

# **Ellen G. White: The Person--I**

## **The Human-Interest Story**

### **Introduction:**

- A. There are at least two equal but opposite dangers in the manner in which many SDAs tend to view Ellen White today:
  - 1. Some rate her too high: They overly “idolize” her and put her on pedestal.
  - 2. Others rate her too low:
    - a. She was just another "ordinary" Christian woman of piety.
    - b. She wrote a lot of good things on various religious topics/issues.
    - c. Reading them may bring the reader spiritual blessings.
    - d. We can accept or reject her ideas with impunity.
- B. Both positions are wrong.
- C. Purpose of this two-part study: To focus upon the humanity of the "real" EGW, to examine this woman as a person, not only in prophetic roles, but also in non-prophetic roles, as daughter, sister, mother, neighbor, friend. We will look for those traits/qualities that marked her as an authentic--if fallible--human being.

### **I. As a Member of the Harmon Family:**

- A. Parents: Of British ancestry, sturdy New England stock
  - 1. Father: Robert F. Harmon, Sr. (Feb. 28, 1786-1866)--a farmer, hat-maker
  - 2. Mother: Eunice Gould Harmon (1787-1863)--a housewife, homemaker
  - 3. Members of the Portland, Maine Chestnut Street Methodist Church (Robert, a deacon); disfellowshipped with other family members in Sept., 1843, in reaction to their accepting Millerite theological positions.
  - 4. Became Sabbath-keeping Adventists in 1851 or 1852, seven or eight years after Ellen's first vision, but totally supportive of the genuineness of her gift from the first.
- B. Siblings: five sisters and two brothers.

1. Caroline Harmon-Clough--(April 9, 1812-Mar. 29, 1883, Paola, KS)--wife of a Methodist clergyman.  
  
Niece: Mary Clough--a writer of some aptitude, and a nonSDA literary assistant to Aunt Ellen (1876-77) in the early development of the "Life of Christ" project (*Desire of Ages*).
2. Harriet Harmon-McCann (1814-d. before 1883), wife of clergyman in KS.
3. John B. Harmon (Dec. 29, 1815-Mar. 6, 1883)--a businessman in IL.
4. Mary Plummer Harmon-Foss (1823-May 22, 1912)--Married Hazen Foss' brother, Samuel.
5. Sarah Harmon-Belden (Feb. 13, 1822-Nov. 25, 1868):
  - a. Married Stephen T. Belden, Aug., 1851. Worked at the Review & Herald Publishing House.
  - b. Two children: Franklin E. (1858) and Lillian:
    - (i) Franklin also worked at RH. Became prolific gospel-song writer (est. 600-800).
    - (ii) Warned by Aunt Ellen not to become one of "Noah's carpenters."
    - (iii) Fought his aunt at 1888 Minneapolis GC Session; disenchanted with her prophetic gift; gave aid-and-comfort to the enemy, became bitter against the church, apostatized, disfellowshipped c. 1907 (*SDA Encyclopedia* [1976]: 142).
  - c. Sarah died of "consumption" (tuberculosis) at age 45; only sister of Ellen's to become SDA.
6. Robert F. Harmon, Jr. (July 13, 1825-Feb. 5, 1853)
  - a. Only brother of Ellen to become SDA
  - b. Died of "consumption" at age 27.
7. Elizabeth ("Lizzie") N. Harmon-Bangs (Nov. 26, 1827-Dec. 21, 1891):
  - a. Ellen's fraternal twin
  - b. Married Reuben Bangs, a Portland, ME grocer
  - c. Never accepted Ellen's gift; never became an SDA; ALW said EGW did not expect to meet "Lizzie" in heaven, as she never made

any pretext of religion.

## II. “My Misfortune” (2SG 9-12):

### A. The Accident:

1. At age nine, Ellen Harmon suffered a tragic accident, which, she later wrote, “was to affect my whole life” (LS 17:2). Struck on the nose by a stone hurled by an angry classmate, she lay in a coma for 3 weeks. Her personal physician and family did not expect her to survive. She was” reduced almost to a skeleton.” (LS 18:1,2)
2. A physical problem: “My nervous system was prostrated,” she wrote. Her hand trembled so much that handwriting was virtually impossible: “I . . . could get no father than the simple copies in a coarse hand”:
  - a. Study became impossible: “The letters in the page would run together.”
  - b. “Great drops of perspiration would stand upon my brow.”
  - c. “A faintness and dizziness would seize me.”
  - d. “I had a bad cough, and my whole system was debilitated.” (LS 19:1).
3. A Psychological Problem: Ellen was also physically disfigured for the rest of her life.
  - a. When, out of curiosity, she first looked into a mirror, she was shocked and revolted by what she saw: “Every feature of my face seemed changed. The sight was more than I could bear. The bone of my nose proved to be broken. The idea of carrying my misfortune through life was insupportable. I could see no pleasure in my life. I did not wish to live, and I dared not die, for I was not prepared.” (2SG 9)
  - b. Reflecting upon rejection by playmates because of her disfigurement, she later wrote:
    - (i) “How vain and empty the pleasures of earth looked to me. How changeable the friendship of my young companions. A pretty face, dress, or good looks, are thought much of. But let misfortune take some of these away, and the friendship is broken” (2SG 10, 11).
    - (ii) “As I became able to join in play with my young friends, I

was forced to learn the bitter lesson that our personal appearance often makes a difference in the treatment we received from our companions” (LS 18:4).

4. Recuperation: “I gained strength very slowly” (LS 18:4) . Because she was unable to read or write, Ellen’s teachers advised her to discontinue school until her health should improve. “It was the hardest struggle of my young life to yield to my feebleness, and decide that I must leave my studies, and give up the hope of gaining an education” (LS 19:2).

**B. The Aftermath:**

1. Ellen was never again to be able to resume formal schooling.
  - a. After a later divine healing, she subsequently learned to read without difficulty.
  - b. She amassed a personal library of 800-1,200 volumes during her lifetime.
2. About 50 years after the accident, EGW returned to Portland, Maine, to visit the site of her “misfortune.” Reflectively, she wrote that “which for a time seemed so bitter and was so hard to bear, have proved to be a blessing in disguise. The cruel blow which blighted the joys of earth, was the means of turning my eyes to heaven. I might never have known Jesus, had not the sorrow that clouded my early years led me to seek comfort in Him.” (RH, Nov. 25, 1884; cited in 1 Bio 30, 31)
3. The traumatic results of this accident were to continue, medically, to affect adversely EGW’s health periodically until the time of her death in 1915. Frequently the Lord would temporarily heal her in order for her to continue functioning physically in her calling as a prophet.

**III. As the wife of James Springer White:**

- A. Lineage: JW was born Aug. 4, 1821, at Palmyra, NY, the 5th of nine children.
  1. Father came from pioneer New England stock.
  2. Mother was a granddaughter of Dr. Samuel Shepherd, a prominent New England Baptist clergyman.
- B. Educational Background:

1. As a child, JW suffered from physical disabilities, especially from weak eyesight. As a consequence, he did not attend school until age 19.
2. At St. Albans Academy, he received a Teacher's Certificate, after completing a 12-week course of study and was certified to teach the "common branches" of learning.
3. The next winter he taught school.
4. Later he attended school for another 17-week term, thus bringing his formal education to a total of 29 weeks.

C. Religious Experience:

1. At 15, JW was baptized into the "Christian Connection" denomination.
2. He was profoundly moved by the preaching of William Miller and Joshua V. Himes in eastern Maine, September, 1842.
3. Convicted of the truth of their message, he acquired a prophetic chart, borrowed a horse, and ventured forth to preach on his own.
4. He was eminently successful: in the winter of 1842-43, he led more than 1,000 converts to Christ.
5. In April, 1842, he returned to Palmyra and was ordained to the gospel ministry of his "Christian Connection."

D. Courtship of Ellen Harmon:

1. JW met EH prior to Oct. 22, 1844, at Portland, Maine. Very impressed, he watched her carefully.
2. He became acquainted with her on a trip to Orrington, Maine, where they both went to combat fanaticism.
3. A courtship developed but was allowed to mature only after both had assured themselves that the relationship had God's approval.

E. Marriage to Ellen Harmon:

1. The ceremony was performed by a Justice of the Peace, in Portland, Maine, August 20, 1846.

2. At this time he was 25 years, 1 month of age; she was 18 years, 9 months old.

#### **IV. The Humanity of the Prophet:**

##### **A. A Problem with Timidity:**

1. Her timidity may have been a residual effect from her accident which physically scarred her for life. At age 15, she “had never prayed in public, and had only spoken a few timid words in prayer meeting.” (LS 32:1)
2. At age 17, in her 2nd vision (Dec., 1844), she was commissioned to a public ministry:
  - a. The Lord revealed three things to her:
    - (i) The “great opposition” which she would have to face.
    - (ii) That, from this and other causes, her “heart would be rent with anguish.”
    - (iii) But “the grace of God would be sufficient to sustain [her] through [it] all.” (LS 69:1)
  - b. Her reaction: “I was exceedingly troubled . . . . My heart shrank in terror from the thought.” (LS 69, 70) Reasons why:
    - (i) Poor health: “I was in constant bodily suffering, and to all appearances had but a short time to live.”
    - (ii) “I was only seventeen years of age, small and frail, unused to society, and naturally so timid and retiring that it was painful for me to meet strangers.” “My brother Robert, but two years older than myself, could not accompany me, for he was feeble in health, and his timidity was greater than mine.” (LS 69, 70)
    - (iii) “I was young and timid, and felt great sadness in regard to visiting the field where fanaticism had reigned.” (Letter 2, Aug. 24, 1874, in 8 MR 233)
  - c. To her anguished plea to be released from this call, God instructed her:
    - (i) Her “faith would be tested,” her “courage and obedience tried,” but, nevertheless, she said, “I must go.”
    - (ii) “God would give me words to speak at the right time.”

- (iii) “If I should wait upon Him, and have faith in His promises, I should escape both imprisonment and abuse, for He would restrain those who would do me harm.” “If I would look to God with humble confidence and faith, no man’s hand should be laid upon me to do me harm.”
- (iv) “An angel of heaven would be by my side and direct me when and where to go.” (8 MR 233)
- (v) And God helped her to cope with timidity: “Though I took the stand as a speaker timidly at first, yet as the providence of God opened the way before me, I had confidence to stand before large audiences.” (1T 104:3)

**B. Distress from Family Embarrassment--Meeting Malicious Slander:**

1. During the first years of her public ministry, Ellen Harmon was single; and in that age, unmarried women of good character did not travel unaccompanied without chaperon, lest personal character come under question and suspicion.

a. Her early travel companions included:

- (i) Her elder sister, Sarah
- (ii) Her twin sister, Elizabeth
- (iii) Louisa Foss, a sister-in-law and sister to Hazen and Samuel Foss.
- (iv) James White, her soon-to-be husband (though the two never traveled alone before marriage)
- (v) An Elder and Mrs. Files
- (vi) A Brother Haskins (Letter 2, Aug. 24, 1874, p. 2; cited in 8 MR 230, 231)

2. Even with adequate chaperonage, however, enemies sullied her name and slandered her character.

a. In increasing embarrassment, her family urged her, on one trip, to return home forthwith:

When in my youth God  
opened the Scriptures to my mind,  
giving me light upon the truths of his  
word, I went forth to proclaim to  
others the precious news of  
salvation. My brother wrote to me,

and said, "I beg of you do not disgrace the family. I will do anything for you if you will not go out as a preacher." "Disgrace the family!" I replied, "can it disgrace the family for me to preach Christ and him crucified! If you would give me all the gold your house could hold, I would not cease giving my testimony for God. I have respect unto the recompense of the reward. I will not keep silent, for when God imparts his light to me, he means that I shall diffuse it to others, according to my ability." (ST, June 24, 1889:9, p. 370)

3. Writing to J. N. Loughborough in 1874, EGW reflected upon her early experience:

I rejoice in God that not a spot or blemish can be fastened upon my name or character. We have in all our deportment, before and since our marriage, tried to abstain from even the appearance of evil. But the very ones God has called me to reprove and warn because of their loose morals and for outbreaking sins, have judged me and have been embittered against me because I have exposed their sins, which were covered up. They have sought to make my testimony of no account by their misrepresentations and malicious falsehoods. But I have gone forward trusting in God to vindicate my cause and to sustain me." (Letter 2, Aug. 12, 1874, in 8 MR 231)

**C. Distress from Personal Sensitivity to Feelings of Those Called To Be Rebuked:**

1. When the Lord first gave me messages to deliver to His people, it was hard for me to declare them, and I often softened them down and made them as mild as possible for fear of grieving some. It was a great trial to declare the messages as the Lord gave them to me. I did not realize that I was so unfaithful and

did not see the sin and danger of such a course until in vision I was taken into the presence of Jesus. He looked upon me with a frown and turned His face from me. It is not possible to describe the terror and agony I then felt.” (EW 76:2)

2. God gave her revelations as He had given to no other person then alive. (2T 607, 608)
3. Much of her work required giving reproof to fellow church members. (5T 679)
  - a. She had to bear plain and pointed testimonies. (5T 678)
  - b. She reproved the secret, private sins of others. (1 SM 52; 3T 324; 5T 65, 671)
    - (i) It was a distasteful, disagreeable task for her. (LS 90, 117; 1T 73, 74, 569, 585; 5T 19, 20, 656, 657, 678, 679).
    - (ii) She dreaded it. (1T 63, 64)
  - c. It was a work that few would or could appreciate. (4T 232)
  - d. To one so reproved, she said, frankly, that she felt she had not spoken or written too plainly; and because the message was God’s, not hers, she did not regret or take back any of her plain pronouncements. (5T 19, 6776)
4. However, much of her ministry was such a continuing emotionally stressful situation, that she wrote to J. N. Loughborough, in the course of correcting a false report against her:

It is utterly false that I have ever intimated I could have a vision when I pleased. There is not a shade of truth in this. I have never said I could throw myself into visions when I pleased, for this is simply impossible.

I have felt for years that if I could have my choice and please God as well, I would rather die than have a vision, for every vision places me under great responsibility to bear testimonies of reproof and of warning, which has ever been against my feelings, causing an affliction of soul which is inexpressible. Never have I coveted my position, and yet I dare not resist the Spirit of God and seek an easier position.”

(Letter 2, Aug. 24, 1874, p. 2; cited in 8 MR 238, 239)

**D. Acute Privation in the White Home in Early Days of Marriage:**

1. In the earliest days there was the necessity of living in the homes of others--family and fellow believers--because of obligatory travel for the cause of God.
  - a. The first year of their married life (1846-47) James and Ellen lived in the home of the Harmon in-laws, briefly at Portland, Maine, and then at Gorham, Maine.
  - b. In October, 1847, they were invited to take Henry, their son of a few weeks old, to Topsham, Maine, to set up housekeeping in the second-floor rooms of the Stockbridge Howland family. Later the Howlands kept little Henry with them while James and Ellen engaged in an itinerant ministry. They started housekeeping with borrowed furniture, but determined to be financially independent.
    - (i) JW worked very hard hauling stone for a railroad, but could not collect his pay after the work was done.
    - (ii) He then took his axe into the woods to chop cordwood. Working from sunrise to sunset, "with a continual pain in his side," he earned 50 cents a day, the daily average wage of a common laborer in the USA in the 1840's.
  - c. In relating a vision concerning them, Ellen wrote, "I was shown that the Lord had been trying us for our good, and to prepare us to labor for others; that He had been stirring up our nest, lest we should settle down at ease. Our work was to labor for souls; if we had been prospered, home would be so pleasant that we would be unwilling to leave it; trials had been permitted to come upon us to prepare us for the still greater conflicts that we would meet in our travels." (LS 105, 106)
  - d. Upon another occasion JW and two others hand-mowed 100 acres of hay with a scythe for 87.5 cents per acre, to meet travel costs, but this would largely bring to an end his efforts to earn funds for travel expense through secular employment (LS 109). The Whites did non-stop traveling for the next several years. (SDAE [1976]: 1599)
2. Speaking of the privation and poverty of those earliest years of service, EGW wrote:

We entered upon our work penniless, with few friends, and broken in health. My husband had inherited a powerful constitution, but his health had been seriously impaired by close application to study at school and in lecturing. I had suffered ill-health from a child, as I have related. In this condition, without means, with very few who sympathized with us in our views, without a paper, and without books, we entered upon our work. We had no houses of worship at that time. And the idea of using a tent had not then occurred to us. Most of our meetings were held in private houses. Our congregations were small. It was seldom that any came into our meetings excepting Adventists, unless they were attracted by curiosity to hear a woman speak.

At first I moved out timidly in the work of public speaking. If I had confidence, it was given me by the Holy Spirit. If I spoke with freedom and power, it was given me of God. Our meetings were usually conducted in such a manner that both of us took part. My husband would give a doctrinal discourse, then I would follow with an exhortation of considerable length, melting my way into the feelings of the congregation. Thus my husband sowed and I watered the seed of truth, and God did give the increase. (1 T 75:2, 3)

3. Even after the move to Rochester, NY, in April, 1852, Ellen told of being “crippled by poverty, and compelled to exercise the most rigid economy and self-denial,” in a letter written six years later and dated April 16, 1858:

We are just getting settled in Rochester. We have rented an old house for one hundred and seventy-five dollars a year. We have the press in the house. Were it not for this, we should have to pay fifty dollars a year for office room. You would smile could you look in upon us and see our furniture. We have bought two old bedsteads for twenty-five cents each. My husband brought me home six old chairs, no two of them alike, for which he paid one dollar, and soon he presented me with four more old chairs without any seating, for which

he paid sixty-two cents. The frames are strong, and I have been seating them with drilling. Butter is so high that we do not purchase it, neither can we afford potatoes. We use sauce in the place of butter, and turnips for potatoes. Our first meals were taken on a fireboard placed upon two empty flour barrels. We are willing to endure privations if the work of God can be advanced. We believe the Lord's hand was in our coming to this place. There is a large field for labor, but few laborers. Last Sabbath our meeting was excellent. The Lord refreshed us with His presence." (LS 142:2)

Because the daily diet consisted largely of beans and porridge, bachelor-boarder Uriah Smith, after having lived with the family a few weeks, remarked to a comrade that he had no philosophical objection to eating beans 365 times in succession, yet when it came to making them a regular diet, he should protest. (RH, June 13, 1935, p. 10; cited in Eugene F. Durand, *Yours in the Blessed Hope, Uriah Smith* [RH, 1980])

4. Things did not improve materially very much, even with the move to Battle Creek in 1855. Wrote Ellen 12 years later in a "Sketch of Experience," Dec. 19, 1866-April 25, 1867:

For fifteen months my husband had been so feeble that he had not carried his watch or purse, or driven his own team when riding out. But with the present year he had taken his watch and purse, the latter empty in consequence of our great expenses, and had driven his own team. He had, during his sickness, refused at different times to accept money from his brethren to the amount of nearly one thousand dollars, telling them that when he was in want he would let them know it. We were at last brought to want. My husband felt it his duty, before becoming dependent, to first sell what we could spare. He had some few things at the office, and scattered among the brethren in Battle Creek, of little value, which he collected and sold. We disposed of nearly one hundred and fifty dollars worth of furniture. My husband tried to sell our sofa for the meetinghouse, offering to give ten dollars of its value, but could not. At this time our

only and very valuable cow died. My husband then for the first time felt that he could receive help, and addressed a note to a brother, stating that if the church would esteem it a pleasure to make up the loss of the cow they might do so. But nothing was done about it only to charge my husband with being insane on the subject of money. The brethren knew him well enough to know that he would never ask for help unless driven to it by stern necessity. And now that he had done it, judge of his feelings and mine when no notice was taken of the matter only to use it to wound us in our want and deep affliction. (1T 582, 583)

**E. Nursing an Invalid Husband (1865-67):**

1. Never in robust health, James White had serious medical problems throughout his lifetime.
  - a. Stricken with paralysis on Aug. 16, 1865, he was incapacitated for the next 15 months. (1T 105)
  - b. He was hospitalized (Sept. 14-Dec. 7) at “Our Home on the Hillside,” a health reform institution operated by Dr. James C. Jackson, at Dansville, NY. (J. N. Loughborough, *Great Second Advent Movement*, p. 380)
    - (i) Dr. Jackson emphasized the idea of obedience to natural law, opposed tobacco and alcohol, favored natural remedies such as hydrotherapy (“water cure”), and linked healthful living with Christian morality. (George W. Reid, *A Sound of Trumpets*, pp. 81. 82)
    - (ii) Unfortunately, Jackson was also a promoter of some very extreme practices, which EGW was shown in vision to be not only false but dangerous to recovery of health:
      - (a) Certain amusements were held to be beneficial to the regaining of health: dancing, card-playing, theater-going, etc., and were a part of his regiment for healing.
      - (b) Salt was viewed as a poison, and its use was forbidden totally.

- (c) Patients were required to observe total bed rest--complete physical and mental inaction, no exercise whatever. (Dores E. Robinson, *The Story of Our Health Message*, pp. 135-39)
  - (iii) God instructed her to remove her husband from “Our Home.”
- c. En route to Battle Creek, the Whites spent three weeks at Rochester, NY, 45 Miles from Dansville, where many of the believers joined various prayer groups to petition God for JW’s recovery.
  - (i) On Christmas Day, 1865, morning and afternoon services of special prayer were held on his behalf in the local church.
  - (ii) Christmas night EGW received a vision during a prayer session in which she was shown the SDAs had not done enough to promote health reform and should establish an institution with a twofold task:
    - (a) To promote proper cures for healing of those already ill.
    - (b) To preach prevention of illness through proper diet and other reforms. The founding of the Western Health Reform Institute (later renamed the Battle Creek Sanitarium) was a direct result of that vision. (SHM, pp. 139-142)
  - (iii) In reporting on JW’s healing, EGW wrote, “Satan’s purpose was to destroy my husband, and bring him down to the grave. Through these earnest prayers his power has been broken. I have been shown that Satan is angry with this company who have continued for three weeks praying earnestly in behalf of this servant of God, and he is now determined to make a powerful attack on them. I was told to say that you ‘Live near to God, that you may be prepared for what may come upon you.’”

Within a few months of that Christmas evening prophecy, “six of the nine who engaged in that three weeks of prayer were in their graves,” one of them (J. T. Orton) a murder victim. (GSAM, pp. 380-82)

- (iv) Although JW recovered from this stroke, he experienced a total of three strokes before his death 16 years later, in 1881, at the age of 60. (LS 248, 249)
2. To hasten his convalescence from the 1st stroke, the Whites sold their home in Battle Creek and relocated on a small farm purchased at Greenville, MI, where EGW nursed her husband back to health during 1866-67. (3T 18)
- a. During this time they began very limited pulpit work in the summer of 1867. (1T 592-600, 605, 675; LS 173-75)
  - b. On week days JW was most reluctant to engage in any exercise because he had been converted to Dr. Jackson's erroneous theory of total mental and physical inaction in the recovery of health. In the spring and summer of 1867, Ellen and son Willie planted, hoed, and pruned on their new farm in Greenville; and slowly JW began to show an interest and joined in the activity in a limited way.
  - c. At haying time JW figured that surely his neighbors would come to assist an invalid; but EGW forestalled this in advance by privately contacting each one, requesting that each contrive an excuse for non-participation at harvest time.
    - (i) JW was livid, incredulous, when he learned that none of his neighbors would assist in bringing in their hay.
    - (ii) EGW cheerfully but resolutely said, "'We can do it ourselves: Let us show the neighbors that we can attend to the work ourselves. Willie and I will rake the hay and pitch it on the wagon if you will load it and drive the team.' To this he consented, but how could they make the stack? The farm was new, and they had no barn. Mrs. White volunteered to build the stack if her husband would pitch up the hay, while Willie should be raking for another load. Thus the hay was gathered and stacked, and with great pleasure they surveyed the result of their labor." (*Life Sketches of Elder James White and Mrs. Ellen G. White* (edition of 1888), p. 357; Cited in SHM, p. 162)
3. Subsequently, EGW would have a lot to say about the importance of physical exertion in the recovery of health. (1T 554-56)

**F. Rejection by the Battle Creek Church Members:**

1. By March, 1867, after an extended absence from Battle Creek, EGW began to receive letters in Greenville “of a discouraging character” from some of the members of the Battle Creek Church. She agonized, “For three nights I scarcely slept at all. My thoughts were troubled and perplexed.” (1T 576; cf. LS 175)
2. Her prayers “came from a heart wrung with anguish, and . . . were broken and disconnected because of uncontrollable grief. The blood rushed to my brain, frequently causing me to reel and nearly fall. I had the nosebleed often, especially after making an effort to write. I was compelled to lay aside my writing, but could not throw off the burden of anxiety and responsibility upon me, as I realized that I had testimonies for others which I was unable to present.” (1T 577)
3. In this emotionally distressed state, JW and EGW returned to Battle Creek, only to discover that during their absence of the past three months the attitudes of many of the members there had totally turned against them:
  - a. “My husband was terribly disappointed at the cold reception which he met at Battle Creek, and I also was grieved . . . I came home to Battle Creek like a weary child who needed comforting words and encouragement. It is painful for me here to state that we were received with great coldness by our brethren, from whom three months before, I had parted in perfect union, excepting on the point of our leaving home.” (1T 579)
  - b. “At Battle Creek we met reports which had been put in circulation to injure us, but which had no foundation in truth . . . . We found a strong accusing spirit against us . . . . We felt homesick. We were so disappointed and distressed . . . . I did not feel at home, as we met distrust and positive coldness instead of welcome and encouragement.” (1T 580)
  - c. “Grieved in spirit beyond measure, I remained at home, dreading to go anywhere among the church for fear of being wounded. Finally, as no one made an effort to relieve my feelings, I felt it to be my duty to call together a number of experienced brethren and sisters, and meet the reports which were circulating in regard us. Weighed down and depressed, even to anguish, I met the charges against me . . . .”(1T 580, 581)

**G. Interpersonal Problems with Husband James:**

1. There were problems between JW and EGW over differences of opinion concerning the handling of son Edson, who had serious **problems** in

developing fiscal responsibility:

- a. James took a very stern, “tough love” attitude, refusing to bail Edson out from the consequences of his spendthrift ways.
- b. Ellen, however, took a more tender, lenient, conciliatory attitude, which caused James to explode. On one occasion the manager of the Pacific Press asked JW for a recommendation with regard to filling a vacancy of shop foreman (Edson was then working in the plant). James replied, “Anyone but Edson.” Edson learned of this “poor-mouthing” by his father, resented it, and a wedge was driven between them. (Robinson, *James White*, pp. 261-63; Letter 5, 1880)

2. There were, inevitably, problems caused by the deterioration of JW’s condition because of his three strokes:

- a. James (as often happens to victims of stroke) eventually experienced a complete metamorphosis of character and personality:
  - (i) He became abusive and domineering, trying to tell EGW how to run her life, her church, and her own prophetic ministry.
  - (ii) In a letter to her girlfriend, Lucinda Hall, Ellen wrote of James’ abusive language toward her:

I shall use the old  
head God gave me until He  
reveals that I am wrong.  
Your head won’t fit on my  
shoulders. Keep it where it  
belongs, and I will try to  
honor God in using my own.  
I shall be glad to hear from  
you, but don’t waste your  
precious time and strength in  
lecturing me on matters of  
mere opinion.” (Lt. 66, May  
16, 1876; cited in Ron  
Graybill PhD dissertation, p.  
41)

- (iii) EGW’s response to James was an apology.

- (iv) The next day she wrote a follow-up letter to Lucinda, requesting her to burn the letter of May 16th. (Lt. 67, May 17, 1876) It is a good thing Lucinda did not burn the letter as requested, or we today should have no knowledge of this traumatic experience through which EGW passed five years before her husband's death of another stroke.
- (v) This letter is significant, also, because it clearly shows that:
  - (a) James recognized and accepted his wife's inspiration.
  - (b) Neither was manipulating the other.
  - (c) As a result, Ellen had, increasingly, physically to distance herself from his presence, one traveling and working in one place for the church, while the other served in another. (Letters 5 and 22 in 1876; 5, 28-30, and 33 in 1880; Robinson, p. 263)

- 3. And there was her grief at her own personal shortcomings, often pathetically expressed to her husband in periodic attempts at reconciliation.

#### **H. Her Prophetic Ministry to Her Husband:**

- 1. James White was a perfectionistic workaholic, and he held very uncharitable and unchristian opinions and attitudes toward his critics within the church.
- 2. It was inevitable that divine reproof must be given even to one's husband especially since he, at times, served as General conference president, and held other high leadership roles within the church.
  - a. It was equally inevitable that some of this counsel would find its way into public print, delineating his "sins" and shortcomings for all to see.
  - b. His response often irascible was equally predictable. Concludes one biographer:

In his own personal experience there were times when White was reproved and corrected by the counsels of his wife. He valued highly these messages, which brought safe guidance. Nevertheless, at times, when he was reproved for a course of action that to him appeared to be proper

and right, he at first was restive. However, a prayerful approach brought him to accept the counsel. A knowledge of his allegiance to the counsels instilled confidence in the hearts of the people. (SDAE [1976]: 1604)

## **I. Widowhood and Aftermath (1881-1915):**

- A. Ellen's last trip with James and its heart-breaking aftermath is touchingly recounted in her autobiography:

Little did I think, as we traveled on, that this was the last journey we would ever make together. The weather changed suddenly from oppressive heat to chilling cold. My husband took cold, but thought his health so good that he would receive no permanent injury. He labored in the meetings at Charlotte, presenting the truth with great clearness and power. He spoke of the pleasure he felt in addressing a people who manifested so deep an interest in the subjects most dear to him. "The Lord has indeed refreshed my soul," he said, "while I have been breaking to others the bread of life. All over Michigan the people are calling eagerly for help. How I long to comfort, encourage, and strengthen them with the precious truths applicable to this time!"

On our return home, my husband complained of slight indisposition, yet he engaged in his work as usual. Every morning we visited the grove near our home, and united in prayer. We were anxious to know our duty. Letters were continually coming in from different places, urging us to attend the camp meetings. Notwithstanding our determination to devote ourselves to writing, it was hard to refuse to meet with our brethren in these important gatherings. We earnestly pleaded for wisdom to know the right course.

Sabbath morning, as usual, we went to the grove together, and my husband prayed most fervently three times. He seemed reluctant to cease pleading with God for special guidance and blessing. His prayers were heard, and peace and

light came to our hearts. He praised the Lord, and said: “Now I give it all up to Jesus. I feel a sweet, heavenly peace, an assurance that the Lord will show us our duty; for we desire to do His will.” He accompanied me to the Tabernacle, and opened the services with singing and prayer. It was the last time he was ever to stand by my side in the pulpit. (1T 108, 109)

B. Her initial grief at his passing, on Aug. 6, 1881, at age 60 years, subsequent loneliness, and indomitable determination to press on alone to finish her task, are all revealed in starkly pathetic terms in her subsequent writing:

1. “His sympathy and prayers and tears I have missed so much, so very much. No one can understand this as myself. But my work has to be done.” (Ms 227, 1902, cited in 3SM 67)
2. Five weeks after James’ death, Ellen sought a little rest and retirement in a cabin they had formerly shared as a retreat in the Rocky Mountains. There she poured out her heart to her son, Willie:

I miss Father more and more. Especially do I feel his loss while here in the mountains. I find it a very different thing being in the mountains with my husband and in the mountains without him. I am fully of the opinion that my life was so entwined or interwoven with my husband’s that it is about impossible for me to be of any great account without him.” (Letter 17, Sept. 12, 1881; cited in Robinson, p. 260)

3. Extracts from a number of EGW’s letters to “The Bereaved” have been gathered together in Chapter 27 (pp. 257-69) of *Selected Messages*, Book Two, and in seeking “to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God” (2 Cor. 1:4), Ellen repeatedly reveals the depth of her own brokenness in the loss of her husband of more than three decades.

C. Ellen’s marriage to James extended over 36 years, almost exactly half of her total 70 years of ministry.

1. Prospect of remarriage:

- a. Stephen N. Haskell, a trusted friend and close colleague in her ministry (and the one who received more letters from EGW than any other person in the church apart from the immediate members of the White family), was widowed in 1894.
- b. Two years later he sailed to Australia, spending the rest of that decade there, again in close association with EGW. He returned to the USA in 1899, EGW in 1900.
- c. In Australia, Stephen reportedly asked Ellen to become his wife. Ellen, ever conscious of her duty to God, and yet keenly sensitive to the inmost feelings of an old family friend, gently declined, reportedly giving two reasons:
  - (i) I don't want you to have to share and suffer the criticisms and accusations which continue to fall upon me, in my daily ministry to others.
  - (ii) I have been shown that I must continue to sign my letters: "Ellen G. White."
  - (iii) But, practical woman that she was, she told Haskell that he needed a wife and that she would assist him in picking one out. In Feb., 1897, Haskell wedded Hetty Hurd, a missionary and trainer of Bible instructors in Australia at the time.

2. Views regarding remarriage

In 1902 she wrote:

Since twenty-one years ago, when I was deprived of my husband by death, I have not had the slightest idea of ever marrying again. Why? Not because God forbade it. No. But to stand alone was best for me, that no one should suffer with me in carrying forward my work entrusted to me of God. And no one should have a right to influence me in any way in reference to my responsibility and my work in bearing my testimony of encouragement and reproof. (Ms. 227, 1902; cited in 3 SM 66, 67)

**V. As a Mother:**

**A. Four Sons of EGW:**

- 1. **Henry** (1847-63), the firstborn, died prematurely at 16 years of age, of

pneumonia.

2. **James Edson** (1849-1928), who throughout his lifetime was known by his middle name, became a minister, printer, and a missionary to former African-American slaves in the southern United States (often at great personal endangerment from violence at the hands of angry plantation owners). He sailed his *Morning Star* up and down the Mississippi River and upon other southern waterways.
3. **William Clarence** (1854-1937), known affectionately to all in the church as “Willie,” not only became a minister, but after his father’s decease he served as counselor, business manager, and traveling companion to his mother, a task to which God had especially called him.
4. **John Herbert** (1860) died at age two and one-half months, from erysipelas.

#### **B. Leaving Her Children in the Care of Others:**

1. EGW, in her ministry, spent a great deal of her life in travel at the expressed direction of the Holy Spirit. However, hers was a unique calling and therefore her life was not the pattern upon which to model an ideal family life.
2. She frequently counseled mothers to spend much time with their children, especially in the early years, a condition contradicted by her own experience in being obliged to leave her children in the care of others while she went about doing the Lord’s will and work.
3. Though required of God to endure extended separation from her small children, Ellen, nevertheless, did not enjoy this deprivation, and once wrote:

Maternal love throbbed just as strongly in my heart as in the heart of any mother than lived, yet I had separated from my nursing children and allowed another to act the part of mother to them. (1T 581:1 cf. pp. 101, 102; LS 106, 107, 165)

#### **C. As a Surrogate Mother:**

Ellen White kept orphans in her own home, from time to time, although she did not legally adopt any into her family; and she recommended this practice to the

church at large. (WM 221, 222; 1SM 34; AH 160; CG 125, 126)

**D. Home Life with the Whites:**

1. Ellen’s extended family often numbered 16 persons. (1T 102; CD 488)
2. In addition to *The Adventist Home and Child Guidance*, for a representative sampling of her counsels on home life:
  - a. Discipline (1T 102)
  - b. The importance of the absence of dissention and words of impatience (Ev 102, 103)
  - c. Methods of amusing children (AH 528)
  - d. Importance of cultivating a solid reading taste in children (SD 178)
  - e. Experiences in child-training (CG 249, 253-55; 2SG 212)

**VI. Was Prophet Ellen White “Perfect”?**

- A. Ellen White wrote in 1895, “In regard to infallibility, I never claimed it; God alone is infallible.” (Letter 10, 1895; cited in 1SM 37:4). She was not perfect. Neither were any of the other prophets. All prophets were human, and, therefore, prone to error, for “everything that is human is imperfect.” (1SM 20:2)
- B. Four categories of imperfections are (a) Literary imperfections, (b) prophetic mistakes, (c) character flaws and (d) personality defects.

**1. Literary Imperfections:**

- a. Technical: The original draft of any Ellen White manuscript was likely to be filled with errors in spelling, grammar, redundancy, all of which required substantial editing before publication.
- b. This is not surprising in view of the fact that she never completed the first four years of formal elementary school-level training.
- c. Over the years of her ministry, she hired salaried literary assistants who aided her in making the necessary corrections. They were, however, forbidden to change the meaning of anything she wrote, to write original material, or to add any new ideas not in her original draft.
- d. Content Details: Minor discrepancies in factual data appeared in her manuscripts--and, sometimes, even in the final published versions of her writings. This was also the case with the writings of the Biblical prophets.

## 2. **Prophetic Mistakes:**

EGW had two “problem” categories:

- a. Unfulfilled prophecies
- b. Giving wrong counsel, by word and by pen.

## 3. **Character Flaws:**

- a. **Deviousness:** Some would cite the incident in which EGW went behind her husband’s back, to persuade surrounding farmers not to assist in bringing in the hay of their invalid neighbor on the White farm, in order to force her husband back into physical manual labor for his health’s sake. This was disingenuous, if not devious.
- b. **Sarcasm:** EGW, upon more than one occasion, descended to sarcasm, which is not a noble characteristic of a true Christian spirit, to “put down” something she and the Lord opposed:
  - (i) In referring to General Conference President George I. Butler’s 10-part, six-month series of RH articles advocating “degrees of inspiration,” published between January and June of 1884, she wrote: “The Lord did not inspire the articles on inspiration.” (1SM 12:1).
  - (ii) In referring to the false, counterfeit “gift of tongues,” she characterized this as “unmeaning gibberish which they call the unknown tongue,” saying that it is not only “unknown . . . by man, but [it is also unknown] by the Lord and all heaven” as well (1T 412:1). Six pages later, she prayed, “May God deliver His people from such gifts.” (1T 418:2)

## 4. **Personality Defects:**

- a. Writing to her husband, James, on May 16, 1876, five years before his death, Ellen apologized for personal feelings which she herself characterized as “wrong”:

It grieves me that I have said or written anything to grieve you. Forgive me and I will be cautious not to start any subject to annoy and distress you. We are living in a most solemn time and we cannot afford to

have in our old age differences to separate our feelings.

It may not view all things as you do, but I do not think it would be my place or duty to try to make you see and feel as I feel. Wherein I have done this, I am sorry. I want a humble heart, a meek and quiet spirit. Wherein my feelings have been permitted to arise in any instance, it was wrong.

I wish that self should be hid in Jesus. I wish self to be crucified. I do not claim infallibility, or even perfection of Christian character. I am not free from mistakes and errors in my life. Had I followed my Savior more closely, I should not have had to mourn so much my unlikeness to His dear image.” (Letter 27, 1876; cited in Graybill Ph. D. dissertation, p. 41)

- b. Writing in her diary on March 31, 1868, she confided:

I have not felt and spoken as I ought to James. The burden of writing and other extra labors borne for the church have told upon me seriously. I feel that the enemy is getting advantage of me. I acknowledged to my husband I had erred.” (Ms. 14, 1868; cited in *I'd Like to Ask Sister White*, p. 45)

- c. In a letter to husband on March 18, 1880, a year before his death, she confessed:

I feel every day like deeply repenting before God for my hardness of heart, and because my life has not been more in accordance with the life of Christ. I weep over my own hardness of heart, my life which has not been a correct

example to others . . . . Forgive me for any words of impatience that have escaped my lips, every seeming act of wrong in your sight. I mean to make straight paths for my feet and to have control over my own spirit, to keep my own heart in the love of God, and make sure work for eternity.” (Letter 5, 1880; cited in 11 MR 27)

- d. In 1886 she wrote an appeal:

May God help us to have a sense of our own shortcomings, and put away the criticism and severity which we have woven into our characters . . . Oh, how wearied Christ must be with our stupidity, our disobedience, our oft rebellion, and yet He does not give us up.” (Letter 19, 1886)

### **Conclusion:**

1. The prophet, while supernaturally given revelation by God, through means not available to non-prophets, and while experiencing supernatural physical phenomena in this process of “inspiration,” is still a basic human being, who functions in most ways like every other of his/her peers. He/She makes mistakes, sins, and must seek forgiveness of God.
2. There is some truth in the belief that the prophet is a “child of his times” and is thus materially influenced by them.
  - a. Evangelicals, however, would deny that the prophet is the hapless, helpless, hopeless captive victim of his environmental times.
  - b. There is no evidence to the contrary that the prophets are able to transcend and rise above their times in significant ways, through the direct interposition of the Holy Spirit.
3. Arthur L. White relates a very moving story about his grandmother who steadfastly refused to be a criterion for any other Christian’s experience with the Lord:

A new housekeeper and nurse had come to the White home. She was a

woman in her twenties, and as she crossed the continent to enter Mrs. White's employ, she contemplated, "I am going to the home of the prophet. How will it be?" The evening of the first day Mrs. white and the new housekeeper were thrown together for a time, and after quite a silence, Mrs. white spoke, pausing between each sentence;

Sister Nelson, you have come into my home. You are to be a member of my family. You may see some things in me that you do not approve of. You may see things in my son Willie you do not approve of. I may make mistakes, and my son Willie may make mistakes. I may be lost at last, and my son Willie may be lost.

But the dear Lord has a remnant people that will be saved and go through to the Kingdom, and it remains with each of us as individuals whether or not we will be one of that number.

As related to the author in 1939, by Mrs. M. J. Nelson.

*Messenger to the Remnant*, p. 127

4. Ellen White may perhaps be best summed up in the words of a high church leader who knew her and worked closely with her for most of his ministerial career in the United States and Australia. Wrote Arthur G. Daniells, president of the General Conference. (1901-22), in the conclusion of a major work dealing with *The Abiding Gift of Prophecy* (Pacific Press, 1936)

In this present year of our Lord 1935, Mrs. White has been at rest twenty years, while I have been toiling on. I had had twenty-three years of direct observation of her lifework. Since her death I have now had twenty additional years for thoughtful reflection and study of that life and its fruits. Now, at an advanced age, with the constraint of expressing only sober, honest truth, I can say that it is my deep conviction that Mrs. White's life far transcends the life of anyone I have ever known or with whom I have been associated. She was uniformly pleasant, cheerful, and courageous. She was never careless, flippant, or in any way cheap in conversation or manner of life. She was the personification of serious earnestness regarding the things of the kingdom. I never once heard her boast of the gracious gift God had bestowed upon her, or of the marvelous results of her endeavors. She did rejoice in the fruitage, but gave all the glory to Him who wrought through her.

I realize that these are grave statements, but they come from the deepest conviction and soundest judgment that I am capable of rendering. They are uttered in the sobering atmosphere of my last illness, as I face the Judge of all the earth, before whose presence I realize that I soon shall stand. (Page 368)