

## An Astonishing Chorus of Adventist Voices:

*A Review of The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* | BY ALDEN THOMPSON

**W**e must... not only strike the iron when it is hot but make the iron hot by striking."<sup>1</sup> In my early years, that 1886 Ellen White quote was my motto.

Now that I am old, an 1872 quote is my guiding star: "We must go no faster than we can take those with us whose consciences and intellects are convinced of the truths we advocate. We must meet the people where they are... In reforms we would better come one step short of the mark than to go one step beyond it. And if there is error at all, let it be on the side next to the people."<sup>2</sup>

*The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* is an astonishing publication that illustrates the appropriateness of that 1872 quote. Why? Because the current Ellen White scene is a zoo, and patience is the word.

Not only does this issue of *Spectrum* feature two reviews of the *Encyclopedia*, but also two reviews of *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet*, a 2014 Oxford University Press publication edited by Terrie Aamodt, Gary Land, and Ronald L. Numbers. But there's more. While working on my articles for the *Encyclopedia*, two other publishing events amplified the tumult. Reflecting deep loyalty to Ellen White, *The Remnant Study Bible* was published by Remnant Publications in 2009.<sup>3</sup> Thirty named contributors—including Doug Batchelor, Kenneth Cox, Herbert Douglass, and Clifford Goldstein—submitted their favorite Ellen White quotations to be inserted in blue into the text of a red-letter NKJV.

The second event was the report on a survey of student attitudes toward Sabbath in the *Collegian*, the student newspaper at Walla Walla University (May 13, 2010). With some 330 students responding, one question was: "Which of the following hold some authority in your decision-making process?" From the list provided, family and personal experience got a ninety percent response, the Bible eighty percent, and Ellen White twenty-two percent. That confirmed a comment from one of my students that same year:

"It almost bothers me how you have collected such powerful, insightful, and balanced quotes from Ellen White. I always am wondering why nobody else seems to notice the things... Never until WWU have I read or heard of a helpful Ellen White." Further to the right are those who revere Ellen White but despise the church;<sup>4</sup> one step more takes us to the Calvinist ex-Adventists who reject both Ellen White and her church.

So given this wild mix, how far does the *Encyclopedia* go in meeting the needs of the church? In my view, it goes a long way. The two editors, Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, both on the faculty of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, and their associate Michael Campbell from the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIAS) in the Philippines, are to be commended for a clever strategy—whether intentional or intuitive—to meet a wide range of needs.

Conceiving the project in the late 1990s, George Knight turned it over to Fortin and Moon while still making himself available for consultation. Though intended to be accessible to both Adventists and non-Adventists, the book is primarily for believers. Those who want a clinical disclosure of the "human" Ellen White will be disappointed. But it is an excellent book for believers, both conservatives and progressives. The key, in my view, is the use of signed articles. In recent years, many "official" church voices have turned away from the kind of Adventist pluralism that marked the mid-century publication of *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*.<sup>5</sup> The *SDABC* listed contributors, but did not link them with the biblical books on which they commented. Some material was excellent, some marginal and hastily done. But the *SDABC* consistently laid out the full spectrum of Adventist views on a particular book or issue.

That method is hardly possible anymore because the dominant mood of the church has turned monolithic. But the *Encyclopedia* bucks the trend and uses signed articles. In

my view, the parameters of the church are best defined by diverse but loyal Adventist authors who write and sign their names. That's what we have in the *Encyclopedia*.

Major articles were assigned to trusted stalwarts in the church. The more progressive stuff is there, too, but more subtly. An interview article of Fortin and Moon in the Andrews University *Focus*<sup>6</sup> says as much. When asked about the diversity of authors, Fortin mentions Douglass, Gerard Damsteegt, and Gerhard Pfandl, "known to be strong conservative Adventists." At the other end of the spectrum, he notes, are "very faithful Adventists" – but he gives no names. Except for short pieces written by the editors, everyone signs their articles, regardless of stripe. That's good.

The 1,465 pages of the *Encyclopedia* contain a wealth of information. After the list of the 183 contributors, the preface and abbreviations, nine "General Articles" appear, four of which I find particularly interesting: a biographical sketch of Ellen White by Moon and Denis Kaiser (Andrews University, seminary PhD candidate); a bibliographical essay by Merlin Burt (Andrews University, Center for Adventist Research); a piece by Jud Lake (Southern Adventist University) and Moon, with the intriguing title: "Current Science and Ellen White: Twelve Controversial Statements." Originally prepared by the late Roger Coon, to whom the book is dedicated, Tim Standish (Loma Linda University, Geoscience Institute) and Campbell have assisted with the editing. The final article is by Fortin, "The Theology of Ellen White."

Two major alphabetical sections follow, one biographical, one thematic. Four appendices conclude the book: White's genealogy, a chart showing relationships between her early books, a list of her letters, and a list of her manuscripts, the last two indicating if a letter or manuscript has been published and if so, where.

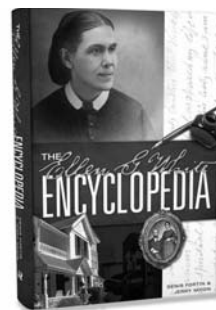
The editors were impeccable in editing the three articles I wrote: "Ellen White's Use of Bible Translations" (three columns); "Ellen G. White's Finances" (twelve columns); and "Prophets and Kings" (two columns). Writing about Ellen

White's finances was an eye-opening experience for me. My initial version was three times longer than requested. The editors cut it down from 6,000 words to 3,800, which is fair enough. But part of what went missing was the "contradictory" stuff. In 1868, for example, she urged an egalitarian wage scale for minister, editor, and physician (*Testimonies for the Church* [T] vol. 1, 640). But in 1885 she argued that it might be necessary to pay a competent press manager "double the wages" of the press foremen (5T 414). That same tendency to avoid sharp contrasts crops up in the Ellen White biographical sketch. For example, Ellen White's alarm at her mother's interest in the non-immortality of the soul is quoted from 1T 39: "Why, mother! cried I, in astonishment, 'this is strange talk for you! If you believe this strange theory, do not let anyone know of it; for I fear that sinners would gather security from this belief, and never desire to seek the Lord'" (*Encyclopedia* 28). But her 180-degree shift on hell is not mentioned in that connection: "The errors of popular theology have driven many a soul to skepticism, who might otherwise have been a believer in the Scriptures. It is impossible for him to accept doctrines which outrage his sense of justice, mercy, and benevolence; and since these are represented as the teaching of the Bible, he refuses to receive it as the word of God" (*The Great Controversy* [GC], 525, 1888, 1911).

Similarly, when discussing the General Conference of 1901, the life sketch omits two of Ellen White's most vivid statements: "All who are educated in the office of publication should see there exemplified the principles of heaven. I would rather lay a child of mine in his grave than have him go there to see these principles mangled and perverted." And, "That these men should stand in a sacred place to be as the voice of God to the people as we once believed the General Conference to be,—that is past."<sup>7</sup> The article by Ross Winkle (Pacific Union College) on the "Voice of God" is nicely balanced. But the life sketch avoids the sharp contrasts.

Turning to a special interest of mine, I want to

**The second of two reviews of:**



*The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, eds. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2013)

**Though intended to be accessible to both Adventists and non-Adventists, the book is primarily for believers.**

explore the role of what I have called “Adventism’s Classic Statements on Inspiration,” the “Introduction” to the GC, pages v–xii (1911) and *Selected Messages (SM)*, vol. 1, pages 15–23 (1958). I included these statements in two of my books: *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers*,<sup>8</sup> and *Escape from the Flames: How Ellen White grew from fear to joy and helped me do it too*.<sup>9</sup> While the “Introduction” to the GC has been available since 1888 (in a form that differs slightly from the 1911 edition), the 1SM statement only became readily accessible in 1958. The GC “Introduction” is helpful, declaring that “men who differed widely” in “mental and spiritual endowments” wrote the Scriptures (page vi). But the really striking quotations are in 1SM. In particular, I doubt if I would have written my book *Inspiration* if it hadn’t been for three quotations:

1. “Everything that is human is imperfect” (20).
2. “Men will often say that such an expression is not like God” (21).
3. “It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired but the men that were inspired” (21).

Debate over the 1SM document was triggered by William Peterson’s 1971 *Spectrum* article on Ellen White’s literary sources in which he argued that Ellen White had not only borrowed Calvin Stowe’s language but also his “ideas.”<sup>10</sup> David Neff disagreed, showing that Ellen White significantly modified Stowe’s ideas in several instances.<sup>11</sup>

My interest here, however, is not sources, but the great difficulty Adventists have had in making peace with the content of Ellen White’s revision of Stowe as published in 1SM. In *Inspiration* I had noted the sharp contrast between Ellen White’s 1886 statement about inspired “men” and M. C. Wilcox’s 1911 statement affirming that it was not the “person” who was inspired, but “the God-breathed Word.”<sup>12</sup> While I had cited the publication gap between 1911 and 1958, I had not then realized that Ellen White had never used any part of her Stowe revision while she was still alive. It is numbered and dated: Ms 24, 1886. But all its finely-tuned phrases simply lay stillborn in the White Estate until Elmshaven scribes began copying White’s manuscripts in the 1930s. Of all people, it was *Review* editor F. M. Wilcox who became eager to get the manuscript out to the church. I say “of all people” because Wilcox was uneasy at the 1919 Bible Conference, gently but firmly resisting the more moderate positions propounded by General Conference president A. G. Daniells.

Concerned that Ellen White’s authority might be undermined, Wilcox frankly stated his classroom philosophy: “I believe there are a great many questions that we should hold back, and not discuss.” “I can not conceive that it is necessary for us to answer every question that is put to us by students or others.”<sup>13</sup>

That is the Wilcox who brought Ellen White’s Ms 24, 1886 (her revision of Stowe) to the church. According to Tim Poirier at the White Estate, the manuscript was released on September 29, 1943, published in *Ministry* in February and March 1944, and added by Wilcox to the 1944 edition of his book *Testimony of Jesus*. I find it almost uncanny to compare the 1934 and 1944 editions.<sup>14</sup> The new chapter includes this almost deadpan introduction to Ms 16, 1888 and Ms 24, 1886: “The following statement by Mrs. E. G. White, on the inspiration of the Scriptures, presents a safe foundation for the Christian’s confidence in God’s Holy Word.”

In 1951, F. D. Nichol included the two manuscripts as an appendix to *Ellen White and Her Critics*.<sup>15</sup> Finally, in 1958 it was published for the whole church in *Selected Messages*, vol. 1.<sup>16</sup>

How much of that can be gleaned from the *Encyclopedia*? Very little. Even the article on Wilcox cites only his 1934 book, not the expanded 1944 edition. But by reading between the lines, we can see how the *Encyclopedia* is continuing the gentle tradition of bringing the more liberating—and more frightening—Ms 24 to the attention of the church. And I believe we must admit that Ms 24 is liberating to some but frightening to others. I will confess that I was startled when I first read the opening chapter on “The Word of God” in the Ministerial Association’s book *Seventh-day Adventists Believe... A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines*.<sup>17</sup> To my amazement, the chapter quotes a paragraph from Ms 24, but omits two key lines: 1) “God as a writer is not represented”; and 2) “It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired but the men that were inspired.” I felt like I had just purchased a car that was missing the engine! This is the same book that initially omitted all references to the all-important preamble to our Fundamental Beliefs, the preamble that declares: “Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language to express the teachings of God’s Holy Word.” I was equally astonished at that omission. It has since been added to the front matter.<sup>18</sup> But the truncated form of Ms 24 remains.

Something similar happens in the *Encyclopedia*. An eleven-column article on “Revelation and Inspiration” is signed by Frank Hasel (Bogenhofen, Austria), one of the contributors to the Adventist Theological Society’s *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, a collection of essays responding to *Inspiration*.<sup>19</sup> His conservative credentials are unquestioned. In his article, he, too, quotes from Ms 24, but omits the words here given in italics: “The Bible is written by inspired men. . . *but it is not God’s mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God as a writer is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God’s penmen not His pen. Look at the different writers.*”

But here the editors have done us a great service by giving us the full statement. By providing diverse perspectives, they produce an impressive Adventist panorama. I am reminded of one of Ellen White’s most powerful diversity statements, the one describing the need for a variety of Bible teachers in our schools. “Different teachers should have a part in the work,” she argues, “even though they may not all have so full an understanding of the Scriptures.” She goes on to apply the same argument to the diversity of Bible writers: “Why do we need a Matthew, a Mark, a Luke, a John, a Paul?” she asks. “It is because the minds of men differ.” The same applies to speakers: “One dwells at considerable length on points that others would pass by quickly or not mention at all. The whole truth is presented more clearly by several than by one.”<sup>20</sup>

In the article by Lake and Moon, “Current Science and Ellen White: Twelve Controversial Statements”—rooted in a document originally prepared by Coon—I was struck by the remarkably open attitude towards issues of inspiration, one that seemed at ease with the views that Ellen White expressed in Ms 24. At the end of the first paragraph under the heading of “Infallible God, but Fallible Prophets,” appears this statement: “For a thorough, biblical exposition of this topic, see “Revelation and Inspiration.” But when one

turns to the article, something remarkable has happened. Hasel has signed off with his name, but then under the same heading of “Revelation and Inspiration” comes a major insertion with this introduction: “*Ellen White’s Statements on Revelation and Inspiration*. Two statements have come to be regarded as Ellen White’s most significant ones regarding the inspiration of the Bible and of her own writings.” Without additional comment but in bold face type, the *Encyclopedia* prints the full statements: the GC, pages v–xii and *Selected Messages*, vol. 1, pages 15–22.

In dealing with my submissions, the editors consistently allowed me to approve whatever they did with them. They made revisions, but with my full approval. Apparently the editors sensed that the church should see the full documents from the pen of Ellen White. But they respected Hasel’s convictions on the matter, so included the documents after his signature, but still under the heading of “Revelation and Inspiration.”

I should also note that Hasel includes in his article one and a third columns under the heading, “Further Reading.” And he covers both sides of the debate, including my two books *Inspiration* and *Escape from the Flames*, as well as the four-part series in the *Adventist Review*, “Adventists and Inspiration” (September 1985) that led to the invitation from the Review and Herald Publishing Association to write *Inspiration*. He does not, however, include a reference to the “Sinai-to-Golgotha” series, a five-part series in the *Adventist Review* (AR) (December 1981) that triggered such a lively reaction that AR editor, Kenneth Wood, dedicated a full issue to the response (July 1, 1982). To my knowledge that is the first time that an Adventist publication has stated clearly that Ellen White had changed her theology, though I did not use the volatile word “change”; I spoke of “growth,” which is safer, but still potentially deadly.<sup>21</sup>

I am grateful to the editors of the *Encyclopedia* for inviting me to participate in this remarkable project. They have served the church well by including such a diverse range of contributors

**Thompson** ➔ continued on page 96...

**By providing  
diverse  
perspectives,  
[the contribu-  
tors] produce  
an impressive  
Adventist  
panorama.**

Thompson → continued from page 61.

and asking us to sign our names. That would be a wonderful disease to infect the whole church. ■

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His books *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* and *Escape from the Flames: How Ellen White Grew from Fear to Joy and Helped Me to Do it Too* have played an important role in the community discussion about Ellen White.

## References

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10. Peterson, William S., “Ellen White’s Literary Indebtedness,” *Spectrum* 3:4 (Autumn 1971), 79.
11. Neff, David, “Ellen White’s Theological and Literary Indebtedness to Calvin Stowe,” unpublished paper, 1979.
12. See Thompson, *Inspiration*, pages 51–52. Milton C. Wilcox was editor of *The Signs of the Times* from 1891 to 1913. The quotation is from page 12 of *Questions and Answers* (1911), a reprint of questions and answers from the *Signs*.
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15. Nichol, Francis D., *Ellen G. White and Her Critics* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assoc., 1951), 651–656.
16. White, Ellen G., *Selected Messages*, vol. 1 (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assoc., 1958), 15–23.
17. Ministerial Association, General Conference of SDA, Seventh-day Adventists Believe... *A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines* (Washington, D.C.: Ministerial Association, General Conference of SDA, 1988), 8. The “Acknowledgment” page indicates that P. G. Damsteegt prepared the “initial draft” of each chapter. With the addition of the 28th Fundamental Belief, a new edition has appeared: *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines* (Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association, General Conference of SDA, 2005), 15.

18. *Ibid.*, v.

19. Holbrook, Frank and Leo Van Dolson, eds., *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1992). Frank Hasel’s essay is entitled “Reflections on the Authority and Trustworthiness of Scripture,” pages 201–220.

20. White, Ellen G., *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students Regarding Christian Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Assoc., 1913), 432.

21. The full Sinai-Golgotha series included the five issues in *Adventist Review* of December 1981 (Dec. 3, 10, 17, 24, 31), the *AR* follow-up issue of July 1, 1982, and another article, “Even the Investigative Judgment Can Be Good News,” published in *Westwind*, the Walla Walla College alumni journal, in Winter (1982), 4–7, 11. The “IJ” article was actually the trigger for the whole series and was a response to Desmond Ford’s claim in his famous Adventist Forum presentation at PUC on October 27, 1979, that there was “no biblical way of proving the Investigative Judgment.” Ford’s stance troubled me because, as I had come to understand it, the IJ doctrine had become an important part of my theology, a theodicy issue rather than a matter of salvation. Thus I saw myself standing in judgment as a witness, not as the accused.

But to my amazement, when I went back to the early Ellen White materials (*Spiritual Gifts*, 1858; *Spirit of Prophecy* vol. 1, 1870), I did not find my position at all. Given the volatility of the material, hundreds of hours went into editing and revising the series. When I came to the “IJ” article that had suffered much at the hands of the *AR* editors, I was too exhausted to take it on, so suggested to Wood that the series run without it. I sensed that he was relieved. Earlier, when I had alerted him to the potential explosiveness of the material, he responded in a letter dated January 16, 1981: “Our readers are quite willing to accept truth if a proper case is made for it.” That editorial nudge from Wood led directly to the explicit listing of these six growth points in part five of the series (Dec. 31, 1981):

**1. Role of the love of God in the great rebellion.** In contrast with *Patriarchs and Prophets*, the early sources do not mention the love of God as a factor in the conflict.

**2. Relationship of free will and the law to the character of God.** Again there is no link in the earlier sources.

**3. The possibility of restoration of Lucifer, even after he had sinned.** In the early sources, there is no hope for Lucifer. Only in *Patriarchs and Prophets* 39 (and also in *The Great Controversy*) does God offer to reinstate him in his office if he would be “willing to return to God, acknowledging the Creator’s wisdom.”

**4. Eternal nature of Christ.** Ellen White was never as strident in her anti-Trinitarian stance as her husband James was (“that old Trinitarian absurdity”), but the early sources clearly indicate that she did not see Christ as fully divine.

**5. Love of the Father for sinners.** “God is love” are the first words of *PP* and the last of *GC*. In *Spiritual Gifts* those lines are missing and she never links love with the Father.

**6. The cross as an illustration of divine self-sacrifice.** In *The Desire of Ages*, Ellen White actually enhanced her emphasis on the substitutionary atonement with its cross pointed heavenward (see “It Is Finished,” chapter 79). But late in life she also turned the cross earthward, drawing on the Gospel of John, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9, NRSV). That earthward perspective is missing from the early sources.

Wood risked much in publishing the series. The late Paul Landa told me that he had asked Arthur White in a public setting for his opinion of the series. White was cryptic: “I wish you hadn’t asked. Ask the editor of the *Review*. He knows what I think.”