

## The Charge of Plagiarism

### I. Plagiarism

#### A. The Charge:

Typical of the plagiarism charge was one made by a former SDA minister in Southern California: Walter Rea. In the *Los Angeles Times* of October 23, 1980, he made three allegations:

- a. Mrs. White used the literary productions of other authors and replaced their names with her own.
- b. She was a liar, for repeatedly denying that she did this.
- c. She and her husband exploited the church members, forcing them to buy her written work and making enormous personal fortunes.
- d. These allegations were repeated and expanded in 1982: *The White Lie*.

#### B. Meaning of Plagiarism:

1. The term comes from the Latin *plagiarium*, which means “kidnapper” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language*, 1959).
2. All authorities agree that the term applies to the intentionally deliberate and unauthorized appropriations by one writer of the words of another, in the process passing them off as his own. However, it is not necessarily the borrowing of another writer’s ideas or words and employing them in one’s own material, for one’s own literary ends.
3. In American literary law, plagiarism is not a crime by statute definition, but is associated with the crimes of copyright infringement and literary theft.

#### C. Literary Borrowing:

1. Literary borrowing occurs when one writer utilizes and employs the ideas or words of another for the purpose of making a particular point.
2. The question of the identity of the original author is not the germane issue as it is in plagiarism, and literary law recognizes what is defined as the “fair use” by one writer of the ideas and even of the words of another, and of converting them to serve the particular purpose of the second writer.

D. The Biblical Issue:

1. Originality of composition is not a valid Biblical test of a true prophet because the Bible writers themselves not only borrowed from each other, but they also borrowed from other non-inspired writers in the preparation of their books.
2. The Bible is replete with literary borrowing, from the Pentateuch, where Moses used the law of Hammurabi, to Revelation, where John repeatedly incorporated large segments from a work entitled *The Book of Enoch*.
3. Luke borrowed from other accounts of Jesus' life. Luke 1:1-4 "*Many* have undertaken to *draw up an account* of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were *handed down* to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have *carefully investigated everything* from the beginning, it seemed good also for me to *write an orderly account* for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may *know the certainty* of the things you have been taught" (NIV).
4. The Apostle Paul borrowed a line from the 6th Century B.C. philosopher Epimenedes and did not identify the original author to Titus with whom he shared it.
5. Solomon is not the author of all of the Proverbs included in his Biblical books.
  - a. In Eccl. 12: 9, 10, Solomon candidly declares that he borrowed wise sayings of different sages, which he incorporated into his Book of Proverbs.
  - b. He openly states that he "sought out" (KJV, Amp.) or "searched out" (NIV, NASB), even "amended" (Jer.) many proverbs originally authored by another.
  - c. He methodically "arranged" (RSV, NASB) or "set in order" (KJV, Amp., NIV) these gems from another's pen, to suit his own literary purposes.
  - d. He avers: that which I collected and set down were "words of truth" (KJV, RSV, NASB) even though their original author was an uninspired writer.
  - e. In the production of Proverbs, Solomon probably acted more in the role of an anthologist or editor rather than the original author.
6. Originality of composition is not a legitimate test of a true prophet because of the widespread practice of literary borrowing by writers of the Bible. In her literary borrowing, EGW is merely following the practice of inspired Biblical writers.

E. The Legal Issue:

1. Certain aspects of plagiarism are defined as criminal acts under the statutes of American literary law. Critics have hinted that EGW was sued or threatened with a suit for plagiarism, but such allegations are totally without foundation.
2. Although inquiries about similarities between Mrs. White's writings and those of other authors have surfaced in public as early as 1867, formal accusations of plagiarism seem to have been first raised in 1889 by a disgruntled ex-SDA minister, Dudley M. Canright.
3. In the autumn of 1981, Attorney Warren L. Johns, then chief legal counsel in the General Conference's Office of Legal Counsel, using private funds, engaged the services of Attorney Vincent Ramik, senior partner of the Diller, Ramik, and Wight, specialists in patent, trademark, and copyright law. Attorney Ramik was provided for his research:
  - a. All of the allegations of plagiarism, historically, from first to last.
  - b. Copies of all denominational polemical defenses against these critical charges.
  - c. The relevant EGW books which were the target of the charges.

Ramik spent more than 300 hours in researching more than 1,000 cases in American literary law (1790-1915). He produced a [27-page legal opinion \(lawyer's brief\)](#) (17 pages online) containing 53 source citation footnotes, in which he concluded that EGW was not guilty either of copyright infringement or of literary theft.

The critics, according to him, had mistakenly focused on mere words while ignoring her message and the way in which she used those words. Her writings were all within the established boundaries of the legal doctrine of "fair use" in literary law which permits the writer use of another's literary materials. [Read a 1981 interview with Attorney Ramik and the story behind this research.](#)

4. Neither Mrs. White nor her Estate has ever been sued in a court of law or even threatened with legal action as a result of suspected plagiarism.

F. The Moral/Ethical Issue:

1. "The Words . . . Are My Own:

In the *Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald* of October 8, 1867, EGW wrote:

Although I am as dependent upon the Spirit of the Lord in writing my views as I am in receiving them, yet the words I employ in describing what I have seen are my own, unless they be those spoken to me by an angel, which I always enclose in marks of quotation. (1SM 37)

Context: The above statement was made in response to the inquiry if her advice that lady's skirt should be nine inches above the floor (Testimony, No. 12) were her words or the angel's words. However, critics have lifted the statement out of its original context to make it appear that EGW was declaring that all of the words she ever wrote were her own, thus creating a moral/ethical problem.

2. Her Ideas: From Contemporary Writers or from God?

Far from denying the use of materials from other authors, EGW admitted that she did engage in literary borrowing and explained why she did it.

In the "Introduction" to *The Great Controversy*, EGW informs the reader that, at times, she incorporated into her manuscript certain writings of other authors, particularly in the fields of history and theology:

In some cases where a historian has so grouped together events as to afford, in brief, a comprehensive view of the subject, or has summarized details in a convenient manner, his words have been quoted, but in some instances no specific credit has been given, since the quotations are not given for the purpose of citing that writer as authority, but because the statement affords a ready and forcible presentation of the subject. In narrating the experiences and views of those carrying forward the work of reform in our own time, similar use has been made of their published works. (GC xii)

3. After careful examination of dozens of pertinent documents, published and unpublished, Warren Johns, attorney and associate editor of *Ministry*, found no attempt on the part of Ellen White to deceive or cover up any literary borrowing. He provides the following facts:

- a. Fact 1: If there was an intent to deceive, why would God give His approval to her use of sources as well as provide specific instruction that she was to gather gems of truth from uninspired writers?

- b. Fact 2: On occasion, Ellen White did her research into other sources in full view of others.
- c. Fact 3: Ellen White freely loaned her books—books that presumably she would need, sooner or later, in her research.
- d. Fact 4: Ellen White made no attempt to conceal from her helpers the fact that she relied upon available books for her research and writing.
- e. Fact 5: Ellen White recommended to the general Seventh-day Adventist church membership the very books from which she was drawing selected material in writing her books and testimonies.

G. The Practical Issue:

- 1. How does an omniscient God communicate truth to and through a comparatively uneducated prophet?
  - a. This is not a new problem: in Bible times, while some prophets were well-educated, others were virtually unschooled.
  - b. So it was with Ellen White, whose formal education was only four years of elementary education.
- 2. EGW herself repeatedly mourned her own lack of formal education.
- 3. God sent an angel to open His solution to Ellen's understanding. Willie White reported:

In her early experience, when she was sorely distressed over the difficulty of putting into human language the revelations of truths that had been imparted to her, she was reminded of the fact that all wisdom and knowledge comes from God; and she was assured that God would bestow grace and guidance. She was told that, in the reading of religious books and journals, she would find precious gems of truth, expressed in acceptable language, and that she would be given help from heaven to recognize these,

and to separate them from the rubbish of error with which she would sometimes find them associated. (Brief Statements, p. 5)

4. Why did EGW have to borrow the literary materials of others? Wouldn't it have been simpler for God to dictate to her the messages he wished to communicate to His people? As she herself has explained:

It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man's words or his expressions, but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thought. (1SM 21)

H. Summary:

1. It is important to make a valid distinction between plagiarism and literary borrowing:
  - a. **Plagiarism**--that morally reprehensible, deliberate and legally unauthorized appropriation by one writer of the words of another with the intent to pass them off as one's own words.
  - b. **Literary borrowing**--the legitimate use by one writer of another's words or ideas for the second writer's own particular literary ends.
2. Originality of composition cannot be a Biblical test of a true prophet because so many of the Bible writers themselves engaged in literary borrowing from the first book to the last; thus, EGW's uses of the same literary practice is clearly in harmony with this tradition and legitimate precedent.
3. After her writings were examined in 1981 by a specialist in copyright law, it was concluded that she was well within the established boundaries of the legal doctrine of "fair use."
4. In EGW's lifetime, she was never sued in a court of law nor threatened with such a suit by any author or publisher suspecting literary piracy or copyright infringement, nor has her Estate been thus threatened since her passing in 1915.
5. Not only did Ellen White never steal the writings of others, she never lied about her practices, whether in her written or oral communication with her church.

- a. She never tried to hide her literary borrowing.
  - b. She declared in print that she had utilized the writings of other authors, particularly citing in the categories of health, history, and theology.
  - c. She explained why she had done this.
  - d. Critics have failed to produce evidence that church leadership in her day or ours have been guilty of cover up for her literary borrowing.
  - e. From the earliest days, church officials have consistently and repeatedly gone out of their way to confront false allegations of plagiaristic wrongdoing.
6. EGW was early told by her angel that because of her limited formal educational background, the Holy Spirit would lead her to beautiful gems of thought, expressed in suitable language, that she might appropriately employ in conveying truths supernaturally revealed to her. In the process, she was assured that the Holy Spirit would also guard her from perpetuating any error which might have accompanied such gems in their original literary context.

## II. Suppression by Church Leaders:

Another favorite issue raised by critics is the question of whether or not SDA church leaders in her days or in ours have been guilty of a “cover-up” of EGW’s literary borrowing, in an attempt to protect her and themselves.

### 1. Critical Charges:

- a. 1889: the first accusation of wrong-doing seems to have been made in ex-SDA preacher Dudley M. Canright’s first of two books against his former church and its prophet (*Seventh-day Adventism Renounced*).
- b. 1907: Battle Creek Sanitariums staff physician Dr. Charles E. Stewart (confidant of Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, who harbored similar views) brought out his “Blue Book,” in which he rehashed the contemporary charges of literary misuse.
- c. 1930’s: E. S. Ballenger made the same charge in his anti-SDA periodical, *The Gathering Call*.
- d. 1976: Dr. Ronald L. Numbers criticized the prophet in his *Ellen G. White: Prophetess of Health*. In four enumerated assumptions held generally by SDAs (Preface: 1976 ed., pp. xi, xii), Numbers disassociates and distances himself from the idea that EGW was ever in possession of inspired materials. Rather, he alleged, she simply copied ideas of contemporary health reformers and passed them off as her own.
- e. 1982: Walter T. Rea, ex-SDA minister, renewed earlier charges of plagiarism in his book, *The White Lie*.

2. The Church Responds:

- a. 1867: EGW herself personally and promptly responded in her own forthright defense.
- b. 1888: In the Introduction to *The Great Controversy*, far from denying literary borrowing, EGW publicly proclaimed the fact, indicating the different categories employed in this work and explaining in detail her personal reasons for doing so.
- c. 1933: In August, William C. White and Dores E. Robinson of the White Estate jointly authored a 16-page document entitled *Brief Statements Regarding the Writings of Ellen G. White*, in which the church officially met the plagiarism charges then circulating. (This document was reprinted in full and published as an insert in the *Adventist Review* of June 4, 1981)
- d. 1951: Francis D. Nichol, then editor of the RH, wrote an encyclopedic reference work, *Ellen G. White and Her Critics*, which sought to compile, organize, and analyze every criticism ever made of EGW. He devoted three chapters (28, 29, and 30) to an attempt to settle once for all persistently recurring charges of plagiarism.
- e. 1976: The White Estate voluntarily reviewed the manuscript for Dr. Number's proposed book and pointed out countless examples of egregious and explainable distortions found. He deleted these from the final draft before publication, but, when the book was published, the staff of the White Estate devoted six full months to producing a 12-page response, in an almost line-for-line refutation of misleading, inaccurate, and cleverly contrived criticisms found in the final published versions.
- f. 1980: Dr. Robert W. Olson, White Estate Secretary, issued the first in a new series of White Estate monograph position papers in response to Walter Rea's critical attacks: "Ellen White's Use of Inspired Sources."
- g. 1981: Three documents were written:
  - (i) Dr. Ron Graybill's 45-page monograph, "Ellen G. white's Literary Work--An Update."
  - (ii) Dr. Olson's 112-page book, *One Hundred and One Questions on the Sanctuary and on Ellen White*, in which plagiarism received major, detailed treatment.
  - (iii) Roger W. Coon's three articles and Kenneth H. Wood's editorial published in the September 17 edition of the *Adventist Review* were subsequently reprinted as an 8-page document.
- h. 1982: Two additional significant contributions followed:



- (i) Warren H. Johns's 14-page article,, "[Prophet or Plagiarist?](#)" (must have [DJVU Browser Plugin](#) to open this file) was published in the June edition of *Ministry*.
  - (ii) Dr. Graybill edited a 16-page supplement to the August edition of *Ministry*, which surveyed and briefly responded to the principal accusations of Walter Rea, and provided an exhaustively detailed bibliography where more data could be found.
  
- i. 1981-88: Dr. Fred Veltman, under direct assignment by the General Conference President, devoted eight years in the preparation of a detailed analysis of 15 chapters of *The Desire of Ages*. He spent the equivalent of five full years to the task of producing a [2,561-page report](#). In the 15 selected chapters of his survey, Dr. Veltman discovered that while EGW had used materials from 23 other literary works, "she was not slavishly dependent upon her sources, and the way she incorporated their content clearly shows that . . . she knew how to separate the wheat from the chaff."
  
- j. 1986: Two significant publications followed:
  - (i) Dr. Olson's 9-page monograph, "The Literary Borrowing Issue," was released and subsequently revised and enlarged on Feb. 8, 1989.
  - (ii) On October 14, Tim Poirier's 3-page summary report on "Project Surprise" documented all known literary parallels and proved conclusively that estimates running from 80%-90% of borrowed materials were grossly inflated:
    - (a) GC had 15.1% quoted, with source indicated, an additional 5.1% uncredited for a total of 20.5% overall.
    - (b) *Sketches from the Life of Paul* had 12.23% borrowed material.
    - (c) *Steps to Christ's* total was 6.2%
    - (d) All other books--excluding DA, which Dr. Veltman studies, came in at 3% or less of borrowed material.
  
- k. 1990: Dr. Olson prepared a new 5-page statement on Plagiarism for an EGW Estate Research Center Directors Workshop, in which he recapitulated the main lines of previous research findings.

1. From all the foregoing, it is evident that church leadership at the highest levels did not seek to ignore or cover-up challenges to EGW's literary practices. On the contrary, they met the issues forthrightly.