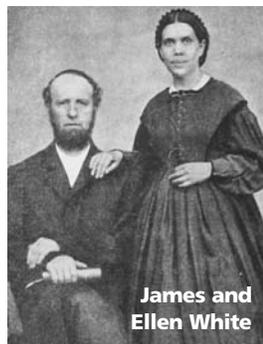


“Let the Slave Reply”: The Critical Sabbatarian Adventist Decade, Ellen White, and Blacks | BY BENJAMIN BAKER

Ellen White and race was the subject of Benjamin Baker’s 2011 Howard University dissertation. This is the second article in an occasional series on the topic for *Spectrum*.

Ellen Harmon and James White (*right*) were wed on August 30, 1846. Initially averse to marriage because of the nearness of the *parousia*, the teenaged visionary and the itinerant minister justified their nuptials by simply stating that James could now provide protection for Ellen on the dangerous traveling circuit with all due propriety, and thus complement each other’s ministries.¹ This union, formed with so little fanfare, was the most significant in Seventh-day Adventist history. Along with Joseph Bates, the Whites are credited with the founding of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

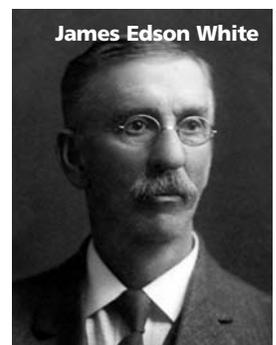


The Critical Decade

Although the denomination was officially founded on May 21, 1863, the inaugural decade of the White marriage (1845–1855) was foundational in the establishment of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. What seems like all accomplishment and triumph now, though, was *sturm und drang* for the young couple, and by extension the fledgling Sabbatarian Adventist movement.² James characterized the newlywed years thus: “We entered upon this work penniless, with few friends, and broken in health.”³ Poverty, illness, homelessness, tedious travel, childbirth, infant sickness, and parental dilemmas, combined with the social persecution stemming from her visions, often pushed Ellen to the brink of despair and death. Yet four developments emerged from this decade-long crucible that would shape White’s, and her church’s, relationship with blacks.

In a meeting among Sabbatarian Adventist believers in Boston on November 18, 1848, Ellen White had a vision. Her takeaway for James was: “You must begin to print a little paper and send it out to the people. Let it be small at first; but as the people read, they will send you means with which to print, and it will be a success from the first. From this small beginning it was shown to me to be like streams of light that went clear round the world.”⁴ This charge, carried out by James and a dedicated editorial staff, was the genesis of a church publishing industry that would produce billions of pages, in myriad languages, read by hundreds of millions of people. Not only would the printed page be the vehicle in which Ellen White would later communicate with the church about the sins of slavery and the necessity of redressing its damage through the evangelization and education of African Americans, but from the last decades of the nineteenth century and beyond it was the means by which thousands of blacks discovered the Adventist message. Just as Anna Knight (*right*) read her way into Adventism by mailed publications, so did countless others of her hue.⁵

In the same month that the first paper appeared, Ellen White gave birth to James Edson White (*right*) on July 28, 1849. Although notoriously flawed, Edson and his Southern Missionary Society’s four years (1895–1899) of nautical evangelism on the Mississippi River in the Deep South would be the base of the efflorescence of African American Adventism. Further, the correspondence between



mother and son during these years would shape race relations and missiology in the church for decades after. Edson also compiled and published *The Southern Work*, began the periodical *Gospel Herald*, and was perhaps the individual who did the most to circulate his mother's appeals to Adventists to assist Southern blacks.⁶

It was largely in the decade after the Great Disappointment that Ellen White became established as messenger to the remnant. The first article in this series posited that William Foy (*right*) provided for White an example of faithfulness to the divine mandate to prophethood in an antagonistic and hostile society. Amidst the fantastic tales of visions, physical phenomena, and confounded detractors, White's resolve to be steadfast to her calling despite often being broken in body and spirit was remarkable. This, as well as the searching missives called "testimonies" that uncannily personally addressed the members of the young movement, all with the aid of defenders and apologists like her husband, Bates, John Loughborough (*right, center*), and Uriah Smith (*lower right*), cemented Ellen White's role as prophet among Sabbatarian Adventists. Perhaps the litmus test of a genuine prophet, though, is to publicly condemn injustice and oppression, which White did in her indictments against the slave institution and the American empire that perpetrated and profited from it. This period, in which White secured her prophetic authority, is so vital to her relationship



William Foy



John Loughborough



Uriah Smith

to blacks because it is from this platform that she would speak out on the unpopular issue of race in the Post-Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras. The issue that was a test of her genuineness as a prophet would later prove one of the greatest tests of her prophetic authority.

Finally, from 1845 to 1855, Sabbatarian Adventists, through much prayer, study, discussion, and debate, arrived at the doctrines that defined the movement: the imminent *parousia*, pre-Advent judgment, seventh-day Sabbath, soul mortality, everlasting gospel, and others. Much later, when large numbers of African Americans encountered the Adventist message, they would deeply identify with the tenets. Aside from statements made by myriad blacks that they embraced the Adventist message because the truths spoke to their condition, this doctrinal identification is borne out by noting that a sizeable portion of the current membership of the North American Division is black; the African-Caribbean islands have the highest church to population ratio of any region in the world;⁷ and continental Africa has an Adventist membership of more than seven million, more than any other continent.⁸ Such success is not accidental, especially in light of the church's challenges with race relations. To be sure, many blacks embraced the Adventist message despite often being treated badly because of their color by its supposed practitioners.

Blacks and Sabbatarian Adventist Eschatology

Part and parcel of these doctrines was the crystallization in the 1850s of Adventist eschatology, most of which remains unchanged today. In particular, an understanding of the role of the United States in prophecy, as well as the identification of Babylon, were arrived at—positions that have influenced and shaped the church's attitudes to America, religious liberty, civil rights, Protestantism, social activism, and politics perhaps more than any other.⁹ As it turns out, African Americans played an essential role in the development of the church's under-

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standing of these teachings and the broader eschatological scenario.

The first Adventist in print to identify the United States as the beast with “two horns like a lamb” which “spake as a dragon” of Revelation 13:11–18, was John Nevins Andrews (*right*) in an article entitled “Thoughts on Revelation XIII and XIV” in the *Adventist Review*¹⁰ of May 19, 1851.¹¹ America’s two horns were Republicanism and



John Nevins Andrews

Protestantism, political and religious liberty, as delineated in the Declaration of Independence: “All men are born free and equal, and endowed with certain inalienable rights, as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” America’s true nature was laid bare, however, in its treatments of black people: “If ‘all men are born free and equal,’ how do we then hold three million slaves in bondage? Why is it that the negro race are reduced to the ranks of chattels personal, and bought and sold like brute beasts?” Andrews wasted no time in coming to his conclusion: “...the lamb is such only in pretensions. He [America] is dragon in character.”¹² Andrews then outlines the now-familiar end time scenario in which the United States fully reveals its dragon character by forcing all to receive the mark of the beast. In the article “What is Babylon,” Andrews decisively reveals the identity of the symbolic power: “The Protestant church at the present time holds many hundred thousand slaves. Nor is the fact to be disguised, that the professed church is now the right arm of the slave power. This great fact identifies the Protestant church as a part of Babylon, with absolute certainty.”¹³

John Loughborough would extend Andrews’ exegetical applications in an article titled “The Two-Horned Beast” published in the *Review* on March 21, 1854.¹⁴ Featuring a large section devoted to excoriating America for slavery, the piece proposes a more accurate rendering of the

Declaration of Independence clause: “All men are created free and equal except 3,500,000.” Loughborough calls America out for violating his conscience, and that of his fellow citizens, by imposing the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Echoing Andrews’ identification of American Protestants as Babylon for aiding and abetting the system of slavery and owning slaves, Loughborough leaves no doubt that the Protestants of the United States speak as a dragon. In an expansion of this article in 1857, he again shares the strongest proof he can find for the identification of America as the beast of Revelation 13:11: “In the institution of Slavery *is more especially manifested*, thus far, the dragon spirit that dwells in the heart of this hypocritical nation. The fearful strides which this government has made on this question up to the present, afford small ground of hope for the future.”¹⁵

Uriah Smith, probably Adventism’s most influential interpreter of Daniel and Revelation, and *Adventist Review* editor for almost twenty years, poeticized America’s oppression of blacks in the epic serial poem “The Warning Voice of Time and Prophecy”:

*With two horns like a lamb a beast arose -
So with two leading forms a power has risen,
Two fundamental principles, than which
In all the earth none can be found more mild,
More lamb-like in their outward form and name.
A land of freedom, pillared on the broad
And open basis of equality;
A land reposing ‘neath the gentle sway
Of civil and religious liberty.
Lamb-like in form, is there no dragon-voice
Heard in our land? no notes that harshly grate
Upon the ear of mercy, love and truth?
And put humanity to open shame?
Let the united cry of millions tell, -
Millions that groan beneath oppression’s rod,
Beneath the sin-forged chains of slavery,
Robbed of their rights, to brutes degraded down,
And soul and body bound to other’s will, -
Let their united cries, and tears, and groans,
That daily rise, and call aloud on Heaven*

For vengeance, answer; let the Slave reply.
 O land of boasted freedom! thou hast given
 The lie to all thy loud professions, fair,
 Of justice, liberty and equal rights;
 And thou hast set a foul and heinous blot
 Upon the sacred page of liberty;
 And whilst thou trafficest in souls of men,
 Thou burl'st defiance, proud, in face of Heaven
 Soon to be answered with avenging doom.
 More fully, soon, shall yet this dragon-voice
 Developed be, and louder yet shall speak;
 More fully as the consummation nears,
 And all the wicked, wickeder become,
 The good more good, more holy, just and pure;
 When he against the followers of truth
 Shall lift his voice and vent his furious rage.
 Whoe'er the beast shall worship, and his mark
 Receive, the vials of God's wrath shall drink;
 Here is the patience of the saints, and they
 Who God's commandments keep and faith of Christ.¹⁶

Ellen White in the Sabbatarian period also linked Babylon with America and Protestantism. She pens the following in the chapter "The Sins of Babylon" in *Spiritual Gifts*, Volume 1:

All heaven beholds with indignation, human beings, the workmanship of God, reduced to the lowest depths of degradation, and placed on a level with the brute creation by their fellow men. And professed followers of that dear Saviour whose compassion was ever moved as he witnessed human woe, heartily engage in this enormous and grievous sin, and deal in slaves and souls of men. Angels have recorded it all. It is written in the book. The tears of the pious bond-men and bond-women, of fathers, mothers and children, brothers and sisters, are all bottled up in heaven. Agony, human agony, is carried from place to place, and bought and sold. God will restrain his anger but a little longer. His anger burns against this nation, and especially against the religious bodies who have sanc-



tioned, and have themselves engaged in this terrible merchandise. Such injustice, such oppression, such sufferings, many professed followers of the meek and lowly Jesus can witness with heartless indifference. And many of them can inflict with hateful satisfaction, all this indescribable agony themselves, and yet dare to worship God. It is solemn mockery, and Satan exults over it, and reproaches Jesus and his angels with such inconsistency, saying, with bellish triumph, Such are Christ's followers!

These professed Christians read of the sufferings of the martyrs, and tears course down their cheeks. They wonder that men could ever possess hearts so hardened as to practice such inhuman cruelties towards their fellow-men, while at the same time they hold their fellow-men in slavery. And this is not all. They sever the ties of nature, and cruelly oppress from day to day their fellow-men. They can inflict most inhuman tortures with relentless cruelty, which would well compare with the cruelty papists and heathens exercised towards Christ's followers. Said the angel, It will be more tolerable for the heathen and for papists in the day of the execution of God's judgment than for such men. The cries and sufferings of the oppressed have reached unto heaven, and angels stand amazed at the hard-hearted, untold, agonizing, suffering, man in the image of his Maker, causes his fellow-man. Said the angel, The names of such are written in blood, crossed with stripes, and flooded with agonizing, burning tears of suffering. God's anger will not cease until he has caused the land of light to drink the dregs of the cup of his fury, and until he has rewarded unto Babylon double. Reward her even as she rewarded you, double unto her double according to her works: in the cup which she hath filled, fill to her double.¹⁷

This brief sampling underscores that for these early Adventist thought leaders, America's treatment of Africans was not simply a grave human rights violation; it was an omen of apocalyptic doom. In short, slavery ruined a republic that was established according to Divine Providence, leaving a terrible curse that would linger until the very end of the world and reverberate throughout eternity.

Aside from molding the history of this

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American-born religion, Adventism’s *sui generis* belief of America’s sinister apocalyptic role dominated Ellen White’s worldview and writings—especially those on slavery and the Civil War. A double-edged sword, White would later declare that as America’s treatment of blacks revealed the republic’s true nature, so Adventism’s treatment of blacks revealed the church’s true nature. Above all else, to Ellen White and the other Sabbatarian Adventist leaders, African Americans were a people of the eschaton, playing an essential part in the ultimate demise of the beast and Babylon, standing with the Lamb’s remnant in triumph. ■

Next installment: Ellen White’s personal relationships with African American Sabbatarian Adventists.

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References

1. James and Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches of James White and Ellen G. White* (Battle Creek, 1888), 97, 238.
2. “Sabbatarian Adventist” refers to the movement led by James and Ellen White and Joseph Bates, roughly between 1845–1860, that became the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The name “Seventh-day Adventist” was voted and adopted at a meeting of Sabbatarian Adventists in Battle Creek, Michigan, on October 1, 1860; the Seventh-day Adventist Church was officially formed on May 21, 1863 in the same town.
3. White, *Life Sketches*, 127.
4. Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, D.C., 1882), 125.
5. Anna Knight as told to A. W. Spaulding, “The Story of Anna Knight,” November 19, 22, 1914 (Ellen G. White Estate File DF 372-1, 1914), 1.
6. The Ellen G. White Estate has now made the correspondence between Ellen and Edson White available online (<http://ellenwhite.org/resources/correspondence/incoming-correspondence>).

7. Montserrat is 1 in 4; Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, 1 in 7; Grenada, 1 in 8; Jamaica, Antigua and Barbuda, and Cayman Islands, 1 in 10. See Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, *2015 Annual Statistical Report* (Silver Spring, 2015), 80–83.

8. *Ibid.*, 4, 17–18.

9. For a book-length treatment of this, see Douglas Morgan’s *Adventism and the American Republic* (Knoxville, 2001).

10. At the time titled *Second Advent Review, and Sabbath Herald* and later *Advent Review, and Sabbath Herald*, for convenience and clarity it will be called *Adventist Review* here.

11. J. N. Andrews, “Thoughts on Revelation XIII and XIV,” *Second Advent Review, and Sabbath Herald* (May 19, 1851): 81–86.

12. *Ibid.*: 84.

13. Emphasis supplied. J. N. Andrews, “What is Babylon?” *Advent Review, and Sabbath Herald* (February 21, 1854): 36.

14. J. N. Loughborough, “The Two-Horned Beast,” *Advent Review, and Sabbath Herald* (March 21, 1854): 65–68.

15. Emphasis supplied. J. N. Loughborough, “The Two-Horned Beast,” *Advent Review, and Sabbath Herald* (March 19, 1857): 156.

16. Uriah Smith, “The Warning Voice of Time and Prophecy,” *The Advent Review, and Sabbath Herald* (June 23, 1853): 18.

17. E. G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, Volume 1 (Battle Creek, 1858), 191–192.