

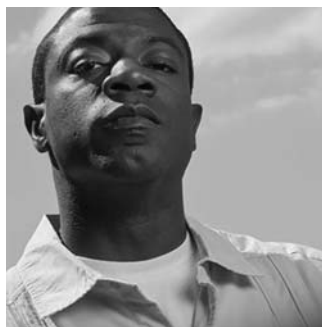
Can The Gift of Prophecy Keep On Giving? | BY JONATHAN BUTLER

The *Gift of Prophecy in Scripture and History*, edited by Alberto R. Timm and Dwain N. Esmond (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald, 2015), is actually a book about Ellen White's prophetic vocation and reminded me of how people get hired. Very often, those responsible for filling a position write the job description with a particular candidate in mind. They interview a myriad of prospective hires. But all the while they are thinking of the especially lustrous individual for whom the job description was originally crafted. With the other hopeful prospects that show up for the interview, the hiring committee is more or less going through the motions. The seemingly "open" job search is actually a *fait accompli*. This book is divided evenly between the biblical study of prophecy in general, and the historical study of White in particular. The biblical essays on the "gift of prophecy," however, amount to a "job description" tailored to White. Each chapter is therefore less an abstract discussion of "the gift of prophecy" than it is an exploration of *her gift*. Both halves of the book seldom stray any real distance from White, and clearly the essayists want her for the "job" of contemporary Adventist prophet.

When he characterizes the Old Testament prophets (Chapter 1), Jeri Moskala is transparently describing Ellen White.¹ Like her, the Hebrew prophets were "*sui generis*, one

of a kind"; they could not manipulate or alter God's message; they offered special insights; they interpreted history; they taught righteousness. Like her, they made accurate predictions of the future, but their prophecies were conditional, so that even when they were "wrong" they were right. But did Old Testament prophets—or White—make mistakes, either in the lives they led or in the messages they delivered? Moskala writes that they did, but argues, "There is a difference between a mistake and a mistake." On the one hand, biblical figures made egregious errors: Abraham lied, Moses murdered, and David committed adultery. On the other hand, their peccadillos were hardly worth mentioning: grammatical gaffes and minor historical inaccuracies. Based on the biblical model, it is not difficult for authors in *The Gift of Prophecy* to concede, in principle, that White erred; it is quite another thing for them to provide an actual example of any significance.²

In noting the many striking parallels between the biblical prophets and White, however, it is important to recognize that White herself had been immersed in these very Scriptures. As a result, she was fully capable of submitting herself as a "job applicant" for prophet, so to speak, whether she did so consciously or unconsciously, presupposing in her own mind the biblical specifications of what she should be like as a prophet. When the essayists in *The Gift of Prophecy* turn the pages of the Bible, they see White's image everywhere, like the Virgin Mary's likeness in a smudged window. But White's similarities to the biblical prophets need not be understood in preternatural terms. After all, no book was more formative of her experience than the Bible. In "applying for the job" of prophet, she therefore knew just what the "job" entailed from a biblical perspective. In effect, she had received the "interview questions" in advance and had come "prepared." The Bible writers, then, had anticipated her, but she also had remembered them.



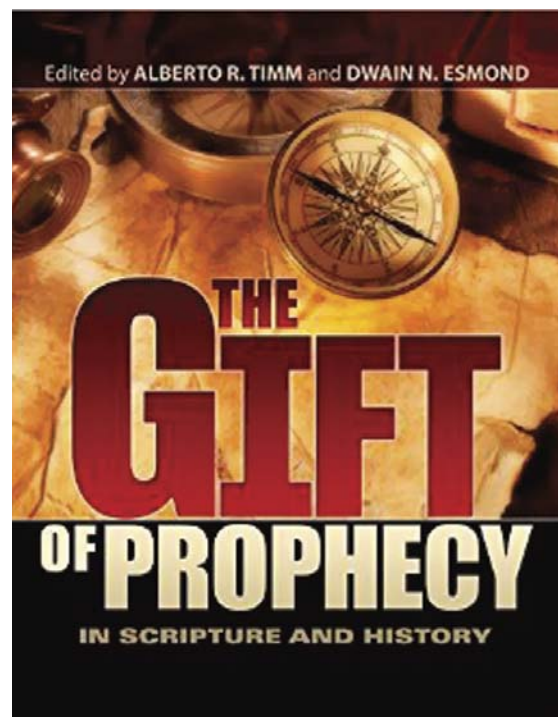
Left, Alberto R. Timm, Co-Editor, Associate Director of the Ellen G. White Estate. Right, Dwain N. Esmond, Co-Editor, Associate Director of the Ellen G. White Estate

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What authors in *The Gift of Prophecy* fail to appreciate adequately—what White herself did not fully understand—is the extent to which she remembered the Scriptures as a person of her time and place, her gender and ethnicity, as well as her religious background and cultural biases. In all fairness to her, prophets of any era rarely recognize that their messages are culturally conditioned. But like them, White was a product of her times. This can be seen as both her most salient qualification as a prophet and, ultimately, her severest limitation. It was her timeliness that made her so compelling to her contemporaries, and it is that same culture-bound timeliness that renders her remote and less relevant to many of her spiritual descendants. How many of us find her *Testimonies for the Church* to be as riveting and moving as her contemporaries did? And it was these *Testimonies*—not the *Conflict* series or the later devotional writings on Christ—that nineteenth-century Adventists equated with the “Spirit of Prophecy.”³ She would not, of course, have accepted an assessment of her prophetic vocation that admitted to its diminishing impact. In her unequivocal view, God had spoken directly to her, not as an echo of her cultural milieu.

The essayists share White’s sense that culture exerted minimal impact on anything divine. Inspired writers were “culturally conditioned” but only in their use of “language, grammar, syntax, thought patterns, metaphors” and in other inconsequential ways. Their substantive message was “transcultural because it comes from above, and not the *Sitz im Leben* context or perspective.”⁴ But such a viewpoint trivializes just how much White’s culture affected her as a prophet. There was far more to her humanity than the awkward fact that, though advocating vegetarianism, she lapsed into meat-eating herself, even consuming gag-worthy oysters.⁵ The New Englander in her seemed to have prompted both her health reforms and some of her diet preferences.

What proves much more significant regarding White’s relationship to her culture is the way in which, like so many of us, she often looked into the Bible and saw what she wanted to see.



***The Gift of Prophecy in Scripture and History*, Alberto R. Timm and Dwain N. Esmond, eds., Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald, 2015. 416 pages.**

When, as a nineteenth-century spokesperson for temperance, she “saw” teetotalism among biblical figures, including Jesus, it was more a case of wishful thinking on her part than sound exegesis.⁶ Or when, as a nineteenth-century anti-Catholic, she clearly “saw” the face of her religious and cultural nemesis—Roman Catholicism—in the opaque symbols of *Revelation*, she had displayed more ethnocentrism than strict Biblicism.⁷ Or when, as a sabbatarian Adventist, she “saw” only her religious community as the “Remnant,” or when, as a prophet, she equated her gift—and no one else’s—with the “spirit of prophecy” in her time, this probably tells us more about White’s visions than John’s.⁸

The essayists find no fault with White’s innocence, which she exhibited throughout her career, of any notion that her culture may have influenced her. In fact, in various ways, she emphatically rejected the idea that it had. On this there is no daylight between how they view White and how she viewed herself. From the early visionary who rebuffed the idea that she’d been mesmerized, to the mature writer who

combated charges of plagiarism, White fiercely, and at times defensively, dismissed the accusation that she'd been inordinately influenced by anyone other than God.⁹ With respect to how her inspiration had been affected by her culture, writers in *The Gift of Prophecy* do not so much provide a critical analysis of the prophet as historians typically do, but instead act more like press secretaries who pass on White's point of view.

But White's very understanding of inspiration was itself a product of nineteenth-century American culture. Her insistence that she had not been influenced was itself a sign that she had been.¹⁰ She clung tenaciously to the idea of her independence, even though, in a series of well-known instances, it did not fit the reality. In the 1860s, she denied reading health reformers before writing her own tracts on health when, in fact, she *had* read them. In the 1880s, she insisted that her visions led her to select the historians who shared her views when, more typically, the historians she read *colored* her visions. In her time, to be inspired implied being an empty slate on which God had inscribed divine messages. There is no more telling example that she was a woman of her times than in the way she embraced this view.¹¹

But she was, after all, anything but an empty slate on which God wrote in immaculate prose. Her slate had been filled and refilled by her own life experiences. This tangle of the religious, the psychological, the social and cultural had

scrawled itself there by way of sermons and exhortations, books, pamphlets and newspapers, as well as letters and conversations. She also fell ill and depressed, she prayed and sang, she took walks and carriage rides, she travelled great distances. And it was all these very human experiences, both extraordinary and ordinary, that scripted her visions. It is not easy to understand the process. The gifted novelist tries to describe where the ideas came from for their book. To some degree, they were autobiographical. They also seemed to have come out of nowhere. As they say, there was both perspiration and inspiration. Writing is work; it is also a gift. From time to time, White attempted to relate her own creative process, not as a novelist, but as a visionary. For her the visions were brilliant and spectacular divine events, and each time they occurred it was natural for her to lose track of their human aspects. Ironically, the visionary herself proved an unreliable witness as to the nature of her visions. This was a way her humanity surfaced.¹²

The Gift of Prophecy covers new ground, and for this it should be applauded. We come across material in this book that we might not have expected to find in a Seventh-day Adventist study of prophecy. If we find fault with the way that material is interpreted, we should nonetheless appreciate finding it in the book. We read in Moskala and Larry Lichtenwalter (Chapters 1 and 8) of striking contrasts between the classic Old Testament prophets and the prophets described in First Corinthians 14. We gain insights from Chantal and Gerald Klingbeil's use of the "cognitive sciences and psychology" regarding the emotions of the prophets (Chapter 6), however unexpected such an interdisciplinary approach might be for this book. We learn from Richard Davidson (Chapter 7) that White exegeted Scripture as though she knew the original biblical languages, when she did not.

We read in the study by John Reeve and Rodrigo Galiza (Chapter 10) of ecstasies, visionaries, and prophets in the Early and Medieval Churches that a close reading of White's *Great Controversy* or her other historical writings do not

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Though this facetiously illustrates the point, Ellen White has remained the only recognized prophet within Seventh-day Adventism.

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Julian of Norwich (c. 1342–c. 1416), English mystic

reveal. Likewise, we face the fact in Denis Fortin's essay (Chapter 11) that the magisterial Reformers, whom White embraced, rejected the very prophetic gift that she possessed. We also learn from Michael Campbell (Chapter 12) that, if sixteenth-century Reformers would have had little use for White's gift, nineteenth-century Americans provided a lush environment for her kind of prophetic claims. Judging by the extensiveness of my own marginal scribbling, I would expect there is much for readers to learn from Theodore Levterov on the early acceptance of White as a prophet (Chapter 13), or the nature of her authority throughout her later career in Merlin Burt's essay (Chapter 14), or her view of the Scriptures, along with her use of them, as covered by Alberto Timm and Frank Hasel (Chapters 15 and 16), and, inevitably, her literary borrowing dealt with by Jud Lake (Chapter 17). Though these latter chapters may be mostly review for serious students of White, they will be read by conservative Adventists as much for their slant as for their content.

As a whole, *The Gift of Prophecy* points to wider vistas on prophecy, both biblically and historically, than Adventists are used to seeing.

But its authors fail to take full advantage of their more expansive purview. Instead, they tend to adopt a rather traditional view of prophecy when it comes to White herself. Examples of such parochialism permeate the volume. To categorize the biblical prophets or White as *sui generis* or one of a kind, for example, implies that prophetic experiences can only be understood by using the unique tools of religious methodology. Indeed, one must presumably be a believer in the prophets to understand them fully; one must be an Adventist to believe in White. Adventists are fine with such an approach when it comes to explaining their prophet, but are at a loss when Mormons make claims for Joseph Smith on the same grounds. This line of thought also rules out drawing on disciplines other than religion—biology, psychology, or sociology—for insights into visionaries.¹³ The Klingbeils, then, surprise us by enlisting cognitive psychology to explain the emotions of the prophets. They use cognitive psychology, however, only by cherry-picking the discipline. They employ it to explain the emotional response of the prophets to their visions but not to account for the visions themselves.

In a careful analysis of prophecy in the Corinthian community, Lichtenwaller appears to see it as a template for Adventism's prophetic experience. Yet where was—and is—the allowance among Adventists, including White herself, for a multiplicity of prophets, as was found in Corinth? And where was—and is—the expectation among Adventists that they should pass judgment on their prophet, as the Corinthians did on theirs, sorting out truth from error in her writings?¹⁴ Surveying White's uncanny insights into biblical narratives without the advantage of knowing the original languages, Davidson reports many "burning heart" experiences as an Old Testament scholar who can only account for White's glosses on Scripture as miraculous. He admits, however, that he has not yet researched the books in her library (and she read other books as well).¹⁵ He will need to do so for his thesis to be taken seriously. We will

look forward to his sequel.

The chapter on the gift of prophecy in the Early and Medieval Churches and the one on the Reformation are as innovative and informative as any in the volume. Reeve and Galiza recognize the gift of prophecy among groups like the Montanists, the Donatists, and the Waldenses. They acknowledge the gift as well in women like Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich. But they also introduce us to a case of strange bedfellows.¹⁶ The fact that the Catholic Church sought to repress generations of prophets seems oddly suggestive of the traditional Adventist penchant for ignoring them. Adventists, after all, never wanted to sanction false prophets. Reeve and Galiza do credit LeRoy Froom, A.G. Daniells, and George Rice for tracing prophetic succession throughout Christian history. But they chide Froom and

as an example, if Hildegard cannot be included among the “true” prophets, how can White make the cut? As to a succession of prophets from the second to the nineteenth centuries, Froom and Daniells, to their credit, attempted to do what White and other early Adventists unfortunately neglected doing. Nowhere in *The Gift of Prophecy* do the authors ask why White, in searching for Adventism’s useable past in *The Great Controversy*, should have affected such a profound historical amnesia with regard to prophets between Bible times and her own. Why would she have failed to embrace her kindred spirits—her fellow prophets, often themselves women—throughout Christian history?

Campbell narrates a colorful travelogue through the prophet-rich landscape of American religious history in which White could easily



Left to right, Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), German mystic; John Bunyan (1628–1688), author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*; Ellen G. White (1827–1915). In all the illustrations above, the inspired writers look heavenward for inspiration; no human sources of their writings are pictured. Placing herself in the good company of other mystics, White adopted this pose a number of times.

Daniells for allowing “prophets” into the tent who do not belong there.¹⁷

In his helpful discussion of prophecy at the margins of the Reformation, Fortin is similarly critical of Froom and Daniells. He, too, wants a sharper definition of prophecy that does more to separate the wheat from the tares.¹⁸ This makes sense, but only if White herself must undergo the same level of scrutiny. Just

have been lost in the shuffle. As a postscript, he asserts her uniqueness without offering credible support as to why.¹⁹ Leverov reviews White's importance in the formation of early Sabbath-keeping Adventism. At that time White was criticized, from the outside, for being an extrabiblical and marginal liability for Adventists.²⁰ Burt follows her through later Seventh-day Adventist history when she sought to reach the

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outsiders with a more traditional evangelical emphasis.²¹ These two chapters, back to back, demonstrate not only White's capacity to reinvent herself, but her ability to provide Adventists with radically different reasons to believe in her. It is the later White who aspired, as a writer, to be less than inspired, in a way, and simply inspirational. Her literary borrowing reflected the change. The early White leaned heavily on fellow Adventists; the later White was more open to source material from non-Adventist biblical, historical, and devotional writers.²² Jud Lake does his best with the provocative question of her literary indebtedness. Unfortunately, though he reflects an awareness of the historical revisionism of the 1970s and early 1980s, he does not sufficiently respond to it or integrate it into his argument. But there is no way of adequately addressing this topic without a proper appreciation for the work of Ronald Numbers, Donald McAdams, William Peterson, Walter Rea, Fred Veltman, and Ron Graybill.

Like the American political scene, historians of Seventh-day Adventism—and biographers of Ellen White—seem to have polarized. On the “left,” non-Adventist historians have discovered White, while ex-Adventists and still-Adventists have rediscovered her. For them she deserves the “job” as prophet, but her “resume” reveals the psychological and cultural baggage of an ordinary and flawed person. On the “right,” conservative Adventist academics, pastors, and administrators argue for the White “hire” as a prophet because she is such a “stand-out candidate” that she may as well have fluttered down as an angel

from above. The two factions need to be talking to each other, not past each other. In political terms, *The Gift of Prophecy* speaks from the “right” to the faithful who form the base of the party. It is unlikely that anyone other than the Adventist base will read the book. By way of

contrast, the “left” recently published *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet* (lower left), edited by Terrie Aamodt, Gary Land, and Ronald Numbers (Oxford University Press, 2014). This book has found a general readership, both widening and deepening appreciation for White beyond the reaches of Adventism.

The church has more than enough writing on White for the base. It is now ready to benefit from books on her for the general public. It is an important way the gift of prophecy can keep on giving. ■

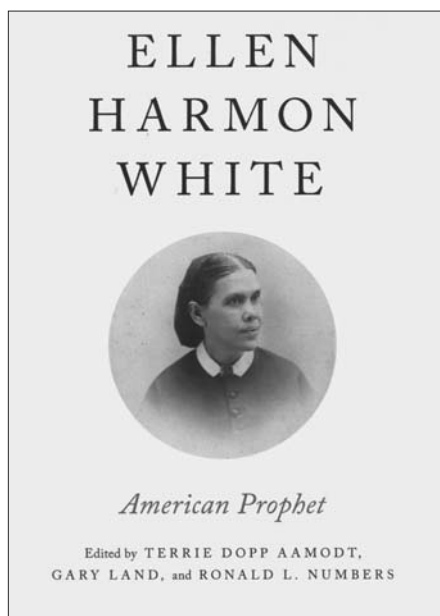
Jonathan M. Butler obtained a PhD in church history at the University of Chicago and authored *Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling: Heaven and Hell in American Revivalism 1870–1920* (1991). Most of his scholarly publications, however, have focused on Millerism and Adventism. He coedited (with



Ronald L. Numbers) *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (1987). He contributed two chapters to Terrie Dopp Aamodt, Gary Land, and Ronald L. Numbers, eds., *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet* (2014).

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1. *The Gift of Prophecy in Scripture and History*, eds. Alberto R. Timm and Dwain N. Esmond (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald, 2015), 11–42, esp. 12, 27–31.
2. *Ibid.*, 31–32.
3. See “Attitudes Towards the Testimonies,” in *Ellen G. White, Selected Messages* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1958, 1986, 2006), 1:40–48; see also Herbert C. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1998), 117–121, 172–174.
4. *The Gift of Prophecy*, 40.
5. Ronald L. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White*, 3rd Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 231, 257.
6. Doug Morgan, “Society,” in *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet*, eds. Terrie Dopp Aamodt, Gary Land, and Ronald L. Numbers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), esp. 231, 235, and 238; Richard Rice, “Tempered Enthusiasm: Adventists and the Temperance Movement,” *Spectrum*, 44 (Winter 2016): 41–55; Ellen G. White, *Temperance* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1949), 92, and 97–98.
7. Jonathan Butler, “Second Coming,” in *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet*, esp. 184–192; Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948), 5:449–554; and Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan* (Oakland,



CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1917), 703–21.

8. Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church*, rev. ed. (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1995), 172–174, 630–631; James R. Nix, “Seventh-day Adventism—A Unique Prophetic Movement,” unpublished manuscript, www.whiteestate.org/resources/nix/unique_movement.html; Tim Poirier, “The Spirit Still Speaks,” Spirit of Prophecy Sabbath Sermon, October 16, 2004, www.whiteestate.org/sop/2004/sop04-sermon/; Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1917), 587; *Testimonies for the Church*, 5:45–62.

9. For White’s dismissiveness of personal and cultural influences on her, see Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts. My Christian Experiences, Views and Labors in Connection with the Rise and Progress of the Third Angel’s Message* (Battle Creek, MI: Published by James White, 1860), 49–52; Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, I:26–29; Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, III:109–114; see also W.C. White, *Selected Messages*, III, Appendix A, 433–440.

10. On the “illuminist spirit” of her era, see David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 256–257.

11. In the 1860s, White rebuffed the suggestion that her health writings relied on contemporary health reformers rather than God’s revelations to her, in Ellen G. White, “Questions and Answers,” *The Review and Herald* (October 8, 1867): 260–261. Numbers undercuts her narrative by documenting her reliance on Larkin Coles, James Jackson, and Russell Trall, in *Prophetess of Health*, 134–137. For the way White cites authors as if they were “words spoken to me by an angel,” see Ronald D. Graybill, “E.G. White’s Literary Work: An Update,” (transcript of presentations made at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Nov. 15–19, 1981), 7–9. For her claims of intellectual and literary independence, see Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948), 5:67; *Selected Messages*, III:63; for historians who discredit White’s narrative on her literary practices, see William S. Peterson, “A Textual and Historical Study of Ellen G. White’s Account of the French Revolution,” *Spectrum*, 2 (Autumn 1970): 57–69; see also Donald R. McAdams, “Ellen G. White and the Protestant Historians,” (unpublished manuscript, 1977); Eric Anderson summarizes the 234-page McAdams manuscript in “Ellen G. White and the Protestant Historians,” *Spectrum*, 9 (July 1978): 23–26.

12. Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, III:34–61.

13. Ann Taves makes this argument in *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 3–5.

14. Taves reflects on why the very earliest Adventists committed to one visionary rather than multiple authorities, in *Fits, Trances, & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 163. Throughout her life as a prophet, White unflinchingly discouraged the idea of a multiplicity of Adventist visionaries, in *Selected Messages*, III:340–341; she also refuted the notion that there were degrees of inspiration, either in the Bible or in her writings, or that aspects of her writings could be challenged; in the way of inspired writings, it was all or nothing; see, *Selected Messages*, I:17, 18, and *Testimonies for the Church*, 5:671.

15. *The Gift of Prophecy*, 166.

16. *Ibid.*, 210–211, 212, 214–215.

17. *Ibid.*, 209–211.

18. *Ibid.*, 227–231.

19. *Ibid.*, 245.

20. *Ibid.*, 253–254, 261–264.

21. *Ibid.*, 275–277.

22. George R. Knight provides an overview of her writing life in *Meeting Ellen White: A Fresh Look at Her Writings, and Major Themes* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996), 91–106; on how her books were written, see Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord*, 444–454; for an example of the “later” White and literary borrowing, see Fred Veltman, “The Desire of Ages Project,” *Ministry*, LXII (October 1990): 4–7. It is not always easy to parse the difference between the “early” and “later” White with regard to literary dependence; White’s *Great Controversy*, for example, evolved over several decades and underwent major literary changes, drawing upon both Adventist and non-Adventist authors. As it turned out, however, White leaned heavily upon Adventist icon Uriah Smith for many of her non-Adventist sources; see Ronald D. Graybill, “How Did Ellen White Choose and Use Historical Sources? The French Revolution Chapter of *Great Controversy*,” *Spectrum*, 4 (Summer 1972): 49–53.

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