

4

CAN A PLAGIARIST BE INSPIRED?

1. CULT SCARE TACTICS (AC. 24:5, 12-14; JN. 7:48)

- A. It has been the devil's practice, in the absence of any real defense against the truth – the *message* – to attempt to discredit the *messenger*. He does this by attempting to defame the character of the individual or movement by “cult scare tactics”.
 - i. Paul was accused of being part of “the cult of the Nazarene,” making Jesus the cult leader (remember He had been equated with “Beelzebub,” and was accused of casting out demons by the “prince of demons” – Mt. 10:25; 12:24), and Paul a cult member! (Ac. 24:5, 12-14).
 - a. “He is a ringleader of the cult known as the Nazarenes” (NLT).
 - ii. His enemies pursued him and, using these tactics, “stirred up the crowds” against him (Ac. 17:13).
- B. The Dragon is Enraged!
 - i. Let's not forget that the devil is enraged with God's last-day church, especially due to two specific characteristics – a commitment to honoring God's commandments and the belief in the gift of prophecy!

2. SUPPRESSED WRITINGS

- i. “Ever wonder why you could never buy a copy of A Word to the Little Flock in an Adventist books store for 150 years?...”
- ii. “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? Furthermore, her acknowledgement of sources in the 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.” Poirer, *Understanding Ellen White*, p. 156

3. PLAGIARISM CHARGES

A. “The genesis for the plagiarism charge has been credited to former Adventist minister D. M. Canright, although there is evidence of earlier questioning of Ellen White’s use of sources.” Poirer, *Understanding Ellen White*, p. 145

B. Plagiarism vs. literary borrowing

i. While some would call this mere semantics, there is a very real and important difference between these two terms. The word “plagiarism” comes from a Latin word (“plagarium”) meaning “kidnapper.” It is defined in the American Heritage Dictionary as “to use and pass off as one’s own.”

a. Plagiarism is a literary masquerade generally perpetrated by someone who can’t write to make it appear as though they can.

ii. Literary borrowing, on the other hand, occurs when a writer utilizes and employs the words of another for the purpose of making a particular point (ex. sermon illustrations). Literary law recognizes what it defines as “fair use” of the ideas and even the words of another.

C. “Plagiarism” (literary borrowing) in the Bible

i. Solomon “sought out” and “set in order” (Eccl. 12:9-10)

ii. Luke “set in order” an account of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection (Lk. 1:1-3)

D. Christ the originator of truth

i. “Nothing new under the sun” (Eccl. 1:9)

ii. A prophet’s words are not true because the prophet says them; the prophet says them because they are true.

a. 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. *Review & Herald*, January 7, 1890

4. ELLEN WHITE’S LITERARY BORROWING

i. Ellen White lacked a formal education, and Lord supplied the lack. W.C. White also wrote of his mother’s borrowing in a letter to L. E. Froom –

a. “She always felt most keenly the results of her lack of school education. 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 representing those things which she knew through revelation, and which she wished to pass on to her readers.

3SM 460

- ii. In another place, he more fully explains the divine direction in her resorting to this practice.
 - a. “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.” Brief Statements, p. 5

B. Historical sources

- i. The revision of the book Great Controversy in preparation for the 1911 printing brought to light the way Ellen White’s books were prepared. A number of the changes made in the new edition had to do with historical facts. This caused perplexity to some who had previously held to a verbal view of inspiration. In the introduction of the 1911 edition, Ellen White wrote
 - a. In some cases where a historian has so grouped together events as to afford, in brief, a comprehensive view of the subject, or has summarized details in a convenient manner, his words have been quoted; but in some instances no specific credit has been given, since the quotations are not given for the purpose of citing that writer as authority, but because his statement affords a ready and forcible presentation of the subject. In narrating the experience and views of those carrying forward the work of reform in our own time, similar use has been made of their published works. GC xi.4
- ii. The 1919 Bible Conference
 - a. This has become an entrance pass into “Area 51” for some Seventh-day Adventists, and much is made of the 1919 conference as the place where those who were really “in the know” about Ellen White decided to keep it all a secret from the rest of the church. Unfortunately, this is fun fiction and little more ;)

- b. “It is more than interesting that the president’s [A. G. Daniells’] suggestion (which was eventually followed) was made subsequent to a spirited discussion regarding such subjects as the Eastern question and the Arian-Trinity controversy. Daniel 11 Unfortunately, some have used Daniells’s statement to include the discussion on the authority and inspiration of Ellen White, a discussion that took place on July 30 and August 1, two weeks after Daniells’s suggestion “to lock up this manuscript.” Herbert Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord*, p. 434

C. Health

- i. In Knight’s book, he refers to Don McMahon’s “path-breaking study” in which he divided Ellen White’s counsels on health into what he called the “whats” and the “whys.”
 - a. “He found her remarkable accurate on the specific counsel that she gave but only comparable with her contemporaries in the reason for that counsel. Robert Olson had raised that very possibility as early as 1990.... He adds that McMahon concluded “that only 66 percent of Ellen G. White’s health and medical statements in her book *Ministry of Healing* would be deemed accurate by modern standards...” Knight, p. 52
- ii. However, Nutritional expert Dr. Clive McKay would disagree –
 - a. “Among the thousands of historical acquaintances in my files, one of the most worth-while is Ellen G. White. As near as one can judge by the evidence of modern nutritional science, her extensive writings on the subject of nutrition, and health in general, are correct in their conclusions. This is doubly remarkable: Not only was most of her writing done at a time when a bewildering array of new health views – good and bad – were being promoted but the modern science of nutrition, which helps us to check on views and theories, had not yet been born. Even more singular, Mrs. White had no technical training in nutrition, or in any subdivision of science that deals with health.” Dr. Clive McKay, Professor of Nutrition, Cornell University: “A Nutrition Authority Discusses Mrs. E. G. White”

D. Extent

- i. One prominent critic has alleged that between 80% and 90% of Ellen White’s writings were borrowed from the works of others.
 - a. “Ellen White’s copying is less than alleged by her critics. 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.” Poirer, *Understanding Ellen White*, p. 154

- b. Percentage of borrowed material in a cross-section of Ellen White’s books as presented in Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord*, p. 457, endnote 9 (full report available from Ellen White Estate) –
- *Great Controversy (in quotes)* – 15.11%
 - *Great Controversy (uncredited)* – 5.05%
 - *Sketches from the Life of Paul* – 12.23%
 - *Steps to Christ* – 6.23%
 - *Acts of the Apostles* – 3.05%
 - *Faith and Works* – 2.97%
 - *Testimonies for the Church, vol. 5* – 2.82%
 - *Messages to Young People* – 2.67%
 - *Patriarchs and Prophets* – 2.28%
 - *Selected Messages, vol. 1* – 2.03%
 - *Testimonies for the Church, vol. 4* – 1.88%
 - *Prophets and Kings* – 1.51%

5. ORIGINALITY NOT A TEST OF INSPIRATION

- A. GC President Neal C. Wilson, in the midst of the plagiarism accusations of the 1980s, correctly stated that “Originality is not a test of inspiration.” Neal C. Wilson, G.C. President of Seventh-day Adventists, *Adventist Review*, March 20, 1980

- i. “Unlike modern allegations of plagiarism against a novelist or journalist, 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.” Poirer, *Understanding Ellen White*, p. 151
- ii. Heman Humphrey, President of Amherst College, in the preface of John Harris’ biography of Jesus, *The Great Teacher*, conjectured as to what the work of a modern prophet may consist of in his day (the book was published in 1835 when Ellen White was about 8 years old). He wrote
- a. “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 on almost every theological subject! And how highly probable it is that his ministry would consist, or seem to consist, in a 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.” Arthur L. White in *The Ellen White Biography*, Vol. 4, p. 63

6. THE LEGAL CASE

- A. As the year 1980 began, the teachings of Australian theologian Desmond Ford were gaining ground in the Adventist Church. Ford professed to be in harmony with the church, only seeking to “prune away” the teachings he considered non-Scriptural. These prominently included the doctrines of the Sanctuary and the Gift of Prophecy. “We’re not antagonistic to the church,” Ford said in one Christianity Today article. “We just want to see it come into full harmony with Scripture.”
- B. During the height of the controversy, an Adventist Pastor named Walter Rea published the book *The White Lie*, alleging that Ellen White was not the primary author of her books.
- C. Finally, in 1981, Warren Johns, chief legal officer of the General Conference, retained the services of Diller, Ramik and Wight, Ltd., a law firm specializing in patent, trademark and copyright law. Vincent L. Ramik undertook the research. Ramik, a Roman Catholic, spent more than 300 hours researching over 1,000 relevant cases in American Legal History. He concluded his 27-page legal opinion with an unequivocal declaration: “Based upon our review of the facts and legal precedents... Ellen White was not a plagiarist, and her works did not constitute copyright infringement/piracy.”
- D. An interview with Ramik appeared in the *Adventist Review*, Sept. 17, 1981. Here is a part of that interview (the interview can be read in its entirety in the document “Was Ellen White a Plagiarist,” available from the Ellen White Estate, in the whiteestate.org website, and on the CD-ROM of Ellen White’s published writings under Research Documents) –

RAMIK: I started out, I think, basically neutral on the literary charges...” After hearing some of the arguments for and against her, but prior to his “delving into her works,” he said “I became actually biased against her in the sense that I thought she was what some people, such as her latest critic, Walter Rea, had alleged – guilty of plagiarism... I simply had to read her writings and then rid my mind of the bias I had already built into it – prejudice...”

REVIEW: So it was reading her writings that changed your mind?

RAMIK: It was reading her messages in her writings that changed my mind. And I think there’s a distinction – a very salient difference – here... I believe that the critics have missed the boat badly by focusing upon Mrs. White’s writings, instead of focusing upon the messages in Mrs. White’s writings... Mrs. White moved me! In all candor, she moved me. I am a Roman Catholic; but, Catholic, Protestant, whatever—she moved me. And I think her writings should move anyone, unless he is permanently biased and is unswayable...

REVIEW: Would you explain what you mean by this?

RAMIK: A person can walk this earth doing good deeds and saying to himself (and maybe to others): “I’m a nice person.” And after a time you really come to believe that you are. But when was the last time that you really looked inside yourself and found out what you were really like? Now, there are a lot of things that Mrs. White has put down on paper that will, if read seriously, perhaps cause a person to look inwardly, honestly. And if you do, the true self comes out. I think I know a little more today about the real Vince Ramik than I did before I started reading the message of Ellen White, not simply her writings...

REVIEW: And the message?

RAMIK: The message is what is crucial. The critic reads a sentence, and receives no meaning from it—he may, and often does, even take it out of context. But read the entire message. What is the author’s intent? What is the author really saying—where the words come from is really not that important. What is the message of this? If you disregard the message, then even the Bible itself is not worth being read, in that sense of the word.

REVIEW: What about plagiarism, then? Is there really no such thing as plagiarism?

RAMIK: ...Let’s take Walter Rea. He reads Ellen White and says: I found a certain phrase here, a certain paragraph there, and it came from this predecessor. Well, that’s not proof; that’s assumption. And I think the first step in any accurate critique is to go back to the real original—it might be Virgil, Homer, the Bible. Because how do you know it was original with the predecessor—how do you know he did not get it from someone else who, in turn, got it from still another earlier someone else? Didn’t Solomon say, “There is no new thing under the sun”?... The literary pirate does not care whether he gets caught; but the plagiarist worries that he will be found out... Incidentally, to accuse Ellen White of plagiarizing Conybeare & Howson’s uncopyrighted Life of Paul is absurd, if for no other reason than the fact that she publicly urged her readers to get a copy and read it for themselves... Ellen White used the writings of others; but in the way she used them, she made them uniquely her own, ethically, as well as legally. And, interestingly, she invariably improved that which she “selected”!...

I have been asked whether I thought Ellen White was “inspired.” Well, inspiration is a theological word, not a legal word; and I am more at home with legal words than I am with theological words. I don’t know whether she was inspired, in the theological sense. I do believe that she was highly motivated. And if it wasn’t God who motivated her, then I don’t know who it could have been. But I get that simply from her writings. I was not there when she wrote, and I suppose that few of the critics were, either... Now, I, personally, could not be disturbed by the thought that God may have inspired

her to select something from a certain book. And if God inspired her to select something that was written better by someone else than she could have written it herself, so what? Actually, in the final analysis, I think it all comes down to a question of faith. And, for myself, I have no trouble in accepting what she wrote as a matter of faith... I, personally, have been moved, deeply moved, by those writings. I have been changed by them. I think I am a better man today because of them. And I wish that the critics could discover that!

REVIEW: Attorney Ramik, how would you sum up the legal case against Ellen White as far as charges of plagiarism, piracy, and copyright infringement are concerned?

RAMIK: If I had to be involved in such a legal case, I would much rather appear as defense counsel than for the prosecution. There simply is no case!

- a. Brethren and sisters, let not your souls be disturbed by the efforts of those who so earnestly seek to arouse distrust and suspicion of Sister White. These attacks have been repeated hundreds of times during the past forty years; but my labors have not ceased; the voice of warning, reproof, and encouragement has not been silenced. The evil reports framed concerning me have injured those who circulated them; but they have not destroyed my work. Before some of these opposers had an existence, I was shown what would come, and from what source. In the day of God, those who have been seeking to prove me a deceiver must answer for their course. I appeal to those who love the truth: Guard well the avenues of the soul. Place sentinels at the eyes, the ears, the lips. When prevarications and conjectures are brought before you, and your minds are disturbed, go to Jesus, and pray for help that you may not be ensnared by the wiles of Satan. Many ask, Why do you not contradict these reports? Why allow them to be circulated? The same question has been asked again and again for the last forty years. My answer is, in the language of one of old, I am doing a great work, and I cannot come down. God has called me to reveal to others by pen and voice, what he has revealed to me. In his strength I must go forward in this solemn and important work, knowing that it is soon to bear the test of the Judgment. While false accusers are doing what pleases themselves, I will seek only to please Him who has given me my work. Christ is our leader, and if we follow him, we shall see his triumph and share his joy. *Review & Herald, August 28, 1883*