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The Writing of the Ellen G. White Books

By ~~Ellen G. White~~
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Abstract of a paper, "The Story of the Conflict of the Ages Series," read by W. C. White, June 18, 1935, at Angwin, California, before the teachers and students of the General Conference Advanced Bible School.

First Ellen G. White Books

The revelations given to Ellen G. Harmon (later White) began in December, 1844. Her first written delineations of these visions were in letters addressed to individuals. A few of these were published by the recipients, and reprints of these letters later appeared. During the years 1849 and 1850, seven articles from her pen were also published by James White in the *Present Truth*.

In the summer of 1851, there was printed by the Davidson Printing Company in Saratoga Springs, New York, a 64-page pamphlet entitled, "A Sketch of the Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White." In preparing this, her first book, Mrs. White assembled articles that had appeared in print, to which she added a few chapters presenting some matters that had been revealed to her, but which had not previously been published.

In 1854, a 48-page supplement to the above which included several later revelations was issued. These two pamphlets as reprinted in 1882, constitute the first two editions of "Early Writings."

"Spiritual Gifts" Volumes I-IV

In the spring of 1858, there was opened up to Mrs. White a very comprehensive view of the events of the great conflict, not only as it has been waged from the fall of Lucifer in Heaven down to our present time, but also to its triumphant culmination. During the next few months, she wrote this out, briefly setting forth the outstanding points of the revelation, and before the year closed, it was published in a 209-page volume entitled,

"Spiritual Gifts,—The Great Controversy Between Christ and His Angels and Satan and His Angels." This may be found today as the third section of "Early Writings."

Subsequent great panoramic views given to Mrs. White in the years following, presented in fuller detail various phases of the controversy. And in 1864, Volumes Three and Four of "Spiritual Gifts" appeared, dealing more comprehensively with the fall of Lucifer, creation, the fall of man, the lives of the patriarchs, and the experience of Israel. These volumes bore the subtitle, "Important Facts of Faith in Connection with the History of Holy Men of Old." ["Spiritual Gifts," Volume II, published in 1860, was an autobiographical work.]

The years passed, the number of believers rapidly increased, and there was need of more books. The brethren called for the republication of the little books, "Spiritual Gifts" which they had learned to love, but Mrs. White felt that she could not consent to this. Since their publication, she had been favored with revelations in which the views had been repeated in more detail, so she pleaded for time and opportunity to present the subjects more completely before they were published again. Definite plans were laid for a series of four volumes, of about four hundred pages each, to contain a fuller account of the great conflict from its inception to its close.

"The Spirit of Prophecy" Volumes I-III

The work on this new series moved forward much more slowly than had been anticipated. Volume One was issued in 1870 and told the conflict story from the

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fall of Lucifer and the creation to the time of Solomon. Volumes Two and Three (issued in 1877 and 1878) dealt with the life and work of Christ and the apostles. Some chapters intended for Volume Four were written, but not until the autumn of 1882, one year after the death of James White, was the work of preparing this volume for the press taken up in earnest.

Volume IV "The Great Controversy"

It had been Mrs. White's plan to resume the story of the acts of the apostles where it was left at the end of Volume Three, but she was instructed in night visions to adopt the plan now seen in "Great Controversy." It was revealed to her that she should present an outline of the controversy between Christ and Satan, as it developed in the first centuries of the Christian era, and in the great reformation of the sixteenth century, in such a way as to prepare the mind of the reader to understand clearly the controversy as it is going on in our day. We can now see that the divine instruction regarding the plan of the book has made it of untold value to the general public. However, at the time of writing, Mrs. White regarded it, like all her former writings, as a message chiefly to the church, and in it she used some matter and many phrases and expressions especially adapted to Seventh-day Adventists.

The steps taken in preparing this book stand out clearly in my mind and they may be of interest in this connection. First, the articles which Mother had already written covering the events from the close of the story in Volume Three to the end of the conflict were brought together and those relating to the acts of the apostles were laid aside. Then the articles which she had written on the destruction of Jerusalem, and the apostasy of the Christian church were brought forward, and were read by Mrs. White and Miss Marian Davis, her literary secretary. It was my privilege many times to be present when the first draft of the chapters of this book were read. The reading was often accompanied by discussion regarding the strength of description, the length of chapter, etc.

Mrs. White then wrote out those parts of the history which she had not previously presented. Prayerful meditation would bring to her mind clearly the views given years before. Then, as she strove

to perfect the narrative by filling in the gaps, the Lord gave her in night visions, new views or a renewal of former views, which resulted in her rewriting in greater detail many scenes already described.

While writing on this book, some of the scenes were presented to Mrs. White over and over again. The visions of the deliverance of God's people, as given in Chapter XL (Editions 1888 to 1911) was repeated three times; and on two occasions, once at her home in Healdsburg, and once at the St. Helena Sanitarium, members of her family sleeping in near-by rooms were awakened from sleep by her clear, musical cry, "They Come! They Come!" (See "Great Controversy," 1911 Edition, page 636).

If Mrs. White had written more than one manuscript on the same subject, Miss Davis was asked to study them all and to eliminate needless repetition and to make such rearrangement of the matter as would make the presentation of the subject most clear and forceful. When she had thus prepared a chapter, she would read it to Mrs. White, who often found that she had something to add to what she had formerly written. Then the chapter was recopied and before going to the printer was given a final reading by Mrs. White.

Usually Mrs. White wrote comprehensively upon the subject she was handling, and there was occasionally a difference of opinion between her and the publishers regarding the quantity of matter that should be used. She was best pleased when the subject was presented very fully, while the publishers were pleased to have the matter condensed or abbreviated so that the books would not be too large. Consequently, there were times when, after important chapters were prepared in as brief a form as possible and sent to the printer, a new presentation of the subject would be given to Mrs. White and she would then write additional matter and insist upon its being incorporated.

Mrs. White was not a mere mechanical writer. The deep impressions often made upon the reader of her writings are due largely to her own intensity of spirit while she wrote. Occasionally she referred in correspondence to her emotional depth of feeling as she penned the solemn messages from heaven to a perishing world. Thus, February 19, 1884, while nearing the close of her work on "Great Contro-

versy" she wrote in a letter to Elder Uriah Smith:

"I write from fifteen to twenty pages each day. It is now 11 o'clock and I have written fourteen pages of manuscript for Volume IV. . . . As I write upon my book I feel intensely moved. I want to get it as soon as possible for our people need it so much. I shall complete it next month if the Lord gives me health as He has done. I have been unable to sleep nights, for thinking of the important things to take place. Three hours and sometimes five is the most sleep I get. My mind is stirred so deeply I cannot rest. Write, write, write, I feel that I must and not delay.

"Great things are before us, and we want to call the people from their indifference to get ready. Things that are eternal crowd upon my vision day and night. The things that are temporal fade from my sight."—*Unc. Letter—7—1884.*

In the fall of 1884, the book was ready for distribution. The price was set at \$1.00, thus harmonizing with the first three books of the series. Very soon it was discovered that it could be sold to all people, so the publishers took the plates and printed an illustrated subscription edition to sell at \$1.50. During the first four years after its publication, ten editions of this book were printed and sold.

In 1885, Mother and I went to Europe. While there, her contact with European people, and her visits to some of the historic places, refreshed her memory and brought to her mind many scenes that had been presented to her in vision during previous years, some of them two or three times, and other scenes many times. And when plans were discussed for the publication of "Great Controversy" in the principal European languages, she decided to make additions to the book. She was able to write more graphically and fully regarding some important events, in preparing the manuscript for translation.

While "Great Controversy" is largely historical in nature, yet Mrs. White has never claimed to be an authority on history. The things which she has written out, are descriptions of representations, often in flash-light pictures, given her regarding the actions of men and the influence of these actions upon the work of

God for the salvation of men, with views of past, present, and future history in its relation to this work.

When I was a mere boy, I heard Mother read D'Aubigne's "History of the Reformation" to my father. She read to him on Sabbath afternoons, and sometimes in the evening. She also read from other histories of the Reformation. Her reading helped her to locate and describe many of the events and movements presented to her in vision.

In connection with the writing out of these views of the events of ancient and modern history, and especially the history of the great Reformation of the Sixteenth Century, she sometimes made use of good and clear historical statements to help make plain to the reader the things which she was endeavoring to present. For a statement by Mrs. White, herself, regarding her use of historical quotations, and her reasons for not citing in the earlier editions of the book all the specific references, see the "Introduction" to "Great Controversy."

In her public ministry, Mrs. White had always shown an ability to select from the storehouse of truth, matter well adapted to the needs of the congregation before her; and she also recognized that in the choice of matter for publication in her books, sound judgment should be shown in selecting that which was best suited to the needs of those who would read the book. Therefore, when the new American edition of "Great Controversy" as enlarged and prepared in Europe, was brought out in 1888, intended for general circulation, there were left out several pages of matter which was instructive to Adventists but which was not appropriate for non-Adventist readers. Examples of this may be seen in the chapter entitled, "The Snares of Satan," pages 518-530 in the 1911 edition, a portion of which was omitted in the subscription edition for the world but which was later republished for our workers. (See "Testimonies to Ministers," pp. 472-475)

In 1911, because the electrotype plates for the book were badly worn, it was necessary to reset "Great Controversy" and when this was done, it was reillustrated and the references to historical quotations were inserted. Soon after receiving copies of this new edition of the book, Mrs. White wrote, July 25, 1911, of her satisfaction regarding it as follows:

"I regard this new edition with

great satisfaction. The book 'Great Controversy' I appreciate above silver or gold, and I greatly desire that it shall come before the people. While writing the manuscript of 'Great Controversy' I was often conscious of the presence of the angels of God. And many times the scenes about which I was writing were presented to me anew in visions of the night, so that they were fresh and vivid in my mind."—*Letter—56—1911.*

"Patriarchs and Prophets"

After the closing scenes of the great conflict had been presented in a fuller and more complete way for the use both of Seventh-day Adventists and the world, Mrs. White's mind turned back to the beginning of the conflict, and the story of the early ages was rewritten and published in "Patriarchs and Prophets" making a companion book for the "Great Controversy." This volume appeared in 1890.

The Writing of "Desire of Ages"

All through the years it was Mrs. White's desire to deal very fully with the life of Christ, His ministry, His teachings, and His sacrifice for us. That which she had written on this phase of the conflict during the 70's, and which was published in Volumes 2 and 3 of the "Spirit of Prophecy" and in a number of pamphlets, later seemed to her to be inadequate. Therefore, when work on "Patriarchs and Prophets" was finished, her thoughts turned to the preparation of a more comprehensive treatise on the life of Christ. For this work she carried a great burden, and in her letters we find many references to her hopes of soon being able to get the book under way.

When she went to Australia in the autumn of 1891, it was her expectation that the long hoped-for life of Christ could soon be prepared. During the years 1892 to 1898, she spent much time in writing chapters for this book.

A glimpse of the intensity under which she worked while preparing copy for "Desire of Ages" is seen in a letter written in 1892 to Elder Olsen, president of the General Conference:

"I walk with trembling before God, I know not how to speak or trace with pen the large subjects of the atoning sacrifice. I know not how to present subjects in the living power in which they stand before me. I tremble for fear lest I shall belittle the

great plan of salvation by cheap words. I bow my soul in awe and reverence before God and say, 'Who is sufficient for these things?'"—*Letter—40—1892.*

A letter written two years later gives us a picture of Mrs. White's busy life and explains the delay in preparing copy for the forthcoming book. She says:

"Now after I have been in this country nearly three years, there is still much to be done before the book will be ready for publication. Many branches of work have demanded my attention. I am pressed beyond measure with the work of writing out testimonies, caring for the poor, and traveling with my own conveyance, 8, 11 and 13 miles to meet with the churches."—*Letter—69—1894.*

Pressed with these burdens and cares, she did much of her writing when others were asleep. "My time for writing usually commences at three o'clock in the morning," she says, "when all in the house are asleep. Often I am awakened at half past twelve, one or two o'clock."—*Letter—114—1896.*

One such morning, before resuming her writing on the book, she penned the following in her diary:

"I awaken at half past two, and offer up my prayer to God in the name of Jesus. I am weak in physical strength; my head is not free from pain; my left eye troubles me. In writing upon the life of Christ, I am deeply wrought upon. I forget to breathe as I should. I cannot endure the intensity of feeling that comes over me as I think of what Christ has suffered in our world.

"He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed; if we receive Him by faith as our personal Saviour."—*MS—70—1897.*

The Ministry of Suffering

It is well known that some of the world's masterpieces of literature, of poetry, and of gospel hymns have been forged on the anvil of pain, and so it was with a part of Mrs. White's writings on the life and ministry of Jesus. Some of the choicest passages in "Desire of Ages," came from her pen when she was

confined not only to her room, but much of the time to her bed or writing chair fitted with an adjustable rest for her pain-racked arm. Soon after she reached Australia, she began to suffer with inflammatory rheumatism, and for eleven months was in constant pain. Of this experience she wrote:

"I have been passing through great trial in pain and suffering and helplessness, but through it all I have obtained a precious experience more valuable to me than gold."

After speaking of her feelings of great disappointment, because she was unable to visit among the churches, she said further:

"This unreconciliation was at the beginning of my sufferings and helplessness, but it was not long until I felt that my affliction was a part of God's plan. I found that by partly lying and partly sitting I could place myself in position to use my crippled hands, and although suffering much pain, I could do considerable writing. Since coming to this country, I have written sixteen hundred pages. . . .

"Many nights during the past nine months, I was enabled to sleep but two hours a night, and then at times darkness would gather about me; but I prayed and realized much sweet comfort in drawing nigh to God. . . . I was all light in the Lord. Jesus was sacredly near and I found the grace given sufficient."—*Letter—7—1892.*

Released at last from the sick room, Mrs. White was called upon to enter more fully into the rapidly developing work in Australia, and the many calls for her counsel and assistance, in addition to her extensive correspondence greatly hindered the progress of the work on "Desire of Ages." Writing to Dr. Kellogg, October 23, 1895, she says:

"I have about decided to . . . devote all my time to writing for the books that ought to be prepared without further delay. I would like to write on the Life of Christ, on Christian Temperance ["Ministry of Healing"] and prepare testimony Number 34 [Volume 6], for it is very much needed. . . .

"You know that my whole theme both in the pulpit and in private,

by voice and pen, is the life of Christ."—*Letter—41—1895.*

Some have marveled at the extraordinary beauty of the language in "Desire of Ages." The last sentence of the foregoing letter, in suggesting that this was her favorite theme, furnishes an explanation for the beautiful phraseology of the book. The abundance of material, and the depth of feeling with which she wrote on this subject, made possible the selection and grouping of the most beautiful passages to be found in her books, in her published articles, and in scores of letters and manuscripts.

In the preparation of "Desire of Ages," as in the preparation of other later publications, Mrs. White did not write the book straight through, chapter by chapter, in the order in which we find them today. This was not necessary, for during the preceding thirty-five years she had written many hundreds of pages on this theme, much of which had already been published. With this background of material, she instructed those who were employed as her helpers to gather from her published books, articles, and her letters and manuscripts what they could find on the subject. With this in hand, she wrote many additional articles as the experiences of Christ were opened anew to her. When these newly written passages together with what she had written in former years were grouped in their natural order, she again studied the story in its connection and sometimes added connecting history.

Her writings on the life and teachings of our Saviour were found to be so voluminous that they could not all be contained in one book. Therefore some of the overflow material which could not be included in "Desire of Ages" was used as material for "Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing," "Christ's Object Lessons," and a portion of "Ministry of Healing."

The Work of Mrs. White's Literary Assistants

The statement that in the preparation of her writings for publication, Mrs. White had the help of one or more efficient workers who assisted in gathering the material and in helping to prepare it, does not mean that the books or articles were in any part the product of their pens. They were not.

The matters revealed to Mrs. White in vision were not usually a word for

word narration of events with their lessons. They were generally in the nature of flash-light or great panoramic views of various scenes in the experiences of men, sometimes in the past, sometimes in the future. These views were in many instances accompanied by spoken instruction. At times, the actions and conversations of men in groups, of churches, of conferences, and of multitudes were revealed to her, with a clear perception of their purposes, aims, and motives. Often divine instruction was given to her regarding the meaning and the use to be made of what was thus revealed.

When the time came to write out these revelations, Mrs. White would endeavor to trace in human language that which had been opened before her in these heavenly views. No supernatural force mechanically took control of her hand, and guided in the words which she wrote, and very rarely were the exact words which she should use dictated by the heavenly messenger at her side. Mrs. White speaks of her own choice of language in writing out her views as follows:

"Although I am as dependent upon the Spirit of the Lord in writing my views as I am in receiving them, yet 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."—*Review and Herald*, October 8, 1867.

It was ever a source of regret to Mrs. White that her school education had been very brief, and her knowledge of the technical rules of writing therefore limited. I clearly remember in the earlier years of her work in Battle Creek, when James White on coming home from the Review and Herald Office, would be asked to listen to what Mother had written and to help her in preparing it for publication. Then, as she read to him, he would comment on the matter, rejoicing in the power of the message, and would point out weaknesses in composition and faulty grammar.

Regarding such experiences, she made a statement in 1906 as follows:

"While my husband lived, he acted as a helper and counselor in the sending out of the messages that were given to me. We traveled extensively. Sometimes light would be given to me in the night season,

sometimes in the daytime before large congregations. The instruction I received in vision was faithfully written out by me, as I had time and strength for the work. Afterward we examined the matter together, my husband correcting grammatical errors, and eliminating needless repetition. Then it was carefully copied for the persons addressed, or for the printer."—*The Writing and Sending Out of the Testimonies to the Church*, page 4.

As time went on, the making of copies of numerous individual testimonies made it necessary to employ a copyist, and as her husband could not give time to the correction of all her writings, the burden of making grammatical corrections was often laid upon the copyist. Many individuals were employed as literary assistants in the years that followed. They copied the testimonies, and prepared articles for the periodicals, and chapters for her books. Conscientious Christians, only, were chosen as literary assistants and in their work they adhered strictly to the instruction which was given them regarding their part of the work.

It was well understood by the secretaries that only Mrs. White's thoughts were to be used, and even her own words, as far as grammatically consistent, in expressing those thoughts. In no case was the copyist or editor allowed to introduce thoughts not found in Mrs. White's manuscripts. In cases where paragraphs and sentences lost some of their power because of faulty arrangement, the secretaries were expected to make transpositions. They were also instructed to leave out that which was plainly unnecessary repetition. To these rearrangements and omissions, Mrs. White gave careful attention.

Regarding the handwritten manuscripts that came from her pen, her literary secretaries say that there was a marked difference in the degree of literary perfection. Usually the original manuscripts written when she was not burdened with travel and preaching, nor full of anxieties connected with the conditions of the church, were found to be beautiful, forceful and elegant in expression and with very few grammatical imperfections. But a number of the original manuscripts were written when she was perplexed by cares and burdens and when working very hurriedly, under the feeling that the manuscript must be completed quickly. At such times

she paid little attention to the rules of punctuation, capitalization and spelling. There was much repetition and faulty grammatical construction. She expected that these matters would be corrected by the copyist.

Speaking of the work of her helpers, Mrs. White, in 1910, made the following interesting statement about the part taken in her work by Miss Marian Davis, who assisted her for more than twenty years:

"The books are not Marian's productions, but my own, gathered from all my writings. Marian has a large field from which to draw, and her ability to arrange the matter is of great value to me. It save my poring over a mass of matter, which I have no time to do."—*Letter—61a—1900.*

Another of her secretaries, at a later time, wrote as follows:

"The editors in no wise change Sister White's expression if it is grammatically correct, and is an evident expression of the evident thought. Sister White as human instrumentality has a pronounced style of her own, which is preserved all through her books and articles that stamps the matter with her individuality. Many times her manuscript does not need any editing, often but slight editing, and again a great deal of literary work; but article or chapter, whatever has been done upon it, is passed back into her hands by the editor."—*Fannie Bolton in "A Confession Concerning the Testimony of Jesus Christ" written in 1901.*

Perhaps in some minds the question may linger as to whether the writings in passing through the hands of the literary assistants may not have been altered somewhat in thought or received additions to the thoughts of the author. This question is clearly answered by written statements from several of Mrs. White's helpers found in our files.

D. E. Robinson, for many years a literary assistant, in 1933, said:

"In all good conscience I can testify that never was I presumptuous enough to venture to add any ideas of my own or to do other than follow with most scrupulous care the thoughts of the author."

W. C. White testified in 1900 that:

"None of mother's workers are

authorized to add to the manuscripts by introducing thoughts of their own."

Miss Marian Davis in the same year wrote:

"From my own knowledge of the work, as well as from the statements of Sister White herself, I have the strongest possible ground for disbelieving that such a thing [the adding of thoughts by the copyist] was done."

Miss Fannie Bolton, for several years one of the helpers, in 1894, testified:

"I can say that just as far as it is consistent with grammar and rhetoric, her expressions are left intact."

These clear assertions are in harmony with Mrs. White's statement penned in 1906. After speaking of the help given by her husband and others, quoted on page 6 of this leaflet, she said:

"As the work grew, others assisted me in the preparation of matter for publication. After my husband's death, faithful helpers joined me, who labored untiringly in the work of copying the testimonies, and preparing articles for publication. But the reports that are circulated, that any of my helpers are permitted to add matter or change the meaning of the messages I write out, are not true."
—*"The Writing and Sending Out of the Testimonies to the Church," page 4.*

A Statement Regarding Later Books

To the question, "How were the later books prepared?" we might briefly reply: Mrs. White wrote voluminously on many topics. To supplement what was written specifically for some definite book, the literary assistant gathered from her writings—published articles, manuscripts, letters, and reports of discourses—other related gems of thought. Working together, Mrs. White and her assistants planned the outline of the books and prepared the matter chapter by chapter. Then in its final form, the manuscripts were read and given final approval by Mrs. White and then sent to the printer.

The Conflict Story Completed

Although the outstanding features of the great conflict were covered in "Patriarchs and Prophets," "Desire of Ages," and "The Great Controversy," there still remained two wide gaps in the span of history from the fall to the final restora-

tion, one period reaching from the death of David to the birth of Christ, the other, covering the first century of the Christian church. When other work permitted, Mrs. White and her literary assistants undertook with enthusiasm the task of gathering and preparing matter for two more volumes to complete the series. As in the case of "Desire of Ages," there were to be found in earlier books and in periodical articles, hundreds of pages already in print covering portions of the history of these periods. Also many chapters and portions of chapters could be drawn from the manuscript and letter file. Then much new matter was written by Mrs. White for the work in preparation.

Limited space permits only one brief statement from Mrs. White relative to the work on these volumes. A letter written, October 15, 1911, gives a picture of the work then in progress:

"The work on the book, 'The Acts of the Apostles,' is completed. In a few weeks you shall have a copy. I have had excellent help in preparing this work for the press. There are other writings that I desire to get before our people, that they may speak when my voice is silent. The book on Old Testament History, 'Prophets and Kings,' which we hope to bring out next, will call for earnest effort. I am grateful for the help the Lord is giving me in the labors of faithful, trained workers, and that these workers are ready to carry forward this work as fast as it is possible."—*Letter—88—1911.*

A few months after the above statement was penned, "Acts of the Apostles" came from the press and was given a

hearty welcome. Soon the work on "Prophets and Kings" was undertaken in earnest, but due to the pressure of other important tasks, was carried forward slowly. The author met with an accident as the last chapters were in preparation. Then, as Mrs. White was unable to continue her careful study and approval of new work on the manuscript, the work ceased. We quote from "Life Sketches" a few words regarding the completion of the book.

"At the time of her accident, in February, 1915, all but the last two chapters had been completed. . . . and these final chapters had been sufficiently blocked out to admit of completion by the inclusion of additional matter from her manuscript file."—*page 436.*

God-Given Instruction

During her last years, Mrs. White frequently took pleasure in rereading the books she had written containing the conflict story. In reviewing her experience in bringing out these books, she places the origin of the information and instruction far beyond her own mind. In 1902, speaking of the source of light presented therein, she said:

"Sister White is not the originator of these books. They contain the instruction that during her life-work God has been giving her. They contain the precious, comforting light that God has graciously given His servant to be given to the world. From their pages this light is to shine into the hearts of men and women, leading them to the Saviour."—*"Colporteur Evangelist," page 36.*