

Letters about Inspiration

from Edwin de Kock

Dear friend,

I have read your piece about inspiration and found a good deal to agree with. The following comments represent my view, at least in part.

Three Forms of Divine Inspiration

1. *The Lord or His Angels Speak Directly to the Prophet*

This often takes the form of an actual voice. It is not, however, just a general impression, a mere conviction, such as preachers often have. The Lord can be quoted. Of course, the words “thus saith the Lord” may also at times include material that results from number 2 below, etc. But prophecy in its most exalted sense must result from a direct, supernatural commission. I am not here concerned with prophecy in a secondary sense.

2. *The Prophet Has a Dream or a Vision*

That is, objects or actions are actually seen and then described in words of the prophet’s choice. Again, however, such dreams or visions are not general impressions, but actually shown to the seer. Ellen White is said to have had about 2,000 prophetic dreams or visions. If so, what she wrote should be taken very seriously. If not, she was a dreadful liar. It went badly with false prophets in Old Testament times.

3. *Guidance in the Writing Process*

Somewhere Ellen White stated something to the effect that the words were her own, and yet that when writing them she was just as dependent on guidance from the Holy Spirit as when she got the dreams or visions. A prophetic writer should strive to be as accurate, as true to what was shown, as possible. On the other hand, linguistically the same thing can be said in many ways. For instance, it does not really matter whether one says, “The Lord showed me . . .” or “It was revealed to me by the Lord . . .” or “I saw . . .” The writer may, like the ancient Hebrews, use verse instead of prose; and this involves an intricate deployment of prosody, figures of speech, and so on, as in Jeremiah’s Lamentations. And yet the prophet must not deviate from truth. For instance, Daniel had a vision and needed to describe the third beast he saw in it, using his own language; but however he did it he had to bring out that it was a leopard with four wings and four heads. He could say “I saw a leopard with four wings and four heads,” or “before me there appeared a four-winged leopard, which also had four heads.” Semantically these are acceptable equivalents. He could not, however, say without lying, “I saw a leopard with four wings and *five* heads.” To say that a prophet is not verbally inspired does not really get us very far. The basic question is, Did the Most High, an angel (though not with leathery wings!), or the Holy Spirit really speak to or show something to the prophet?

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What is tricky is that inspired writers sometimes quote from other people, even reproducing entire chunks from other authors—whether inspired or not. Not only Ellen White gives evidence of this phenomenon. We find it aplenty in the Bible, especially in historical material. Quotations from wicked people like Cain, Ahab, and Caiaphas abound, as do statements, edicts and letters from pagans such as that impudent Rabshakeh who represented Sennacherib outside Jerusalem's walls; Nebuchadnezzar; Cyrus, and so on. There is also the problem of prophetic writers that quote directly from other prophets, without deigning to give the source. Examples can be found in the Old Testament, e.g. Micah 4, cf. Isaiah 2, and bountifully in the New. Matthew seems to have swallowed and reproduced entire sections of Mark, often verbatim, without attribution. Much of Revelation, probably about a third, consists of quotations and references. This, by the way, is also a literary technique that is found in ordinary literature through the ages, inter alia in Virgil, Dante, James Joyce, and T.S. Eliot. Shakespeare, of course, almost never invented a plot of his own. He just brilliantly revamped the works of others, whom posterity has forgotten. Those who object to such procedures on anachronistic grounds that the writers were ignoring copyright (a recent invention) or plagiarized in a disreputable way are simply ignorant. Yet this type of thing does raise many questions in inspired writers, especially in the four Gospels. How, too, must we deal with Luke's acknowledgement in his first chapter that he wrote after doing diligent research?

It seems that in dealing with history, even if inspired writers may supernaturally see some events, they are also required to find out what happened in other ways. The results may include a discrepancy here and there. For instance, compare the four Gospels to establish exactly what Pilate wrote and had posted above the head of Jesus on the cross. You will find there are four versions of it. At least three--if not all--of them are undoubtedly a little inaccurate, from a literal point of view. But their import is the same and no doubt reflect the memories of eye-witnesses. These, however, had something much more important to look at and listen to: Jesus on the cross. They noted, but did not seek to memorize, the actual words of the superscription. In such minor matters, it would seem, the Lord has tolerated a certain latitude, though not too much.

Incidentally, Ellen White's procedure as a writer goes far beyond her reuse of material from authors like Wylie and D'Aubigné. To understand her, we need at all times to remember that she was an old-fashioned, unreconstructed Protestant, untouched by ecumenicism, with its largely Catholic inspiration—including mendacity in the rewriting of history. From childhood she absorbed the viewpoint of the Reformation, including its precursors, the Waldenses, Hus, and Wycliffe. Luther and Wesley were among her heroes. Despite some distinctively Adventist doctrines, Ellen White was also theologically an old-fashioned, unreconstructed Protestant. To reject her writings often involves a rejection of the Reformation, whose tenets they mostly reflect.

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Verbal Inspiration

Some verbal inspiration does occur, when the prophet hears an actual voice. The Lord is quite capable of using a human language, whether Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew or even English. In such a case, the resultant text should be taken as representing God directly. Though we do not believe in large-scale verbal inspiration, this does not diminish from 1 and 2 above. Whatever words are used must harmonize with the words the prophet has heard or the dream/vision he/she has seen.

Better Than Verbal Inspiration

Some of the most authoritative and valuable pieces in the Bible are not inspired at all. Most notable of these is the Decalogue. It was spoken to an entire nation and then personally written by God. Ten Commandments are not an inspired, mediated document but have the Lord himself as their personal author. As I have put it elsewhere, this Law is the only part of the Bible written by God himself. Much in the four Gospels are quotations from what Jesus said. These, too, are not inspired but recorded. Admittedly they are now in Greek translations from the Aramaic originals and therefore subject to some variation. Fortunately much of what the Lord said is quoted by more than one author. The Gospels represent a fourfold witness.

Well, that is as far as I can go, since my writing must of necessity be focused on other things.

God bless and a happy Sabbath.

Edwin

Dear friend,

You are right in hinting that with my diminished strength and limited life expectancy I should concentrate on finishing my book, and so I cannot get too involved in endless arguments about Ellen G. White. And yet this topic is important. There are, therefore, a few things I feel constrained to comment on.

Yes, I agree with the basic idea you get at with your drastic phrase that “the use of Ellen White had made many Adventist Scriptural illiterates.” Such people are simply being lazy and do not study the Bible for themselves. Others depend not on Ellen White but on their ministers. No, we need to study the Word of God for ourselves.

Some who jump into the arena to argue about Ellen White’s dependency on other writers are recycling old statements (often inaccurate), rumors, gossip, and even downright lies. Inadvertently you yourself have fallen prey to the most notorious of these. You say, “the book *In the Steps of St. Paul* had to be withdrawn because the publishers of a similar

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book threatened to sue for copyright infringement. . . . Unfortunately, now that the copyright has expired, the book has been produced by photocopying the book and hundreds of readers will regard it as verbally inspired. By EGW.”

This statement involves the following elements: (1) There was copyright infringement, and (2) the publishers threatened to sue, and therefore (3) the book was withdrawn. All of this was brilliantly refuted by Francis D. Nichol in his *Ellen G. White and Her Critics*, published in 1951. I suggest you read this for yourself but briefly under the following headings also summarize the gist of what he said:

1. There was copyright infringement

The similar book to which you refer was *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* by Conybeare and Howson. “There were no copyright relations between the United States and Great Britain until the issuance of the Presidential proclamation on July 1, 1891, which proclamation extended copyright protection to the works of British authors upon compliance with the provisions of the United States copyright law. (The Conybeare and Howson book was first published in England in 1851-52.) British authors residing in England whose books were published prior to that date could not secure any copyright protection in the United States, hence their works were in the public domain as far as United States publishers were concerned.” (Nichol, 454).

2. The publishers threatened to sue

But the rumors kept on circulating, so one man took it upon himself to do some further research. Nichol subheads his most clinching evidence under **A Publisher of Conybeare and Howson Book Testifies**. On p. 455, he provides the following information:

“On January 15, 1924, C.D. Holmes, who for some years was an employee of the Review and Herald publishing house, wrote the following letter to the T.Y. Crowell Company in New York:

‘T.Y. Crowell Co.,
New York City.

‘Messrs:

‘Some years ago you published a book entitled “Life and Epistles of the Apostle Paul.” In 1883 a book was printed by the Review and Herald Publishing Co., of Battle Creek, Mich., entitled “Sketches from the Life of Paul.” For a long time it has been claimed that because of a similarity of ideas and words in several instances in this book, you at one time threatened prosecution unless the book was withdrawn from circulation.

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‘This report is now being scattered about in printed form and I should be pleased to know if there is any truth in it. Any information that you can give me regarding this matter will be greatly appreciated.

‘Respectfully yours,

‘[Signed] C.E. Holmes.’

On p. 456, Nichol photographically provides the answer and also quoted it on the adjoining page:

“On January 18, 1925, the Crowell Company replied to him as follows (see photograph of letter on preceding page):

‘Mr. C.E. Holmes
511 North Grove Ave.
Oak Park, Ill.

‘Dear Sir:—

‘Your letter of Jan. 15th received. We publish Conybeare’s LIFE AND EPISTLE OF THE APOSTLE PAUL but this is not a copyrighted book and we would have no legal grounds for action against your book and we do not think that we have ever raised any objection or made any claim such as you speak of.

‘We shall be very glad to see the printed matter to which you refer.

‘Very truly yours,
‘Thomas Y. Crowell Company,
‘[Signed] T. I. C.’

“Every other American publisher of the Conybeare and Howson book would have had to make the same admission: ‘no legal grounds for action.’”

3. The book was withdrawn

I will not weary you with the details, all given by Nichol, but simply state what happened back in the nineteenth century. The Church continued selling both *Life and Epistles of the Apostle Paul* by Conybeare and Howson (as it had been doing all along) and Ellen White’s *Sketches from the Life of Paul*. But when the latter was exhausted, it was not reprinted because she wanted first to expand it, especially by including material on the ministry of the other apostles. She was already planning it in 1903 but others work prevented her completion of this project. She copyrighted it in 1911, and it went into circulation in 1915 under its new title, *The Acts of the Apostles: In the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*.

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The charge was circulating that Ellen White “copied a large part of her book” from Conybeare and Howson,” which implies that her *Sketches from the Life of Paul* was just a rehash of *Life and Epistles of the Apostle Paul*. So what percentage of it did she incorporate in her book? According to Nichol, “Direct quotations of words, phrases, and clauses, plus any accompanying close paraphrase, constitute about 7 per cent of *Sketches From the Life of Paul*.” (Nichol, 424).

Sincerely in the Lord,

Edwin

Circa 2003