

Did Ellen White Contradict Herself on Thought Inspiration?

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Based on her statements in *Selected Messages*, vol. 1, page 21, Ellen White clearly articulated the view of plenary-thought inspiration: “It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man’s words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts.” On two occasions, however, she used the word “dictated” in describing the biblical writers. Furthermore, she used the phrase “inspired words” when referring to the Bible. Is this a contradiction? First, I will analyze two key statements and then discuss her use of the phrase “inspired words.”

The two key statements:

Statement A:

“He who is the father of lies, blinds and deceives the world by sending his angels forth to speak for the apostles, and make it appear that they contradict what they wrote when on earth, which was *dictated by the Holy Ghost*” (*Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1, 176).

Statement B:

“The lives recorded in the Bible are authentic histories of actual individuals. From Adam down through successive generations to the time of the apostles, we have a plain, unvarnished account of what actually occurred, and the genuine experience of real characters. It is a subject of wonder to many, that inspired history should narrate facts in the lives of good men that tarnish their moral characters. Infidels seize upon these sins with great satisfaction, and hold their perpetrators up to ridicule. The inspired writers did not testify to falsehoods, through fear that the pages of Sacred History would be clouded by the record of human frailties and faults. *The scribes of God wrote as they were dictated by the Holy Spirit, having no control of the work themselves.* They penned the literal truth, and stern, forbidding facts are revealed, for reasons that our finite minds cannot fully comprehend. It is one of the best evidences of the authenticity of the Scriptures, that the truth is not glossed over, nor the sins of its chief characters suppressed” (RH, January 22, 1880; compare with *Testimonies*, vol. 4, 9).

This is a legitimate issue based on the use of the word “dictated” in these two statements. A detailed analysis is certainly in order:

1. Background:

At the 1883 General Conference Session the church voted to formally embrace the view

of thought inspiration (*Review and Herald*, Nov. 27, 1883). As such, the church is on record as espousing this view of inspiration. Ellen White and her son, Willie, had been promoting this position and were influential in the action. In 1884 G. I. Butler, General Conference president at the time, wrote a series of articles in the *Review and Herald* (January 8 through June 3, 1884), in which he proposed “degrees of inspiration” in the Bible. Ellen White reacted negatively to this concept and responded in a series of formal writings on the subject: 1886 (*Selected Messages*, vol 1, 19-21); 1888 (*The Great Controversy*, v-xii); 1888 (*Selected Messages*, vol. 1, 15-18; and 1889 (*Testimonies*, vol. 5, 698-711). In these writings she clearly articulates the concept of plenary-thought inspiration in which all of the Bible is equally inspired and authoritative.

Statement B was first penned in 1876 (4T 9) and later edited and republished in the *Review and Herald*, on January 22, 1880. It is thus in close proximity to the 1883 vote by the General Conference. Statement A, however, is much earlier, since *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 1, was published in 1858.

2. Ellen White’s personal experience:

Based on the nature of Ellen White’s method of publishing early visions (presupposing that she was truly inspired), verbal dictation did not fit her experience, and it is hard to imagine that she ever believed such a view. For example, she received her first vision in December, 1844, but did not publish it until 1846 (“Letter from Sister Harmon,” *Day-Star*, Jan. 24, 1846, pp. 31-32; and a broadside). This version was **edited** by her husband, James, and republished in *A Word to the Little Flock* (1847). Other visions were initially published in the periodical *Present Truth* (1849-1850) and also **edited** and later republished. Ellen’s first book, *A Sketch of the Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White* (1851), was comprised of the **edited** versions of these early visions. The wording was changed, sentences were deleted (origin of the suppression charge), and so forth, but the thoughts remained the same. This editing of her writings continued throughout her 70-year prophetic ministry, illustrated most pointedly in the expanding versions of her 1858 Great Controversy vision. She endeavored to improve the expression of the thought with each new edition. **Thus, Ellen White’s own experience of the prophetic gift reflected thought inspiration, not verbal dictation.**

On one occasion, however, she did acknowledge being led to words when she was puzzled about how best to express her thought (Lt. 127, 1902). Receiving specific words on occasion, therefore, was not out of the purview of her experience and understanding of inspiration. But in general her experience was far from a word-for-word-dictation view of inspiration.

When she formally articulated her understanding of inspiration in 1886, she expressed what she already knew from studying Scripture and from personal experience.

In light of this experience, did she contradict herself in statements A and B by using the

word “dictated” when referring to the Bible?

3. Meaning of the word “dictate”:

The word “dictate” carries more than one meaning. Which meaning did Ellen White intend in Statements A and B? Did she mean the Holy Spirit *dictated the actual words* to the biblical writers in the same way a letter is dictated? Or did she mean the Holy Spirit controlled and *directed the biblical writers* as they wrote the Scriptures? There is a difference and both ideas are included in the root meaning of this word. Notice a contemporary definition of “dictate”:

1. To say or read aloud to be recorded or written by another: *dictate a letter*. 2. To prescribe with authority; impose: *dictated the rules of the game*. To control or command: “Foreign leaders were . . . dictated by their own circumstances, bound by the universal imperatives of politics” (Doris Kearns Goodwin). From <http://www.answers.com>.

The question we must ask is, What did the word mean in Ellen White’s day? Noah Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* was very influential in the nineteenth century and continues to influence Christians today. The distinguishing feature of this dictionary is Webster’s use of the Bible as a foundation for his definitions, which makes it a most useful dictionary for understanding the wording of the King James Version of the Bible. As such, this particular dictionary is very helpful in understanding much of Ellen White’s wording as a nineteenth-century writer on religious topics. In fact, the Ellen G. White writings on CD ROM have a copy of Webster’s 1828 dictionary. Below is Webster’s definition of the word “dictate”:

v. t. [L., to speak.] 1. To tell with authority; to deliver, as an order, command, or direction; as, what God has dictated, it is our duty to believe. 2. To order or instruct what is to be said or written; as, a general dictates orders to his troops. 3. To suggest; to admonish; to direct by impulse on the mind. We say, the spirit of God dictated the messages of the prophets to Israel. Conscience often dictates to men the rules by which they are to govern their conduct.

Notice the primary meaning of the word is (1) to “tell with authority; to deliver an order, command, or direction.” Of significance is Webster’s example here: “as, what God has dictated [or commanded], it is our duty to believe.” Next comes “to order or instruct what is to be said or written.” This number (2) usage is the closest to what we understand today as word-for-word dictation. Most importantly, in the number (3) usage, Webster gives the theological meaning of the term: to “suggest; to admonish; to direct by impulse of the mind.” This, he says, is how “the spirit of God dictated the messages to the prophets of Israel.” Notice he did not say “dictated the words” but “dictated the messages.” Thus, Webster defines the word in its theological sense more as “to direct by impulse of the mind.” Significantly, he defines “impulse” as an “influence acting on the mind,” an “impression,” a “supposed supernatural influence on the mind.” This is quite different

from the idea of a *mechanical control* over every word that is written.

Ellen White's two statements can be read grammatically with Webster's first and third sense ("dictated" is used both times as an intransitive verb with the prepositional phrase "by the Holy Spirit" functioning in the adverbial sense, which suggests the following reading):

Statement A: "He who is the father of lies, blinds and deceives the world by sending his angels forth to speak for the apostles, and make it appear that they contradict what they wrote when on earth, which was *dictated [directed]* by the Holy Ghost."

Statement B: "The scribes of God wrote as they were *dictated [directed]* by the Holy Spirit, having no control of the work themselves."

Have I read something into these statements that is not there? Read on.

4. Larger context:

It is important to note that of the 55 times Ellen White uses the word "dictated," she uses it mostly in the sense of "control" or "direct" (the same is true of the root "dictate"; see the EGW CD ROM). For example, in two places she uses the words interchangeably: "You are unwilling to be dictated to or directed," (2T 165) and "Love is a pure and holy principle; but lustful passion will not admit of restraint, and will not be dictated to or controlled by reason" (2T 475). She does, however, write that Paul "dictated" to his scribe for Timothy (AA 499) and that Jeremiah "dictated" all of "the words of the Lord, which the Lord had spoken to him" to his scribe, Baruch (PK 432). But in neither of these rare instances is she suggesting that the entire Bible was dictated word for word from God. **Thus, Ellen White's overall usage of the word "dictated" reflects Webster's sense of "direct," "control," or to "tell with authority."**

What about the specific wording in statements A and B?

5. Detailed analysis of Statement A:

"He who is the father of lies, blinds and deceives the world by sending his angels forth to speak for the apostles, and make it appear that they contradict what they wrote when on earth, which was dictated by the Holy Ghost." Notice that the grammatical antecedent to the dependant clause "which was dictated by the Holy Ghost" is "what they wrote when on earth." Thus, the statement is grammatically clear: The writing of the apostles was "dictated by the Holy Ghost." Is she saying the writings were verbally (word for word) dictated?

First of all, this statement cannot be applied to the entire Bible, because in the context Ellen White is talking only about the writings of the New Testament apostles, not the rest

of the Bible. **So this is not about the entire Bible's being "dictated."** Even when she uses the term "Bible" later in the paragraph, she means the New Testament (read the entire context, pages 176-178). Second, the thought that she is conveying here (presupposing thought inspiration) is the contrast between Satan's control of the world through his angels (disguised as apostles contradicting their own writings) and the divine origin of the apostolic writings. There is no precedent for reading verbal dictation into this context based on Ellen White's own experience of inspiration (see point 2 above). **The point is that the apostolic writings were controlled or directed "by the Holy Ghost" and therefore true in contrast to the satanic lies of the fallen angels impersonating the apostles during the final crisis. She is using "dictated" in Webster's general, theological sense, rather than making any doctrinal statement about how inspiration works, in order to convey the basic thought that the apostolic writings are of divine origin.** The word "dictated" works here because it conveys the idea that the Holy Spirit was in control of the writings of the New Testament apostles, but not necessarily in the sense of verbal dictation.

6. Detailed analysis of Statement B:

"The scribes of God wrote as they were dictated by the Holy Spirit, having no control of the work themselves." In the context of this statement ("Bible Biographies," *Review and Herald*, January 22, 1880), Ellen White is emphasizing the point that the Bible writers, led by the Holy Spirit, did not leave out the faults and blemishes of Bible heroes and this is for our good. Without the Holy Spirit, she emphasizes, these blemishes would have been omitted, and we would have only perfect examples, which would be discouraging. This, she says, is "one of the best evidences of the authenticity of the Scriptures." **Her point is that the Holy Spirit was in control of the writing of the Scriptures.** Significantly, the grammatical antecedent to "dictated by the Holy Spirit" is the "scribes of God." Thus, *they* were dictated, not their writings. It makes the best sense, then, to read this clause as "the scribes of God wrote as they were *directed* by the Holy Spirit."

But what about the second clause, "having no control of the work themselves"? Does it mean that the scribes had no control of each "word" they wrote? Or does it mean they had no control of the work in its entirety, that is, the overall message about the true picture of Bible heroes? **The latter view best fits the meaning of the statement: The Holy Spirit did not allow the scribes of the narrative portions of Scripture to leave out the failings of great Bible heroes. In this sense they had no control. Again, what we have here is a general statement about the divine origin of the narratives in the Bible, not a doctrinal statement about inspiration.**

One final point: This statement cannot be applied to the entire Bible, because in the context she is talking only about the scribes who wrote the narrative portions of the Bible. The inspired sages, poets, and apostles are not included here.

Conclusion:

Based on the six reasons above, statements A and B do not represent a contradiction to Ellen White's clear teaching on plenary-thought inspiration. These two statements can contextually be interpreted in the sense of control and direction of the Holy Spirit, rather than verbal, mechanical dictation. Furthermore, both statements are contextually limited to portions of the Bible and cannot be applied to the Bible in its entirety. **Thus, statements A and B do not reflect any doctrinal teaching concerning a dictation view of inspiration and do not contradict Ellen White's clear teaching on the subject penned during the years 1886-1889.**

The phrase "inspired words":

Ellen White used this phrase only nine times in her writings (see the EGW CD ROM "Domain Search Template," 1845-1917). Each usage is dated after she formally wrote out her understanding of plenary-thought inspiration in 1886 (*Selected Messages*, vol. 1, 19-21) and must be understood in that context. She used this phrase in the same way she used phrases like "oracles of God," "inspired word," "words of inspiration," or "word of God" —as a way of expressing the divine nature of the Scriptures. There is no doctrine of verbal dictation in her use of these expressions. While she believed "it is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired," she also believed "the utterances of the man are the word of God" (1SM 21). Thus, while the human equation is very much a part of inspiration, the end product is the Word of God and should be treated as such. Ellen White's tagging verses of Scripture as "inspired words," then, was her way of stressing that all of the Scripture (plenary) is inspired and should be heeded. **It is clear from the larger literary context of her writings that she did not mean for her use of this phrase or any of the others to be taken literally (mechanical, word-for-word dictation). These expressions were simply one of her many ways of exalting the Bible as the Word of God.**