June 1998

Ellen G. White and the Apocrypha

Denis Fortin
Andrews University, fortind@andrews.edu

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Seventh-day Adventists today, like many other Christians, accept only sixty-six books in the Old and New Testaments to form what is called the canon of the Bible. These books are considered inspired, authoritative, and reliable for a complete knowledge of the plan of salvation. Other Christians, however, like Roman Catholics, include in the canon of the Old Testament from nine to twelve other books or portions of books. While Catholics call these extra books deuterocanonical (i.e. they are considered as a second canon), Protestants view them as apocrypha (i.e. they are considered as spurious and false). Seventh-day Adventists view these books as apocrypha because their alleged authorship is doubtful and some of their teachings do not harmonize with the rest of the Bible. Hence, these apocryphal books are considered as uninspired and are not accepted as part of the biblical canon.¹

Given our present understanding and rejection of the Apocrypha, it comes as a surprise to many Adventists to learn that early Adventists made references to some of these books in their writings. In his 1847 *A Word to the “Little Flock”*, James White included some references to the Apocrypha in his own writings and in some footnotes to sections written by Ellen White. Furthermore, Ellen White herself mentioned the Apocrypha in the description of a vision she received in January 1850. Why was it that early Adventists alluded to the Apocrypha in their writings? Did our pioneers, and Ellen White in particular, consider the Apocrypha as an inspired part of Scripture?

Apart from providing answers to these questions, the purpose of this study is to

¹Any good Bible Dictionary will give the reader further information on the Apocrypha.
discuss the historical context in which early Adventists referred to the Apocrypha and to give a possible explanation of what Ellen White meant when she referred to the Apocrypha in her 1850 vision.2

I. The use of the Apocrypha in early Adventism

In the 1830s and 1840s many English Bibles used by Millerites and early Adventists included the Apocrypha. The Apocrypha were included not only in Catholic Bibles, but in Protestant ones as well. It was only in May 1827 that the British and Foreign Bible Society decided to exclude the Apocrypha from its English Bibles. Up to that time it had included them in a separate section between the Old and New Testaments. The large family Bible in Ellen White’s childhood home, printed in Boston in 1822, was one of these Bibles with the apocryphal books inserted between the Old and New Testaments. (This Bible is now in the Ellen G. White Estate vault in Silver Spring, Maryland.)

Consequently, it should come as no surprise that the apocryphal books were familiar to all English-speaking Christians in the 1840s. Although many Christians did not consider them as inspired and on the same level as the rest of Scripture, the attitude of the Christian world toward the Apocrypha was different than what it is today. Allusions to, or quotations from, the Apocrypha were neither uncommon nor thought strange because it was believed that much wisdom and even truth could be found in these writings.

This was also the case with many Adventists. Although they did not all believe in

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2Document File 31-C-2 in the Ellen G. White Research Center at Andrews University contains a number of very relevant documents on this subject. It particularly shows how the Ellen White Estate dealt with this issue in the past. I have used many of these and borrowed some of their comments in this essay.
the inspiration of the Apocrypha, they acknowledged that relevant information could be found in them for their study of the Bible. This was particularly true of the apocryphal book of 2 Esdras which is the most extensively referred to book from the Apocrypha among early Adventists. Second Esdras is believed to have been written around the end of the first century A.D. It contains a number of visions filled with symbols and apocalyptic prophecies, warnings and promises, that attempt to predict the future and to answer some questions regarding God's dealings with his people. One of these end-time visions, in particular, attracted the attention of early Adventists: the vision of the eagle with three heads, 12 wings, and 8 smaller wings (11:1 to 12:39). ³

II. The Apocrypha in the writings of Ellen G. White

A. Her visions published in *A Word to the "Little Flock"

In May 1847, James White published a pamphlet titled *A Word to the "Little Flock"* in which he included the early visions of Ellen White and a few remarks from Joseph Bates. This pamphlet was the first publication to include writings from these three Seventh-day Adventist pioneers. Of particular interest to our discussion is James White's inclusion of references to 2 Esdras in his article on the seven last plagues (pages 2 and 3), and in footnotes to Ellen White's article "To the Remnant Scattered Abroad" and in her letter of April 7, 1847, to Joseph Bates (pages 15 to 20). These references illustrate how early Seventh-day Adventists, and in particular James White, viewed the book of 2 Esdras as a reliable source of information on last day events.⁴


⁴In fact, James White's references to 2 Esdras in his article indicate that he had a high view of the reliability of this book. On page 2 of *A Word to the "Little Flock,"* he quotes various
But what about Ellen White? How did she use references to the Apocrypha in her writings?

Ellen White’s first ever published writings were two letters she addressed to Enoch Jacobs regarding the contents of her first visions. Her two letters were published by Jacobs in *The Day-Star* editions of January 24 and March 14, 1846. For many Millerites who were struggling to find light and to understand the meaning of the 1844 Disappointment, the contents of her visions seemed to be a confirmation of what other Millerites were discovering through intense and prayerful Bible study.

These two Ellen White letters published in *The Day-Star* contained very few direct Scripture references in the text. It is the first of these two letters that James White republished in *A Word to the “Little Flock”* (pages 14 to 18) in 1847. But, although the two original letters did not contain many references to Scripture, James White added, in footnotes, a large number of references to support various biblical allusions made in the text by Ellen White. Among these references are two taken from 2 Esdras, chapter 2. James White explained: “The following vision was published in the Day-Star, more than a year ago. By the request of friends, it is republished in this little work, with scripture references, for the benefit of the little flock” (*A Word to the “Little Flock,”* 13).

In addition, James White also published in the pamphlet a letter Ellen White had written to Joseph Bates in April 1847. To this letter he also added biblical references in texts of Scripture to illustrate the dreadfulness of God’s day of wrath. He says, “Ezekiel saw it in the men with ‘slaughter-weapons,’ slaying ‘utterly, old and young’... John saw it in the ‘seven last plagues;’ while Esdras saw it in the famine, pestilence, and the sword. The Bible contains many descriptions of this soon expected day of wrath.” White’s association of 2 Esdras with Ezekiel and John and his following comment about the content of the Bible may indicate that 2 Esdras had more than casual significance for him.

These references are footnote v on page 15 which refers to 2 Esdras 2:43 and footnote 11 on page 17 which refers to 2 Esdras 2:19. Graybill has noted rightly in his article that another allusion from 2 Esdras 2:47 should have been included in footnote y on page 15 (*ibid.*, 31).
footnotes, in which we find four references to 2 Esdras and one to the Wisdom of Solomon. Should these references to the Apocrypha lead us to believe that Ellen White quoted from the Apocrypha in her writings?

A comparison between James White’s seven footnotes in Ellen White’s vision narrative and letter and their corresponding apocryphal references shows evident similarities in wording in three cases, while the other four references are more elusive. Although this indicates that Ellen White may have been very conscious of the content and wording of some prophecies in the books of 2 Esdras and Wisdom of Solomon, we have no way of knowing if she directly quoted from them. Like her many other allusions to passages found in the canonical Scripture, these allusions to the Apocrypha may only reflect her familiarity with these texts found in her Bible and do not mean she considered them as inspired.

What perhaps enlightens us most about these references to the Apocrypha in her writings is Ellen White’s decision not to include any of them in her subsequent publication of her visions. In 1851, preferring the original appearance of her documents, she republished the content of her first visions in The Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White (now found in Early Writings of Ellen G. White, pages 11 to 83) without any biblical references. This is a clear indication that she did not want or need these references in her writings and preferred to let the text remain as it was in the original.

Since early Adventists accepted the Bible as an infallible authority it is normal for James White to want to buttress his wife’s vision narratives with as many Bible

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6These references are 2 Esdras 15:5-27 in footnote m, 2 Esdras 16:68-74 in footnote n, 2 Esdras 6:24 in footnote t, 2 Esdras 15:34, 35 in footnote u, and Wisdom of Solomon 5:1-5 in footnote bb.

7A “forgotten” reference to 2 Esdras 2:37 in footnote y on page 15 also shows evident similarity.
references as possible. This would inevitably give credibility to her gift of prophecy and to her visions. Moreover, since their Bibles included the Apocrypha, our pioneers likely read these books and were familiar with their contents, even more so for those books which have an apocalyptic motif like 2 Esdras. Thus, it is understandable, that James White would give references to the Apocrypha if Ellen White’s vision had any allusions to something found in them. It is also possible that many early Adventists may not have known much, if anything, about the debates regarding the canonicity of the Apocrypha.

B. Ellen White’s January 1850 vision

On January 26, 1850, while visiting in Oswego, New York, Ellen White had a vision concerning the end-time preparation of God’s people. In this vision, God revealed to her the lack of preparation for Jesus’ return on the part of some church members who cared more for their material possessions than were willing to make sacrifices for spreading the gospel. Toward the end of this manuscript she discusses the importance of the Word of God and makes an obscure reference to the Apocrypha.

I then saw the Word of God, pure and unadulterated, and that we must answer for the way we received the truth proclaimed from that Word. I saw that it had been a hammer to break the flinty heart in pieces, and a fire to consume the dross and tin, that the heart might be pure and holy. I saw that the Apocrypha was the hidden book, and that the wise of these last days should understand it. I saw that the Bible was the standard Book, that will judge us at the last day. I saw that heaven would be cheap enough, and that nothing was too dear to sacrifice for Jesus, and that we must give all to enter the kingdom (Manuscript 4, 1850, also found in Manuscript Releases, 16:30-35).

What did Ellen White mean by “the Apocrypha was the hidden book” and “the wise of these last days should understand it”? This unique statement in Ellen White’s writings has puzzled many people and it is difficult to know with any amount of certainty what she really intended to say by this reference to the Apocrypha.
The immediate context of this statement in the manuscript makes reference to the Bible as the Word of God, pure and unadulterated. She also declares that the Bible is the standard Book that will judge us at the last day. Therefore, it seems that one should try to understand her comment on the Apocrypha in the context of these references to the Bible. Yet, it is not clear whether somehow she associates the Apocrypha as part of the Bible which as we have already seen is a plausible explanation, since Bibles in her day contained the Apocrypha, or whether she is contrasting the Apocrypha with the standard as found in the Bible. Is she contrasting the sure “Word of God, pure and unadulterated,” with the deficiencies and weaknesses of the “hidden book”? What is it in the “hidden book” that should be understood by “the wise of these last days”? The content of the Apocrypha or the unreliable nature of the Apocrypha? Does she have in mind a particular book of the Apocrypha like 2 Esdras, or all the books of the Apocrypha? These questions remain unanswered.

According to Arthur White, “The full meaning and significance of the E. G. White statement of 1850 is not clearly seen. It should be observed that Ellen White makes no reference to the Apocrypha at any time in her writings in the subsequent 65 years” (Manuscript Releases, 15:3).

Arthur White also brings up the uncertainty as to the accuracy of some of the early statements and documents of Ellen White. In a letter to Dr. W. G. C. Murdoch, Dean of the SDA Theological Seminary, on January 20, 1870, White explained that

There are a number of very uncertain factors in connection with the statement in question. . . . We do not have the statement in what we know to be an absolute authentic E. G. White source. That which is in the file is said to be “a copy of E. G. White’s vision which she had at Oswego, New York.” Had this been Ellen White’s copy it would not have been so titled. This indicates to us that what we have before us is a copy held by one of our believers, perhaps copied from someone else’s copy, but it did help to furnish a part of the record of the early days, and was one of the documents embodied in what we call ‘Record
Book, Number 1” (EGWRC-AU, File 31-C-2).

The many documents comprising this Record Book, Number 1, were copies of early materials assembled by W. C. White, Ellen White’s son, in the 1870s as found in earlier record books held by early believers and copies of documents Ellen White had on hand. Being before the days of typewriters, the record book is handwritten. At times the names of those from whom copies were secured is given at the close of the document. In this case with Manuscript 4, 1850, this is not so. The title it bears identifies it as some other than a copy made by Ellen White. We have no Ellen G. White original of this document (see the White Trustees document, “Ellen G. White and the Apocrypha,” January 19, 1970, EGWRC-AU, File 31-C-2).

This unique reference to the Apocrypha becomes even more perplexing when one realizes that it was not reproduced by Ellen White in her first publication of this manuscript a few months later. Major portions of this manuscript were reproduced under the title “To the Little Flock” in The Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White in 1851 (Early Writings, pages 48 to 52). A comparison of the manuscript with the published text in Early Writings reveals that the published account of the vision follows quite closely MS 4, 1850 in content, but the wording is not identical. Furthermore, the reference to the Apocrypha we quoted above does not appear in the middle of page 51 of Early Writings where it should be after the words “the sun at noonday.”

Conclusion

What are we to make of these few references to the Apocrypha in the writings of Ellen G. White? I believe we should give the matter a minimum of attention.

The footnote references to the Apocrypha in Ellen White’s writings published in A Word to the “Little Flock” were the initiative of James White and are not included in any
other publications by Ellen White. These references indicate that early Adventists gave some credibility to these apocryphal writings found in their Bibles, in particular 2 Esdras, but they did not consider them as part of the canon of Scripture.

Her unique comment about the “hidden book” of the Apocrypha in her vision of January 26, 1850, is uncertain as to its accuracy and is never republished or commented upon by Ellen White. Furthermore, at no subsequent time did she make use of the Apocrypha or call upon Seventh-day Adventists to study the Apocrypha, or spoke of its importance or value.