

ELLEN G. WHITE ESTATE

HOW THE DESIRE OF AGES WAS WRITTEN

ROBERT W. OLSON

How The Desire of Ages Was Written

Ellen G. White

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About the Author

Ellen G. White (1827-1915) is considered the most widely translated American author, her works having been published in more than 160 languages. She wrote more than 100,000 pages on a wide variety of spiritual and practical topics. Guided by the Holy Spirit, she exalted Jesus and pointed to the Scriptures as the basis of one's faith.

Further Links

[A Brief Biography of Ellen G. White](#)
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by Robert W. Olson

An Introductory Statement to the Document, “Exhibits Relating to
the Writing of *The Desire of Ages*”

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Introduction

The Desire of Ages is, for many Seventh-day Adventists, their favorite source of spiritual nourishment outside the Bible. Its deep devotional tone and strikingly beautiful phrases, combined with its Christ-centered theme, make this much-loved masterpiece unique, even among the works of Ellen White.

The story of how *The Desire of Ages* was written probably will never be fully told, for no one living knows the complete story, with all its details. However, an examination of the available sources does provide many illuminating insights into the question of how this perennial best seller came into existence.

Chapter 1—Ellen White’s Books on the Life and Teachings of Jesus

Ellen White’s writing on the life of Christ began in 1858, following her visit to Lovett’s Grove, Ohio, where many scenes from the age-long conflict between Christ and Satan were revealed to her in vision. Her written account of that vision, as found in *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 1, includes over fifty pages on the life of Christ.

In 1876 and 1877, Ellen White rewrote and enlarged her narrative of Christ’s life and work so that it comprised more than 640 pages in *Spirit of Prophecy*, Volumes II and III. Then, in the 1890’s, she expanded the account still further, until it filled three books, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, *The Desire of Ages*, and *Christ’s Object Lessons*.

Chapter 2—Editorial Assistance

Even though she was inspired in the fullest sense, Ellen White did not always use perfect grammar, spelling, punctuation, or sentence and paragraph construction in her writing. She felt this shortcoming strongly throughout her entire life. In 1873, she lamented, “My heart is inexpressibly sad.... I am not a scholar.... I am not a grammarian” (Entries for January 10 and 11, 1873, pp. 10-11).¹ [2] Twenty years later she again mourned over her inadequacy when she declared, “I lay down my pen and say, Oh Lord, I am finite, I am weak and simple and ignorant. Thy grand and holy revelations I can never find language to express” (See Exhibit 63).

Feeling as she did, it is quite understandable that Ellen White should seek skilled literary help in the preparation of her manuscripts for publication. When working on the *Spiritual Gifts* series, from 1858 to 1864, she was assisted by her husband who was a qualified schoolteacher. (See [Selected Messages 1:50](#)). In the 1890’s, when *The Desire of Ages* was finally taking shape, her major editorial assistant was Marian Davis.

Ellen White’s copyists were entrusted with such tasks as correcting grammar and spelling, eliminating unnecessary repetition, grouping material in paragraphs, and transferring sentences or paragraphs from one manuscript to another “where the same thought was expressed, but not so clearly” (See Exhibit 81). At times, however, a few other key individuals were given additional leeway to make improvements in her writings. For example, Mrs. White was quite willing to have J. H. Waggoner criticize her manuscript and offer suggestions for improvement (See Exhibit 15). She, in fact, expressed displeasure with Waggoner when he failed to change or improve one of her manuscripts when given an opportunity to do so (See Exhibit 15).

¹Unless otherwise indicated, all references in this statement are to the attached document, “Exhibits Relating to the Writing of The Desire of Ages.”

Dr. David Paulson was also called upon for this kind of service. In 1905, Mrs. White's son, W. C. White, sent the manuscript for *The Ministry of Healing* to Dr. Paulson with the request, "I wish that in all your reading you would note those places where the thought is expressed in a way to be especially criticized by medical men and kindly give us the benefit of your knowledge as to how to express the same thought in a more acceptable way."²

It was Ellen White's understanding that some Bible writers also had needed editorial assistance, for she wrote concerning the book of Acts, "At that time it was customary for a writer to send his manuscript to someone for examination and criticism. Luke chose Theophilus, as a man in whom he had confidence, to perform this important work."—*SDA Commentary*, Volume 6, p. 1051

- [3] Since it is clear that Mrs. White did at times permit, and even seek, help which resulted in the changing of some of her words, a question might be raised about her statement, "The words of someone else would not rightly represent me" (See Exhibit 79). This comment, it should be noted, was made with reference to one of her copyists in particular and did not include the technical improvements which all of her copyists were supposed to make. It should be emphasized though that Ellen White's copyists and editors did not contribute to the actual writing of her books. Marian Davis made note of this fact when, in response to the publisher's appeal for immediate completion of *The Desire of Ages* manuscript, she wrote W. C. White, "There is one thing... that not even the most competent editor could do—that is to prepare the manuscript before it is written" [i.e., Marian Davis could not do her editorial work until Ellen White had written the manuscript] (See Exhibit 69).

²W. C. White to David Paulson, February 15, 1905, W. C. White Letter File.

Chapter 3—The Role of Marian Davis

Marian Davis was one of those special people to whom Ellen White looked for more than routine copying and editing. Marian was authorized to drop out needless words (See Exhibit 67) or at times to change words when necessary (See Exhibit 37). She helped Mrs. White plan a good number of her books, from the first chapter to the last (p. 39, par. 1).

Marian was Ellen White’s “bookmaker” (p. 41, par. 1). She gleaned material, even isolated sentences (p. 28, par. 6; p. 39, par. 1; p. 30, par. 4), on the life of Christ from Ellen White’s diaries, letters, and articles (p. 44, par. 3; p. 29, par. 0), which she pasted in scrapbooks. She drew material for *The Desire of Ages* from these scrapbooks, the bound E. G. White books, and some longer manuscripts (p. 24, par. 4).

In organizing the material into chapters, Marian noted areas on which she had nothing from Ellen White’s pen. Apparently the two women had such a close working relationship that Marian felt free to make suggestions to Mrs. White as to what she thought might be lacking from the book. Some of these suggestions Ellen White accepted, but others she rejected. For example, while Marian’s advice regarding “the rock, when the water flowed,” was accepted for an earlier book (p. 21, par. 1), her recommendation concerning “the building a tower” and “the war of kings” was rejected. Ellen White declared she would not write on these topics unless “the Lord’s Spirit seems to lead me” (p. 25, par. 3).³

[4]

³W. C. White recognized that in his mother’s experience, the Lord at times overruled even the best human advice. He wrote her once, “I see many reasons why you should not go to the Colorado and California campmeetings. In my opinion, it would be the most unfortunate thing in the world, for you to go and take a large burden of their perplexities. It would do you ten times as much harm, as it would do them good. I am of one mind regarding all the meetings. Do not think of going to any of them, unless the Lord plainly tells you to go, and when He does this, I withdraw all objections. W. C. White to Ellen White, August 18, 1890, W. C. White Letter Book C, p. 58.

Marian also made suggestions to Ellen White with reference to Christ's struggle when tempted to use His divine power (p. 26, par. 5), and the parables of the pearl and the net (p. 23, par. 6). While Ellen White no doubt appreciated these suggestions, it was clearly she herself, and not Marian, who decided what topics she would write on.

Not only did Ellen White do the initial writing, she also took full responsibility for every word which eventually appeared in her books. She explained to her sister Mary, "I read over all that is copied, to see that everything is as it should be. I read all the book manuscript before it is sent to the printer" (p. 44, par. 2). This clearly was her routine method of working. Marian Davis once remarked to Ellen White, "Of course, nothing will go that you do not approve" (p. 30, par. 2).

Chapter 4—Sources of Information

Visions

In her first account of Christ's life, written in 1858, Ellen White frequently made such declarations as "I saw," "I then viewed," "I was shown," etc. (p. 10). While she did not lace her later accounts of Christ's life with these expressions, she may actually have seen in vision all the events in Christ's life of which she wrote. In 1889, after mentioning the "betrayal, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus," she commented, "All this had passed before me point by point" (p. 22, par. 3).

However, it is not necessary for us to believe that every single fact mentioned in *The Desire of Ages* was first seen in vision in order also to believe that the book came from a truly inspired pen. For example, Paul wrote the Corinthians, "There is among you envying, and strife, and divisions" (1 Corinthians 3:3). But he was not shown this in vision. He was informed in this matter by the members of the house of Chloe. (See 1 Corinthians 1:11). Yet we hold that 1 [5] [1 Corinthians 3:3](#) was written under inspiration. Ellen White states that although "the Lord did not give him [Paul] a new revelation for that special time... the reproof he sent them was as certainly written under the inspiration of the Spirit of God as were any of his other epistles" ([The Acts of the Apostles, 302-3](#)). If God could speak to the prophets of old "in diverse manners" ([Hebrews 1:1](#)), He could most surely do the same in more recent times.

The Bible

Ellen White knew her Bible well, a fact that is attested by the thousands of quotations from the Word of God which run through all of her writings. She used the Bible freely in all of her books on Christ's life and teachings. The Scriptures were to Ellen White the primary source of information regarding what Jesus did and said.

“Bible Histories” and other books

Since the Lord apparently did not reveal the order of biblical events to Ellen White, she found it necessary to seek this information as best she could by her own personal study from various “Bible histories” (p. 21, par. 2). She also appears to have used some books which dealt more specifically with the life of Jesus. She instructed her family in Oakland to send her certain books which she had “laid out.” (p. 17, par. 5). She does not name these books, but it is likely that one of them was William Hanna’s *Life of Christ*, since some of her phraseology in *Spirit of Prophecy*, Volume II, written at this time, is similar to the language of Hanna. The extent and nature of her use of Hanna can be determined only by a careful analysis of these books. ⁴ Ellen White used both the Bible and historical sources in the preparation of her other “conflict books” as well. W. C. White states,

[6] In some of the historical matters such as are brought out in *Patriarchs and Prophets*, and in *Acts of the Apostles* and in *The Great Controversy*, the main outlines were made very clear and plain to her, and when she came to write up these topics, she was left to study the Bible and history to get dates and geographical relations and to perfect her description of details.—W. C. White Correspondence File. ⁵

It may come as a new thought to some that Ellen White, in writing an inspired book, should at times draw not only phraseology but certain types of information from previously existing sources. But those who have studied the Bible carefully will not find this thought disturbing inasmuch as they will have noted that the Scripture writers also followed this practice. For example, the Apostle Paul more than once used lines from Greek poets, and Jude included a passage in his little epistle which someone else had written at least a hundred years earlier. (See *SDA Bible Commentary* on [Acts 17:28](#), [1 Corinthians 15:33](#), and [Jude 14](#)).

⁴For the benefit of those who may wish to make comparisons between Hanna’s work and that of Ellen White, the White Estate has reproduced several hundred copies of five chapters drawn from Hanna’s *Life of Christ*. These are available on a complimentary basis while the supply lasts.

⁵For the most informative and concise statement from her own pen as to her use of the historical material of other authors see her Introduction to *The Great Controversy*.

Chapter 5—The Desire of Ages an Inspired Book

In 1892, as Ellen White once again commenced her writing on the life of Christ, she spoke of “the things which burn in my soul in reference to the mission of Christ.” “I know not,” she wrote, “how to present subjects in the living power in which they stand before me” (p. 23, par. 4, 5).

A year later she asserted that in writing on Christ’s life she was tracing words which would communicate to others “the light which the Lord has been pleased in His great mercy and love to give me” (p. 25, par. 2). Some time later, after mentioning several of her books, including *The Desire of Ages*, she declared, “In my books, the truth is stated, barricaded by a ‘Thus saith the Lord.’ The Holy Spirit traced these truths upon my heart and mind as indelibly as the law was traced by the finger of God, upon the tables of stone” (p. 44, par. 7).

In the writing of *The Desire of Ages* Ellen White had help—help from her secretaries and help from some other authors. But first and foremost she had the help of the Lord. It was the Spirit of God who directed and controlled her and who was the Guiding Force in the writing of all her messages.

The *Desire of Ages* is not just another book on the life of Christ. In marked contrast to other works on Christ’s life, it was written under the inspiration of the Spirit of God. It carries within its pages its own divine credentials. It breathes a heavenly spirit. Here we come face to face with the Lord Himself. Through *The Desire of Ages*, as through no other book outside the Bible, we may become intimately acquainted with our Saviour. And this blessing will surely come to all who search its pages with hearts and minds that are receptive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. [7]