

14

War, Slavery, and Race

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BOTH ELLEN HARMON White's critics and her followers have distorted her statements about the American Civil War and its aftermath, including the issues of race and reunion that remained significant at her death in 1915. Too often her comments, assumptions, and expectations have been wrested from any appropriate historical context and conscripted into the service of such polemical purposes as proving either that she was a "false prophet" or a truly inspired one.

But a twenty-first-century historian might profitably begin the study of a nineteenth-century visionary by noticing where the official apologists and the angry heretics agree. They all assume, for example, that slavery and the Civil War were centrally important topics to Ellen White, as intrinsically important to her as to later observers. They agree that her credibility would be damaged if she could be shown to be a "racist" by today's standards. They are also sure that her role as a prophet and sectarian leader was built on prediction of the future, or, at least, unique insight into the events around her.¹ If she was really a prophet, by their assumptions, she should be expected to anticipate the course of events.

What she actually said about the American crisis presents a challenge to both her enemies and her defenders. Her strictly predictive writings turn out to be remarkably secondary to another objective—namely, instructing Adventist believers in their duty. Her commentary on the Civil War and slavery is, in fact, surprisingly spotty. She had nothing to say about the Fugitive Slave Law until nearly a decade after its enactment, when the law was already a dead letter in key areas of the North. Her private

correspondence yields not a single reference to the name of Lincoln, a leader about whom the historian expects her to have definite and quotable opinions. After a flurry of comments about slavery and disunion between 1858 and 1863, she drops the subject, giving no evaluation of the Emancipation Proclamation, the employment of black troops, or the decisive victories of Grant and Sherman.² She does not return to the Civil War issues until the 1890s, when Adventist efforts to evangelize black southerners encountered ferocious opposition, compelling a mostly northern church to consider (belatedly) the troubling matter of ecclesiastical segregation. Once again, she offers little in the way of prediction.

If we put aside our ideas about what Mrs. White "should have said," and try to understand her world view on its own terms, perhaps we will be less surprised. We will find, I believe, a woman who was first and last a preacher of the second coming of Christ, an apocalyptic prophet who interpreted everything around her as a "sign of the times." She approached the War of the Rebellion and related matters not as an historical analyst or a political activist, but as an evangelist preaching the end of her world. Slavery, race, secession, and the war were important topics, to be sure, but subjects to be taken up or discarded as they helped to explain biblical prophecy and God's requirements for his faithful "remnant people." Her ideas about war, American nationality, "the Afro-American character and destiny" (to borrow George M. Fredrickson's phrase) were all shaped by the more fundamental matter of the mission of Seventh-day Adventism.³

Civil War

Ellen White's historical context is not easily recovered. Indeed, only a painstaking exercise of historical imagination can re-create her world, the Adventist world of the Civil War era. When Confederate artillery opened fire on Fort Sumter and its tiny Federal garrison in April 1861, there were few believers in "present truth"—no more than 4,000 Seventh-day Adventists in the entire world, almost all of them residing in the northern part of the United States. This group was not yet organized into a national denomination. The very name "Seventh-day Adventist" was new, the brethren having agreed upon it only eight months earlier.

These scattered believers were evolving into fully recognizable Seventh-day Adventists, but in crucial respects they were different from the species as it exists today. They were remarkably united, however, on

their view of America, a nation they saw as rapidly declining from its original greatness, undone by the sin of slavery. As preacher J. H. Waggoner said, the nation's "democratic professions" were inconsistent with its "slaveocratic practices." Although the Adventists opposed slavery, at the same time they were certain that slavery would never be abolished, since, by their reading, the book of Revelation taught that slavery would exist at the time of the Second Coming. Uriah Smith, editor of the *Review and Herald*, took the unusual step of reprinting Lincoln's "House Divided" speech in 1858, but rejected Lincoln's views as hopelessly unrealistic: "He who looks for good, or hopes for reform in the legislative or executive departments of this government, is doomed, we think, to utter and hopeless disappointment." Ellen White's husband, James, accurately summarized the Adventist position in 1862: "For the past ten years the Review has taught that the United States of America were [sic] a subject of prophecy, and that slavery is pointed out in the prophetic word as the darkest and most damning sin upon this nation."⁴

Once the fighting began, Adventists expected the worst, believing that the conflict in the United States could well be the herald of earth's final crisis. "What then will be the end of these things?" asked Uriah Smith early in 1862, as the Army of the Potomac prepared for its spring offensive. "One of the two things must follow: either a continuation of our national difficulties, or a peace upon dishonorable and disgraceful terms." In his thinking, a clear victory for the Union was simply not a possibility.⁵

A few months later, as Northern armies were finally advancing on Richmond, J. H. Waggoner was equally glum. "As a question of rights," he wrote, the slaves were entitled both to freedom and an education that would "restore the capability" to properly use their rights. "In my opinion, education and gradual emancipation would be the best for all parties. But who has any hope for such a thing?"⁶

"The hope which animates others," wrote James White, "that the war will soon terminate with the freedom of the millions of 'bond-men and bond-women' of North America, and that a period of peace of millennial glory is to follow, we do not cherish." He proceeded to explain the Adventist understanding of Revelation, especially chapter six in which the prophet describes kings, mighty men, chief captains, bond-men and free men, all calling for the rocks and mountains to fall on them in the day of the Lord's wrath. "We think we see, though the prophetic word," explained White, "the continuation of slavery down to the end of all earthly governments." As White demonstrated that biblical prophecy predicted the

continuation of slavery, his timing was unfortunate: President Lincoln had already decided to issue an emancipation proclamation. Indeed, a confidential draft of this document lay in the President's desk, awaiting a Union victory to be activated.⁷

Despite their condemnation of slavery, Adventists did not reject America. Even as they despaired of the future of the United States' experiment in democracy, they did not embrace an ideology that saw the nation as flawed from the start or inherently oppressive. Even in the darkest days of the Civil War, they believed that America had "the best government under heaven," and that, "with the exception of those enactments pressed upon it by the slave power, its laws are good." Like Lincoln, they saw the United States as the last, best hope of earth; unlike him, they were certain that the last hope was failing, that the nation was degenerate, rapidly departing from "the wisdom and virtue of its founders."⁸

Although they lamented the failure of the federal government to move immediately against slavery, Adventists' sympathies were, "as far as they are enlisted, . . . on the side of the government." The South's campaign for independence was simply a rebellion, "one of the most causeless and wicked that ever was incited," comparable to the "hellish rebellion" of Satan and his angels. With slight hyperbole James White declared: "We know of not one man among Seventh-day Adventists who has the least sympathy for secession."⁹

Such was the consensus among Adventists. There is no evidence that Ellen G. White deviated from this consensus. Indeed her visions and prophetic utterances served to confirm the judgments of her fellow believers about the providential significance of the Civil War. She placed a divine imprimatur on their insights that slavery was wrong, that the war was about slavery, and that the North's early missteps were based on a failure to act on these truths. Neither she, nor any other Seventh-day Adventist, expected the war to end in a "new birth of freedom" or a period of national prosperity, peace, and expansion.

Slavery

Like many other opponents of slavery, Ellen White focused her comments more on the sins of the slaveholders than on the aspirations of the enslaved. At times she so emphasized the damaging impact of slavery on black people that she risked dehumanizing them. As early as 1858, she

blamed the owners of slaves for treating human beings as brutes, and creating circumstances in which slaves could not justly be held accountable for their moral choices. "I saw that the slave-master would have to answer for the soul of his slave whom he had kept in ignorance," she wrote, adding that the slave who was too ignorant of the Bible to be saved, would be "as though he had not been." But apparently not all slaves were so benighted. At the same time, she predicted that the "last call" would reach some slaves.¹⁰

In 1859, she urged Adventists to disobey the Fugitive Slave Law and "abide the consequences for violating this law." (Unlike Henry David Thoreau, however, she had no expectation that disobedience would bring about significant reform.) "The slave is not the property of any man," she declared. "God is his rightful master."¹¹

Even before the opening guns of the war, in January 1861, she warned the Parkville, Michigan, congregation that the nation would endure a terrible war. She had seen in vision, she said, the marshaling of huge armies, followed by ferocious combat and families in "distress and anguish."¹² After the defeat at the first battle of Bull Run, she said: "God is punishing this nation for the high crime of slavery. He has the destiny of the nation in his hands. He will punish the South for the sin of slavery, and the North for so long suffering its overreaching and overbearing influence." Although some devout Christians explained the Union defeat as God's punishment for the North's initiating combat on Sunday, Ellen White insisted that the Northern armies had failed at Bull Run because God "would suffer no victories to be gained faster than He ordained." Indeed, if the Union forces had not panicked as the direct result of divine intervention, the defeat would have been worse.¹³

In a "testimony" published in pamphlet form in 1862, Mrs. White offered wide-ranging comments on the war, attributing most of her insights to specific visions.¹⁴ "I was shown," "I saw," "This scene was presented before me," "I had a view," and similar expressions are sprinkled throughout her testimony. She asserted that the "accursed system of slavery," and it alone, lay "at the foundation of the war." Even if the North now succeeded in quelling the rebellion, she warned, it had not dealt with the central issue. "The system of slavery, which has ruined our nation, is left to live and stir up another rebellion."

"It seems impossible to have the war conducted successfully," she wrote, because so many Union leaders were proslavery. Accepting the assumptions (if not the prescriptions) of the Radical faction within the

Republican party, her comments on current events had a distinctly partisan flavor. Those who, like the war Democrats, wanted to preserve the Union but "despised" abolitionists, she described as "rebels at heart." Perhaps thinking of General George McClellan's scrupulous respect for the rights of slave masters, she strongly condemned those who denied freedom to runaway slaves or even "sent them back to their cruel masters."

No doubt her fellow Adventists recognized her references, direct and indirect, to recent events. She eloquently rejected, for example, the Lincoln administration's call for a day of fasting and prayer on Thanksgiving, 1861, as "an insult to Jehovah." Without naming the battle, she also referred to the embarrassing Union defeat on October 21, 1861 in the minor battle of Ball's Bluff, an event central to the Radical case that disloyal officers were weakening the war effort. After a small force under the command of General Charles Stone was repulsed with heavy loss, Congress created the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War to investigate the humiliating failure, especially the death of a promising Republican officer, former Senator Edward Baker. Under a cloud of suspicion, General Stone was arrested and held in prison for six months.¹⁵ The Adventist prophet referred to the incident by reminding her readers of the biblical story of Uriah: "Valuable men have thus been sacrificed to get rid of their strong antislavery influence. Some of the very men whom the North most need [sic] in this critical time, whose services would be of the highest value, *are not*. They have been wantonly sacrificed."

Ellen White offered little in the way of specific predictions. She did anticipate great and increasing distress, including famine and ultimately (after a "little time of peace") "strife, war, bloodshed, with famine and pestilence" that included "other nations." She expected the United States to be "humbled into the dust." She phrased most of her comments in contingent or qualified language: "It looked to me like an impossibility now for slavery to be done away." "Had our nation remained united it would have had strength, but divided it must fall." "When England does declare war, all nations will have an interest of their own to serve, and there will be general war, general confusion."¹⁶ She did not foretell the outcome of particular battles or campaigns or identify crucial turning points.

If she seldom revealed the future in unmistakable clarity, she did have strong and definite counsel about the duty of Seventh-day Adventists, especially after a debate about military service broke out in the summer and fall of 1862. This debate was set off by James White's editorial "The Nation," which appeared in the August 12, 1862, issue of the *Review and*

Herald. Published at a low point in the Northern war effort, the editorial dealt with how Adventists should respond to the impending military draft. Although the fledgling denomination opposed slavery and secession, “our people have not taken that part in the present conflict that others have,” White admitted. Adventists declined to volunteer, he wrote, because they believed that the Bible predicted that slavery would never be abolished. In addition, the Adventist affirmation of the “perpetuity and sacredness of the law of God” clashed with certain of the “requirements of war.” It was not possible, he asserted, to serve as a soldier and yet obey the divine injunctions against Sabbath-breaking and killing.¹⁷

White moved onto controversial ground with his next statement, which proved to be the most explosive two sentences in the entire history of the official church publication: “But in the case of drafting, the government assumes the responsibility of the violation of the law of God, and it would be madness to resist. He who would resist until, in the administration of military law, he was shot down, goes too far, we think, in taking the responsibility of suicide.” Although believers “might call into question” the policies of “our amiable president, his cabinet, or of military officers” (especially the decision to keep “the precious blacks” out of battle, while sending “the valueless white man” to “fall in battle by thousands”), they still had an obligation to honor “every good law of our land.” Adventists had no need to flee the country “or stand trembling in their shoes for fear of a military draft,” White concluded. Believers needed to trust in God’s mighty power.¹⁸

In the intense discussion that followed, one reader declared that White’s editorial had “grieved and astonished” him, leaving his faith “terribly shaken.” The claim that the government bore the responsibility when a conscripted soldier violated God’s law struck him as a “dangerous and untenable” position. If the government can “assume the responsibility now for the violation” of the fourth and sixth commandments, “and we go clear,” he asked, “why may not the same government assume the responsibility . . . and we go clear” at the end of time when Adventists expected national legislation requiring Sunday worship.¹⁹

M.E. Cornell pithily summarized the Adventist consensus on the war: “The cause of the North is just, but there are too many Achans in the camp,” a reference to Israel’s defeat at Ai, caused by the secret disobedience of Achan (Joshua 7:10–26). Although he rejected an interpretation of “Thou shalt not kill” that forbade all warfare, he still objected to “voluntary service in this war,” since soldiers could not keep the Sabbath and were

exposed to corrupt “camp associations” such as swearing and card playing. Another reader insisted: “We should move in reference to the shortness of time. . . . We cannot now move as good Christians did in reference to the revolutionary war.” If we really believe that “this generation” will witness “the fall and dissolution of all earthly governments,” we will not act as if we expected an indefinite extension of “probationary time.” Therefore, he fully endorsed White’s editorial.²⁰

A few Adventists were ready to move farther away from pacifism. One brother ready to fight was Joseph Clarke, a man who “almost fancied that the time might come when a regiment of Sabbath-keepers would strike this rebellion a staggering blow.” Although his imagination was “full of Gideons, Jephthahs, and fighting Davids,” even Clarke did not expect “the full destruction of slavery.”²¹

In response to this controversy about conscription, Ellen White’s leadership role—or her “role as a prophet”—was manifested most clearly. If her comments on the war had been neither original nor predictive, she now made unmistakably clear statements about the obligations of “God’s people.” Writing in early 1863, she began by noting “the dreadful state of our nation.” The key issue for her was spiritual, not political or military. “The one all-important inquiry which should now engross the mind of everyone is: Am I prepared for the day of God?” She warned Adventists of the dangers of excess, repeatedly employing words such as “caution,” “discretion,” and “quiet,” while rejecting “fanaticism” and agitation and indiscretion. Since their failure to volunteer made some people think that they were Rebel sympathizers, Adventists needed to be very quiet about “refusing to obey a draft.” She counseled her fellow believers to let the denomination’s “true sentiments in relation to slavery and the Rebellion to be made known.” At the same time, she made it clear that Adventists should not volunteer to fight. “I was shown that God’s people . . . cannot engage in this perplexing war, for it is opposed to every principle of their faith.” Without specifically commenting on the debate about the sixth commandment and killing in war, she warned of worldly officers, and the “requirements of rulers” that conflict with the Ten Commandments.²²

If volunteering for the Union Army was one extreme, the other was political sympathy with the South. Ellen White rebuked an Adventist from upstate New York for his “indiscreet course” in supporting the South and defending the institution of slavery. “Your views of slavery cannot harmonize with the sacred, important truths for this time. You must yield your views” or be expelled from the Advent fellowship, she warned.²³

Her own political views remained resolutely Radical Republican, at least in analysis. She never went beyond what Jonathan Butler has described as "paper radicalism" to advocate diverting any time or money to campaigning for Republican politicians or legislation. It was too late for that. "Everything is preparing for the great day of the God," she wrote, and time would last only "a little longer." She thus interpreted the Democratic gains in the 1862 Congressional elections as the Radicals would: "Many were blinded and grossly deceived in the last election, and their influence was used to place in authority men who would wink at evil . . . who are Southern sympathizers, and would preserve slavery as it is." She continued to interpret Union military failure as the Radicals did, blaming highly placed "rebel sympathizers" and proslavery "professed Union men." In a claim with particular power for Adventists, she asserted that many Union generals were influenced by spiritualism, which she believed was Satanic. "These leading men" were often led to defeat, she said, by following the instructions of evil spirits posing as great warriors of the past.²⁴

In a clear reference to the Union defeat at Second Bull Run (1862), she wrote: "In some cases when generals have been in most terrible conflict, where their men have fallen like rain, a reinforcement at the right time would have given them a victory. But other generals cared nothing how many lives were lost, and . . . withheld necessary aid, fearing that their brother general would receive the honor of successfully repulsing the enemy." As Ellen White's readers were likely to know, this was precisely the accusation against General Fitz-John Porter, who faced a court-martial after Second Bull Run for failing to obey orders. An admirer of McClellan and a proslavery Democrat, Porter had first taken little initiative to help John Pope, the blustery antislavery general who had superseded McClellan, and then moved slowly to obey direct orders. In private, both Porter and McClellan were pleased to see Pope discomfited.²⁵

And there Ellen White left the subject. She could muster no optimism beyond this faint hope: "I saw that God would not give the Northern army wholly into the hands of a rebellious people, to be utterly destroyed by their enemies." After early 1863, she had nothing more to say about the nation's fiery ordeal. Having endorsed the emerging consensus that condemned both volunteering and Confederate sympathies, she left the details of dealing with the state and federal government to the brethren. As the scholarly John N. Andrews and others negotiated a legal exemption from combat for Adventist conscripts, she was silent. She had already

moved on to other subjects, including health reform, dress reform, and wrong use of her testimonies.²⁶

Race and Reconstruction

She did venture a strange, off-handed statement about race (or more precisely, races) in 1864 that has provoked considerable controversy ever since.²⁷ In the third volume of *Spiritual Gifts*, Ellen White retold the history of ancient Israel, as presented in Genesis and Exodus. In describing the crimes of antediluvian man, including idolatry, polygamy, and cruelty, she declared: "But if there was one sin above another which called for the destruction of the race [i.e., the human race] by the flood, it was the base crime of amalgamation of man and beast which defaced the image of God [in man], and caused confusion everywhere." In this intriguing statement, which stands without elaboration, her reference was to the human race in general. She added a second comment a few pages later, however, that applied to the post-Flood world and *races*: "Since the flood there has been amalgamation of man and beast, as may be seen in the almost endless varieties of species of animals, and in certain races of men."²⁸

These statements provoked significant debate among Seventh-day Adventists, with critics charging that she believed Negroes were not human and defenders insisting that she meant no such thing. A strong Adventist consensus rejected theories of polygenesis (which asserted that some humans were not descendants of Adam and Eve), as well as any other religious or scientific justification for slavery.²⁹ Uriah Smith defended Mrs. White by noting that she was, after all, discussing "races of men," and therefore *human by definition*. At the same time he was certain that certain primitive groups were low "in the scale of humanity," mentioning "the wild Bushmen of Africa, some tribes of Hottentots, and perhaps the Digger Indians of our own country" as examples.³⁰ For Smith (and White), it should be noted, "race" was a looser term than it is in today's usage, which would not label a particular tribe or discrete ethnic group as a "race." Significantly, Smith did not mention the recently freed African Americans as an example of the lowest or most backward groups.

Ellen White no doubt knew what Smith was saying in her defense, and there is no evidence that she objected to it. It is reasonable, in fact, to assume that she agreed with him. For either Smith or White, the discovery of some particularly backward tribe, far from Battle Creek, would not

justify American slavery or diminish the philanthropic and evangelistic obligations of Christians. In Smith's words, "What has the ancient sin of amalgamation to do with any race or people at the present time?" "Has any one a right," he asked, "to try to use it to their prejudice?"³¹

Neither the prophet nor other church leaders were changed greatly by the crisis of the house divided. In the light of a sweeping Union victory and the end of slavery, Adventists might have re-examined their interpretation of prophecy, their suspicion of political activism, and their certainty that their nation was rapidly declining. Instead, they reacted to the crises of Reconstruction much as they had to the conflicts of the Civil War.

As Andrew Johnson, in effect, broke diplomatic relations with the Republican party, and promoted his own mild form of Reconstruction, Adventist leaders hardly remained neutral. "The President is a rebel and traitor," declared the *Review and Herald* early in 1866. In the next issue, the editors continued to cite Republican denunciations of Johnson and even quoted a speech from the old abolitionist warrior, William Lloyd Garrison. At the same time the editors rejected direct political involvement, insisting that Adventists should "keep aloof from political matters." Although they might note "these commotions, as signs of the times," they should not "drink into their spirit," commented the *Review and Herald*, adding, "We are pilgrims and strangers here, and our citizenship is in a better country over which the Prince of Peace shall reign." Just before the autumn congressional elections, the church paper published an appeal from a sympathetic non-Adventist calling upon Adventists to join other Christians in opposing Johnson's dangerous policies. Editor Smith commented that he was "in sympathy with the sentiments it expresses," but emphatically rejected political action: "For our own part, we feel less and less inclined to have any connection with political matters."³²

Ellen White returned to the issue of race only when it was necessary to do so. For a long time Seventh-day Adventists had virtually no black adherents. As late as the 1890s, there were "not over twenty colored Seventh-day Adventists south of Mason and Dixon's line." Then prompted by the prophet herself, Adventist evangelists (black and white) began a "mission to black America," with the result that by 1907 some 700 African Americans had become Adventists (out of a North American membership of roughly 60,000). She urged Adventists to develop schools for blacks in the South, including Oakwood Industrial School (Figure 14.1).³³

The prophet's return to the subject came at a time of increasing white prejudice against black Americans. As Adventists (including Ellen White's



FIGURE 14.1 Ellen White at Oakwood Industrial School (now Oakwood University), a historically black Seventh-day Adventist institution in Huntsville, Alabama, that she helped found. She is flanked in the front row by her sons James Edson (on her right) and William C. (Courtesy of the Ellen G. White Estate, Inc.).

son Edson) sought to evangelize black southerners, the white South was moving to undo the achievements of Reconstruction.³⁴ By 1910 every Southern state had, by one method or another, disfranchised the vast majority of black voters and codified a system of radical racial segregation. There was little effective resistance from the federal government or northern public opinion. (Indeed, with the election of Woodrow Wilson in 1912, many of the leaders in this southern campaign against blacks came to national prominence.)

During the last years of Ellen White's life, shrill white fanatics commanded unprecedented attention and respect. A person could win elections or sell novels or pack lecture halls by insisting that blacks had no future in America, not even a rigidly segregated America, and that Negroes were a dangerous group steadily reverting to barbarism. In this unpromising context, Ellen White returned to her admonitions of the Civil War era, emphasizing both the degradation of "the colored race" and the duties of Adventists. "Though the colored people have been freed from political slavery, many of them are still in the slavery of ignorance and sin," she wrote. She described Christ and his angels weeping at the sight of "a people unable, because of their past slavery, to help themselves." If such language strikes a modern ear as infelicitous or "insensitive," her basic