

Ellen G. White and Sources The Plagiarism Debate – 125 Years Later

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2012

[A condensed version of this paper is published in
Understanding Ellen White, Merlin Burt, ed., pp. 145-165.]

Ellen White used the writings of others in her books, articles, letters, and manuscripts. While that statement is undeniably true, what has remained disputed over the past 125 years are her reasons for so doing, the candidness of her acknowledgments, and the implications of such usage for her claim of inspiration.

The first part of this chapter summarizes the plagiarism allegations and provides a brief history of responses to those allegations, with special emphasis on the discussion during Ellen White's active ministry and that of her associates. The second part summarizes present understandings of Ellen White's use of sources, including contrast and comparison with the historical discussion.

I. Historical Summary

1887 – 1907
1907 – 1933
1933 – 1970
1970 – 2012

1887 – 1907

The genesis of the plagiarism charge has been credited to former Adventist minister D. M. Canright,¹ although there is evidence of earlier questioning of Mrs. White's use of sources.² The first known published criticism of her copying is Canright's article in the October 8, 1887, issue of the *Michigan Christian Advocate*:

She often copies, without credit or sign of quotation, whole sentences and even paragraphs, almost word for word, from other authors. (Compare "Great Controversy," page 96, with "History of the Reformation," by D'Aubigne, page 41.) This she does page after page. Was D'Aubigne also inspired?³

¹ Ron Graybill, "D. M. Canright in Healdsburg, 1889: The Genesis of the Plagiarism Charge," *Insight*, Oct. 21, 1980, 7-10.

² See Ellen White, "Questions and Answers," in *Review and Herald*, Oct. 8, 1867; J. White in *Life Sketches* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Steam Press, 1880), 328, 329; J. H. Kellogg, "Interview," Oct. 7, 1907, 34-36 (pagination from 1986 reprint, "The Kellogg File 1907" (Tempe, Ariz.: Omega Historical Research Society, 1986)), EGWE-GC DF 213.

³ Cited in F. D. Nichol, *Ellen G. White and Her Critics* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assoc., 1951), 417.

The next year this brief accusation was expanded to include the specific charge of “plagiarism” in Canright’s first edition of *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced*:

She often copies, without credit or sign of quotation, whole sentences, paragraphs and even pages, word for word, from other authors. Compare “Great Controversy,” page 96, with “History of the Reformation,” by D’Aubigne, page 41. Indeed, her last book, “Great Controversy,” which they laud so highly as her greatest work, is merely a compilation from Andrew’s [*sic*] History of the Sabbath, History of the Waldenses by Wylie, Life of Miller by White, Thoughts on Revelation by Smith, and other books. I have compared many pages from all these and find that she has taken from these word for word and page after page. She gives no credit to these authors but claims it all as a revelation from God! She is a literary thief. Webster says: “Plagiarism:—A thief in literature; one who purloins another’s writings and offers them to the public as his own.” Exactly what she does.⁴

In his second edition, published in 1889, Canright included as support the investigations of the recent Healdsburg, California, Pastor’s Union,⁵ which, he wrote, “proves her guilty of stealing her ideas and matters from other authors.” Interestingly, he omitted the quote from Webster and the specific mention of “plagiarism” in this and subsequent editions,⁶ although it features prominently in his later *Life of Mrs. E. G. White* (1919).⁷

How did Ellen White’s contemporaries respond to these allegations? At the public debates in Healdsburg, Elders W. M. Healey and J. N. Loughborough offered five lines of defense:

- That Canright had overstated the amount of copying. This was supported by publishing parallel columns of White’s writings with her alleged sources, showing greater selectivity in her borrowing than the impression that had been left by Canright.
- When writing on matters of historical record, “if each party told the truth in the case there must of necessity be similarity in the facts stated.”
- The copying presented dealt with “*matters of fact*, and not in any sense a copying of *ideas or reasoning*.”
- Believers have recognized copying among the Bible writers “without [their] being subject to the charge of being plagiarists.”
- In contrast to Mrs. White’s borrowing of “facts,” a plagiarist will quote “ideas and arguments” without giving any acknowledgment to the “real author” of what is claimed

⁴ D. M. Canright, *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Kalamazoo Publishing Co., 1888), 44.

⁵ See discussion of the debates in Graybill, *op cit*.

⁶ Canright, *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced*, Second Ed. (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1889), 139.

⁷ Canright, *Life of Mrs. E. G. White* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co., 1919), chapter 10, “A Great Plagiarist.”

as one's own—"Exhibit A" being the virtual reproduction of Moses Hull's *Bible From Heaven*, under the name of D. M. Canright.⁸

Consideration of these and other responses will be given in the second part of this chapter. From 1887, we advance 20 years for the next public record of plagiarism charges, the period of the "Battle Creek controversy."

1907 - 1933

The earliest discussions of Ellen White's use of sources up to and including this time appear to have been limited to her writings on history and health, specifically *The Great Controversy*, *Sketches From the Life of Paul*, and the series *Health, or How to Live*.⁹ Two Battle Creek physicians—Charles E. Stewart and John Harvey Kellogg—reintroduced the plagiarism question in 1907.

Stewart outlined his "evidences of plagiarism" in a letter to Ellen White sent through W. C. White, May 9, 1907.¹⁰ It consisted of illustrations of copying found in *Sketches from the Life of Paul* and *The Great Controversy*, with the suggestion of similar copying in *The Desire of Ages*. In an expanded version printed later that year, Stewart reacted against "various explanations" that had been offered for the obvious similarities between Mrs. White's books and other authors. First, that it was the "fault of the proofreader" he found to be an insufficient argument because the proofreader's duty is to "follow copy," not insert quotation marks where none are found in the manuscript. Second, quotation marks could not even be "readily used" due to the fact that in many instances thoughts are paraphrased and not quoted verbatim. Third, Ellen White's acknowledgment of her use of other authors in her Preface to the 1888 edition of *The Great Controversy* was merely the result of a protest by "a prominent member of the denomination" against "sending out literature in this manner."

He summarized by posing a question to Mrs. White in what appears to be as charitable a fashion as he deemed possible: "Is that special light you claim to have from God revealed to you, at least to some extent, through your reading the various commentaries and other books treating of religious subjects?"

Kellogg, in his parting interview with Battle Creek Church elders, also in 1907, made clear that he was that "prominent member of the denomination" who had protested to W. C. White concerning *The Great Controversy*'s use of Wiley's *History of the Waldenses*. Apparently also

⁸ "False Charges Refuted," Healdsburg *Enterprise*, Mar. 13, 1889.

⁹ As per Canright, Kellogg. In his 1907 interview, Kellogg speaks of *The Desire of Ages* and "other books." No earlier mention of borrowing in *The Desire of Ages* or other books (apart from *The Great Controversy* and *Health, or How to Live*, has been found.

¹⁰ Stewart's introductory letter to W. C. White is dated May 8, 1907. The May 9 letter was published five months later, with some expansion, as "A Response to An Urgent Testimony from Mrs. Ellen G. White Concerning Contradictions, Inconsistencies, and Other Errors in Her Writing" (Battle Creek, Mich.: The Liberty Missionary Society, 1907)—commonly referred to as "the Blue Book." The publisher's Preface states that the author of the letter (unnamed in the booklet) was not responsible for its appearance in print.

the source of Stewart's rebuttal to the "fault of the proofreader" defense, Kellogg opined that "it would not have been proper to put [these excerpts] in quotation marks when there were so many words and phrases changed; they were not quotations; they were borrowed. They were plagiarisms and not quotations. There is a difference between plagiarism and quotation. . . . If you should put it in quotation marks, it would be telling an untruth, because you would be representing this thing as being word for word from the author when it is not word for word from the author at all."¹¹

Kellogg went on to quote W. C. White as responding, "Don't you think that when Mother sees things, runs across things that agree with what she has seen in vision, that it is all right for her to adopt it?" Kellogg disagreed, replying, "No, not without giving credit for it. It may be all right for her to quote it and make use of it, but she ought to put quotation marks on and tell where she got it, and should say this is in harmony with what she had 'seen.'" She had no right to incorporate it with what she had 'seen' and make it appear that she has seen it first of all."

Kellogg called Ellen White's statement in the Preface to the new edition merely a "crawl out." Nor did their explanation "help the case at all about other books." He concluded by informing the elders that they probably didn't know that Ellen White had borrowed from Coles' *Philosophy of Health* in her *Health, or How to Live*. To the contrary, Elder Amadon responded, "I knew a large share of it was borrowed."¹²

What responses did Ellen White's supporters offer to this round of criticisms? Because Kellogg's interview was stenographically recorded but not publicly disseminated at the time, there is no record of any direct response to his comments. Stewart's letter, however, was published anonymously a few months later, and led to discussions among the "Elmshaven" staff and certain General Conference leaders on how best to deal with the questions raised—which involved considerably more than the plagiarism issue.

Notes from these discussions suggest that responses to specific questions be assigned to various named individuals, including W. C. White, A. G. Daniells, W. W. Prescott, or simply "the brethren in Washington." Regarding the plagiarism question in particular, it was agreed that "W. C. White shall prepare quite a full and frank statement of the plans followed in preparing manuscripts for publication in book form, including (if Sister White gives her consent) a statement of the instruction which Sister White received in early days as to her use of the productions of other writers." The plan continued, "This matter will then be forwarded to Washington for criticism and suggestions, with a view to its publication in leaflet form."¹³ A parenthetical note offered this additional suggestion: "Show how higher critics claim that Old

¹¹ Kellogg, "Interview," 34.

¹²Ronald Numbers, author of *Prophetess of Health*, attributes his interest in Ellen White's health reform sources to his accidental discovery of Kellogg's personal copy of Coles' volume, in which he had marked passages paralleling Mrs. White's writings. See Ronald L. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health* (Knoxville, Tenn: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), xv.

¹³ "Memorandum of Plans Agreed Upon in Dealing With 'The Blue Book,'" 2. (EGWE-GC DF 213)

Testament writers were plagiarists, etc.,” echoing an earlier defense offered by Loughborough and Healey during the Canright debates.¹⁴

A review of denominational publications in the years immediately following Stewart’s letter does not yield any article or leaflet on the plagiarism question. Responses seem to have been given verbally or through meetings with interested parties. A. G. Daniells summarized the five-pronged approach he took in publicly meeting the plagiarism allegation as follows:

- A writer’s use of another’s thoughts and words does not necessarily make him or her a plagiarist “in either motive or spirit.”
- Given the voluminous writings of Ellen White, she had no need to “purloin” the writings of others.
- The themes and subject matter of her books were unique.
- Ellen White explained the reasons for her use of others’ writings in her Preface to *The Great Controversy*.
- Ellen White may have copied material from Conybeare and Howson’s *Life and Epistles of St. Paul* without inserting quotation marks that would have alerted the stenographer, the editor, or the publisher of her use of their work.¹⁵

Still, the need for a “clean, clear-cut statement” from W. C. White and his mother was urged—something the General Conference officers could incorporate into a fuller response.¹⁶

In July 1907, W. C. White wrote to M. N. Campbell, pastor of the Battle Creek church, responding to the plagiarism and suppression charges against *Sketches from the Life of Paul* which had been publicized through one of the Battle Creek newspapers. White acknowledged that a statement similar to what appeared in the author’s Preface to *The Great Controversy* should have been made in *Sketches from the Life of Paul*, faulting his “lack of experience in the publishing work that such acknowledgment was not made.”¹⁷ White reviewed further circumstances connected with the book and concluded his letter by advising Campbell that what he had written was not for publication but for his own information and that of the Battle Creek officers, presumably in meeting the criticisms. “A printed statement regarding this matter,” he wrote, “will be brought out soon by some officer of the General Conference.”

So far as is known, no such statement was issued by either the “Elmshaven” office or the General Conference until 1933 when E. S. Ballenger’s renewed agitation of the plagiarism charge led to

¹⁴ “Memoranda, Stewart Tract,” 4. (EGWE-GC DF 213)

¹⁵ A. G. Daniells to W. C. White, June 24, 1907.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ W. C. White to M. N. Campbell, July 30, 1907. He pointed out that *Life of Paul* was the first Ellen White book to be issued after James White’s death, and that “the management of her business affairs was new to me.”

the printing of “Brief Statements Regarding the Writings of Ellen G. White,” prepared by W. C. White and D. E. Robinson.¹⁸

Before reviewing the discussion of the 1930s, however, three preceding events should be noted. First, Ellen White’s new edition of *The Great Controversy*, published in 1911, provided opportunity for W. C. White to explain his mother’s use of historians and the role her assistants played in supplying correct references to what was quoted. W. C. White presented his explanation in a letter addressed to “Our General Missionary Agents,” and again orally at the General Conference Fall Council, October 30, 1911. Ellen White signaled her approval of White’s comments by writing to the editor of the *Review*, “I think he has presented the matter correctly and well.”¹⁹

Second, Canright’s charge of plagiarism was revived in 1919 with his publication of *Life of Mrs. E. G. White*. The two or three paragraphs in *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced* were expanded to an 18-page chapter, “A Great Plagiarist,” the bulk of which reprinted Dr. Stewart’s 1907 letter as published in the “Blue Book.”

Third, the Bible and History Teachers’ Council, following the 1919 Bible Conference, included a discussion of Ellen White’s use of sources, particularly as it related to the question of inerrancy and revisions in her writings.²⁰

1933 - 1970

E. S. Ballenger’s *Gathering Call* publications marked the next major public debate regarding Ellen White’s alleged plagiarism.

Ballenger included exhibits from Stewart’s letter, additional examples of copying, allegations of “stolen illustrations,” and unfavorable reports from various unnamed individuals on how Ellen White did her writing.²¹ Among other incidents, Ballenger related that “just recently we received the best of evidence that Fannie Bolton wrote ‘Steps to Christ’ without any dictation or assistance from Mrs. White whatever. It was her product in toto, but was published as Mrs. White’s production.” Miss Bolton had died six years earlier, making personal verification of such an allegation impossible, but the charge—and a host of others reported by Ballenger—meant increasing questions for the “Elmshaven” staff, which in 1933 consisted of W. C. White (78), Doris E. Robinson (53), and Arthur L. White, who had begun working in the office three years earlier at age 22.

¹⁸ W. C. White and D. E. Robinson, “Brief Statements Regarding the Writings of Ellen G. White,” (St. Helena, Calif.: “Elmshaven Office,” 1933). Citations in this article follow the pagination of the June 4, 1981 *Adventist Review* reprint.

¹⁹ W. C. White’s statement is reprinted in *Selected Messages*, book 3, 433-440. Ellen White’s letter is reprinted on pages 123-124.

²⁰ See the discussion on August 1, 1919, pages 1243-1254.

[<http://www.adventistarchives.org/docs/RBC/RBC1919-08-01/index.djvu>]

²¹ E. S. Ballenger, *The Gathering Call*, Sept. 1932 and Mar/Apr 1933.

Ballenger, as did Canright before him, presented a barrage of allegations against Ellen White and the denomination in general, of which plagiarism was but one. These, together with the challenges of the Adventist Reform movements, the newly formed “Shepherd’s Rod,” and other elements, led to appeals by W. C. White and Robinson to General Conference leaders for proper “Defense Literature” to meet the many and varied attacks. The “Elmshaven” staff took up the task of preparing responses to key Ellen White-related issues, for which they sought counsel from the “leading brethren.”²²

Responses from the “Elmshaven” office relating to the plagiarism charges included: “The Evolution of ‘Great Controversy’” (1932), “Brief Statements Regarding the Writings of Ellen G. White” (1933), “Was Mrs. E. G. White A Plagiarist?” (1936), “Integrity of Mrs. White as an Author” (1936). These responses were reviewed and refined by select church leaders in Washington, providing at the same time both helpful input and frustrating delays in the efforts of the “Elmshaven” office to meet the objections.

The cumulative lines of defense coming from these 1930s responses included these points:²³

- Ellen White received revelations (“light”) that constituted the basic sources for her writings.
- “It is not necessary, nor does God always give direct revelation as a substitute for knowledge that may be gained by using the powers with which He has entrusted His creatures.”
- Her usage of sources was “incidental” to the unique themes found in her writings—particularly the conflict between the forces of good and evil. Ellen White read and made use of “good and reliable historians” to provide convincing evidence for non-believers of the portrayal of events she had seen in vision or that were in harmony with views she wished to present. “Her copying from historians was a matter of convenience, and not a matter of necessity.”
- Ellen White had received divine instruction regarding the selection of “gems of truth” from her reading: “In her early experience when she was sorely distressed over the difficulty of putting into human language the revelations of truths that had been imparted to her, she was reminded of the fact that all wisdom and knowledge comes from God and she was assured that God would bestow grace and guidance. She was told that in the reading of religious books and journals, she would find precious gems of truth expressed in acceptable language, and that she would be given help from heaven to recognize these and to separate them from the rubbish of error with which she would sometimes find them associated.” This appears to be the statement those responding to the Stewart letter

²² The relationship between the Estate and the General Conference was a topic that generated its own complications, as the way was being laid for the Trustees of the Estate to form a corporation separate from the General Conference yet financially supported by the same. See James R. Nix, “A History of the Ellen G. White Estate,” (Silver Spring, MD: unpublished paper, 2003), 36-45.

²³ All the summarizations and quotations that follow are taken from the four documents named above.

in 1907 had earlier requested W. C. White to include in a response to be printed in leaflet form.²⁴

- “The pioneers in the Seventh-day Adventist work regarded truth as common property.”
- “We find that writers of the Bible used the language of other Bible writers without giving credit.”
- It is unfair to apply current standards of “literary courtesy” to writers in the 1880s. Ellen White “acted without knowledge of the literary standards that would count a moderate use of others’ writings as unfair or worthy of condemnation.” Contemporary authorities were quoted showing that “plagiarism” involves more than the mere uncredited use of another’s language. “One who freely appropriates the writings of another without giving credit is called a plagiarist. If this is done with the intent to deceive or to increase financial gain, it is plainly censurable.” Ellen White had no such intent, as is evidenced by her use of familiar and widely read authors. Furthermore, she gave acknowledgment of using sources in her Preface to *The Great Controversy*, and instructed that quotation marks be inserted where they could be used.
- The quantity of quoted matter has been greatly exaggerated by critics, and the nature of it is descriptive, historical, or relating to prophetic and doctrinal exposition.
- The charge of “stolen illustrations” [artwork] is refuted by correspondence negotiating their purchase.
- The charge that *Steps to Christ* had been written by Fannie Bolton “in toto” is refuted by proving the existence of earlier (pre-Bolton) Ellen White sources for its material.
- Regarding *Sketches from the Life of Paul*, there had never been a lawsuit or threat of lawsuit. Nor had there ever been an effort to recall the book. It was a decision of expediency by the publishers not to take the time to properly identify quoted passages in the manuscript.

Plagiarism, of course, was but one of a series of accusations against Ellen White’s integrity that had been raised by Ballenger, and Canright before him. The church’s newly formed “Defense Literature Committee” recognized the need for answers to the full range of criticisms. F. D. Nichol was assigned the task, resulting in the 1951 publication of *Ellen G. White and Her Critics*. Nichol’s stated object was to answer “all the charges against Mrs. White which are currently prominent, representative, and impressive sounding.”²⁵ It included 65 pages on the plagiarism charge, roughly 10 per cent of the book.²⁶

Nichol’s response essentially reiterated the points brought out in the 1930s documents, but he rigorously supported them with extensive documentation. He examined “what really constitutes plagiarism” from legal and practical viewpoints; the history of *Sketches from the Life of Paul* and *The Great Controversy*; whether Ellen White intended to deceive her readers; the extent of her borrowing; the threatened lawsuit allegation; and the question of how literary borrowing relates to inspiration.

²⁴ See above.

²⁵ Nichol, 20.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 403-467.

We will notice only two examples of Nichol's fuller presentation of supporting evidences. Both relate to charges surrounding *Sketches from the Life of Paul*. Nichol cited an advertisement for Conybeare and Howson's book appearing in the *Signs of the Times* four months before Ellen White's book was published. As a part of the advertisement, Ellen White was quoted as highly recommending the book: "'The Life of St. Paul' by Conybeare and Howson, I regard as a book of great merit, and one of rare usefulness to the earnest student of the New Testament history."²⁷ Nichol summarized that to draw any other conclusion but that Ellen White knew her readers would note parallels between the books "would be equivalent to saying that in publishing her work on Paul Mrs. White deliberately set out to expose herself as a literary thief and a prophetic fraud!"

Nichol devoted the largest percentage of his defense to a refutation of the persistent allegation that a lawsuit had been threatened against Ellen White for her alleged plagiarisms in *Sketches from the Life of Paul*. After tracking down and reviewing sources for the rumor, he photographically reproduced a 1924 letter from the Thomas Y. Crowell Company, publishers of Conybeare and Howson's work, stating that they did not believe they had ever "raised any objection or made any claim" against Mrs. White's *Sketches from the Life of Paul*—nor could they have had legal grounds to do so, as the book was not copyrighted.²⁸ Wrote Nichol, "We believe the reader will conclude that the threatened lawsuit has been quashed."

Nichol's volume appeared to supply the forceful refutation that had been called for, providing answers to the plagiarism question as it had been defined. Inside of 20 years, however, the debate would resurface in the light of new discoveries, and would continue to the present time.

1970-2012

Research into Ellen White's use of sources in the late 1960s, 70s, 80s moved the discussion beyond the mere documentation of copying to an analysis of the sources used, the class of material in which borrowing occurred, the nature of inspiration, and Ellen White's apparent denials of borrowing.

William Peterson challenged the reliability of the Protestant historians Ellen White cited and the belief that her reading merely "filled in the gaps" of her visions;²⁹ Donald McAdams's research further pressed the question of how much history was actually shown Ellen White in vision;³⁰

²⁷ *Signs of the Times*, Feb. 22, 1883, in Nichol, 423.

²⁸ Nichol, pp. 455-457. Unbeknown to Nichol, and only recently coming to light, is the fact that F. E. Belden, a prominent critic of Ellen White and denominational leaders since the Kellogg-Battle Creek controversy, had written the Crowell Company 11 years earlier ostensibly seeking further ammunition on the plagiarism charge. Crowell's reply: "We know nothing about the complaint to which you refer." Thomas Y. Crowell Company to F. E. Belden, Sept. 9, 1913. (EGWE-GC DF 389)

²⁹ William S. Peterson, "A Textual and Historical Study of Ellen G. White's Account of the French Revolution," *Spectrum* (Autumn 1970), 57-69.

³⁰ Donald R. McAdams, "Ellen G. White and the Protestant Historians," unpublished paper (Keene, Texas: Southwestern Adventist College, 1977 rev.).

Ronald Numbers disputed Ellen White's originality and accuracy in her health writings;³¹ and Walter Rea questioned Ellen White's originality in virtually all areas of her writing—discounting any need for a “divine source” for her writings.³²

Suddenly F. D. Nichol and his predecessors' answers came up short. No one had previously questioned the biases of the historians Ellen White quoted, nor had the extent of her borrowing been understood to reach beyond *The Great Controversy*, *Sketches from the Life of Paul*, and, to a lesser extent, *The Desire of Ages*, with sparse examples in two or three other titles. Then, in 1981, evidence came from White Estate researchers that Ellen White had used sources on occasion when reporting the message of a vision.³³

The church published responses to the findings of this new generation of questions through articles in denominational papers (also *Spectrum*), symposiums, workshops, and commissioned reports. We will list here the major denominational responses to the literary borrowing issue,³⁴ and summarize their conclusions in the next section.

- *The Ellen G. White Writings*, by Arthur L. White (1973)
- “Literary Relationship Between *The Desire of Ages*, by Ellen G. White, and *The Life of Christ*, by William Hanna,” by Raymond F. Cottrell and Walter F. Specht (1975)
- *Critique of Prophetess of Health*, by the E. G. White Estate (1976)
- Appendices A, B, C, in *Selected Messages*, book 3 (1980)
- *One Hundred and One Questions*, by Robert W. Olson (1981)
- “Brief Statements Regarding the Writings of Ellen G. White,” by W. C. White and D. E. Robinson. Reprint insert in *Adventist Review*, June 4, 1981.
- Special issue of *Adventist Review*, “Was Ellen G. White a Plagiarist,” (Sept. 17, 1981)
- *The White Truth*, by John J. Robertson (1981)³⁵
- “The Ramik Report,” by Attorney Vincent L. Ramik (1981)
- “E. G. White's Literary Work: An Update,” by Ron Graybill (1981)
- *The Truth About The White Lie*, by the E. G. White Estate and Biblical Research Institute (1982)
- Special issue of *Ministry*, “Ellen White: Prophet or Plagiarist?” (June 1982)

³¹ Numbers, op cit.

³² Walter T. Rea, *The White Lie* (Turlock, Calif.: M & R Publications, 1982). Rea's publication became the apex for the modern plagiarism charge against Ellen White.

³³ See Ron Graybill, “Did Mrs. White ‘borrow’ in reporting a vision?” *Adventist Review*, Apr. 2, 1981, 7; “Author writes,” *Adventist Review*, Apr. 30, 1981, 2; and “The ‘I saw’ parallels in Ellen White's writings,” *Adventist Review*, July 29, 1982, 4-6.

³⁴ This list does not include works that discuss the broader ministry of Ellen White or other apologetic works in which the literary borrowing question is not their particular focus, nor does it include works that were not published by Seventh-day Adventist publishing houses.

³⁵ Notwithstanding its title, Robertson's book was not written as an answer to Rea's *The White Lie*, which had not yet been published.

- “Henry Melvill and Ellen G. White: A Study in Literary and Theological Relationship,” by Ron Graybill, Warren H. Johns, Tim Poirier (1982)
- International Prophetic Guidance Workshop, sponsored by the E. G. White Estate (1982)
- *Luke, a Plagiarist?* by George E. Rice (1983)
- *Full Report of The Life of Christ Research Project*, by Fred Veltman (1988)³⁶
- “Issues and Answers: Ellen G. White and ‘Plagiarism,’” by Roger W. Coon (1994)
- *Acquired or Inspired?* by Don S. McMahon (2005)
- *The Prophet and Her Critics*, by Leonard Brand and Don S. McMahon (2005)

II. Retrospective Summary and Present Understandings

Definitional and Legal Issues Ellen White’s Use of Literary Sources The Inspiration Issue The Ethical/Moral Issue Summary

Beginning with Canright, it is apparent that, unlike modern allegations of plagiarism against a novelist or journalist, for example, the question of Ellen White’s use of sources is inextricably linked to questions about the nature of inspiration and assumptions about how inspired writers ought to write. In basic terms, Ellen White’s critics maintain that where an uninspired source is identified in her writings it negates any divine influence in the message being communicated. The message has to be 100% original revelation or it is a mere human production.

For Canright, that Ellen White copied historians, often rewrote what she had previously written, and used secretaries, was enough to prove that she was not inspired. “The quotations already given,” he wrote, “are sufficient to show that Mrs. White’s inspiration was from very human sources, although she sent her works forth as inspired by the Holy Spirit.” “She was a copyist rather than an original or inspired writer.”³⁷

Ellen White’s defenders did not—indeed could not—deny that she had incorporated material from other authors in her writings. However, they did dispute the assumption that “inspired” also meant “original.” White and Robinson responded by emphasizing the divine source of Ellen White’s knowledge, notwithstanding her use of others’ language to ably present what she had been shown in vision. They pointed to the original themes found in her books. While there had been countless histories written about the Christian Church and the Reformation, they argued that one could not point to any other book like *The Great Controversy* with its overarching view of the conflict between Christ and Satan and its outplay in future events. Ellen White’s use of Adventist and non-Adventist authors were aids to tell *her story*

³⁶ While confined to the area of Ellen White’s writing on the life of Christ, this has been the most in-depth analysis of Ellen White’s use of sources to date. The entire study is accessible online at the General Conference Archives website: www.adventistarchives.org/DocArchives.asp. Veltman also reported on his research in a two-part series in the October and December 1990 issues of *Ministry*. His work is hereafter cited as “Life of Christ Research Project.”

³⁷ Canright, *Life of Mrs. E. G. White*, 200, 205.

Regarding the extent of Ellen White's borrowing, it is clear that until the 1970s her critics and supporters alike had underestimated both the amount and the classes of material involved. This was no doubt due to the fact that the two books that were the focus of criticism were *The Great Controversy* and *Sketches from the Life of Paul*. For the most part, Ellen White's borrowing in those books was confined to areas that could be defined as "descriptive," "historical," or relating to "prophetic and doctrinal exposition."³⁸ But even granting that inspired writers may legitimately incorporate pre-existing material, more challenging for her defenders has been the question of why acknowledgments of this usage were not provided in her books—apart from *The Great Controversy*—and how to understand Mrs. White's statements that appear to deny such borrowing.

In the light of the discussion and research of the past 125 years, we may summarize present understandings of Ellen White's use of sources as follows:³⁹

The Definitional and Legal Issues

Definitions of "plagiarism" vary. By this is meant that, from the time of Canright, differing definitions of plagiarism and standards of literary ethics have been cited by both sides of the debate to provide support for their respective positions. One side defines plagiarism simply as "literary theft," and a plagiarist as "one who purloins another's writings and offers them to the public as his own." The other side maintains that there is a distinction between "plagiarism" and "literary borrowing." *The mere use of another's language does not constitute plagiarism.* Plagiarism, they argue, is the deliberate passing off of another's material as one's own, with the implied *intention* of appearing to be the original author; in contrast, literary borrowing is using the ideas or words of another in *one's own composition* to serve new and often improved literary purposes.⁴⁰ It is linked to the legal doctrine of "fair use," and involves entirely different motives than that of the plagiarist. One hundred and twenty-five years after Canright made the allegation, it is evident that there is still substantial disagreement over whether the term "plagiarism" accurately describes Ellen White's use of other authors.⁴¹

The literary standards of today are more stringent than those of Ellen White's time. This is recognized by both critics and supporters. Not only are standards of attribution more demanding today, but, complicating the matter, they vary from one genre of writing to another. Jerry Moon has illustrated how forms of acknowledgment vary among sermons, news accounts, popular

³⁸ As in *Brief Statements*, 12.

³⁹ The categories of issues, but not the summaries that follow, are adapted from Roger Coon's "Issues and Answers: Ellen G. White and Plagiarism," Ministerial Continuing Education program 7463 (1994).

⁴⁰ See, for example, Jerry Moon, "Who Owns the Truth? Another Look at the Plagiarism Debate," in "Ellen White and Current Issues" Symposium, (Andrews University: Center for Adventist Research, 2005), 46-71. Moon writes, "Proper literary borrowing is like using apples grown by someone else to make pies that are my own," 47.

⁴¹ For recent discussions within Seventh-day Adventism, see articles by J. Stirling, J. Walters, and T. Joe Willey in *Adventist Today*, (May/June 2007) and the three-part series by K. Morgan and D. Conklin in *Ministry* (Aug., Oct., Dec. 2007).

writing, and academic works, for example.⁴² Critics have argued that, as a prophet, Ellen White should have risen above the common literary practices of her day. Supporters have countered that, if such were the case, we should similarly expect to find the Bible writers rising to today's standards and acknowledging their unnamed sources. To the contrary, we find, for example, that the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are so similar and contain so much verbatim copying that scholars for centuries have debated which came first and who copied from whom.

Judged by contemporary legal standards, Ellen White was not a plagiarist. When one factors into the discussion both *intent* and *legal precedent* from court cases of Ellen White's day, the case appears to be clearly in Ellen White's favor. This was the conclusion following a professional review of Ellen White's alleged plagiarisms by patent and trademark law attorney, Vincent L. Ramik. Ramik researched more than 1,000 cases in American literary law from 1790-1915 and noted several factors that critics of Ellen White's writings have failed to take into account when accusing her of literary theft or deceit:

- Her selections “stayed well within the legal boundaries of ‘fair use.’”
- “Ellen White used the writings of others; but in the *way* she used them, she made them uniquely her own”—adapting the selections into her own literary framework.
- Ellen White urged her readers to get copies of some of the very books she made use of—demonstrating that she did not attempt to conceal the fact of her use of literary sources, and that she had no intention to defraud or commercially displace any other author.⁴³

No lawsuit, or threat of a lawsuit, in connection with Ellen White's Sketches from the Life of Paul was instituted. Notwithstanding critics' continued allegations that such a lawsuit by the publishers of Conybeare and Howson's work, direct inquiry of the publishers themselves has verified that no lawsuit was ever threatened, indeed could not have been, as the book was not copyrighted.

Ellen White's Use of Literary Sources

Ellen White read widely and used the writings of others in her books, articles, letters, and manuscripts. The significance of this basic statement is not only that there has been an increased awareness of Ellen White as a reader, but also that she used sources in all categories of her writings. Initial discussions of Ellen White's use of sources focused on *The Great Controversy*, *Sketches from the Life of Paul*, and a handful of other publications. Research has since documented parallels not only in these well-known works but also in her articles and letters—whether published or unpublished.⁴⁴

Literary parallels have been documented not only in Ellen White's writings on history and health but also in the areas of Biblical narrative, end-time events, devotional themes, personal

⁴² Moon, 49.

⁴³ “Memorandum of Law; Literary Property Rights, 1790-1915,” Aug. 14, 1981. Reprinted at: [<http://www.whiteestate.org/issues/ramik.html>]

⁴⁴ See, for example, the exhibits cited by W. Johns in *Ministry* (June 1982).

*testimonies, and even autobiographical accounts.*⁴⁵ The latter category is of significance in that it was obviously not a necessity for Ellen White to borrow another's language to describe her own life experiences—yet she did so at times. Similarly, she is known to have borrowed descriptions of places she visited and saw with her natural eyes.⁴⁶ These instances lend support to the argument that one reason for her use of another's language was the mere fact that another writer expressed or summarized well the ideas and thoughts she wished to describe. No doubt a sense of her own literary inadequacies was an additional factor, as noted, for example, in this communication to a church leader:

Now I must leave this subject so imperfectly presented that I fear you will misinterpret that which I feel so anxious to make plain. Oh, that God would quicken the understanding, for I am but a poor writer, and cannot with pen or voice express the great and deep mysteries of God.⁴⁷

The same principle carries implications for her borrowing in other areas such as Reformation history, the life of Christ, or her writings on healthful living. We cannot say that just because a description in Ellen White's writings shows literary dependency upon another writer it necessarily means that the earlier author was Ellen White's only source of knowledge for that event or point of information. While we would like to draw a sharp line between writings based on revelation and writings which reflect knowledge gained from a previous writer, in reality we must recognize that both factors may be operating at the same time in Ellen White's borrowing. As expressed by W. C. White and D. E. Robinson:

She admired the language in which other writers had presented to their readers the scenes which God had presented to her in vision, and she found it both a pleasure, and a convenience and an economy of time to use their language fully or in part in presenting those things which she knew through revelation, and which she wished to pass on to her readers.⁴⁸

It is not necessary, nor does God always give direct revelation as a substitute for knowledge that may be gained by using the powers with which He has entrusted His creatures.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Ibid. For examples of autobiographical borrowing, compare Ellen White's *Life Sketches* (1915 ed.), pp. 17, 165, 166, with her husband James's accounts in *Signs of the Times*, Jan. 6, 1876, p. 4 and *Life Sketches* (1880 ed), p. 325.

⁴⁶ Ms 29, 1887, diary entry of May 15, 1887, cited in *Adventist Review*, Apr. 2, 1981, 7. See also R. Graybill, "A Letter to Elizabeth: Ellen White's 1880 Trip to California," *Adventist Heritage* (Summer 1990), 13:25-35.

⁴⁷ Lt 67, 1894, quoted in 3SM 90.

⁴⁸ W. C. White to L. E. Froom, Jan. 8, 1928, reprinted in 3SM 460.

⁴⁹ D. E. Robinson, "The Evolution of 'Great Controversy,'" 3. (EGWE-GC DF 51)

Several instances of verbal parallels have been noted in Ellen White's reporting of a vision. See the discussion of this phenomenon below.

*Some sources relied upon by Ellen White included factual errors. This was recognized in Ellen White's day, as evidenced in part by revisions she made in 1911 to her earlier edition of *The Great Controversy*. While making use of "faithful" and "reliable" authors, Ellen White stated plainly in her introduction to *The Great Controversy* that the historians she referenced were "not quoted for the purpose of citing that writer as authority." Without attempting to differentiate between significant or insignificant errors, the point remains that inaccuracies have been documented in certain material Ellen White drew from other authors.⁵⁰ The fundamental issue is whether Ellen White claimed infallibility or inerrancy in her writings, or in material she drew from the works of other authors. In actuality, she and her associates allowed for the possibility of errors, corrected statements shown to be inaccurate, and expressed that her writings were not to be treated "as authority regarding the details of history or historical dates."⁵¹*

*Ellen White drew from at least one popular fictionalized account in her writing on the life of Christ.⁵² In the Ellen White material studied by Veltman he noted the mention of an extra-Biblical incident that may draw on J. Ingraham's work, *Prince of the House of David*. Veltman observed a resemblance to Ingraham's account but cautioned that "further study is required before one may speak with certainty of Ellen White's use of Ingraham here."⁵³ Elsewhere, the literary parallels documented from Ingraham consisted of descriptive words and phrases similar in kind to her use from other authors.*

*There is no credible evidence that Ellen White's literary assistants did the copying for her. This was one of the questions also answered by the *Life of Christ Research Project*, relating to *The Desire of Ages*. As stated by Veltman, "Ellen White, not her literary assistants, did the literary borrowing."⁵⁴ Parallels found in her original handwritten drafts demonstrate that Ellen White herself incorporated material from those sources.*

*Any discussion of Ellen White's use of sources is incomplete if it does not also examine how she used those sources. This involves not only a comparison between her adaptations and the source documents, but also her selectivity in the material she did *not* include from those sources.⁵⁵ One study showed how Ellen White used the language of another author while making theological*

⁵⁰ See, for some examples, McAdams, op. cit.; R. Graybill, "Historical Difficulties in *The Great Controversy*," E. G. White Estate, 1978, 1982.

⁵¹ See, for examples, W. C. White to E. E. Eastman, Nov. 4, 1912, reprinted in 3SM 445-450; *Brief Statements*, 6.

⁵² See Veltman's *Life of Christ Research Project*, 179-181. In Ingraham's work, a fictionalized eye-witness to events in Christ's life reports scenes and details in the form of letters written to another.

⁵³ Veltman, 185.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 911.

⁵⁵ Veltman, among others, points out this need, *ibid.*, 937.

assertions sharply divergent from those of that author.⁵⁶ Particularly in the transitory and often contradictory literature presenting medical and health opinions, Ellen White demonstrated remarkable selectivity,⁵⁷ giving additional evidence that her borrowing was guided by her own purposes.

The amount of Ellen White's copying is greater than previously recognized; the percentage of documented parallels is far less than alleged by her critics; the percentage of borrowed material is irrelevant to the question of inspiration. These three statements belong together in any answer to the question, "How much did Ellen White copy?" Research since the 1970s has revealed that Ellen White used sources to a much greater extent than was previously known. At the same time, estimates that 80 or 90 percent of her material is copied from other authors are wildly exaggerated and unsupported by the facts. Currently documented parallels put a percentage estimate in the low single digits when compared to her total literary output.⁵⁸ However, the question of how much material Ellen White borrowed is immaterial to her claim of inspiration, as will be noted in the next section.

The Inspiration Issue

For most Seventh-day Adventists this is the central issue. Even if Ellen White is found to have been writing within the literary norms of her contemporaries, how does one relate her use of material from other authors to her claim of inspiration? If a passage is found to have parallels with pre-existing non-Biblical writings, where is the divine source for the message? Or, put more directly, Can an inspired writer include material from uninspired sources and still present an inspired message?

For believers, the only legitimate way to determine an authoritative answer to this question is to examine the evidence from Scripture. What can we learn from the Bible concerning the use of other sources by Bible writers? This is where Ellen White's supporters looked for answers during the Canright debates, the Stewart/Kellogg/Ballenger criticisms, and the more recent controversies of the 1970s to the present.

*The Biblical model indicates that inspired writers may incorporate material from other inspired and uninspired sources. "Inspiration is not to be equated with originality."*⁵⁹ Just as it cannot be denied that Ellen White used literary sources in her writings, so it cannot be denied that Bible

⁵⁶ D. Neff, "Ellen White's Theological and Literary Indebtedness to Calvin Stowe," unpublished paper, 1979 rev. (EGWE-GC DF 389-c)

⁵⁷ This is argued in D. McMahon, *Acquired or Inspired? Exploring the Origins of the Adventist Lifestyle* (Victoria, Australia: Signs Publishing Co., 2005). For a recent detailed analysis of Ellen White's selective use of sources in *The Desire of Ages*, see E. Marcella Anderson King and Kevin L. Morgan, *More Than Words* (n.p.: Honor Him Publishers, 2009).

⁵⁸ "Ellen White's Literary Sources: How Much Borrowing Is There?"

[www.whiteestate.org/issues/parallel.html]

⁵⁹ Johns, op. cit., 17.

writers also used the writings of others without giving credit. Originality has been shown not to be a test of inspiration.⁶⁰

The rebuttal from Ellen White's opponents to this comparison is that the *quantity* of copying is higher in her writings than among the Bible writers.⁶¹ But the amount of borrowing is irrelevant to the question of whether inspired writers may legitimately use the language of other authors—including extra-Biblical sources.⁶² Once it is recognized that inspiration is not negated by the use of pre-existing human sources, who is to say what percentage of an inspired messenger's language must be free from such dependency?

Ellen White's "I saw" parallels, though rare, are not essentially different from any other parallel. Some who are willing to grant that Ellen White could legitimately use sources in certain types of writing draw the line when it comes to her use of another's language in conveying information received through vision. How could it be that there are examples of parallels even when Ellen White reports words she has heard in vision? Would this not be proof of a purely human origin for her visions?⁶³

The presupposition of this criticism is that if Ellen White had truly received divine information, the words she used in reporting the vision would have been a verbatim account of the precise words given by revelation—in other words, they would have been verbally dictated expressions. While some adhere to a mechanical-dictation view of inspiration in which the inspired writer acts as God's pen or recording secretary, Adventists have historically recognized from Scripture that inspiration does not function this way.⁶⁴ God inspires His messenger with a message, and the writer conveys that message as best he or she is able, under the influence of the Holy Spirit. If the message of inspiration is not verbally dictated in the one case, why should we demand that it be in the other? Rather, we should expect the inspired writer to attempt to report the content of the vision (what was seen and heard) as faithfully as possible, but not necessarily with only divinely provided words. "Thought" inspiration allows for the messenger to use language drawn from prior experiences and associations.

⁶⁰ G. Rice proposed that the "Lucan model" of inspiration, in contrast to the "prophetic model," provides Biblical support for this position. See *Luke, a Plagiarist?* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1983). See also D. Johnson, "The Sources of Inspired Writings," *Adventist Review*, Dec. 30, 1982, 4, 5, and T. Crosby, "Does Inspired Mean Original?" *Ministry*, Feb. 1986, 4-7. Jud Lake describes how "the nature of inspiration is a major underlying issue in the debate on Ellen White" in *Ellen White Under Fire* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2010), 90-131.

⁶¹ Rea, *op. cit.*, 139.

⁶² Jude 9, 14, 15, being a notable example.

⁶³ Rea, *op. cit.*, 53, 54.

⁶⁴ See General Conference session action of Nov. 16, 1883: "We believe the light given of God to His servants is by the enlightenment of the mind, thus imparting thoughts, and not (except in rare cases) the very words in which the ideas should be expressed." *Review and Herald*, Nov. 27, 1883, 741. See *Selected Messages*, book 1, 15-22, for Ellen White's understanding.

Looking again at the Biblical model, scholars have noted parallels from extra-Biblical sources in John the Revelator's reports of scenes and dialogues from his visions.⁶⁵ The question arises whether Ellen White intended for us to understand her "reporting" of a vision as a verbatim recording of what she saw and heard. The answer is, sometimes "yes," sometimes "no." She wrote in 1867:

The words I employ in describing what I have seen are my own, unless they be those spoken to me by an angel, which I always enclose in marks of quotation.⁶⁶

Here Ellen White is saying that, except for the words of the angel, the content of the vision was not given to her in auditory form. At other times, she makes it clear that she is reporting the *gist* of what she has heard in vision, and not the exact words:

I was in the night season in my dreams brought in connection with the Health Retreat. I felt grieved to see you [Dr. Q] unhappy and much discouraged. . . . But while I was distressed over this revelation to me, there was One speaking with you, Dr. Q. His words reproved you, but were mingled with tender compassion. *I cannot write the exact words as He spoke them. I will try my best to give you the import of them.* He said, "You are nourishing despondency" ⁶⁷

If Ellen White is "trying her best" to capture the essence of a divine message, it would not be surprising for her to use another's language if it conveyed well the thought she wished to communicate.

The Ethical/Moral Issue

Accompanying the plagiarism charge has been the accusation that Ellen White was deceitful not only in copying from the works of others, but also in denying having done so when she was challenged by her critics. Even if it is conceded that her use of other authors did not legally constitute plagiarism, her practice and denials, it is alleged, constitute unethical behavior for one claiming to be inspired.

Contemporary defenders of Ellen White's integrity point to many of the same lines of reasoning as her earlier supporters offered:

*How could Ellen White be intending to deceive her readers or cover-up her copying when she recommended primary source books she utilized to ministers and church members and these works were in wide circulation?*⁶⁸ Furthermore, her acknowledgment of sources in the

⁶⁵ See, for example, comparisons cited by Crosby, op. cit.

⁶⁶ *Review and Herald*, Oct. 8, 1867, 260.

⁶⁷ Lt 8, 1888, quoted in *Testimonies on Sexual Behavior, Adultery, and Divorce*, 160. Emphasis supplied. See *Gospel Workers*, 94, for another example.

⁶⁸ For Ellen White's recommendations, see *Signs of the Times*, Feb. 22, 1883, 96, and *Review and Herald*, Dec. 26, 1882, 789. For the wide circulation of key books she used, see Nichol, op. cit., 413-415.

Introduction to *The Great Controversy*, while specific to that work, nonetheless refutes the allegation that she did not want her readers to know that she referenced other works in her writings.

Ellen White's use of uncredited sources was not out of step with how other respected religious writers of her day used others' material. White and Robinson made this case in relation to shared material among Adventist writers,⁶⁹ and Nichol expanded this point showing examples from other nineteenth-century Bible commentators.⁷⁰ Raymond Cottrell observed the same uncredited borrowing in his research,⁷¹ as did Veltman after reviewing more than 500 works on the life of Christ. Wrote Veltman: "There were times when we were uncertain as to which literary source the *DA* parallel was to be credited. The writers used by Ellen White often exhibited literary parallels among themselves equal to those found between the writings of Ellen White and these same writers."⁷² This is noted not to excuse any improper literary borrowing, but to illustrate that Ellen White wrote within a period when less stringent standards were both common and acceptable—especially among authors of pietistic or moralistic writings, a nineteenth-century genre particularly favored by Ellen White.

Ellen White instructed that proper credit be given in her revised Great Controversy. Wrote W. C. White: "When I presented to Mother questions as to what we should do regarding the quotations from historians and the references to these historians, she was prompt and clear in her opinion that we ought to give proper credit wherever we can."⁷³ She further instructed, "Whenever any of my workers find quotations in my writings, I want those quotations to be exactly like the book they are taken from. Sometimes they have thought they might change a few words to make it a little better; but it must not be done; it is not fair. When we quote a thing, we must put it just as it is."⁷⁴ This conforms with W. C. White's description of Ellen White's modified perspective on crediting her sources, when the question became one of fairness to other authors:

When in the early days inquiries came to Mrs. White regarding the passages in her books that she had copied from historians, they were presented as questions regarding the authenticity of the statements. The inquiry was: "Are these passages

⁶⁹ *Brief Statements*, 7.

⁷⁰ Nichol, *op. cit.*, 405-407.

⁷¹ R. Cottrell, "The Literary Relationship Between *The Desire of Ages*, by Ellen G. White and *The Life of Christ*, by William Hanna," 1979, 6.

⁷² Veltman, "Life of Christ Research Project," 952. More recent research has further documented this free borrowing among authors used by Ellen White. See D. Conklin and K. Morgan, "Plagiarism: a historical and cultural survey," *Ministry*, Aug., Oct., Dec. 2007); D. Conklin and J. Moon, "A Method for Analyzing Alleged Plagiarism in Nineteenth-Century Literature Using Ellen White's *Desire of Ages*, Chapter 77, as a Case Study," (forthcoming).

⁷³ W. C. White to A. G. Daniells, June 10, 1910. Presumably the qualification "wherever we can" refers to the fact that many passages were paraphrased and/or condensed, rather than direct quotations.

⁷⁴ E. G. White to Mary Steward, July 31, 1910 (EGWE-GC DF 83b). Cited in A. L. White, *The Later Elmshaven Years*, 311.

that which had been shown her in vision, or were they what she had learned by the reading of histories?”

She dismissed these questions with few words, stating that what she had presented in her books was a delineation of that which had been presented to her in vision, and that her copying from historians was a matter of convenience, and not a matter of necessity.

In later years when Mrs. White became aware that some of the readers of her books were perplexed over the question as to whether her copying from other writers was an infringement on somebody's rights, the inquiry was raised, “Who has been injured?” No injustice or injury could be named. Nevertheless, she gave instruction that, lest anyone should be offended or led to stumble over the fact that passages from historians had been used without credit, in future editions of her book *Great Controversy*, a faithful effort should be made to search out those passages that had been copied from historians which had not been enclosed in quotation marks, and that quotation marks should be inserted wherever they could be used.⁷⁵

Ellen White's apparent denials of her copying are specific and not general. In 1991 Robert Olson, then director of the Ellen G. White Estate, examined each of 10 “denials” or “non-admissions” that have been cited as evidence that Ellen White was not honest in regard to her use of sources.⁷⁶ He showed that, when read in their context, she was not excluding the possibility that the language of others might be employed in presenting her messages. Her statements were directed toward specific accusations and were not “intended to describe all of her reading and writing habits.”

Olson pointed out, however, that one of the “denials” is more difficult to understand than the others. In 1867, when asked what she knew of other health writings, Ellen White responded that she had not read “any works on health until I had written *Spiritual Gifts*, volumes 3 and 4, *Appeal to Mothers*, and had sketched out most of my six articles in the six numbers of *How to Live*.” These earliest of health writings had been published in 1864 and 1865, respectively. The specific naming of these works has invited scrutiny of these writings to discover any literary dependency. Her statement does not rule out the possibility of health sources in the *How to Live* articles as she says she had only “sketched” them out before consulting other works. But what about the two earlier works? To date, two passages in particular have drawn attention. Olson cited the clearest example:

John C. Gunn: “[Tobacco is] a poison of a most deceitful and malignant kind, that sends its exciting and paralyzing influence into every nerve of the body.” (1857)

⁷⁵ *Brief Statements*, 8.

⁷⁶ R. Olson, “Ellen White's Denials,” *Ministry*, Feb. 1991, 15-18.

Ellen White: “Tobacco is a poison of the most deceitful and malignant kind, having an exciting, then a paralyzing influence upon the nerves of the body.” (1864)

Olson offered six possible explanations for the parallels, favoring the answer that, outside of reading books on health, Ellen White stated that she had conversed freely with others on the topics revealed to her in vision. “As Ellen White discussed health topics with those who were knowledgeable on them, she would naturally have become acquainted with the vocabulary and expressions used by the health reformers of her day.”

Olson recognized that there are aspects of this “denial” that we cannot answer with the information available to us. Interestingly, since his article was printed it has been found that Gunn did not originate the expressions that parallel Ellen White’s. He appears to have been borrowing from earlier temperance writers who wrote of the poisons of tobacco (and alcohol) using the same phraseology—including one whose article had been reprinted in the *Review* several weeks before Ellen White’s work was published.⁷⁷ This discovery lends support to the possibility that Ellen White’s choice of language in this instance may reflect what had become relatively common parlance by anti-tobacco reformers regarding its destructive effects.⁷⁸ It also gives reason to withhold hasty pronouncements of dishonesty in Ellen White’s 1867 “denial.”

Ellen White viewed truth as of divine, not human, origin. Several authors have pointed to this concept as perhaps providing the key to understanding why Ellen White chose not to credit her literary sources as freely as we would expect today.⁷⁹ Her intention was to credit the source of her writings to the great Originator of truth—not the human instrument, whether herself or the authors she made use of. The following passage, though lengthy, no doubt gives us a window into Ellen White’s self-perspective regarding the Source of her own writings—written within a year of the Healdsburg plagiarism debates:

Patriarchs, prophets, and apostles spoke as they were moved upon by the Holy Ghost, and they plainly stated that they spoke not by their own power, nor in their own name. They desired that no credit might be ascribed to them, that no one might regard them as the originators of anything whereof they might glory. They were jealous for the honor of

⁷⁷The phrase a “poison, and of the most deceitful and malignant kind,” actually traces to a description of the effects of *alcohol* found in the 6th American Temperance Society report of 1833. This was picked up by Rev. B. I. Lane and applied to tobacco in his *The Mysteries of Tobacco* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1845, 1846, 1851), 93, 94, and subsequently used by Gunn, who linked it with a phrase apparently borrowed from Larkin B. Coles: “sending its exciting and paralyzing influence into every nerve of the body,” in *The Beauties and Deformities of Tobacco-Using* (Boston: Brown, Taggard, and Chase, 1851), 22. Coles’ essay was reprinted in the *Review and Herald* of May 24, 1864, 205, 206, three months before Ellen White’s article entitled “Health” was published in *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 4. (see RH Aug. 23, 1864, 104). The link between Gunn, Lane, and Coles, was first identified by Kevin Morgan (email to T. Poirier, June 16, 2006).

⁷⁸ The second strongest example of a parallel in these earliest health writings consists of a passage in *Appeal to Mothers* where several destructive effects of “self-abuse” are enumerated in the same sequential order as by an earlier author (J. C. Jackson), suggesting acquaintance with the source.

⁷⁹ See, for examples, Veltman, “Life of Christ Research Project,” 172, 173; Moon, “Who Owns the Truth?” op. cit., citing R. Coon.

God, to whom all praise belongs. They declared that their ability and the messages they brought, were given them as delegates of the power of God. God was their authority and sufficiency. . . .

Christ is the Author of all truth. Every brilliant conception, every thought of wisdom, every capacity and talent of men, is the gift of Christ. He borrowed no new ideas from humanity; for he originated all. . . . Some of the truths that Christ spoke were familiar to the people. They had heard them from the lips of priests and rulers, and from men of thought; but for all that, they were distinctively the thoughts of Christ. He had given them to men in trust, to be communicated to the world. On every occasion He proclaimed the particular truth He thought appropriate for the needs of His hearers, whether the ideas had been expressed before or not.

The work of Christ was to take the truth of which the people were in want, and separate it from error, and present it free from the superstitions of the world, that the people might accept it on its own intrinsic and eternal merit. He dispersed the mists of doubt, that the truth might be revealed, and shed distinct rays of light into the darkness of men's hearts. He placed the truth in clear contrast with error, that it might appear as truth before the people.⁸⁰

Summary

Current perspectives on Ellen White's use of sources still indicate a divide between opponents and supporters over whether her practice should rightly be termed "plagiarism." This is due, in part, as to whether one imposes today's literary standards on Ellen White's writings.

Though she did not publicly explain her use of other sources (apart from in *The Great Controversy*), neither was her dependence upon others' works a secret to church members of her generation who were familiar with the popular books of Andrews, Smith, Wylie, Hanna, Geike, and a host of other authors advertised and recommended in the pages of the *Review* and *Signs*.

Still, one wonders whether the plagiarism discussion would have evolved as it has if acknowledgments like the one in *The Great Controversy* had been made in prefaces to her other works. As President A. G. Daniells wrote to W. C. White, "I presume we all must admit that it would have been better to have given quotation marks or some other kind of credit than to have put the matter out as it was."⁸¹

Looking at the Biblical model of inspiration, however, one finds evidence that the Bible writers utilized pre-existing sources, without credit, to serve the purposes of their own composition.

⁸⁰ E. G. White, *Review and Herald*, Jan. 7, 1890, 1. Also, "Let the gems of divine light be reset in the framework of the gospel. Let nothing be lost of the precious light that comes from the throne of God. It has been misapplied, and cast aside as worthless; but it is heaven-sent, and each gem is to become the property of God's people and find its true position in the framework of truth. Precious jewels of light are to be collected, and by the aid of the Holy Spirit they are to be fitted into the gospel system." (Ibid., Oct. 23, 1894, 657).

⁸¹ A. G. Daniells to W. C. White, June 24, 1907.

Being the first to say or write a truth, therefore, is not a prerequisite for being an inspired messenger, nor does dependence upon prior human sources necessarily eliminate divine superintendence in expressing those truths. This was recognized by an author whose book was published the same year that a nine-year-old Portland girl would nearly lose her life from a rock thrown by an angry schoolmate:

Suppose, for example, an inspired prophet were now to appear in the church, to add a supplement to the canonical books,—what a Babel of opinions would he find existing on almost every theological subject!—and how highly probable it is that his ministry would consist, or seem to consist, in the mere selection and ratification of such of these opinions as accorded with the mind of God. Absolute originality would seem to be almost impossible. The inventive mind of man has already bodied forth speculative opinions in almost every conceivable form; forestalling and robbing the future of its fair proportion of novelties; and leaving little more, even to a divine messenger, than the office of taking some of these opinions, and impressing them with the seal of heaven.⁸²

John Harris's work would later find its place among other worthy titles in Ellen White's library.

⁸² John Harris, *The Great Teacher* (Amherst, Mass.: J. S. and C. Adams, 1836), xxxiii, xxxiv.