyzed the spiritual condition of individuals, seeming to read into their very souls. The visions offered consolations to those stymied by the failure of Miller's predictions, conveying divine sympathy for their plight and compensating for the scorn of newspapers and neighbors. White mentioned her visions in letters to friends and family and published a few in Millerite periodicals or as broadsides with local printers.[7]

Falling into trance, having a vision, and writing it out was arduous work for a young, illness-prone, and barely educated woman such as Ellen Harmon. The process of writing gave expression to her acute moral and social sensitivities, relieving her "burdens" or intense religious feelings. "It was not until I began to have visions that I could write so anyone could read it," she wrote in a later autobiographical manuscript. "One day the impression came to me as strong as if some one had spoken it, 'Write, write your experiences.' I took up a pen, and found my hand perfectly steady, and from that day to this it has never failed me." By the time the printed version came off the press, however, the "impression" had become an angel's

voice, the "experiences" specified as visions, and taking up the pen was in response to a divine command. In this way, White reified her spiritual experiences to produce a lifetime of testimonies and other writings while remaining true to her inner world of images and voices.[8]

How to recognize a testimony when you see one

Each year, Ellen White wrote dozens of testimonies and hundreds of pages expressing her convictions and persuading Adventists to change their attitudes and habits. Not all of her letters were testimonies, however, so how would a recipient know? Growing out of White's regular familial correspondence, the testimony letter developed over a decade into a distinguishable document with a definable structure, standard sentence types, stock arguments, and repeated rhetorical strategies. Although shorter testimonies might lack or truncate portions, the letter usually followed this order (most of the following examples are from the letter to Brother Rumery):

Date, place of writing, and salutation. Most addressees are readily identifiable, including those stated as "Dear Brother…," "Dear Sister …," or "Friend." Occasionally, she played with a name, displaying satire or irony such as "Victory Jones" or "Sir Emory Fisk." These formal features become standardized early in her life and rarely changed over the years.

Occasion of writing. The opening sentence or two linked the letter to a recent vision and announced the subject of the testimony. Reading this sentence was the recipient's first clue that he or she had received a testimony letter. "You remember the vision given last Thurs. evening," she wrote to Brother Rumery. "In that vision I saw the case of Brother Victor Jones…."

Announcement of theme. In a few sentences, White summarized the general topic of the testimony and identified its principal persons. She often expressed the theme as a general complaint, or as a failure to exhibit certain traits or perform certain actions. For example, "I saw that the Lord loved him [Jones] but he had reasons for discouragement . . ." she announced in the same letter. "He looked for and expected to find the same disposition in his brethren but was disappointed. They said by their profession we are pilgrims and strangers, yet their heart and treasure were here." From this summary, the remainder of the letter expanded on the themes of discouragement/encouragement, wealth/poverty, and profession/practice.

Analysis of case(s). Using moral language mixed with religious images and ideas, White compared her subject's behavior or spiritual condition, as she saw it, with her own moral and social ideals. "Brother Rumery, you could have in many little acts have eased Brother Jones' burden, and never felt it," she opened her analysis of Rumery's case, "but for years you have loved money better than religion, better than God." Viewing current problems as continuous with the past, she referenced her subjects' life histories in the longer testimonies. Fully developed testimonies contained extended discussion of several linked "cases" and ran ten or twenty written pages.

Clearly, the testimonies are no ordinary letters, but what are they?

Call to action. The testimony followed analytical with prescriptive language, usually a required response mixed with the language of appeal. Most often, White used imperative forms from biblical passages—"earnestly seek the Lord," "do not become discouraged," "cleanse your heart," and so forth, but also borrowed contemporary idioms. "You must cut loose, cut loose from the world," she insisted to Brother Rumery.

Warrants and principles. In order to reinforce her analysis and call to action, White called upon a half-dozen commonplace beliefs. As we have seen, her readers assumed the Adventist worldview with its apocalyptic images: Judgment scenes, an omniscient deity, record-keeping angels, and the shortness of time available to humans. If she refer-

enced a person's sins or secrets, readers could assume that she was accessing in her visions the life histories kept by "recording angels." She also relied on moral and social ciphers accepted by most American evangelicals, such as the ban on "worldliness"—a term whose meaning varied from group to group, but which typically prohibited amusements, frivolity, and preoccupation with material matters. "Reform," on the other hand, was code for earnest concern with personal and social change. She was steeped in the language of sentimental theology that proposed shared feelings between the human and divine realms, and salvation through transformation of the affections. In these instances, she described the feelings and facial expressions of Jesus, trusting such imagery would evoke sympathy and self-reflection in her readers.

Appeal. Toward the end of each testimony, White made appeals to her readers to embrace the changes she had outlined. The mature testimony frequently appealed to particular emotions: fear, hope, anxiety, love, and sympathy. The spiritual outcome most feared was to "be left to themselves," "in darkness," or "unaware" that the Spirit had left a person or church. In her most eloquent appeals, White invoked the popular evangelical trope of the sufferings of Christ in his betrayal and death on the cross, asking believers to measure their meager inconveniences against the infinite sacrifice of Christ their "Example." Accustomed to the rhetorical strategies of sentimentalist writers such as Harriett Beecher Stowe, readers viewed such appeals as encouragement to face awkward feelings or espouse unpopular causes.[9]

Personal note. Sometimes White added a short note of greeting, an expression of love to family members, a request for her correspondent to make a copy and return the original, or instructions regarding the reading of the letter to others. The final paragraph of her testimony to Brother Rumery explained her intense "distress" and failure to arrive at his home that morning.

Sign-off. The concluding phrase White commonly used in all her correspondence echoed the urgent sense of time and the supreme social value expressed in the Millerite and Adventist communities. Although sometimes abbreviated, it rarely changed over the years: "In haste and love, Ellen G. White." But to Brother Rumery she signed off, "In trial, E. G. White."

Audiences: individuals, families, churches

Adventists lived in a transparent universe. Angels scrutinized every act and word; the gaze of believing and unbelieving neighbors was continuously on church members. "I was shown, Mary, that many idle words have fallen from your lips," White wrote to her close friend Mary Loughborough. "If the recording angel should place them before you, it would astonish, distress, and alarm you." Messages tailored to individuals were needed because humans, unable to perceive the heavenly realm—or peer into their own souls or interpret the actions of others—were oblivious to the causes and consequences of their actions. "Brother and Sister Wright . . . could have seen and understood the spirit of Sister Booth, from observation," White wrote to friends, "and if they had stood free in God could have discerned the spirit, acts, and words, and the character developed. But they failed to see." The testimonies met this deficit by mediating knowledge from hidden sources, but she expected her readers to develop the self-insight to view and correct themselves.[10]

While White wrote most often to individuals, the best of her analyses emerge in her letters to families. As young parents, James and Ellen White traveled and visited homes in New England, observing the piety, parenting styles, and domestic practices of their hosts. "I saw that our keeping house has discovered selfishness in your families," she wrote to one family in the summer of 1851, "and I saw that there has not been true faith in the visions." The two families were joined by an emotional "link" that should be "broken" because it produced collusion rather than mutual strengthening and growth in grace. Each family needed to stand more "separate" and direct their love to Jesus, if they wanted to have "vital godliness and heart holiness."[11]

Like a modern family therapist, White used her powers of moral discernment and social observation—including critical attention to stories and snippets of conversation—along with her growing experience as a parent, to craft prescriptions for a happier and holier life. When young women wrote for advice on family matters, she answered using notes from her visits and visions. Certain types and motifs appear regularly in the testimonies: the garrulous wife undermining her husband's authority; the impulsive socialite whose unthinking actions bring bewilderment to others; the hypocrisy of religiosity that covers an underlying lack of genuine spiritual experience; overly sympathet-

ic parents who fail to discipline their children; the unkempt and slovenly housewife; the minister who competes with or openly disrespects his fellow ministers; the elderly church leader who resists passing the baton to younger leadership. Just as middle-class mothers relied on Catherine Beecher's rules for cleanliness and amusements in her *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, the testimonies became the official source of rules and practices of domesticity for Adventist families.[12]

White's concern with character and influence expanded from individuals to larger units of believers, where the increased social and spiritual effect—either positive or negative—counted for or against the credibility of Adventism, especially in small rural towns where most believers lived. Testimonies for the church as a whole, usually addressing the spiritual health of the widespread body, were usually read at conferences and quickly printed in the church paper. She adapted and focused the testimony to the needs of the Adventist community, mediating between divine expectations and human capabilities while protecting the church's reputation.

Writing: composition, circulation, reception

When Ellen White went into vision during a public meeting, associates such as James White or Hiram Edson often took notes of her utterances, which she later used to reconstruct her memory and write out her interpretation of the vision. She then addressed a letter to the subjects of the vision—a page or two up to twenty or more—describing their role in it and urging them to follow its prescriptions. A single vision, if it concerned several people or families, could generate five or ten letters, which were "circulated" to an even wider readership.

After writing, White visited the subject and read it aloud in their presence—if an individual, at his or her home; if a church or conference, before the assembly. If the recipient was not local, she mailed the letter to the named person or an associate, with instructions to pass it along to any other persons mentioned in the letter or to read it before a church gathering. Occasionally, as in a letter to the Kellogg family of Battle Creek, she waited a year or more after a vision before sending a testimony.[13]

Once the testimony was delivered, White "anxiously watched the result, and if the individual reproved rose up against it, and afterwards opposed the truth, these queries would arise in my mind. Did I deliver the message just as I should?" She sometimes met with and observed the person and her family, looking for signs of improvement. As she told Angelina Andrews, "I read over the testimony frequently for you and sister Mary…and inquire in my own mind, Are they living up to the testimony?" White then inquired of others to discover what Angelina had been doing about it before she calculated and sent her response.[14]

In return for the letter, she hoped for the original back, along with an acknowledgment of the accuracy of the visions and a "confession" of all wrongs. Others wrote back asking for clarification, or expressed gratitude and regret while promising to reform. Many of the surviving responses seem to follow a prescribed outline: I received your letter, I thank God that he notices me, I acknowledge my errors, I will try to do better.[15]

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Readers: believers, resisters, defenders

No one, it seems, expected to receive a testimony letter from White. Its arrival might throw its subject into a moral crisis—a person might "break in pieces" and engage in a "thorough work" by confessing wrong attitudes and surrendering to "present truth." White expected that through constant reform or "cleansing," recipients would "overcome" wrong feelings and behaviors—or expect another confrontation. Phoebe Lamson read James and Ellen's letter to John Andrews (a young scholar and minister mentored by James White) and it "deeply affected" her. "My eyes opened to our sad state…how unworthy and unprofitable we have been in the service of the Lord." Andrews, for his part, admitted that he had "expressed opinions…in some matters" that

"seemed to open the door for the prince of darkness to step in," and promised to "keep in my proper sphere"—in submission to the Whites. The testimonies became indispensable to those committed to improving themselves while maintaining social relations with the Whites.[16]

Questions about the visions arose in the reading and reception of the testimonies and became a central issue in the growing Adventist community, generating defenders and detractors. By the time the denomination was organized, many churches read White's testimonies in meeting and called for comment. Brother Carpenter read aloud and then bore his own testimony "in regard to the truthfulness of the visions respecting myself." This was followed by question time, during which Brother Breyer spoke of things "freely acknowledged by the church," and of "the faith which he had in the visions." Some were less convinced. Brother Young was "more backward" in speaking of past meetings and deferred to Carpenter to "say a few words" regarding what he knew. Carpenter completed his endorsement with confidence: "I believe," he said of the testimony, "it is true."[17]

Others, however, reacted defensively to the testimonies. More than one breakaway group cited the testimonies as evidence of Ellen White's mistaken belief in her gifts. Some organized active opposition to the Whites, citing three grounds: the visions on which the testimonies depended were spurious; the testimonies were inaccurate or false; belief in the testimonies should not be made a test of fellowship. White responded that some who "professed perfect confidence in the vision" nevertheless "found fault with the instrument" or "the manner in which the vision was delivered. They took the position that a part of it was correct and part of it was a mistake, that I had been told circumstances and thought that the Lord had shown them to me in vision." Some serial testimonies chart the Whites' efforts to maintain influence with those doubting Ellen's visions, especially those who sympathized with rival movements such as Spiritualism. Most detractors, however, resisted her diagnoses of their souls, not her theology, making the widely distributed testimonies occasions of conflict as well as conciliation among local Adventists.[18]

Publication: editing and compiling inspiration

White's testimony letters first found their mark in the souls of her private correspondents and in the networks of local churches that read them. Starting in the mid-1850s, however, they found new readers. When James and Ellen White's conception of a community in the last days extended beyond the surviving Millerites, they enlarged their readership by publishing for a more general audience. After the installation of a hand press at Battle Creek, the Whites printed a broadside and then a sixteen-page, tract-style pamphlet (3½" by 5½" pages) based on recent visions, titled *Testimony for the Church*. Following a reading before church members in Battle Creek, "on whose minds it apparently made a deep impression," the Whites included endorsements by ministers—a common boost to women writers of the period.[19]

About once per year, James printed another pamphlet edited from a selection of testimonies the Whites believed would be of general interest to members. Aware that a series was in the making and each new issue could be had for the postage, readers made their own compilations. Sister M. E. Devereaux, who stitched books for the Battle Creek press, offered a female friend "all Sister White's visions…bound in morocco." In late 1857, for the fourth pamphlet, James increased the size to thirty-six pages and the print run to 1,500; he placed a note in the *Review and Herald* urging they be "circulated immediately." As a sample, the *Review* excerpted nine pages from the pamphlet, entitled "He Went Away Sorrowful for He Had Many Possessions," based on Ellen's vision at Monterey, October 8, 1857.[20]

In a few short years, the testimonies became *Testimonies for the Church*. Ellen continued to write out new visions in her handwriting as before, but the edited pamphlets lacked the intimacy of the personal letter. Names and places were deleted to give the impression of a more general message. In several printed testimonies, for example, we come across initials for persons, although it is unlikely that readers would not know who "J.N.A." and "J.N.L." were (well-known Adventist authors). To read of the spiritual weaknesses of church leaders in this way must have given lay readers the impression they shared an angelic viewpoint. When demand after the Civil War required that James republish the pamphlets from the 1850s, he saw in them only "matters of a local and personal character, which do not have a direct bearing on our time," but praised their "high-toned spirit of scriptural piety." His bound edition of 1871 became the standard text for following generations. Some omitted testimonies were never seen in print again, but early testimonies—or at least para-

graphs from them—showed up in later testimonies, articles, and books, as Ellen reworked and enlarged them for wider audiences.[21]

The regular publication of the testimonies increased but complicated their status among Adventists, adding an aura of inspiration difficult for the Whites to control. There is no evidence from Ellen or James White in this period, however, that the testimony letter was considered an inspired document, in the sense that evangelicals considered the Bible inspired. Certainly there was no phenomenon like the "automatic writing" exhibited by Shakers and Spiritualists in the writing of some of their testimonies. Her testimonies were literary traces of full-bodied and socially embedded revelatory experiences, not merely the recordings of a spiritual channel. Her ideas came to her mediated through images, narratives, emotions, bodily sensations, memories, and social encounters. Ellen's widely circulated letters and manuscripts contained scratchings, rewriting, and spelling and grammatical errors incompatible with any idea of verbal inspiration. James and others early resisted the idea that the visions in any way constituted an authority rivaling the Bible and refused for a number of years to publish them in the church paper. The locus of controversy, however, was the visions—and by extension Mrs. White herself—not her writings per se.[22]

Despite any flaws in the mechanics of her writing and the strong editing hand of her husband James and others, Ellen insisted on an essential role for the Spirit in the production of her writings. Her clearest statement from the antebellum period, summarizing fifteen years as a visionary, came in a letter to John Andrews in 1860. Her visions are "either of God or the devil," she insisted. "There is no half-way position to be taken in the matter." After a vision, she explained, "I do not at once remember all that I have seen, and the matter is not so clear before me until I write, then the scene rises before me as presented in vision, and I can write freely…." Apparently, trance experience depleted her mental capacities for a period, but the very act of writing helped stimulate her memory and efficiently led to inspiration. By the late 1850s, Adventist lecturers freely distributed printed testimonies along with Bibles and "truth-filled" books that they sold for modest profit. Many had not only read a testimony but had also seen Ellen White in vision, witnessed her miraculous recoveries, and heard her speak. Along with the church paper and familial letters, the testimony letters played a special part in the "communicative network" spreading among Adventists from New England and New York to the Midwestern states and into eastern Canada. All this had a sacralizing effect, giving the testimonies special religious authority somewhere above the *Review and Herald* but below the Bible.

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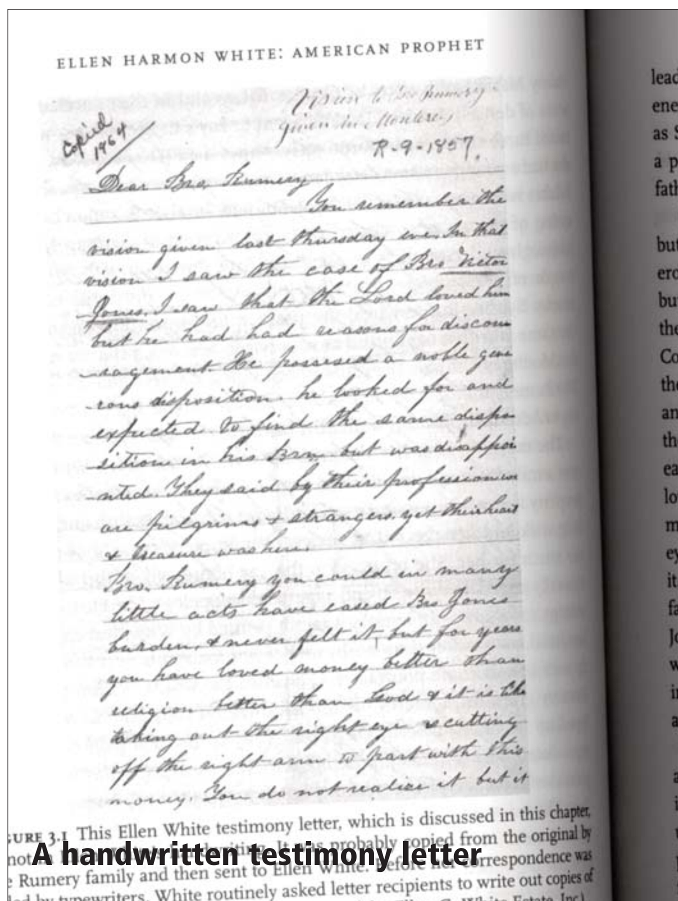
Case study: testimony to Brother Rumery

We return finally to Monterey, Michigan, and the testimony letter Mrs. White wrote and mailed to Brother Rumery because, overcome with feelings, she could not deliver it in person. This section examines the testimony in its historical and social context and considers how the testimony written in Monterey, Michigan, contributed to the life of the wider Adventist community.[23]

In the first half of the nineteenth century, as thousands of New Englanders, New Yorkers, and European immigrants pushed westward in the Great Lakes area, the Miami and Pottawatomie peoples of southern Michigan were removed from their traditional lands by a long series of treaties and forced marches. After the land to be known as Allegan County was surveyed and indexed in 1837, early purchasers (known as patentees) chose the best and highest lands with the best soils and stands of oak trees for $1.25 per acre. Within the county, Township No. 3 North, Range 13 West, located north of Allegan, attracted many farmers because of its rolling hills, well-drained and rich soils, and abundant stands of oak, beech, elm, basswood, walnut, and ash. Young adults from the township families quickly intermarried and

began raising a new generation. In 1847, area pioneers called a meeting to organize and name a new civil township within Allegan County. The winning suggestion, offered by pioneer Sylsbre Rumery, was "Monterey," after a recent victory in the Mexican-American War.[24]

By 1856 a church was organized at "the center of a large farming community of Seventh-day Adventists." From the church paper subscriptions list and other references, we know the names and occupations of many Adventist families, including Wilcox, Day, Lay, Clarke, Kenyon, Pierce, Russ, Wilson, Patterson, Howard, Jones, and Rumery. Before their conversion to Adventism, township pioneers such as George T. Lay, Leonard Ross, Frederick S. Day, Harvey Kenyon, and Sylsbre Rumery achieved leadership positions in the new township as


ELLEN HARMON WHITE: AMERICAN PROPHET

Copied 1964

Vision to Bro Rumery given in Monterey
R-9-1857.

Dear Bro Rumery
You remember the vision given last Thursday eve. In that vision I saw the case of Bro Victor Jones. I saw that the Lord loved him but he had had reasons for discouragement. He possessed a noble generous disposition. he looked for and expected to find the same disposition in his Brn but was disappointed. They said by their profession we are pilgrims & strangers. yet their heart & treasure was here.
Bro. Rumery you could in many little acts have eased Bro Jones burden, & never felt it, but for years you have loved money better than religion better than God & it is like taking out the right eye or cutting off the right arm to part with this money. You do not realize it but it

...URE 3.1 This Ellen White testimony letter, which is discussed in this chapter, ... probably copied from the original by ... Rumery family and then sent to Ellen White. Before her correspondence was ...ed by typewriters, White routinely asked letter recipients to write out copies of ...

A handwritten testimony letter

supervisor, clerk, treasurer, justice of the peace, and constable. Lay, the largest landowner in Monterey, with high and fertile lands, had donated the land on which the schoolhouse was built and in which Ellen White had her October 8, 1857 vision. As members pledged support for Adventist causes such as a new press for the church's printing business and the Whites' push for denominational organization, the church in Monterey quickly developed a reputation for wealth and generosity. If an exemplary Adventist community could be found anywhere, it would be the church in Monterey.[25]

Brother Sylsbre Rumery, known as "Syb," was a farmer with a growing family living in the southeastern portion of Monterey Township. Born in 1820 and raised in Lockport, New York, he moved to Allegan County in 1839, was converted to the Methodist Episcopal faith in 1840, and emerged during the next decade as an energetic community leader. In 1841, he married Nancy Maria Lay, a sister of George T. Lay, and in 1843 purchased eighty acres of densely forested land adjacent to Lay's in Section 26, where they raised three children. Unfortunately, Nancy died (December 25, 1847), but she had a younger sister Betsy Jane, aged twenty-two, who agreed to marry Sylsbre within a year (April 1, 1848). Younger brother Solomon came in the spring of 1847, was converted at a local meeting of German Methodists (although understanding no German), and stayed on with Sylsbre for a couple of years before marrying Julia A. Elliott and building a home nearby. Sylsbre Rumery held the position of township treasurer in 1856, the same year that Lay served as supervisor, and was a charter member of the Monterey Grange, the guild encouraging farmers and their families. The Rumery brothers became prosperous during the 1850s boom, converting to Adventism just a few months before the Whites' October 1857 visit.[26]

The morning after her vision in the schoolhouse, Ellen White walked over a mile west and uphill to the Rumery farmhouse, viewing the choice property in late harvest and its extensive views to the south and east. The long walk and her mounting anxiety over Rumery's case, however, were too much for her. She returned to the Lay home, where the Whites customarily stayed, to write several pages and an apology. The surviving manuscript, 1,164 words in length, was not penned by White but copied from her hand, as was her custom, by one of her assistants or a Rumery family member. At some point later, she added the words "Vision to Brother Rumery given in Monterey" to the handwritten copy and the whole was typed up "as grammatically corrected" in 1964. Except for a few excerpts, it has never been published. Like a typical testimony letter, however, it references a vision, "last Thursday eve." "In that vision," Ellen declared, "I saw the case of Victor Jones." He was the man whom

Ellen had encouraged with her message the night before, but who was he?

Victor Jones lived in a small home with his wife Elizabeth and son Frank near the large Lay farm, but with few possessions, at least in comparison to wealthier Adventists. Born and raised in New York state, like so many other Michigan settlers, he had first lived in Pennsylvania, where his son was born, before the family moved west. Rumery and Jones were each in their thirties and married, but the Rumery brothers owned sixty times the property of Jones. As Elizabeth Jones had recently published a letter in the church paper, the family was not unknown to the Whites.[27]

To supplement their income, poorer men such as Victor Jones worked as day laborers for wealthier landowners or merchants. The distinction between farmers and laborers in settler culture was so clear that, almost without exception, sons of farmers were always farmers, even if they labored for their fathers and owned no land. Whether they worked on the family farm or on another, sons and brothers were increasing their stakes in the family fortune, which was rarely true for laborers such as Victor Jones. In this patrimony system, therefore, "love of the world" meant the attendant rights of property ownership such as family security and civic leadership. The sale of such property for causes such as Adventism threatened diminishment of the family's future, especially for young men such as Sylsbre Rumery's three minor sons. Young Frank Jones, as the son of a poor man, however, might receive almost nothing from his laboring father.[28]

In the written testimony Ellen reported "that the Lord loved [Jones] but he had had reasons for discouragement." He possessed "a noble, generous disposition" and expected to find the same in his fellow believers but was "disappointed." He had seen wealthy church members profess they were "pilgrims and strangers, yet their heart and treasure were here." Compared to the typical testimony, which directly addressed the subject of the vision, Ellen here used a foil. Having announced her diverting subject and her complaint in general terms, she opened the next paragraph in the second person: "Brother Rumery, you could in many little acts have eased Brother Jones' burden, and never felt it; but for years you have loved money better than religion…." Rumery's problem was his "love of money" and attachment to his large property. "It is like taking out the right eye, cutting off the right arm, to part with this money. You do not realize it, but it is your god." He was blind to "the worth of the soul" and to be faulted for his "close dealing" with poorer church members such as Victor Jones, "making a little something out of them, taking advantage of them when you can." "God hates such things," she warned, "and every single instance wherein you are guilty is written in the book," and would "stand against" him unless he reformed.

Yet the testimony's main concern was the relationship between Rumery and Jones. "I saw that instead of inquiring into Brother Jones' wants, feeling a kindly sympathy for him," White charged, "you have coldly shut up the bowels of compassion toward him." When Rumery "embraced the present truth," Jones expected a "reformation" in a wealthy man known for taking advantage, but was instead "disappointed." In the vision, Jones' hands were "weakened and fell without strength by his side. He felt and said, 'It is no use. It is no use. I can't live religion. I can't keep the truth.'" Stumbling over Rumery's selfishness, Victor Jones had sunk deeper into his despair and his drink, and it was Brother Rumery's fault.

In White's vision, an angel had said to Rumery, "Thou art thy brother's keeper and in a degree responsible for his soul." Instead of neglecting and exploiting his fellow believers such as Jones, Ellen implored, Rumery should be a "brother's keeper," to "bind to your heart with strong Christian cords an erring, burdened brother," even "give your life for a brother" and love him. This would require "noble-hearted" and generous feelings from Rumery—remember her characterization of Jones as "noble" and "generous" in the opening sentences—and

Falling into trance, having a vision, and writing it out was arduous work for a young, illness-prone, and barely educated woman such as Ellen Harmon.

"every noble, generous act" would be "written in the book." This "truth" would "purge" away love of the world, or else the love of money would "crowd out all the noble principles of the soul." Reversing their relation of owner/laborer, White was implying that Jones possessed nobleness of soul that Rumery lacked. Riches were deceitful because they blind the possessor to the needs of others and to "the cause," and made it more difficult to hear "the voice of Jesus" when he called for money. God, "at present," did not call for people to sell their homes, but the time would soon come.

In her closing appeal, White acknowledged it would be hard for Brother Rumery to "deny self and take an upright, generous, noble course." He should do so, in part, because others looked for "a reformation… wrought in you by the truth." She employed a naval idiom often found among religionists of the period: "cut loose, cut loose from this world" or he would lose "heaven and its treasure." "The time has come for you to choose," she insisted.

White's subsequent feelings, not just the vision, were a key part of the testimony and of her rhetorical strategy. Near the start of the letter, she had accused Brother Rumery of a lack of sympathy; "Dear brother," she implored halfway through the letter, "in the vision God gave me as it has unfolded to my mind I have felt distressed, distressed." In the concluding personal note, she poured out her feelings, hoping to evoke his capacity to feel for others: ". . . my heart sank within me. I knew my weakness and knew I should feel the deepest distress for you while relating it to you, and I was afraid I should not have enough strength to do it…." "Afflicted…distressed . . . burdened…trembling," she "could not stay" and deliver her message: a "thorough work" was needed "or you will fail of heaven" because "it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Luke 18:25." White's explanation, that her irregular behavior that morning was a result of her emotional state, was exceeded only by the disclosure that she had "kept the vision from everyone, including my husband"—a statement appearing in no other letter.

In testimonies such as the one to Brother Rumery, Ellen White seemed to chafe at the prosperity achieved by families who then passed it down to their sons, who in turn raised their families and took care of their aged parents—the accepted patrimony system. Holding wealth and investing in the family implicitly denied Adventism's central belief—was this world their home, or were they bound for another? If wealth was achieved at the expense of a poorer Christian brother such as Victor Jones, she had double reason for concern. Ellen also believed that suffering and sacrifice were essential to salvation; wealth not sacrificed would become an obstacle because it closes the heart and divides person from person. The failure of a distinguished convert and pillar of the Monterey community such as Sylsbre Rumery to exhibit compassion thereby risked his salvation and threatened the social values and influence of Adventism.

Conclusion

Ellen White's testimony letters wielded an extraordinary spiritual power among antebellum Adventists. Based on her visions, which no one else saw and no one but she interpreted, their source was inaccessible and mysterious; they could only be admitted or ignored. For 150 years, whenever Adventists said "Mrs. White says…" they were probably quoting from one of her testimonies. Today we read them in their historical and social context and appreciate a unique religious accomplishment: the redemption of the Millerite movement's victims and their transformation into a growing community able to function in a world without end.

The testimonies are best viewed as religious texts mediating the many conflicting spiritual and social forces active in the lives of their readers. At first glance, a testimony letter in a few pages challenged its reader to examine and "cleanse" his or her life—and life records—while waiting for divine examination in the Judgment. Whether read in person, mailed through the post, sent to church leaders for congregational reading, dispersed as pamphlets, or published through the church paper, the testimonies persuaded thousands to reach for a spirituality that saw human life transparently and with feeling. As mirrors for personal reflection, they nurtured aspects of Adventist piety from Sabbath-keeping to child rearing and promoted the integration of belief and practice. In their largest range, as paradigms of community and church policy, they informed and reflected Adventism's spiritual ideals, resolved conflicting viewpoints within the church, and resisted centrifugal forces. As the Whites itinerated, they encountered local tensions such as exploitation between the wealthy and the poor in the

farming town of Monterey. In response, a testimony letter advocating "systematic benevolence" or the concept of the "worthy poor" could mediate acceptable standards of Christian community and the realities of human self-interest under patrimony culture and the emerging market economy.

The moral ideal urged by the testimonies was the serious, self-controlled, sympathetic, self-aware believer whose ordered life balanced faith and feeling, conviction and compassion, improvement and sacrifice, and reflected positively on the Adventist cause—a view of Christian perfection eminently social yet advocating self-responsibility. The community of Adventism reading the testimonies was the knitted product of believing parents and children, the aged and the young, the wealthy and the deserving poor. Families receiving White's approval practiced the headship of the husband and the supportive role of the wife, suppressed their children's passions, and shaped decorous behavior and promoted respect between younger and older generations. Similarly, the ideal church successfully negotiated the space between cold formalism and heated fanaticism, established members and new arrivals from the East and wealthy property owners and laborers. The testimonies expressed the community's difference from the larger world in personal appearance and avoidance of social fads and entertainments. In other words, in a reversal of the powerlessness of the earlier Millerites, the terms of engagement were to be set by the church, not the world.

The testimonies simultaneously addressed both the interior self (or conscience) and the social self and placed a higher value on emotion than on argument. After all, the community of the redeemed did not merely agree—they *felt* themselves to be one. What may surprise modern readers is the degree to which White relied on sentimental appeals—even sympathy for herself and her husband. In difficult cases, such as those of the Monterey church, she reached for unifying metaphors such as growth, melting, and soul education in order to transcend conflicts between loyalty and purity, wealthy and poor, the saving of the soul and the reputation of the church. ■

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2. Ellen G. White to S. Rumery, n. d. Emphasis by underlining in original. Unless otherwise indicated, White letters and manuscripts are from transcriptions on file at the Center for Adventist Research, Andrews University, Michigan, hereafter referred to as CAR.

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9. See Harriet Beecher Stowe's portrayal of slavery through the trope of the sufferings of Christ in *Uncle Tom's Cabin;* or, *Life Among the Lowly*, ed. Ann Douglas (1852; repr., New York: Penguin, 1981).

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12. See Beecher, Catherine E., *A Treatise on Domestic Economy: For Use of Young Ladies at Home*, rev. ed. (1842: New York: Schocken Books, 1977).

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16. Phoebe M. Lamson to James S. White, March 17, 1863; John N. Andrews to James S. White, Nov. 3, 1862.

17. William Carpenter to Ellen G. White, March 21, 1863.

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25. Van Horn, Bert, "Early History of the Church at Monterey, Mich.," *Review and Herald* 96, no. 4 (1919): 22–24; Members of the Day family held positions of supervisor, clerk, and treasurer in the 1840s and 1850s. George T. Lay was Monterey supervisor and S. Rumery was treasurer in 1856. S. H Wilcox held both clerk and treasurer positions. See Johnson, History of Allegan County, 282–292; and "Pledges for Power Press," *Review and Herald* 24 (1857), 192.

26. See 1850 Federal Census, 1860 Federal Census, and 1864 Michigan Agricultural Census for Monterey Township. According to the 1860 Census, two Rumery brothers with their families lived adjacent: Sylsbre (40), worth $4,000, living with Betsey (33), John (15), Andrew (12), Maria (10), Horatio (8) and Lee (3); and Soloman (listed as "Silas") Rumery (33), worth $2,000, living with his wife Julia (32), Joshua (7), and Alice (1).

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28. Schob, David E., *Hired Hands and Ploughboys: Farm Labor in the Midwest, 1815–1860* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 37–40.