

The E. G. White Counsel on Versions of the Bible

by Arthur L. White

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Introduction

In her writings of the Holy Scriptures Ellen White made use of the various English translations of the Holy Scriptures that were available in her day. She does not, however, comment directly on the relative merits of these versions, but it is clear from her practice that she recognized the desirability of making use of the best in all versions of the Bible. What she has written lays a broad foundation for an open-minded approach to the many renderings of the Sacred Text.

As a part of the great controversy vision of March 4, 1858, she was given a view of the preservation of the Bible, which she presented in the chapter, “Death Not Eternal Life in Misery” (Early Writings pages 218-222). This early statement is significant:

“Then I saw that God knew that Satan would try every art to destroy man; therefore He had caused His word to be written out, and had made His purposes in regard to the human race so plain that the weakest need not err. After having given His word to man, He had carefully preserved it from destruction by Satan or his angels, or by any of his agents or representatives. While other books might be destroyed, this was to be immortal. And near the close of time, when the delusions of Satan should increase, it was to be so multiplied that all who desired might have a copy, and, if they would, might arm themselves against the deceptions and lying wonders of Satan.

“I saw that God had especially guarded the Bible, yet when copies of it were few, learned men had in some instances changed the words, thinking that they were making it more plain, when in reality they were mystifying that which was plain, by causing it to lean to their established views, which were governed by tradition. But I saw that the Word of God, as a whole, is a perfect chain, one portion linking into and explaining another. True seekers for truth need not err; for not only is the Word of God plain and simple in declaring the way of life, but the Holy Spirit is given as a guide in understanding the way to life therein revealed.”—EW 220, 221 (1SG 116, 117).

On Mrs. White’s attitude toward the English revision of the 1880’s, her son, W. C. White, reports:

“Before the revised version was published, there leaked out from the committee, statements regarding changes which they intended to make. Some of these I brought to Mother’s attention, and she gave me very surprising information regarding these Scriptures. This led me to believe that the revision, when it came to hand, would be a matter of great service to us.”—W. C. White, DF 579 (1931); Ministry, April, 1947, p. 17.

It is significant that almost immediately after the appearance of the English Revised Version, Mrs. White made use of it in her books, as she did also of the American Standard Revision when it became available in 1901. It is also significant that four major statements from Mrs. White’s pen concerning the Bible and the Bible writers were penned during this decade of the appearance of the revised versions of the New and Old Testaments.

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The revision of the New Testament was published in 1881, the revision of the Old Testament in 1885. It is of interest to note that during the decade of the revision, a number of articles appeared in the *Review and Herald* in a rather casual way, keeping before Seventh-day Adventists what was involved in the revision—the progress of the work, its reception, its relationship to the King James Version, and its value to us. Most of the articles were reprints from other journals:

1. March 11, 1880 (p. 167), “The Revised Bible.”
2. February 8, 1881 (p. 87), “Different Versions of the Bible”—A historical review.
3. June 14, 1881 (p. 377), “The Revised Greek Testament”—A discussion of the Greek texts used in the revision of the New Testament.
4. June 28, 1881 (p. 9), “The New Version”—An editorial, probably by Uriah Smith, representing a favorable reaction to the new version.
5. March 20, 1883 (p. 186), “The New Version vs. the Old”—W. H. Littlejohn answers questions, with favorable reaction.
6. October 21, 1884 (p. 666), “The Revision of the Old Testament Ready for the Press.”
7. February 8, 1887 (p. 83), “The Revised Version”—A recommendation from F. D. Starr.
8. June 11, 1889 (p. 384), “Revising the Scriptures”—A discussion by L. A. Smith of work undertaken by the Baptists to get a satisfactory translation of texts on baptism.

Apart from these articles, there is little or nothing in the columns of the *Review* on the revised versions of the Bible of 1881-1885 and 1901.

Between the years 1886 and 1889, however, Mrs. White penned the four comprehensive and illuminating article on the nature and authority of the Holy Scriptures referred to above. These are as follows:

1. In 1886, “Objections to the Bible,” Ms 24, 1886 (ISM 19-21).
2. In 1888, Introduction to *The Great Controversy*, v-vii.
3. In 1888, “The Guide Book,” Ms 16, 1888 (ISM 15-18).
4. In 1889, “The Mysteries of the Bible a Proof of Its Inspiration”—5T 698-711.

From these articles we cull a few excerpts which make clear her understanding of the writing and preservation of the Biblical text. These considerations evidently prepared the way for her to make use of various versions and translations of the Scriptures.

Chapter 1—Statements Made in 1886—“Objections to the Bible”

“Human minds vary. The minds of different education and thought receive different impressions of the same words, and it is difficult for one mind to give to one of a different temperament, education, and habits of thought by language exactly the same idea as that which is clear and distinct in his own mind. Yet to honest men, right-minded men, he can be so simple and plain as to convey his meaning for all practical purposes. . . .

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“The writers of the Bible had to express their ideas in human language. It was written by human men. These men were inspired of the Holy Spirit. Because of the imperfections of human understanding of language, or the perversity of the human mind, ingenious in evading truth, many read and understand the Bible to please themselves. It is not that the difficulty is in the Bible. Opposing politicians argue points of law in the statute book, and take opposite views in their application and in these laws. . . .

“The Bible is not given to us in grand superhuman language. Jesus, in order to reach man where he is, took humanity. The Bible must be given in the language of men. Everything that is human is imperfect. Different meanings are expressed by the same word; there is not one word for each distinct idea. The Bible was given for practical purposes. . . .

“The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God’s mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God’s penmen, not His pen. Look at the different writers.”—Ms 24, 1886 (ISM 19-21).

Chapter 2—Statements Made in 1888—Introduction to The Great Controversy

“The Bible points to God as its author; yet it was written by human hands; and in the varied style of its different books it presents the characteristics of several writers. The truths revealed are all given by inspiration of God’ (2 Tim. 3:16); yet they are expressed in the words of men. The Infinite One, by His Holy Spirit, has shed light into the minds and hearts of His servants. He has given dreams and visions, symbols and figures; and those to whom the truth was thus revealed have themselves embodied the thought in human language.

“The Ten Commandments were spoken by God Himself, and were written by His own hand. They are of divine, and not of human composition. But the Bible, with its God-given truths expressed in the language of men, presents a union of the divine and the human. Such a union existed in the nature of Christ, who was the Son of God and the Son of man. Thus it is true of the Bible, as it was of Christ, that ‘the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us’ (John 1:14).

“Written in different ages, by men who differed widely in rank and occupation, and in mental and spiritual endowments, the books of the Bible present a wide contrast in style, as well as a diversity in the nature of the subjects unfolded. Different forms of expression are employed by different writers; often the same truth is more strikingly presented by one than by another. . . .

“God has been pleased to communicate His truth to the world by human agencies, and He Himself, by His Holy Spirit, qualified men and enabled them to do this work. He guided the mind in the selection of what to speak and what to write. The treasure was entrusted to earthen vessels, yet it is, nonetheless, from Heaven. The testimony is conveyed through the imperfect expression of human language, yet it is the testimony of God; and the obedient, believing child of God beholds in it the glory of a divine power, full of grace and truth.

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“In His Word, God has committed to men the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard

of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience. 'Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness; that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work' (2 Tim. 3:16, 17, RV.)—*The Great Controversy* Introduction vi-vii. (Written at Healdsburg, California, May, 1888.)

Chapter 3—Statements Made in 1888—“The Guide Book”

“This Holy Book has withstood the assaults of Satan, who has united with evil men to make everything of divine character shrouded in clouds and darkness. But the Lord has preserved this Holy Book by His own miraculous power in its present shape—a chart or guidebook to the human family to show them the way to heaven. . . .

“Some look to us gravely and say, ‘Don’t you think there might have been some mistake in the copyist or in the translators?’ This is all probable, and the mind that is so narrow that it will hesitate and stumble over this possibility or probability would be just as ready to stumble over the mysteries of the Inspired Word, because their feeble minds cannot see through the purposes of God. Yes, they would just as easily stumble over plain facts that the common mind will accept, and discern the Divine, and to which God’s utterance is plain and beautiful, full of marrow and fatness. All the mistakes will not cause trouble to one soul, or cause any feet to stumble, that would not manufacture difficulties from the plainest revealed truth.

“God committed the preparation of His divinely inspired Word to finite man. This Word arranged into books, the Old and New Testaments, is the guidebook to the inhabitants of a fallen world, bequeathed to them that, by studying and obeying the directions, not one soul would list its way to heaven. . . .

“I take the Bible just as it is, as the Inspired Word. I believe its utterances in an entire Bible. Men arise who think they find something to criticize in God’s Word. They lay it bare before others as evidence of superior wisdom. These men are, many of them, smart men, learned men; they have eloquence and talent; the whole lifework is to unsettle minds in regard to the inspiration of the Scriptures. They influence many to see as they do. And the same work is passed on from one to another, just as Satan designed it should be, until we may see the full meaning of the words of Christ, ‘When the Son of man cometh shall He find faith on the earth?’ (Luke 18:8). . . .

“Men should let God take care of his own Book, His Living Oracles, as He has done for ages. They begin to question some parts of revelation, and pick flaws in the apparent inconsistencies of this statement and that statement. Beginning at Genesis they give up that which they deem questionable, and their minds lead on, for Satan will lead to any length they may follow in their criticism, and they see something to doubt in the whole Scriptures. Their faculties of criticism become sharpened by exercise, and they can rest on nothing with a certainty. You try to reason with these men, but your time is lost. They will exercise their power of ridicule even upon the Bible. They even become mockers, and they would be astonished if you put it to them in that light.

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“Brethren, cling to your Bible, as it reads, and stop your criticisms in regard to its validity, and obey the Word, and not one of you will be lost. The ingenuity of men has been exercised for ages to measure the Word of God by their finite minds and limited comprehension. If the Lord, the Author of the Living oracles, would throw back the curtain and reveal His wisdom and His glory before them, they would shrink into nothingness and exclaim as did Isaiah, ‘I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips’ (Isa. 6:5).”—Ms 16, 1888; (ISM 15-18). (Written at Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the autumn of 1888.)

Chapter 4—Statements Made in 1889—“The Mysteries of the Bible”

“All who come to the Bible with a teachable and prayerful spirit, to study its utterances as the word of God, will receive divine enlightenment. There are many things apparently difficult or obscure which God will make plain and simple to those who thus seek an understanding of them. . . .

“Many feel that a responsibility rests upon them to explain every seeming difficulty in the Bible in order to meet the cavils of skeptics and infidels. But in trying to explain that which they but imperfectly understand, they are in danger of confusing the minds of others in reference to points that are clear and easy to be understood. This is not our work. Nor should be lament that these difficulties exist, but accept them as permitted by the wisdom of God. It is our duty to receive His Word, which is plain on every point essential to the salvation of the soul, and practice its principles in our life, teaching them to others both by precept and example.

“My brethren, let the Word of God stand just as it is. Let not human wisdom presume to lessen the force of one statement of the Scriptures.”—5T 704-706, 711.

Chapter 5—Some Later Comments—1889 and 1901

“God had faithful witnesses to whom He committed the truth, and who preserved the Word of God. The manuscripts of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures have been preserved through the ages by a miracle of God.”—Letter 32, 1899.

“The Lord speaks to human beings in imperfect speech, in order that the degenerate senses, the dull, earthly perception of human beings may comprehend His words. Thus is shown God’s condescension. He meets fallen human beings where they are. The Bible, perfect as it is in its simplicity, does not answer to the great ideas of God, for infinite ideas cannot be perfectly embodied in finite vehicles of thought. Instead of the expressions of the Bible being exaggerated, as many people suppose, the strong expressions break down before the magnificence of the thought, though the divine penman selected the most expressive language through which to convey the truths of higher education. Sinful beings can only bear to look upon a shadow of the brightness of heaven’s glory.”—*Selected Messages*, vol. I, 22.

Chapter 6—Mrs. White’s Use of the Revised Versions

As noted earlier, Mrs. White occasionally used the Revised Version renderings, also the marginal reading of texts, in nearly all of her books published after 1885, the year of the appearance of the complete English Revised Version.

In *The Great Controversy*, published in 1888, seven texts from the newly issued revision were employed, and she also used the marginal rendering of eight other texts. The proportion of Revised Version and marginal rendering of texts is very small when we consider that there are more than 850 scriptures quoted in *The Great Controversy*, or an average of a little more than one scripture text to a page, whereas there is approximately one Revised Version rendering and one marginal rendering for each one hundred pages.

In 1901 the American Revised Version came from the press, and from that time forward we find that Mrs. White occasionally employed both the English Revised and the American Revised versions.

In 1911, when *The Great Controversy* was reset, Mrs. White retained six of the seven texts previously quoted from the English Revised Version. For the other text she substituted the American Revised rendering. The eight marginal renderings were used as in the earlier edition.

In the publication of *The Ministry of Healing* (1905) Mrs. White employed eight texts from the English Revised Version, 55 from the American Revised Version, two from Leeser, and four from Noyes, in addition to seven marginal renderings.

Other volumes in which Revised Version texts frequently appear are *Patriarchs and Prophets* (1890); *Steps to Christ* (1892); *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* (1896); *The Desire of Ages* (1898); *Education* (1903); and *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8 (1904).

The E. G. White books using a few Revised Version or marginal renderings are *Christ's Object Lessons* (1900); *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7 (1902); *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9 (1909); *The Acts of the Apostles* (1911); *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (1913); *Gospel Workers* (1915); and *Prophets and Kings* (1917).

Patriarchs and Prophets (1890) also contains two renderings from the Bernard translation, and at least one from the Boothroyd Version. *Education* (1903) contains at least one rendering from the Rotherham translation.

In the five volumes of the Conflict of the Ages Series, we find the revised versions quoted. As might be expected, those volumes that enter into an exposition of Bible truth dealing with points of doctrine or the teachings of Christ, contain more texts quoted from the revised versions than do volumes of counsel to the church and those presenting largely historical description. In the three-volume *Comprehensive Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White* use of revised versions is indicated in the Scripture Index.

As to Mrs. White's attitude toward the revisions of 1885 and 1901, and as to her own use of these in preaching and writing, her son, W. C. White, who was closely associated with her in her public ministry and in the preparation and publication of her books, wrote in 1931:

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"I do not know of anything in the E. G. White writings, nor can I remember of anything in Sister White's conversations, that would intimate that she felt that there was any evil in the use of the Revised Version. . . .

"When the first revision was published, I purchased a good copy and gave it to Mother. She referred to it occasionally, but never used it in her preaching. Later on, as manuscripts were prepared for her new books and for revised editions of books already in print, Sister White's attention was called from time to time by myself and Sister Marian Davis, to the fact that she was using texts which were much more clearly translated in the Revised Version. Sister White studied each one carefully, and in some cases she instructed us to use the Revised Version. In other cases she instructed us to adhere to the Authorized Version.

"When *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, was printed and it seemed desirable to make some lengthy quotations from the Psalms, it was pointed out to Sister White that the Revised Version of these Psalms was preferable, and that by using the form of blank verse the passages were more readable. Sister White gave the matter deliberate consideration, and instructed us to use the Revised Version. When you study these passages you will find that in a number of places where the Revised Version is largely used, the Authorized Version is used where translation seems to be better.

"We cannot find in any of Sister White's writings, nor do I find in my memory, any condemnation of the American Revised Version of the Holy Scriptures. Sister White's reasons for not using the A.R.V. in the pulpit are as follows:

"There are many persons in the congregation who remember the words of the texts we might use as they are presented in the Authorized Version, and to read from the Revised Version would introduce perplexing questions in their minds as to why the wording of the text had been changed by the revisers and as to why it was being used by the speaker."

"She did not advise me in a positive way not to use the A.R.V., but she intimated to me quite clearly that it would be better not to do so, as the use of the different wording brought

perplexity to the older members of the congregation.”—White Estate DF 579; *Ministry*, April, 1947, pp. 17, 18.

The extracts quoted above reveal the position of Ellen White on such questions as the transmission of the Sacred Text, the union of the divine and the human in the written record of God’s revelation to man, and also as to her relation to the various translations of the Holy Scriptures.

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