

*Endorsing the Septuagint: Ellen White and Her Later
Views of the Apocrypha*

Matthew Korpman, La Sierra University

1. Introduction

The topic of Ellen White and Seventh-day Adventism's relationship to the Apocrypha has been steadily growing since 1987 when the first study on the issue appeared (Graybill 1987). Since that time, the last few years have seen an explosion of research hyper-focused on exploring this forgotten Adventist heritage (Fortin 2002; Casebolt 2018; Korpman 2018, 2019, 2021). This has been in-part due to the 2014 release of a previously unpublished vision of Ellen White in which she claimed that the Apocrypha was the "Word of God" (White 1849, "Remarks in Vision"). The results of this research have demonstrated most recently that White not only quoted from passages in the Apocrypha when writing her early visions, a fact agreed on by previous studies (Graybill 1987, 1994), but also throughout her lifetime (Korpman 2020). The question of what these continued allusions and quotations mean for reconstructing her later beliefs about the Apocrypha has remained unsettled.

The historical background for White's use of the Apocrypha, exploring the often overlooked positive reception that these deuterocanonical works received from Protestants, has been explored in-depth elsewhere (Korpman 2021). However, a short comment by Graybill in his first study is helpful in contextualizing the younger Ellen White.

Back in the 1830s and 40s, however, many Bibles containing the Apocrypha were still in circulation. Up until 1827, Bibles distributed by the American Bible Society often contained the Apocrypha. In fact, the huge Bible in the Harmon family

home, which the youthful Ellen held aloft in vision, contained the Apocrypha printed in smaller type between the Testaments. (Graybill 1987:26)

It has been cautiously noted in previous studies that Ellen White's *explicit* endorsements of the Apocrypha only provide clarity as they relate to her early adulthood (Graybill 1994:11; Korpman 2020:143). Her discussions about the Apocrypha span two visions from 1849 to 1850 (a period of less than a year).

(Taking the large Bible containing the apocrypha:) Pure and undefiled...The Word of God, take it...bind it long upon thine heart, pure and unadulterated...Thy word, thy word, thy word, a part of it is burned unadulterated, a part of the hidden book, a part of it is burned (the apocrypha). Those that shall despitefully tread [treat?] that remnant would think that they are doing God service. Why? because they are led captive by Satan at his will. Hidden book, it is cast out. Bind it to the heart...bind it, bind it, bind it...let not its pages be closed, read it carefully. (White 1849)

I saw that the Apocrypha was the hidden book, and that the wise of these last days should understand it. (White 1850)

Despite her later silence on the topic, White's continued usage of the Apocrypha, documented in recent studies, indicates that she did not come to reject the works in her later life (Korpman 2020:143). For example, her continued references to Ezra as a prophet (1862:37; 1899:273), a detail unsupported except by the apocryphal work of 2 Esdras, are certainly indications that her view of their inspiration had not changed as she grew older. None the less, there is one instance from her later ministry which might provide some further clarification on this issue, indicating that her youthful visionary revelations maintained their consistency in older age.

The following short study will make the case that Ellen White's theological position in 1849 appears to have stretched onward until at least 1897, suggesting that her position on the Apocrypha was grounded in a consistent and principled belief about the Bible's transmission and inspiration. Quotations in this study have been given emphasis by me with italics.

2. Impossible to Judge Inspiration

A notable belief of hers that she outlines in her later years is that nobody can decide what is inspired and what does not belong within the Bible (an idea she largely explores within

relation to science). She writes that: “I would have both my arms taken off at my shoulders before I would ever make the statement or set my judgment upon the Word of God as to what is inspired and what is not inspired.” Again, she emphasizes that: “I take the Bible just as it is, as the Inspired Word. I believe its utterances in an *entire Bible*” (White 1888a, “The Guide Book”). That Bible, of course, at the time, included the Apocrypha. Elsewhere she writes that “No part of the Bible has died from old age. *All the past history of the people of God is to be studied* by us today, that we may benefit by the experiences recorded” (White 1897). Some other of her comments, reproduced in full, are illustrative of this thinking.

[God] has not... qualified any finite man... [or] inspired one man or any class of men to pronounce judgment as to that which is inspired or is not. When men, in their finite judgement, find it necessary to go into an examination of Scriptures to define that which is inspired and that which is not, they have stepped before Jesus to show Him a better way than He has led us. (White 1888a)

We must cling to our Bibles. If Satan can make you believe that there are things in the word of God that are not inspired, he will then be prepared to ensnare your soul. We shall have no assurance, no certainty, at the very time we need to know what is truth... Therefore let no one entertain the question whether this or that portion of the word of God is inspired. (White 1888b:787)

We call on you to take your Bible, but do not put a sacrilegious hand upon it and say, “That is not inspired,” simply because somebody else has said so. Not a jot or tittle is ever to be taken from that Word. Hands off, brethren! Do not touch the ark. Do not lay your hand upon it, but let God move (White 1888c, “Sermon”).

Her words in later life appear to echo her concern from her youth when in 1849, speaking about the Apocrypha, she declared that Adventists should “Bind it to the heart... le[s]t everything be cast off” (White 1849). One plausible interpretation of her youthful vision was that she was warning that any removal of part of the Bible (the Apocrypha), would risk the same removal happening to any other parts of the Bible. If true, this would mean that she saw the denigration of the Apocrypha as being “un-inspired,” as a denigration of scripture and inspiration itself. This also reveals that for White, the canon of scripture was whatever had been retained within her Bible up until that point. This can find evidence in her declaration that “the Lord has preserved this Holy Book by His own miraculous power *in its present shape*” (White 1888a).

Since the Bible in 1888 had no one shape, given that some had the Apocrypha and others now didn’t, the statement affirms that White only considered one Bible to be correct (dis-

missing the other versions). Which version could she have leaned toward? Although many Bibles were without the Apocrypha by 1888, many Adventists still retained their older Bibles that had it (Graybill 1987; Korpman 2018). As such, it is likely that the Bible in its present shape she referred to was one that retained the Apocrypha within it. Applying these insights, the implication appears to be that she apparently believed that if a book like Tobit had been preserved in the Bible for thousands of years, no one had the right to remove it since it was God, in her mind, who had through his providence allowed it to enter and who had retained it.

3. Endorsing the Septuagint

The second point of consideration is a comment Ellen White made with regard to the canon in her later years. The statement relates to the intertestamental period of Judaism, during which time the books that came to be included in the Apocrypha or Deuterocanon were composed and propagated. She notes in her work *the Desire of Ages* that: “For hundreds of years the Scriptures had been translated into the Greek language, then widely spoken throughout the Roman Empire.” She adds that this was necessary because “the Jews were scattered everywhere,” an allusion to the fact that it was the Jewish community in Egypt that first translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek (White 1898:33).

This seemingly innocuous comment is fascinating for two reasons. The first reason this comments is striking is that the Greek translation which she referred to was the Septuagint (LXX), and furthermore it was not widely held in a favorable position by some Protestants at this time. This is the first and only time that White references the ancient translation, and she does so positively. Some of the books White would have been exposed to would have spoken quite disparagingly about it precisely because it was believed that the Septuagint translation was first responsible for mixing the apocryphal books together with the canonical.

My assertion was that “the Septuagint is *not* the Word of God,” and to this I hold...It is to the Septuagint version that we are indebted for the Apocrypha...Now, knowing all this, and more more; was I not fully justified in saying, that it is not *the Word of God*? (Thelwall 1839:15)

Unlike today in which it is widely acknowledged that the Septuagint could look different depending on each locale or time period (and maybe even the group responsible for compiling the codex), the popular writers of White’s day often spoke of the idea of a Septuagint which was believed to have included, like the King James translation she held in her hands, both the canonical and apocryphal works. As such, it would be less likely that she made these

comments imagining a version of the Septuagint that lacked the apocryphal works (and in truth, to this day we don't know of a single copy of the Septuagint that didn't include some of them). The likelihood is that she made the comments with the assumption of a Greek translation that looked very similar to her own King James Bible: inclusive of the Apocrypha.

This is clearly important, since for White to speak favorably of the Septuagint as synonymous with "Scriptures," without distinguishing one set of books in the Septuagint from another, appears to tacitly endorse the entire collection. Or as another writer, who was favorable to the Septuagint, put it: "The Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, may be called the Canon of the Apocrypha, or hidden wisdom" (von Bunsen 1867: 248).

4. Conclusion

Given that almost any discussion of the Septuagint in the nineteenth century made reference to the issue of the Apocrypha, it seems unlikely that she would not have recognized the potential objections to her positive endorsement. As such, this small reference to the history of the Bible's translation, when placed alongside her admonitions that nobody can make decisions as to what is inspired or not inspired within the binding of her King James Bible, seems to give weight to the argument that she still maintained her younger view on the canon between 1888-1898, holding that the apocryphal books shared the same inspiration as the canonical. While not conclusive, when combined with her quotations and allusions of the Apocrypha, it is compelling. This would then demonstrate a consistent theological position on her part from 1849 to 1899, indicating that the role of the Apocrypha represents an important aspect of her total ministry.

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