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Ellen G. White's *Life of Christ*: An Episode in the History of Early Adventist Translation Work

Denis Kaiser

Abstract

In the late 1880s and early 1890s a book on the life of Jesus Christ was published in various foreign languages in Europe and North America. Ellen G. White was given as the author of the book. It generally was known under the English working title *The Life of Christ*, although an English counterpart to these foreign language editions has never been published. The circumstance of those editions raises the question of their textual basis, background, and significance. The following article shows that the *Life of Christ* is an adapted version of *Spirit of Prophecy*, vols. 2 and 3, which also influenced the chronology and content of the later *Desire of Ages*. Published in Danish-Norwegian, Swedish, German, French, and Finnish, the *Life of Christ* had a major impact on evangelistic work and on the principles followed in the preparation of Ellen White's books in later years.

Throughout her life Seventh-day Adventist leader, writer, and prophetic voice Ellen G. White (1827–1915) was moved in her writing and speaking ministry by a passion for Jesus Christ and Scripture (Burt 2010; Kaiser and Moon forthcoming). This passion is reflected in her many sermons, articles, manuscripts, and letters that speak of her love for Jesus as a personal Savior, Lord, and Friend. Her books also manifest a continual amplification and enlargement of the life of Christ theme: *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1 (White 1858); *Spirit of Prophecy*, vols. 2 and 3 (White 1877; White 1878); *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* (White 1896); *The Desire of Ages* (White 1898); and *Christ's Object Lessons* (White 1900). In his extensive research on the literary sources and the development of ideas in the *Desire of Ages* Fred Veltman briefly mentioned various foreign language editions of a book on the life of Jesus Christ, authored by Ellen White and published during the late 1880s and early 1890s in Europe and North America (Veltman 1988, 119–123). These editions were generally called *The Life of Christ*¹ although a published English counterpart never existed. Since Ellen White was not conversant in any language other than English and the text of those editions differs somewhat from any of her other books published in English, these *Life of*

¹ The title *Life of Christ* was used in contemporary correspondence, advertisements, and mission reports which is why it is subsequently used for simplification although there never existed a published English edition of the book.

Christ editions represent a rather obscure chapter in Adventist literary history. This article looks at the literary relationships, the background, and the significance of these editions, specifically for the evangelistic work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the editorial process in translating and publishing Ellen White’s books, and the conceptions of divine inspiration.²

1. Literary Relationships of the *Life of Christ*

As can be seen below there are striking literary relationships not only between *Spirit of Prophecy*, vols. 2 and 3, and the *Life of Christ* but also between the latter and the literary masterpiece *Desire of Ages*. The explanation of these relationships is preceded by a chart containing a comparison of the chapters of the three works.³

<i>The Spirit of Prophecy</i> , vols. 2 and 3				<i>The Life of Christ</i>			<i>The Desire of Ages</i>		
	Chs.	Titles	Page	Chs.	Titles	Page	Chs.	Titles	Page
Vol. 2				1.	Plan of Redemption	9	1.	God With Us	19
							2.	The Chosen People	27
							3.	The Fulness of Time	31
	1.	The First Advent of Christ	9				4.	Unto You a Saviour	43
							5.	The Dedication	50
							6.	We Have Seen His Star	59
	2.	The Life of Christ	30	2.	The Birth of Jesus Christ	14			
							7.	As a Child	68
							8.	The Passover Visit	75
							9.	Days of Conflict	84
	3.	Life and Mission of John	41	3.	Childhood of Jesus Christ	30			
							10.	The Voice in the Wilderness	97
							11.	The Baptism	109
	4.	The Mission of Christ	58	4.	John the Baptist	43			
						57			
				6.	The Temptation in the Wilderness	65	12.	The Temptation	114
							13.	The Victory	124
							14.	We Have Found the Messiah	132
				7.	John Bears Witness to Christ	78			
				8.	John's Character	84			
5.	The Death of John	74	9.	John's Death	90				
6.	Temptation of Christ	85							
7.	The Marriage at Cana	98	10.	The Wedding of Cana	100	15.	At the Marriage Feast	144	
8.	Cleansing the Temple	115	11.	Jesus Cleanses the Temple	116	16.	In His Temple	154	
9.	Nicodemus Comes to Christ	124	12.	Nicodemus Comes to Christ	124	17.	Nicodemus	167	
							18.	He Must Increase	178
10.	The Woman of Samaria	140	13.	The Samaritan Woman	139	19.	At Jacob's Well	183	
11.	The Centurion's Son	151	14.	The Centurion's Son	149				
							20.	Except Ye See Signs and Wonders	196
12.	Jesus at Bethesda	156	15.	Jesus at Bethesda	154	21.	Bethesda and the Sanhedrin	201	
							22.	Imprisonment and Death of John	214
							23.	The Kingdom of God Is at Hand	231
							24.	Is Not This the Carpenter's Son?	236
							25.	The Call by the Sea	244
13.	Jesus at Capernaum	173	16.	Jesus in Capernaum	170	26.	At Capernaum	252	
14.	Choosing the Disciples	182	17.	Jesus Chooses the Disciples	179				

² A concise article on “The Life of Christ” will appear in the forthcoming *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (Kaiser, forthcoming).

³ The page numbers of the *Life of Christ* in this chart stem from the Swedish *Kristi lefnad* of 1885.

<i>The Spirit of Prophecy, vols. 2 and 3</i>				<i>The Life of Christ</i>			<i>The Desire of Ages</i>			
	Chs.	Titles	Page	Chs.	Titles	Page	Chs.	Titles	Page	
Vol. 2				18	The Leper's Healing	189	27	Thou Canst Make Me Clean	262	
				19	The Paralytic	195				
	15	The Sabbath	193	20	The Sabbath	204	28	Levi-Matthew	272	
							29	The Sabbath	281	
	16	Sermon on the Mount	200	21	Jesus' Sermon on the Mount	210	30	He Ordained Twelve	290	
	17	The Leper Healed	225				31	The Sermon on the Mount	298	
	18	Parable of the Sower	232	22	The Parable of the Sower	234				
	19	Other Parables	242	23	Other Parables	243				
							32	The Centurion	315	
							33	Who Are My Brethren?	321	
							34	The Invitation	328	
					24	Jesus Calms the Storm	259	35	Peace, Be Still	333
							36	The Touch of Faith	342	
					25	The Men from the Grave	264	37	The First Evangelists	349
							38	Come Rest Awhile	359	
	20	The Loaves and Fishes	258	26	Loaves and Fishes	271	39	Give Ye Them to Eat	364	
	21	Walking on the Water	267	27	Jesus Walks on Water	279	40	A Night on the Lake	377	
							41	The Crisis in Galilee	383	
	22	Christ in the Synagogue	274	28	Christ in the Synagogue	284	42	Tradition	395	
	23	The Paralytic	282							
							43	Barriers Broken Down	399	
	24	Woman of Canaan	301	29	The Canaanite Woman	300	44	The True Sign	404	
	25	Christ Still the Tempest	305							
	26	Men from the Tombs	311							
	27	Jairus' Daughter	318	30	Jairus' Daughter	304				
							45	The Foreshadowing of the Cross	410	
	28	The Transfiguration	324	31	Christ's Transfiguration	310	46	He Was Transfigured	419	
							47	Ministry	426	
							48	Who Is the Greatest?	432	
	29	Feast of Tabernacles	337	32	Feast of Tabernacles	325	49	At the Feast of Tabernacles	447	
30	Go and Sin no More	349	33	Go and Sin no More	336	50	Among Snares	455		
						51	The Light of Life	463		
						52	The Divine Shepherd	476		
						53	The Last Journey From Galilee	485		
						54	The Good Samaritan	497		
						55	Not With Outward Show	506		
						56	Blessing the Children	511		
						57	One Thing Thou Lackest	518		
31	Resurrection of Lazarus	358	34	Resurrection of Lazarus	345	58	Lazarus, Come Forth	524		
						59	Priestly Plottings	537		
						60	The Law of the New Kingdom	547		
						61	Zacchaeus	552		
32	Mary's Offering	372	35	Mary's Offering	358	62	The Feast at Simon's House	557		
33	Riding into Jerusalem	382	36	Jesus Rides into Jerusalem	368	63	Thy King Cometh	569		
1	Weeping over Jerusalem	9	37	Jesus weeps over Jerusalem	380	64	A Doomed People	580		
2	Cleansing the Temple	20	38	Jesus Cleanses the Temple	391	65	The Temple Cleansed	589		
3	Jesus and the Pharisees	36	39	Jesus and the Pharisees	406	66	Controversy	601		
4	Denouncing the Pharisees	56	40	Jesus denounces the Pharisees	424	67	Woes on the Pharisees	610		
5	In the Outer Court	74	41	In the Outer Court	440	68	In the Outer Court	621		
6	The Passover Supper	81	42	The Passover Supper	447	69	On the Mount of Olives	627		
						70	The Least of These My Brethren	637		
						71	A Servant of Servants	642		
						72	In Remembrance of Me	652		
						73	Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled	662		
7	In the Garden	94	43	In the Herb Garden	459	74	Gethsemane	685		
8	In the Judgment Hall	107	44	Jesus in the Judgment Hall	471	75	Before Annas and the Court of Caiaphas	698		
						76	Judas	716		
9	Condemnation of Jesus	127	45	Jesus' Death Warrant	490	77	In Pilate's Judgment Hall	723		
10	Calvary	148	46	Golgotha	510	78	Calvary	741		
11	At the Sepulcher	173	47	At the Grave	533	79	It is Finished	758		
12	The Conflict Ended	183	48	The Battle Ended	542	80	In Joseph's Tomb	769		
13	The Resurrection	191	49	The Resurrection	550	81	The Lord Is Risen	779		
14	The Women at the Tomb	198	50	The Women at the Tomb	556	82	Why Weepst Thou?	788		
15	Jesus at Emmaus	206	51	Jesus at Emmaus	564	83	The Walk to Emmaus	795		
16	In the Upper Chamber	216	52	The Disciples in the Hall	573	84	Peace Be Unto You	802		
17	Jesus at Galilee	223	53	Jesus at Galilee	579	85	By the Sea Once More	809		
18	Meeting of the Brethren	234	54	The Brother's Meeting	590	86	Go Teach All Nations	818		
19	Ascension of Christ	249	55	Christ's Ascension	604	87	To My Father, and Your Father	829		
Vol. 3										

1.1 The Relationship to *Spirit of Prophecy*, Volumes 2 and 3

The charts above show that the material used in the *Spirit of Prophecy* volumes appears in almost the same chronological order in the *Life of Christ*. A comparison of the 55 chapters of the initial *Life of Christ* with the 52 chapters on Jesus' life in vols. 2 and 3 of the *Spirit of Prophecy* series reveals striking similarities between those books. The chapters from vol. 3 appear in the exact same order in the *Life of Christ*, whereas the order of the chapters from vol. 2 was rearranged and slightly adapted. Thus the first four chapters from vol. 2 were replaced by eight chapters in the *Life of Christ* that contain new material. The first four chapters in vol. 2 were entitled: (1) "The First Advent of Christ," (2) "The Life of Christ," (3) "Life and Mission of John," and (4) "The Mission of Christ." These chapters were replaced in the *Life of Christ* by one rearranged old chapter and seven new chapters on the following topics: (1) "The Plan of Redemption," (2) "Jesus Christ's Birth," (3) "Childhood of Jesus Christ," (4) "John the Baptist," (5) "Christ's Baptism," (6) "The Temptation in the Wilderness" (rearranged), (7) "John Bears Witness to Christ," and (8) "John's Character." Further on in the book, five chapters were moved to different places: chapter 6 on the temptation of Christ was placed right after the new chapter 5; chapter 17 on the healing of the leper and chapter 23 on the paralytic were placed right after the old chapter 14; and chapters 25 on the stilling of the tempest by Christ and 26 on the men from the tombs were placed right after the old chapter 19.

The textual basis of the *Life of Christ* was basically vols. 2 and 3 of the *Spirit of Prophecy*, also published under the alternative series title *The Great Controversy*. William C. White explained the literary basis as follows: "While this edition [the *Life of Christ*] is largely a translation of G[rea]t Con[troversy], vols. 2&3, the text has received some additions, and a special preparation for translation into the European languages." He left no doubt that his mother was involved in the preparation of the textual basis for the translation: "In the production of the book, no pains have been spared by the author, the translators, or the publishers, to make the book just what it ought to be, that it may go freely among the people, and do the most possible good."⁴

Those remarks are supported by two interesting copies of the *Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 2, which are found in the vault of the Ellen G. White Estate at Silver Spring, Maryland. Both copies contain introductory notes that are quite insightful. Thus the first copy was "marked for the German Life of Christ," and was intended to be the "Manuscript for [the] Translator." It was supposed to be returned to "M. A. Davis," referring to Marian A. Davis, Ellen White's long-time literary assistant. The second copy was designed for the "French Life of Christ," and was sent on "May 13, 1884" to "G. I. Butler," then president of the General Conference of

⁴ W. C. White, letter to H. P. Holser, September 5, 1887; cf. W. C. White, letter to L. C. Chadwick, July 10, 1888; W. C. White, letter to A. O. Tait, July 10, 1888. All letters referred to are from the Ellen G. White Estate, Silver Spring.

Seventh-day Adventists (EGWE 689). Even more significant is the fact that these two copies contain a number of notes, markings, and insertions for the translators (for more details, see Kaiser 2008, 44–50). The existence of these adapted *Spirit of Prophecy* copies is indicative of the fact that there was no single published English work used as the master copy for the *Life of Christ*.

1.2 The Relationship to the *Desire of Ages*

While the text of the *Desire of Ages* obviously constitutes a significant improvement over the text of the *Life of Christ*, the chronology of the events is quite similar. A comparison of the 55 chapters of *Life of Christ* with the topics treated in the 87 chapters of the *Desire of Ages* revealed that the 55 chapters of the *Life of Christ* were used in the same chronological order in the *Desire of Ages* with a few exceptions. Four chapters were moved to a different place;⁵ chapters 22 and 23 were either left out, or their content was used in other chapters. Further, the *Desire of Ages* contains 32 additional chapters that contain new material or material that was previously part of already existing chapters.

A close examination of the chapter on the birth and ministry of John the Baptist led Fred Veltman to the discovery

that selections which later appear in Patriarch and Prophets but are not part of the S[pirit of] P[rophetcy] text show up also in the French work [of the Life of Christ]. There are other sentences which appear to be, upon translation into English, closer to the D[esire of] A[ges] text than to the S[pirit of] P[rophetcy] text. We also found sentences in the French edition [of the Life of Christ] which we were not able to find elsewhere in Ellen White's writings. Perhaps these materials originated from the writings Ellen White was preparing at the time and while translated for the European editions were not preserved for the English text of either Patriarchs and Prophets or the D[esire of] A[ges] (Veltman 1988, 122).

Veltman further states that Ellen White's later works on Christ's life follow "the order and arrangement of the narrative presentation" (Veltman 1988, 122). That confirms Marian Davis' statement that "in the suggestions made as to detail and arrangement, I have followed, as nearly as seemed feasible, the French L[ife of] C[hrist]."⁶ Although the plan to prepare an English edition of the *Life of Christ* was eventually aborted, it is reasonable to conclude that the *Life of Christ* constitutes a distinct stage in the history of the text of *The Desire of Ages* and could be called a missing link as well (Veltman 1988, 123).

⁵ Chapter 7 on John's witness about Christ was moved between the chapters on Nicodemus and the events at Jacob's well; chapter 9 on John's death was moved between the chapters on Bethesda and the kingdom of God being at hand; chapter 17 on Jesus calling his disciples was moved right before the chapter on the events at Capernaum; and chapter 30 on Jairus' daughter was moved between the chapters on the stilling of the storm and the first evangelists.

⁶ Marian Davis, letter to James Edson White, December 22, 1895.

2. The Story of the Various *Life of Christ* Editions

It was during the 1883 Session of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists that the resolution was passed that “Sr. White’s ‘Life of Christ’ shall be published in the Danish-Norwegian language. ... This and other books shall also be published in the French, German, and Swedish languages.” (Butler and Oyen 1883, 733) Subsequent correspondence shows that the basis for the translation was vols. 2 and 3 of the *Spirit of Prophecy*.⁷ In order to realize this resolution, it was recommended that A. B. Oyen should move to Norway to translate the book into the Danish-Norwegian language with the help and criticism of J. G. Matteson. Further, W. C. White was asked to “arrange his business to go at some time to Europe in order to take advanced steps in establishing publishing interests in Europe” (ibid.). Between September 1885 and August 1887, W. C. White, his mother Ellen G. White, and the rest of her staff established their headquarters in Basel, Switzerland (Delafield 1975). It was during those years that the *Life of Christ* was prepared and published in various languages.

2.1 Published Editions

Danish-Norwegian Edition. Although Oyen did not plan to leave for Norway until the end of the following March (1884), he had already begun to translate the book before he left. Since he regarded many sentences as rather “wordy” and not concise enough, he asked W. C. White for the permission to shorten some of the statements.⁸ When Matteson received and proofread the first couple of pages, he arrived at the conclusion that Oyen was not competent to translate the *Life of Christ* or anything of importance.⁹ Hurt by Matteson’s behavior and criticism, Oyen wanted to stay in America, discard the project, and leave the translation entirely to Matteson.¹⁰ Yet the denominational leaders were able to convince him to change his mind and go to Norway. His mood and attitude towards the project improved, and he wanted to prepare himself as well as possible to accomplish that translation work. He considered the manuscript of the *Life of Christ* to be a decided improvement over the *Spirit of Prophecy* text. Oyen was especially pleased with the new first chapter “The Plan of Redemption.” The message of the book had been made clearer and more interesting by subdividing the subsequent

⁷ J. G. Matteson, letter to G. I. Butler, January 16, 1884; W. C. White, letter to H. P. Holser, September 5, 1887; W. C. White, letter to L. C. Chadwick, July 10, 1888; W. C. White, letter to A. O. Tait, July 10, 1888.

⁸ A. B. Oyen, letter to W. C. White, February 8, 1884.

⁹ J. G. Matteson, letter to G. I. Butler, January 16, 1884; A. B. Oyen, letter to W. C. White, February 8, 1884.

¹⁰ A. B. Oyen, letter to G. I. Butler, February 14, 1884; A. B. Oyen, letter to W. C. White, March 20, 1884.

chapters and by the introduction of “new matter.”¹¹ He suggested the insertion of the statement “Specifically prepared by the author for translation into Danish-Norwegian” on the title page of the book, a suggestion that was also accepted in an adapted form in the Swedish edition (White 1885, 1; White 1886a, 1).¹² The translation was actually done by Matteson, who dictated to a shorthand writer, getting “along quite rapidly” this way.¹³ While the book was published in one volume in North America, it was bound in two volumes in Norway to “facilitate the sale.”¹⁴ The Danish-Norwegian edition, which was entitled *Jesu Kristi liv*, was published at Battle Creek (Michigan), Chicago (Illinois), and Kristiana (Norway) between 1885 and 1895 (White 1885; White 1888a; White 1895).

Swedish Edition. It took a little bit longer to get the book translated and published in Swedish. However, by the latter part of 1886 it was also issued in that language.¹⁵ While the books were initially printed at the Review and Herald publishing house in Battle Creek, it was considered more efficient by the people in Sweden to have printing plates in Europe too so that they could print as often and as many copies as necessary, without waiting for several months for books to arrive from America.¹⁶ Thus, from 1886 until 1893, *Kristi lefnad* was printed at the publishing houses in Battle Creek and Stockholm (White 1886; White 1893a). The circulation of the book was attended with much success and good results, as W. C. White reported.¹⁷

German Edition. In early 1886, the book was almost entirely translated into German.¹⁸ However, the publishing date had to be postponed several times due to various disagreements about the best and most accurate translation.¹⁹ Although initially the project looked quite promising, it was not certain anymore if it could be completed before W. C. White would leave Europe again.²⁰ The determination “to have it as good as possible” made the German translation unusually expensive and time-consuming.²¹ However, there were other reasons for the delay apart from the translation and shortage of money. In November 1886, the work was practically at a standstill, for Marian Davis’ time was taken up entirely with

¹¹ A. B. Oyen, letter to W. C. White, March 20, 1884.

¹² A. B. Oyen, letter to W. C. White, March 21, 1884.

¹³ A. B. Oyen, letter to W. C. White, June 19, 1884.

¹⁴ W. C. White, letter to British Mission Board, May 18, 1888.

¹⁵ W. C. White, letter to A. R. Henry, June 23, 1886.

¹⁶ W. C. White, letter to C. H. Jones, February 19, 1886; W. C. White, letter to A. B. Oyen, April 5, 1886; W. C. White, letter to A. R. Henry, June 23, 1886; W. C. White, letter to E. Eldridge, August 1, 1886; W. C. White, letter to A. R. Henry, Sept. 6, 1886.

¹⁷ W. C. White, letter to H. P. Holser, September 5, 1887.

¹⁸ W. C. White, letter to C. H. Jones, February 14, 1886; W. C. White, letter to C. H. Jones, March 8, 1886.

¹⁹ W. C. White, letter to C. H. Jones, May 13, 1886.

²⁰ W. C. White, letter to G. I. Butler, January 26, 1887.

²¹ W. C. White, letter to L. C. Chadwick, December 1887.

articles that Ellen White was sending from her journeys.²² Yet by the end of July 1887 it was finally printed with the title *Das Leben Jesu Christi*, although it was not ready for the market until September (Conradi 1887a, 253–254; Holser 1888, 237).²³ The book was well received and very popular among ordinary people in Germany (Conradi, 1887b, 286). W. C. White advertised *Das Leben Jesu Christi*, printed in Basel, at the General Conference Session in November 1887, urging church administrators to employ good agents and train them well to work among the German population in their areas. Several weeks afterwards the German edition was also printed by the Pacific Press at Oakland in California (Abtheilung 1888).²⁴ The German edition was published at Basel (Switzerland), Hamburg (Germany), Oakland (California), and Battle Creek (Michigan) from 1887 until at least 1893 (White 1887a; White 1888b; White 1891a; White 1893b).

French Edition. The translation of the book into French occurred simultaneously with the translation into German. As with the German translation, the completion of the French was repeatedly within eyeshot but it had to be postponed several times.²⁵ W. C. White reported that precious months had been lost in the French project

until some who ought to have had the burden of pushing the work forward almost forgot that there was such a book being published. At one time Bro. Whitney proposed to throw away all we had done and begin anew. This would have delayed us another year, and how pleased the Devil would have been, if he had succeeded in cheating us out of another year.²⁶

The book was not available until October 1, 1887.²⁷ Afterwards it was published initially under the title *La vie de Christ* and later with the title *La vie de Jésus-Christ notre Seigneur* in Basel (Switzerland), Oakland (California), and Battle Creek (Michigan) between 1887 and 1891 (White 1887b; White 1888c; White 1891b).

²² W. C. White, letter to E. G. White, November 14, 1886.

²³ W. C. White, letter to C. H. Jones, July 29, 1887; W. C. White, letter to M. K. White, August 1, 1887; W. C. White, letter to C. H. Jones, August 11, 1887; W. C. White, letter to E. G. White, August 11, 1887.

²⁴ W. C. White, letter to H. P. Holser, September 5, 1887; W. C. White, letter to L. C. Chadwick, December 1887.

²⁵ W. C. White, letter to E. G. White, October 19, 1886; W. C. White, letter to C. H. Jones, November 10, 1886; W. C. White, letter to S. N. Haskell, March 18, 1887; W. C. White, letter to C. H. Jones, March 23, 1887; W. C. White, letter to T. Valentine, March 24, 1887; W. C. White, letter to A. R. Henry, April 1, 1887; W. C. White, letter to C. H. Jones, April 4, 1887; W. C. White, letter to unknown, April 15, 1887; W. C. White, letter to R. H. Coggshall, May 13, 1887; W. C. White, letter to C. H. Jones, May 18, 1887; W. C. White, letter to C. H. Jones, July 21, 1887; W. C. White, letter to G. I. Butler, July 28, 1887.

²⁶ W. C. White, letter to the Central European Mission Board of S. D. Adventists, May 15, 1888.

²⁷ W. C. White, letter to E. G. White, August 11, 1887.

Finnish Edition. The Seventh-day Adventist faith had entered Finland for the first time in 1891, and by 1897 the church had grown to 68 members (Land 2009, 100; “Finland (1897–1900)”). Thus it is surprising that such a small group of people was able to accomplish the translation and publishing of this 635-page book. *Kristuksen Elämä* was published in Helsinki (Finland) in 1897 (White 1897), the year before the *Desire of Ages* appeared in English.

2.2 Proposed Editions

English Edition. In 1886, W. C. White was so satisfied with the sale of the *Life of Christ* in Scandinavia that he desired the book to “be published in English soon.”²⁸ He recognized the need of the book “to be revised and enlarged, and an English edition of this put out.”²⁹ While he wished that his mother would be able to prepare that edition before their return to America,³⁰ she wanted to make “important additions” which deferred its publication for an indefinite period of time.³¹ Convinced of the importance of the Christ-centered content and perspective of the book, W. C. White considered either reprinting the two *Spirit of Prophecy* volumes as one book or hastily revising the *Life of Christ* and making plates for the publishing houses in England, the United States, and perhaps even Australia. He added, however, that she “greatly desired to add something when the book was printed again, and this is why we have not printed it in English.”³²

Dutch Edition. By the end of 1887 it was suggested that the *Life of Christ* be translated into the Dutch language. W. C. White favored the idea of having G. Velthuysen translate the book.³³ After Velthuysen was employed by the Central European Mission Board at Basel, Switzerland, he began translating the book from the English copy, comparing it with the German and the French editions.³⁴ For an unknown reason, Velthuysen was relieved of that task shortly afterwards, and M. J. van der Schuur³⁵ was considered as a possible translator but these considerations were soon given up. Now it was discussed if the translation should be done by J. Kolvoord from the English and be critically examined by Van der

²⁸ W. C. White, letter to E. Eldridge, August 1, 1886.

²⁹ W. C. White, letter to C. H. Jones, November 10, 1886.

³⁰ W. C. White, letter to G. I. Butler, January 26, 1887.

³¹ W. C. White, letter to F. E. Belden, March 1, 1888.

³² W. C. White, letter to the British Mission Board, May 18, 1888.

³³ W. C. White, letter to B. L. Whitney, L. R. Conradi, and E. J. Waggoner, December 13, 1887; W. C. White, letter to F. E. Belden, February 3, 1888; W. C. White, letter to G. I. Butler, February 14, 1888; W. C. White, letter to F. E. Belden, March 1, 1888; W. C. White, letter to E. W. Whitney, March 6, 1888.

³⁴ W. C. White, letter to Central European Mission Board, May 15, 1888; W. C. White, letter to L. R. Conradi, May 16, 1888.

³⁵ M. J. van der Schuur was asked to come from the Netherlands to the United States. See W. C. White, letter to the Central European Mission Board, August 8, 1888.

Schuur.³⁶ That was the procedure recommended by W. C. White, whereas the publishing house apparently argued for “a translation from the German by a man who could not read the English.”³⁷ Kolvoord felt that many passages in the book would be considered objectionable by the readers since they would not understand “the author’s special gift,” or they would not regard it as “sufficient authority for statements not susceptible of Scripture proof.”³⁸ Since the book committee decided to wait for the revision until the end of the year 1888, the translation came to a standstill.³⁹ Yet, even after the revision had been accomplished, the Dutch people were unwilling to continue working on the book, as the following statement by W. C. White shows.

There is but little prospect that we shall have the *Life of Christ* very soon in the Dutch language. Our Holland Brethren find so many points to criticize, and their criticism finds so little favour with us, that they have no heart to go forward with the work, and it must wait. I hope the time will come when they will like taking hold of the work, and bring it out, for I am sure it would meet with favour, in South Africa, if not in Holland.⁴⁰

Spanish Edition. In 1891 the European book committee recommended revising the *Life of Christ* so that it could be published as a subscription book in Spanish for South America. Henry Holser, the chairman of that committee, envisioned the book “as a pioneer book among the Spanish speaking people.” Yet John N. Nelson confronted Holser’s dream with reality when he informed him that the book was not even ready in English.⁴¹ Hence the plans for a Spanish edition had to be postponed.

3. The Significance of the *Life of Christ*

The *Life of Christ* in its various foreign language editions had an impact in Europe, North America, and even Australia in several ways. Since its envisioned audience was not so much the membership of the denomination but rather non-members, special care was taken to present it in the best way possible. Thus illustrations were sought that would attract the interest of the readers. The text of the book was

³⁶ W. C. White, letter to G. I. Butler, July 2, 1888; W. C. White, letter to the Managers of the Review and Herald, July 4, 1888.

³⁷ W. C. White, letter to the Managers of the Review and Herald, July 4, 1888; W. C. White, letter to E. W. Whitney, July 10, 1888; W. C. White, letter to the Central European Mission Board, August 8, 1888.

³⁸ “Book Committee Proceedings: Third Session, Fall of 1888,” Minneapolis, MN, October 25 – November 17, 1888, 10.

³⁹ W. C. White, letter to H. P. Holser, December 18, 1888.

⁴⁰ W. C. White, letter to J. H. Waggoner, April 2, 1889.

⁴¹ “Meeting of the European Aux. Book-Committee,” July 24, 1891, 1, 2; “Book Committee Proceedings of the Fall 1891,” n.d., 21.

repeatedly improved, omitting phrases that were questioned and criticized by its readers, yet without changing the basic content and meaning of the text. The *Life of Christ*, intended as a work that would open the way for later doctrinal works, was a great evangelistic success. However, beyond being an evangelistic door opener, it also influenced the preparation of Ellen G. White's masterpiece *The Desire of Ages*.

3.1 Contextualized Illustrations

When the *Life of Christ* was published in the different countries, W. C. White invested much time and effort in finding fine illustrations that would make the book really appealing to the readers.⁴² He also ensured that the European editions contained different illustrations than the American editions because people on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean were attracted in different ways.⁴³ When some illustrations proved to be rather "coarse," they were replaced by better ones in subsequent editions.⁴⁴ In a letter to Henry Holser, W. C. White emphasized that good pictures were sometimes the crucial factor in securing the sale.⁴⁵

3.2 Continuing Editorial Work

Besides finding the best illustrations to make the book attractive, Ellen White and her staff were also interested in providing a text that would be received favorably by the readers. Thus they were willing to change the wording in subsequent editions to make it more acceptable. For example, much energy and money had been invested to secure a good German translation but it was exposed to adverse and bitter criticism from the newspapers, which meant the reception of future publications might be hindered.⁴⁶ Hence, over the following years, several committees were formed to examine the *Life of Christ* in its different languages, and to make recommendations to Ellen White for making it more "suitable for publication as a pioneer work in English" as well as in other languages.⁴⁷ Those

⁴² W. C. White, letter to C. H. Jones, February 14, 1886; W. C. White, letter to J. E. White, February 18, 1886; W. C. White, letter to M. C. Wilcox, February 24, 1886; W. C. White, letter to J. G. Matteson, March 17, 1886; W. C. White, letter to O. A. Olsen, March 29, 1886; W. C. White, letter to A. R. Henry, April 14, 1886; W. C. White, letter to O. M. Dunham, April 15, 1886; W. C. White, letter to A. B. Oyen, May 7, 1886. See also W. C. White's letter books between 1886 and 1887.

⁴³ W. C. White, letter to C. H. Jones, November 10, 1886.

⁴⁴ W. C. White, letter to H. P. Holser, September 5, 1887; W. C. White, letter to F. E. Belden, December 21, 1887; W. C. White, letter to S. Curtis, December 1887; W. C. White, letter to F. E. Belden, February 5, 1888; "Book Committee Proceedings: Spring Session of 1888, held at Battle Creek, Mich.," March 29 – April 10, 1888, 9.

⁴⁵ W. C. White, letter to H. P. Holser, September 5, 1887.

⁴⁶ W. C. White, letter to H. P. Holser, December 18, 1887.

⁴⁷ W. C. White, letter to L. R. Conradi, May 16, 1888; "Book Committee Proceedings: Third Session, Fall of 1888," 14; W. C. White, letter to E. W. Whitney, December 13, 1888; W. C. White,

committees consisted of such people as W. C. White, Ludwig Richard Conradi, Doris E. Robinson, Frank E. Belden, A. Swedberg, J. Kolvoord, E. P. Auger, M. A. Davis, Mary Stewart, T. Valentin, and J. Edson White.⁴⁸

The suggestions that were made in these committees may be summarized in two categories: First, some corrections—the most serious ones—dealt with matters that were “partly or wholly errors of the translators or publishers.”⁴⁹ Second, “some passages not susceptible of direct Scripture proof,” were criticized “by those not familiar with the special gift of the author.”⁵⁰ Some recommended replacing such statements “with something less suggestionable to the reader, who is not acquainted with the author and the nature of her work,” whereas others regarded such a procedure as a “proposition to eradicate all evidences of special enlightenment.”⁵¹ It was decided to revise the *Life of Christ* with a special focus on such passages.⁵²

The changes were apparently only made in the manuscripts of the German and French texts but not in the Swedish and Danish-Norwegian editions, for W. C. White insisted that the Review and Herald, in translating the *Life of Christ* into Dutch, should not merely use the “manuscript from which it was translated into Danish and Swedish” but also pay attention to the revisions made at Basel.⁵³ Although the book had been revised by the summer of 1890, objectionable passages had again been found in the French edition, which called for renewed editorial work.⁵⁴ While most of the recommendations for changes were made by the committees, there was at least one individual who made changes single-handedly.⁵⁵ Both these revisions and the additions that Ellen White made to the English manuscript in subsequent years led to the publication of the *Desire of Ages* in 1898 (Olson 1979; Veltman 1988).

letter to H. P. Holser, December 18, 1888; W. C. White, letter to Central European Publishing Board and Board of Managers, April 2, 1889; Book Committee Proceedings from Spring 1891, 10.

⁴⁸ “Book Committee Proceedings: Fourth Session, Spring of 1889,” 17.

⁴⁹ “Book Committee Proceedings: Fourth Session, Spring of 1889,” 23; W. C. White, letter to Central European Publishing Board and Board of Managers, April 2, 1889.

⁵⁰ Book Committee Proceedings from Spring 1891, 10; W. C. White, letter to H. P. Holser, December 18, 1888.

⁵¹ W. C. White, letter to J. H. Waggoner, April 2, 1889.

⁵² “Book Committee Proceedings October 25 - November 17, 1888,” 14; W. C. White, letter to E. W. Whitney, December 13, 1888; W. C. White, letter to H. P. Holser, December 18, 1888.

⁵³ W. C. White, letter to E. W. Whitney, July 10, 1888.

⁵⁴ “Proceedings of the S. D. A. Book Committee: Fifth Session, Summer of 1890,” 7½; Book Committee Proceedings from Spring 1891, 10.

⁵⁵ L. R. Conradi, letter to W. C. White, January 4, 1915. While the first edition of the German *Life of Christ* still showed Judas as being present at the institution of the Lord’s Supper revealing Christ’s forbearance with Judas, later editions omitted this aspect and left the impression that Judas had already left before. It was supposedly Conradi who was responsible for this change and its implementation in the other foreign-language editions. See W. C. White, letter to L. R. Conradi, February 26, 1915.

3.3 The Impact on the Evangelistic Work

The *Life of Christ* was frequently mentioned in the *Review and Herald* between 1886 and 1888 in connection with references to the evangelistic work among the Scandinavians⁵⁶, the French, and the Germans both in Europe (Olsen 1886, 748; *Herold* 1887, 352; *Herold* 1888a, 384; *Herold* 1888b, 64; Conradi 1887a, 253, 254; Whitney 1888, 91; Conradi 1888a, 365, 366; Conradi 1888b, 123) and North America (Wilson 1886, 748; W. B. White 1887, 126; Wilson 1887, 380; Underwood 1888, 140; Paquette 1888, 156; Hutchins 1888, 157). Speaking about the sale of the *Life of Christ* in Iowa, one literature evangelist commented, "We have now just about canvassed the whole State for that good book" (Wilson 1887, 380). W. C. White considered the *Life of Christ* as "the most salable of all our books,"⁵⁷ which was designed to prepare the way for the sale of doctrinal works.⁵⁸ The book was advertised as far as Australia, as can be seen a dozen times in the *Australian Bible Echo and Signs of the Times* in 1890. The advertisement stated that the book is "issued only in French, German, Swedish, and Danish," the English *Life of Christ* being "supplied in two volumes known as The Great Controversy, vols. II and III" ("The Life of Christ" 1890, 383). The publishing houses in Europe and the United States published the book in its various languages throughout the late 1880s and the early 1890s, thus supporting Ellen White's Christocentric emphasis.

Ellen G. White showed her personal interest in the distribution of the book when, while in Denmark and Norway, she talked to people and gave them copies of the Danish-Norwegian *Life of Christ*.⁵⁹ The education of evangelistic workers in Germany and Switzerland was so close to her heart that she gave the royalties from the *Life of Christ* to the advancement of that cause.⁶⁰ It was her common practice to devote the proceeds from her translated books to the mission work.⁶¹

3.4 The Impact on the *Desire of Ages*

Although no revised edition of the book was published in English, the German edition and especially the French edition of the *Life of Christ* did influence the

⁵⁶ Oftentimes they were merely called "Scandinavians," without distinguishing between Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish origins.

⁵⁷ W. C. White, letter to A. R. Henry, June 23, 1886.

⁵⁸ "Book Committee Proceedings: Third Session, Fall of 1888," 14; W. C. White, letter to E. W. Whitney, December 13, 1888.

⁵⁹ Ellen G. White, Diary June 9-22, 1887 (Manuscript 34, 1887).

⁶⁰ W. C. White, letter to L. C. Chadwick, December 1887; W. C. White, letter to the Central European Mission Board, August 8, 1888; W. C. White, letter to George I. Butler, August 10, 1888; W. C. White, letter to S. C. Stickney, August 11, 1889.

⁶¹ W. C. White, letter to George I. Butler, November 6, 1886; W. C. White, letter to A. R. Henry, December 22, 1886.

preparation of the *Desire of Ages*. Ellen White's "bookmaker," Marian Davis, stated later that the German and French *Life of Christ* was "arranged and prepared with the counsel of sister [sic] White, W. C. W[hite], M[ary] K. W[hite], and sister [sic] E. J. Burnham." The decisions made at that time guided her "in the preparation of the new book," i.e. the *Desire of Ages*. One of those guiding decisions was to avoid statements for which the Bible gives no evidence, since the readers would not be conscious of the prophetic gift of the author; this statement calls to mind the discussions already mentioned above in the book committees in 1888 and 1891. She further stated that "In the suggestions made as to detail and arrangement, I have followed, as nearly as seemed feasible, the French L[ife of] C[hrist]."⁶² In counseling James Edson White in his preparation of *Christ Our Savior*, Davis pointed to the French *Life of Christ* for principles and guidelines in regard to chronology and content.⁶³ Then she remarked:

The above arrangement is that which we shall probably follow in the new book, and it is very undesirable to have different books disagree, especially now when they have such wide circulation.⁶⁴

Accordingly the chronology of events followed in the *Life of Christ* formed the primary basis for the chronology found in the *Desire of Ages*. Further, the principles proposed by the book committees in regard to "unnecessary statements" and statements "not susceptible of direct Scripture proof" were followed in the preparation of the *Desire of Ages*. In fact, Ellen White was already revising the English manuscript that provided the basis for the *Life of Christ* and adding new material to it even before the German edition was published. These efforts led directly to the later publication of the *Desire of Ages*.

4. Conclusion

The *Life of Christ*, as it was published in Danish-Norwegian, Swedish, German, French, and Finnish, was one of the most successful Seventh-day Adventist evangelistic books prior to the *Desire of Ages*, and continued to be such in those languages until the latter work was eventually translated. While the broad textual basis of those translations was *Spirit of Prophecy*, vols. 2 and 3, the *Life of Christ* represents a more advanced stage of that text. There was never any published English edition of the book, but Ellen White herself and her staff were active in preparing the textual basis for the translations. After the publication of the foreign

⁶² Marian Davis, letter to James Edson White, December 22, 1895; cf. "Book Committee Proceedings: Third Session, Fall of 1888," 10; Book Committee Proceedings from Spring 1891, 10.

⁶³ Marian Davis, letter to James Edson White, December 22, 1895. The latter part of the letter gives several suggestions for changes to the book *Christ Our Savior*. Although the book lists Ellen G. White as the author, the book was, in fact, prepared by her son James Edson.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

language editions of the *Life of Christ*, additional revisions were made to them, including corrections to errors in translation, elimination of references to special knowledge, and addition of new material. Ellen White obviously welcomed help from others to find a wording that would make the divine message as attractive for the readers as possible, without changing the message itself. This supports previous findings that her own concept of inspiration cannot be defined in terms of mechanical or verbal inspiration but rather in terms of an inspiration of the person (Olson 1979; Veltman 1988; Kaiser 2010, 10–13, 22–24, 31–32; etc.). It remains for future studies to identify the sources of the new material added to the original text of *Spirit of Prophecy*, vols. 2 and 3 (Kaiser 2008, 44–50), to compare the various language editions of the *Life of Christ*, and to detect revisions within each of those languages. The translation into other languages (Dutch, Spanish, and English) had to wait until these revisions were accomplished. The result of that revision work was finally published as *The Desire of Ages*. The *Life of Christ* was thus a distinct stage in the preparation of the *Desire of Ages*, and a missing link between *Spirit of Prophecy*, vols. 2 and 3, and the *Desire of Ages*. It is quite apparent that Ellen White, W. C. White, and her staff were highly interested in bringing Jesus Christ, humanity's personal savior and friend, to the attention of people all around the world so that they might enter into a saving relationship with him and be prepared to receive further biblical truths. Thus this study contributes to a better understanding not only of early Adventist editorial and translation work but also of the evangelistic efforts of Adventism's publishing ministry in Europe and North America and of Ellen White's conception of her inspiration.

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Abstract

In den späten 1880er und frühen 1890er Jahren wurde in Europa und Nordamerika ein Buch über das Leben Jesu Christi in verschiedenen Fremdsprachen veröffentlicht. Es wurde im Allgemeinen unter dem englischen Arbeitstitel *The Life of Christ* geführt, obwohl es nie ein veröffentlichtes Gegenstück dieser fremdsprachigen Ausgaben gab. Die Existenz dieser Ausgaben wirft Fragen zu ihrer Textgrundlage, ihrem Hintergrund und ihrer Bedeutung auf. Der vorliegende Artikel zeigt, dass *The Life of Christ* eine bearbeitete Fassung des 2. und 3. Bandes von *Spirit of Prophecy* ist, die auch die Chronologie der Ereignisse und den Inhalt des späteren Buches *The Desire of Ages* beeinflusste. *The Life of Christ* wurde in Dänisch-Norwegisch, Schwedisch, Deutsch, Französisch und Finnisch herausgegeben und hatte einen großen Einfluss auf evangelistische Arbeit und auf die Prinzipien, die in späteren Jahren bei der Erstellung von Ellen Whites Büchern befolgt wurden.

Résumé

A la fin des années 1880 et au début des années 1890 un livre sur la vie de Jésus fut publié en différentes langues en Europe et en Amérique du Nord. Ellen G. White était considérée comme étant l'auteur de ce livre. Il était connu sous le titre de travail en anglais *The Life of Christ* (*La vie de Jésus*) et pourtant une édition anglaise en contrepartie à ces éditions en langues étrangères n'a jamais été publiée. L'occasion de ces éditions souleva la question de leur fondement textuel, de leur origine et de leur importance. L'article qui suit montre que le livre *Life of Christ* (*La vie de Jésus*) est une version adaptée du livre *Spirit of Prophecy*, vols. 2 et 3 qui a également influencé la chronologie et le contenu du tardif *Desire of Ages* (*Jésus-Christ*). Publié en danois, norvégien, suédois, allemand, français et finnois, le livre *Life of Christ* (*La vie de Jésus*) eut un impact majeur sur l'œuvre d'évangélisation et sur la suite de l'élaboration des livres d'Ellen White dans les années tardives.

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