



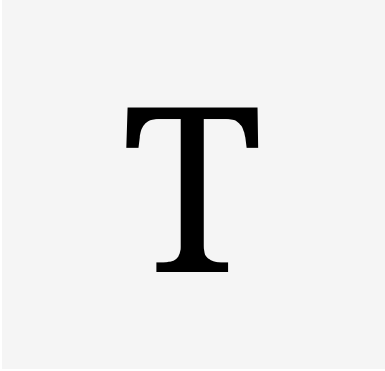
The Desire of Ages project: the conclusions

The uniqueness of The Desire of Ages is to be found in its practical use of Scripture and its stress on spiritual realities and personal devotion rather than the originality of its content.

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> THE DESIRE OF AGES PROJECT: THE CONCLUSIONS

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o what degree was Ellen White dependent upon literary sources in writing *The Desire of Ages*? Did she do the copying herself or was it done by her literary assistants? Could she have unconsciously used the literary expressions of other authors—did she have a photographic memory? Our lengthy and detailed investigation led

to five general conclusions that cast light upon these broad questions posed in the introduction to the study. The conclusions are based primarily but not exclusively on the answers generated by the 14 questions we addressed to each chapter of *The Desire of Ages* (DA) text.¹ They also include interpretations of the data, and to that degree involve personal judgment. I have tried, however, to separate my opinion from what I would argue the evidence indicates to be a fact.

I have attempted to set forth the five concluding statements in as concise a manner as accuracy would allow. To understand properly the meaning intended, the reader should give careful consideration to the accompanying explanations and supporting arguments, brief as they are.

As is true of most research activities, the process of drawing conclusions raised additional issues that in my view call for further study. I hope that the underscoring of these issues will challenge some readers to add their efforts to those of myself and others who have tried to shed more light on Ellen White's work and writings. It should be clearly understood that these questions are not offered to dilute the reasonableness of the arguments or to suggest that this investigation is incomplete, and that therefore its conclusions are invalid.

1. ELLEN WHITE USED LITERARY SOURCES WHEN WRITING *THE DESIRE OF AGES*.

The purpose of this fundamental claim, and for many an obvious truth, is to set forth clearly the following facts. It is of first importance to note that Ellen White herself, not her literary assistants, composed the basic content of the DA text. In doing so she was the one who took literary expressions from the works of other authors without giving

them credit as her sources.² Second, it should be recognized that Ellen White used the writings of others consciously and intentionally. The literary parallels are not the result of accident or photographic memory.

In view of the fact that she employed editorial assistants, our clearest evidence of Ellen White's literary borrowing comes from her personal diaries and manuscripts. If we want to establish more precisely the degree of literary dependence, it would be well to study the manuscripts as they come from her hand, comparing both the dependent and independent sentences. Each manuscript should be treated as a whole. When we take the chapter as the basic unit of composition, we remove ourselves several steps from Ellen White's basic work.

This first and fundamental conclusion never fails to elicit a further inquiry as to its implications. Implicitly or explicitly, Ellen White and others speaking on her behalf did not admit to and even denied literary dependency on her part.³ In the light of this study and other similar studies, what are we to make of such denials? I think that any attempt to address this problem should include a serious consideration of Ellen White's understanding of inspiration and of her role as a prophet. Such a study should be contextualized in terms of nineteenth-century views on inspiration, especially within Adventism.

2. The content of Ellen White's commentary on the life and ministry of Christ, *The Desire of Ages*, is for the most part derived rather than original.

In light of the data our source studies on the DA text provided, this conclusion might appear to some readers as being unjustified.⁴ To those who have been told that literary sources played a minimal role in Ellen White's compositions such a statement may be incredible. Obviously this second general conclusion calls for some clarification.

As I explained in the first article, source dependency involves more than verbal parallels. We must consider not only the DA text as it reads today, but also Ellen White's earlier writings, the thematic structure of her writings, and the content of her material even where no direct literary similarity exists. When we do so, we find that she depended on her sources to a much greater degree than the verbal similarities of the DA text to those sources indicate.

We must not place too much weight upon arguments from silence. But it is worthy of note that the DA material that we classified as independent was often material dealing with topics not usually covered in a work on the life of Christ. Since our study was largely limited to this type of literature, the reader must consider our estimate of the level of source dependency in *The Desire of Ages* as conservative.⁵

In practical terms, this conclusion declares that one is not able to recognize in Ellen White's writings on the life of Christ any general category of content or catalog of ideas that is unique to her. We found source parallels for theological, devotional, narrative, descriptive, and spiritual materials, whether in reference to biblical or extrabiblical content.

Ever since the recent surfacing of the issue of Ellen White's literary borrowing, the question How much? has had center stage. Adventists have tended to emphasize the uniqueness, the originality, of the content of Ellen White's writings. But in an ultimate spiritual sense Ellen White always insisted that her works were derivative. She received the information from which she wrote out her views through visions, through some sort of impression upon the mind, and from Scripture. She saw herself as a messenger of the Lord. I believe the issue that concerned her was the authority and truth of her messages—not their originality. For Ellen White, all truth ultimately originates with God.

This second conclusion suggests some areas for fruitful study. Even though we found parallels to sources in all of the types of the DA materials, perhaps we need to make a serious comparison of the content of the parallels and that of the independent sections.⁶ And it may be that we will find other distinctions when we study the other books published from her writings on the life of Christ—*Christ's Object Lessons* and *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*.

We also need to look at the content of her visions. Did she leave any record—what she saw and when that would enable us to identify the vision content independent of her commentary on the life of Christ that exhibits the use of sources? And what about those times when she was impressed to write? Did she have revelatory experiences other than what is generally understood as a vision? Would the use of sources play any role in such experiences?

There is also the matter of plagiarism. We have now identified several of the sources she used. We know the types of literature these sources represent. And we have an idea of the nature and extent of Ellen White's literary dependency at the level of her original writings. With all this data at hand, we should be able to examine the issue of plagiarism in terms of the literary conventions that governed the use of such religious works among her contemporaries.

3. The special character of Ellen White's commentary is to be found in its practical use of Scripture and in its stress on spiritual realities and personal devotion.

Though Ellen White's writings appear to have been largely derivative, they do not lack originality. A fair assessment of the evidence should not deny or underplay the degree of her dependence, but neither should it overlook or depreciate her independence. Despite her lack of formal education and her dependence upon literary sources and literary assistants, Ellen White could write. She obviously had the ability to express her thoughts clearly. She was not slavishly dependent upon her sources, and the way she incorporated their content clearly shows that she recognized the better literary constructions. She knew how to separate the wheat from the chaff.

It may not be possible to identify Ellen White's "fingerprint" in the material that Marian Davis edited, but certain features of her work are readily apparent. She did not approach the biblical text as a scholarly exegete. Rather, she approached it from a practical point of view, taking the obvious, almost literal, meaning. She gave Marian Davis the responsibility of deciding where the earlier publication needed improving. In some instances the revision included a change in the order of events to bring her writings into harmony with the text of Scripture.

Another distinct characteristic of her work is stress on what I have called "spiritual realities." She differed from her sources in the emphasis she gave to descriptions of the activities or viewpoints of God and His angels and of Satan and his angels. She appears to be much more informed and at home than her sources when discussing the "other world," the real though invisible world of the spiritual beings of the universe. Her concern for reality is also evident in her replacing the expressions of probability, supposition, and imagination found in the sources with factual accounts given in the style of a reporter or eyewitness.

Ellen White's "signature" is also to be found in the proportion of commentary given to devotional, moral, or Christian appeals or lessons that usually appear at the end of a chapter. This feature would naturally fit the evangelistic purpose that motivated her writing on the life of Christ. It is among her devotional comments and throughout her presentation of what I have called "spiritual realities" that we are more likely to find her independent hand at work.

Ellen White's independence is also to be seen in her selectivity. The sources were her slaves, never her master. Future studies would do well to compare her text with that of the sources and to note how she selected, condensed, paraphrased, and in general rearranged much of the material she used.

Our study raised another question that merits further attention: Was Ellen White indebted to sources for her devotional or spiritual comments? We did find several parallels in one or two works of this type, but our research did not survey enough of these works to establish whether her apparent independence is owing to her originality or to the limits of our investigation. When we extend the survey of possible sources to sermons and devotional literature, we will be able to tell how accurate are our data on her independence and bring into sharper focus just how much of her sections of comment corresponds to or differs from the sources she used.

No doubt a thorough look at Ellen White's use of Scripture would also prove helpful. Is biblical interpretation today limited to her practical approach? Is there a place for careful exegesis? If there is more than one legitimate approach to the study of Scripture, should Ellen White's views control Adventist interpretation of Scripture?

Finally, regarding content, how do Ellen White's writings on the life of Christ compare among themselves? We can no longer ask either Ellen White or those who knew her to explain what she meant by what she wrote. To be fair to her and to avoid the misuse of her authority, we must be careful how we represent what she wrote and how we establish what her position on a given subject was. My study of her writings on the life of Christ has given me the impression that some of her views changed through time. The very fact that the DA text represents a revision of her earlier work suggests that her writings form a textual tradition.

If continued investigation indicates that there is some development in her ideas, would it not suggest that her comments need to be considered in terms of "time and place" not only within her own life experience and textual tradition but with respect to the larger background of her times, both within and without the Adventist Church? Perhaps we need Adventist historians and/or the Ellen G. White Estate to provide introductions to her writings in similar fashion to what we find useful in studying the Old and New Testament writings. At any rate, we may not necessarily find her view by simply striking a harmony among all her writings on a given subject. Her latest view might well be a correction or at least a modification of an earlier position.

4. Ellen White used a minimum of 23 sources of various types of literature, including fiction, in her writings on the life of Christ.²

Actually, we have no way of knowing how many sources are represented in Ellen White's work on the life of Christ. In addition to the remaining 72 chapters of the DA text, there are two other books to review: *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* and *Christ's Object Lessons*. These 23 writers are sufficient, however, to answer the questions so many have asked: From what writers did Ellen White borrow? What kinds of books were they writing?

Space does not permit us to survey all 23 here. But there is no need to cover the entire lot, since many fall under the literary category of "Victorian lives of Christ." The books in this category were never intended to be biographies. Today they would probably be classified as historical fiction.

One obviously fictional account is Ingraham's *The Prince of the House of David*, a work that Albert Schweitzer referred to as one of the " 'edifying' romances on the life of Jesus intended for family reading."³ Ingraham cast his work as a collection of letters written by an eyewitness in Palestine to her father in Egypt.

William Hanna's popular work was designed to be "practical and devotional."⁴ No wonder that parallels from Hanna are to be found in 13 of the 15 DA chapters we investigated.

The books in Ellen White's library at the time of her death appear to corroborate what her writings reveal. She read widely in works of differing literary type, theological perspective, and scholarly depth.

5. Ellen White's literary assistants, particularly Marian Davis, are responsible for the published form of *The Desire of Ages*.

The role of Ellen White's literary assistants was not a major concern of the study. But this subject cannot be entirely excluded from any serious attempt to treat her use of sources. Her method of writing inextricably involved the work of her secretaries, especially that of her "bookmaker." A significant part of the introduction to the research report covers this rather interesting side to Ellen White's literary work.

In her day she was no doubt known more for her public speaking than for her writing. She loved to speak, took every opportunity to speak, and was confident of her speaking ability. It was not that way with her writing. Though she felt the burden to write, her confidence in her ability as a writer was not strong. She knew that her education did not qualify her to write for publication.

The evidence suggests that she wrote day by day in her journals, moving from topic to topic as time and opportunity made it possible. No doubt she worked with one source for a while and then moved on to another source and another subject. These jottings would be copied and corrected for grammar, syntax, and spelling when she passed that journal over to one of her secretaries. Several journals would be active at the same time.

From these collections her assistants would compose articles for Adventist journals. It appears that larger publications were produced from collections of materials gathered into a scrapbook. At least that seems to be the way the chapters for *The Desire of Ages* were compiled. Apparently her assistants at times developed manuscripts from journal entries. Several of the manuscripts consist mainly of excerpts from earlier writings and do not carry Ellen White's signature.

Our comparison of manuscripts with the finished text and our study of the letters Ellen White and Marian Davis wrote that reveal the steps required for preparing the text for publication clearly show that Marian Davis had the liberty to modify sentence structure, to rearrange paragraphs, and to establish chapter length. Ellen White was more concerned about the general content of the book, the cost, and getting the material to the public as soon as possible. She also took a keen interest in the art work used to illustrate her writings.

I found no evidence to indicate that Marian Davis was involved in the original composition of any Ellen White text. But without the original manuscripts it is difficult to prove that such did not happen with any portion of the text of *The Desire of Ages*. It might prove helpful to make a stylistic study of the letters of Marian Davis and the handwritten materials of Ellen White. If their "fingerprints" emerge, we would have some basis for determining more precisely the level of involvement Marian Davis exercised in her role as "book maker." It may well be that she deserves some public recognition for her services in this regard.

As a final statement on the research project, I think it is fair to say that in respect to the text of *The Desire of Ages*, Ellen White was both derivative and original. Future studies will no doubt bring to our attention not only more sources but also a greater understanding of Ellen White's creative role. With the aid of her literary assistants, she built out of the common quarry of stone not a replica of another's work but rather a customized literary composition that reflects the particular faith and Christian hope that she was called to share with her fellow Adventists and the Christian community at large.

It is perhaps more accurate and useful to speak of her creative and independent use of her writings and those of others than to minimize her dependence upon the writings of others. Whether sentence, paragraph, chapter, or book, it is the finished product that should be considered in the final analysis. A reading of the full report will readily reveal that the multiple aspects of literary dependence or independence, particularly of large portions of text, are often too subtle, too intertwined, and otherwise too complex to be precisely and consistently evaluated.

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1. See the first article in this series: *Ministry*, October 1990.
 2. I do not claim that her secretaries did not borrow from the sources. My point is that I found no evidence that they composed the text using literary sources, and there is plenty of evidence in Ellen White's manuscripts to show that she did so.
 3. See "Personal Postscript" for the reference of the statement from *The Great Controversy* on this question.
 4. See questions 5, 6, and 7 in the first article in this series, "The Desire of Ages Project: the Data," *Ministry*, October 1990.

5. For example, chapter 56, "Blessing the Children," includes much comment on motherhood, fatherhood, and the family. Until we survey the literature that we know Ellen White read on such topics, we cannot be sure that the sentences of this chapter actually deserve the independent rating we have given them.

6. For a good example of a content analysis, see Tim Poirier's "Sources Clarify Ellen White's Christology," *Ministry*, December 1989, pp. 7-9.

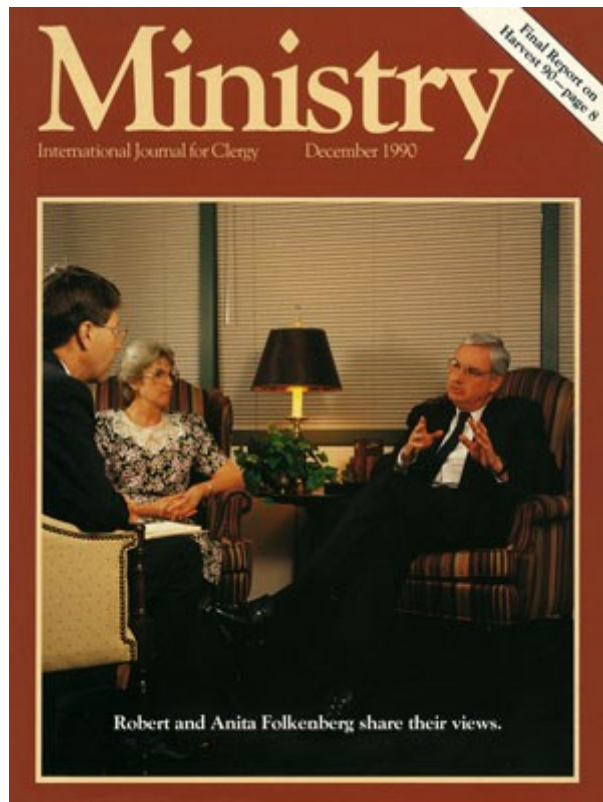
7. The summary statement in the first article listed 28 writers and 32 sources for both the DA and pre-DA texts. I came up with the number 23 by omitting the duplications between the two textual surveys and, in an effort to be sure that we had bonafide sources, by eliminating from the count all sources providing less than five parallels for any given chapter.

8. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: A. and C. Black, Ltd., 1910), p. 328, note 1.

9. Daniel L. Pals, *The Victorian "Lives" of Christ* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1982), p. 69.

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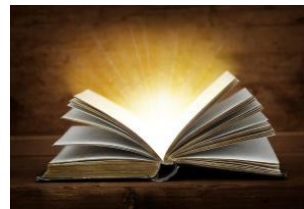
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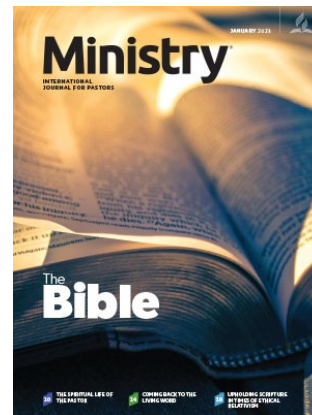
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