

A Fresh Look at Ellen G. White's Statements Within Their Original Context on the Heathen Being Saved

Andrew Tompkins
Andrews University

Introduction

This article is a study of a number of statements found in the writings of Ellen G. White on the experience of the heathen who have not heard about Jesus or God's law. A brief section on the historical theological setting during the lifetime of Ellen White, specifically as it relates to the question of the eternal destiny of the heathen, will preface the primary portion of the study. The question of the eternal destiny became a major discussion issue, in the wider Protestant world, during the lifetime of Ellen White. It was also an issue that John Wesley addressed on a few different occasions in his sermons. The Wesleyan approach to the issue is mirrored in many ways in the writings of Ellen White, this article will attempt to highlight some of these.

The main sections of the study contain analysis of three chapters in White's writings, one from each of the following: *Desire of Ages*, *Christ's Object Lessons*, and *Prophets and Kings* with a few additional notes on some other passages she wrote. The goal is to place the statements of Ellen White on the heathen within their literary context in order to have a more complete understanding of these statements. Part of the reason this is needed is because these quotations are often quoted without reference to their wider setting, and in sometimes contradictory ways.

For Seventh-day Adventists the question of the unevangelized has not always been clearly answered either from Scripture or the writings of

TOMPKINS: HEATHEN BEING SAVED

Ellen White. This article seeks to shed some light on Ellen White's understanding in order to create a balanced understanding of Ellen White's statements on the eternal destiny of the heathen.

Historical Setting

During the lifetime of Ellen G. White the Protestant missionary movement had sent missionaries around the world. As a result North American and European missionaries were encountering people from vastly different cultural and religious backgrounds. While these encounters resulted in a wide variety of new types of questions for missionaries and theologians to grapple with, there was one particular question that challenged the theological constructs of many. This was the question of the "unevangelized" millions who had never heard of Jesus or the Bible. Not only were the missionaries encountering such people but it was clear that many millions had died before having the opportunity to hear of Jesus. Had they all gone to hell? Were some of them saved, and if so how?¹

Literature on this issue began to proliferate with a variety of different views and understandings emerging. While there was no one clear consensus on the issue of the destiny of the unevangelized one thing was clear, this issue had become a front and center question during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The proof of this lies in the Edinburgh mission conference of 1910 in which a consensus statement was drafted, known as Commission IV, on how to understand the theological significance of the unevangelized.² Prior to the era of Protestant missions those outside of Christendom had been labeled heathens (with the exceptions of Muslims and Jews). After the great century of missions this was no longer a fitting term. The issues were

¹ For an extensive study of the historical mission context that birthed the growth in the discussion of the issue of the unevangelized in theological studies see Kenneth Cracknell, *Justice, Courtesy and Love: Theologians and Missionaries Encountering World Religions, 1846-1914* (London, UK: Epworth Press, 1995). Notice that the years Cracknell studied correspond almost exactly with Ellen White's years in ministry.

² For more on the studies that led up to the drafting of Commission IV see Cracknell, *Justice, Courtesy and Love*, ch. 4.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

more complex than many had imagined and the result for many was a turn away from Calvinistic determinism towards Arminian freewill.³

Ellen White also dealt with the issue of the unevangelized in her writings. She dealt with it from a different context than most of the missionaries who were dealing with the question. Ellen White did not have much experience in dealing with people who, for that matter, had not heard of Jesus or that were from outside of Christendom. For Ellen White the issue arises in the setting of careful Bible study and making sense of the realities she was hearing about in the mission field with the framework of her Wesleyan Methodist theological background. White did not quote the major authors who were dealing with the issue of the unevangelized during her lifetime. A careful review of the books that we know were in her library does not reveal any works by these authors and yet the issue was still something Ellen White dealt with, often in an indirect way, all in the midst of writing on major theological or biblical issues.

What does become clear in the study that follows is that Ellen White was thoroughly Wesleyan and Arminian in her theology. This is not new to most who have given careful study to her writings. However, a careful review of her statements on the heathen within her Wesleyan theological context is still needed.

John Wesley, in several of his sermons, spoke concerning the eternal destiny of the unevangelized. For Wesley the idea that all humanity had the ability to make an intelligent choice for or against God was essential to his theology. This is known as the work of prevenient grace which, according to Wesley, is essential in order for all humanity to be “moral agents.”⁴ Wesley preached that “Yea, I am persuaded every child of God has at some time ‘life and death set before him’, eternal life and eternal death, and has in himself the casting voice.”⁵ From the same sermon, however, Wesley describes a day that he hopes is coming when Christians will live temperate lives which will break down barriers to

³ For more on the debates and theological shifting in connection with Calvinism and Arminianism that occurred as a result of questions coming from the mission field see Cracknell, *Justice, Courtesy and Love*, ch. 1.

⁴ John Wesley, “The General Spread of the Gospel,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, v. 2, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985), 489.

⁵ Wesley, “The General Spread of the Gospel,” 490.

TOMPKINS: HEATHEN BEING SAVED

those who currently view Christian habits as uncouth and to be avoided. Many Muslims and Hindus of India had made such statements about Christians during Wesley's life, comments that much vexed him. Wesley felt that the actions of Christians were vital in sharing God with the heathen.⁶ There was a tension in Wesley between the idea that all people have a chance to hear about God and the need for human agents to take the message out to save the world. His freewill theology demanded the former while his missional understanding of Scripture required the latter. It will be shown later in this study that Ellen White had a similar tension in her writings.

In another sermon entitled "On Living without God" Wesley discusses the worthlessness of morality outside of grace of God and makes the following comment:

Let it be observed, I purposely add, 'to those that are under the Christian dispensation,' because I have no authority from the Word of God 'to judge those that are without.' Nor do I conceive that any man living has a right to sentence all the heathen and Mahometan world to damnation. It is far better to leave them to him that made them, and who is 'the Father of the spirits of all flesh,' who is the God of the heathens as well as the Christians, and who hateth nothing that he hath made.⁷

Wesley's understanding of freewill and prevenient grace made possible a statement like the one above. He strongly believed in going out in mission to the heathen, but this did not mean the heathen were outside the possibility of salvation simply because they were heathen.⁸

⁶ Ibid., 495-496.

⁷ John Wesley, "On Living without God," in *The Works of John Wesley*, v. 4 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987), 174.

⁸ For a very accessible description of John Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace as well as some additional relevant quotations from Wesley's sermons on the fact that there is no human being who falls outside the pale of God's grace see Kenneth J. Collins, *Wesley on Salvation: A Study in the Standard Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 22-25. For more detailed descriptions of Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace see Kenneth J. Collins, *A Faithful Witness: John Wesley's Homiletical Theology* (Wilmore, KY: Wesley Heritage Press, 1993), 63-66, and Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 243-252. Another important aspect of Wesley's theology is his emphasis on God's omnipresence, therefore there was no human being who had not encountered God

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Statements like these found in the sermons of John Wesley may have influenced Ellen White's statements on the issue. There is no evidence that I am aware of in which we can make a direct tracing of Ellen White's statement to John Wesley or any other author for that matter on this issue. But as will be shown below Ellen White made clear statements on her understanding of God's ability to save the heathen even before they hear about Jesus using similar language to that utilized by John Wesley. Ellen White's thoughts on this issue fall within the Wesleyan Arminian thought, which fits well with the rest of her teachings on salvation.

Ellen G. White's Statements on the "Heathen"

Probably the most often quoted statement written by Ellen White on the salvation of the "heathen" is found in the *Desire of Ages* page 638.⁹ Below I have given this quote in full in order to guide the discussion on this topic. As will be shown the elements that make up the chapter surrounding this quote are similar to other portions of Ellen White's writings and will help guide the discussion of some of the more relevant quotations and chapters that are connected to the concept of the "heathen" and their possible salvation in the writings of Ellen White.

The following is a direct quotation from chapter 70 of the *Desire of Ages* entitled "The Least of these My Brethren":

Those whom Christ commends in the judgment may have known little of theology, but they have cherished His principles. Through the influence of the divine Spirit they have been a blessing to those about them. Even among the heathen are those who have cherished the spirit of kindness; before the words of life had fallen upon their ears, they have befriended the missionaries, even ministering to them at the peril of their own lives. Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish. Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence

in some form. For more on this see Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley's Teachings: God and Providence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 41. It will be shown later in this article that Ellen White had a similar understanding.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 638.

TOMPKINS: HEATHEN BEING SAVED

that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God.¹⁰

There are several portions of this quotation that are relevant to the overall question of what Ellen G. White understood would happen to those who had not explicitly heard about Jesus or the Bible. I have given this quote in full because it is the most often used quote by Adventist authors discussing the destiny of the heathen. The quotation also leaves little room for doubt as to the fact that Ellen White did believe some heathen, who did not hear about Christ nor know God's law will be saved.

In order to look more closely at the challenges the above quote raises I have looked carefully at chapter 70 of the *Desire of Ages* entitled "The Least of These My Brethren," which is an exposition on Matthew 25:31-46. Ellen White works off of Matthews emphasis on righteous works to develop a way of understanding how God is working all over the world all the time, as seen through the actions of people. The second chapter I looked at is *Christ's Object Lessons* entitled "Who Is My Neighbour?"¹¹ This chapter is similar to chapter 70 of *Desire of Ages* although it works off of a different narrative from the life of Jesus. The last chapter that was most relevant to this study is found in *Prophets and Kings* and is entitled "Hope for the Heathen."¹² In many ways the title gives enough information to show how this chapter would be relevant to this study. In this chapter Ellen White primarily deals with the prophetic utterances of the Old Testament dealing with nations outside of Israel. In several of the sections below there are additional writings of Ellen White reviewed to add to the overall argument, but in general these three chapters serve as the primary sources.

Christ's Light has Touched All Human Beings

Desire of Ages Chapter 70

Ellen White develops the concept in her writings that no human being that has ever lived is without some sort of connection to God. She

¹⁰ White, *Desire of Ages*, 638.

¹¹ Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1900).

¹² Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1917).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

states this in a few different ways in chapter 70 of *Desire of Ages*. On page 638 she has this to say regarding Christ and His love: “He identifies Himself with *every* child of humanity... He is the Son of man, and thus a brother to *every* son and daughter of Adam (emphasis added).”¹³ Commenting on the work of the angels who are “sent forth to minister” on earth she says, “*Not one* is neglected or passed by. God is no respecter of persons, and He has an *equal* care for *all* souls He has created (emphasis added).”¹⁴ Finally in the last paragraph of the chapter White writes, “To *every* soul a trust is given (emphasis added).”¹⁵ Ellen White is clear that all human beings are given an opportunity to know God in some form or another. This is founded on a strong theological conviction of equality and fairness that is a part of God’s character. If God were not to somehow reaching out to all humanity He would not be who He claims He is. Therefore the heathen have to receive some sort of revelation from God, even if they do not know it comes from God, or else God is not fair. Referring back to the introduction section on the historical background it was shown that John Wesley had developed a very similar sort of theological framework. Both Wesley and White cited John 1:9 as a key text in their understanding on the issue of God sending His light to all people.

Christ’s Object Lessons Chapter 27

As seen in the chapter quoted from above, it is common for Ellen White to emphasize God’s all penetrating love towards every single human being who has ever existed. This is also true of chapter 27 in *Christ’s Object Lessons* as well.

In relation to mission Ellen White set the tone of this chapter by reminding the reader that Jesus was clear, our neighbors are not only those within our faith community or part of our ethnic group. Instead our neighbor is “every soul who is wounded and bruised by the adversary. Our neighbor is everyone who is the property of God.”¹⁶ In other words everyone is our neighbor.

¹³ White, *Desire of Ages*, 638.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 639.

¹⁵ White, *Desire of Ages*, 641.

¹⁶ White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, 376.

TOMPKINS: HEATHEN BEING SAVED

This is a theme she hammers home in other parts of the same chapter. She states that “No distinction on account of nationality, race, or caste, is recognized by God. He is the Maker of all mankind. All men are of one family by creation, and all are one through redemption.”¹⁷ This kind of inclusive statement was common in the writings of Ellen White and was often used when discussing the fate of the heathen. It was of the utmost importance to Ellen White that the reader understand God was fair in reaching out to all humanity in some form or another. In this particular chapter she uses this theological concept to inspire humanity to reach out to each other, because this is what God was already doing, and we are to follow His example.

We find another quotation, which is also found in *Prophets and Kings*: “His love is so broad, so deep, so full, that it penetrates everywhere.”¹⁸ This chapter emphasizes that “Whatever the difference in religious belief, a call from suffering humanity must be heard and answered.”¹⁹

Prophets and Kings Chapter 31

In this chapter on the heathen in the Old Testament Ellen White makes some statements that are very similar to some of those found in the *Christ's Object Lessons* chapter found above. After briefly discussing some of the people of the nation's surrounding Israel, Ellen White has this to say, “No distinction on account of nationality, race or caste, is recognized by God.... All men are of one family by creation, and all are one through redemption.”²⁰ This is quickly followed by another quotation concerning God, “His love is so broad, so deep, so full, that it penetrates *everywhere*.”²¹ (emphasis added). She has once again reiterated that God's love, in some way, touches every person who lives on earth.

Later in the same chapter she states, “Heaven's plan of salvation is broad enough to embrace the whole world. God longs to breathe into prostrate humanity the breath of life. And He will not permit any soul to be disappointed who is sincere in his longing for something higher and

¹⁷ White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, 386.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ White, *Prophets and Kings*, 369-370.

²¹ White, *Prophets and Kings*, 370.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

nobler than anything the world can offer.”²² No one slips past God’s ever seeing eyes, He is interested in all humanity and is ready to reach out to anyone who shows the slightest inclination towards Him.

Other Relevant Passages from Ellen White’s Writings

Commenting on the case of Naaman, Ellen White notes that “Today in every land there are those who are honest in heart, and upon these the light of heaven is shining.”²³ “Every land” is pretty clear language to suggest that there is no place on earth where the light of God is completely absent. The life of Naaman is proof of this, to a certain extent, although the maid who lived with Naaman’s family was part of the light given to Naaman the work of the Spirit was also active. In the following paragraph Ellen White says that “To every sincere soul ‘that walketh in darkness, and hath no light,’ is given the invitation, ‘Let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God.’”²⁴ This is a reminder that Ellen White felt all humanity had a chance to hear about God or experience Him in some fashion and that they then had to make a choice to follow God or not.²⁵

The idea that God’s light has shown on all humanity in some capacity is very similar to John Wesley’s concept of prevenient grace. While neither White nor Wesley used this exact terminology it seems to accurately define what both of them believed. For Ellen White that is most clearly seen in her clear belief that there was no human being who had ever lived that did not receive some amount of light from God.²⁶

²² White, *Prophets and Kings*, 377-378.

²³ White, *Prophets and Kings*, 253.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ In the third chapter of *Desire of Ages* Ellen White repeatedly refers to the work of God among people from outside the Jewish nation. These were prophets and others who had somehow gotten a hold of the Scriptures and believed in them. This is probably an indirect reference to the wise men who she more explicitly discusses in a later chapter. I have not included this data in this section because these people had access to the Scriptures and therefore are in a bit of a different category than those who had never heard of the law of God. See *Desire of Ages* chapter 3. For more on Ellen White’s interpretation of the wise men see *Desire of Ages* chapter 6.

²⁶ For more on this in Wesley’s works see Oden, *John Wesley’s Teaching*, 41.

TOMPKINS: HEATHEN BEING SAVED

Some Who Have Not Heard of Jesus or His Law Will be Saved

Each of the chapters from *Desire of Ages*, *Christ's Object Lessons*, and *Prophets and Kings* contains material that deals with the issue of those who have not heard of Jesus or the law of God but who still live up to the requirements of Jesus.

Desire of Ages Chapter 70

There are clear statements in this chapter that there are people who display kindness and even “minister” to others as Jesus would have them to do without knowing about Jesus. She even goes so far as to state that these “heathen” are actually worshipping “God ignorantly.” She is also clear that they “will not perish” which is a reference to an eternal state not their temporal life on earth. Many Seventh-day Adventists have used this statement to answer the question of what happens to those who have not heard of Jesus, but few have taken the time to comment on this quotation both from within its own paragraph and in the wider chapter in which it is located.²⁷

The last part of this chapter in *Desire of Ages* is extremely important in understanding why Ellen White made the comments she does concerning the heathen. First, Ellen White notes that while they have not had access to the written word of God these heathen have “heard His voice speaking to them in nature.” Ellen White was a firm believer in the

²⁷ Examples include: Russell Staples, “Exclusivism, Pluralism and Global Mission,” *Ministry* November (1992): 13; Gerhard Pfandl, “Jesus Only,” *Perspective Digest* 17 no. 1 (2012). Accessed online at the following link: <http://www.perspectivedigest.org/article/60/archives/17-1/jesus-only>. Accessed on Dec. 6, 2016; Clifton Maberly, “Adventist Use of Non-Christian Scriptures,” in *Adventist Responses to Cross-Cultural Mission: Global Mission Issues Committee Papers 1998-2001* ed. Bruce L. Bauer (Berrien Springs, MI: Department of World Mission, Andrews University, 2006), 62-63; Gottfried Oosterwal, “Adventism Faces the World Religions,” in *Adventist Mission in the 21st Century: The Joys and Challenges of Presenting Jesus to a Diverse World* ed. Jon L. Dybdahl (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1999), 51; Jon L. Dybdahl, “Is There Hope for the Unevangelized?” in *Adventist Mission in the 21st Century: The Joys of Presenting Jesus to a Diverse World* ed. Jon L. Dybdahl (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1999), 59, 60; Morris Venden, *Why Don't They Tell Me: Sharing Jesus Isn't Something We Do. It's Who We Are*. (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), 58; Reinder Bruinsma, *The Body of Christ: A Biblical Understanding of the Church* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2009), 183. These authors use Ellen Whites quotes in various ways. I am not trying to say whether their interpretations are right or wrong, but that they have quoted Ellen White without giving the wider background to her statements.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

power of nature to witness to God, as this quote shows. It may, however, be the last sentence that is the most important in this context. The comment she makes on nature, if taken alone, sounds a lot like a natural approach to theology. The last sentence disabuses the reader of this. She is clear that it is not just the natural surroundings that draw people to God, but the active work of the Holy Spirit which, the rest of the chapter in *Desire of Ages* thus illuminates.

The overall thrust of this chapter is similar to portions of John Wesley's sermon "On Living without God." Wesley stated plainly that he could not say for sure what the fate of those who had not heard about Jesus was. Wesley did feel however that God "respects the goodness of the heart rather than the clearness of the head" and that this meant some would not be thrown into hell even though they had not explicitly put their faith in Jesus.²⁸

Christ's Object Lessons Chapter 27

This chapter, entitled "Who is My Neighbour?," contains quotations similar to those in the *Desire of Ages*. This chapter is focused on interpreting the work of the Samaritan as an outsider of Israel who would not have had knowledge of God in the same way as an Israelite insider. In relation to the sympathy and love shown by the Samaritan White states, "The Holy Spirit has implanted the grace of Christ in the heart of the savage, quickening his sympathies contrary to his nature, contrary to his education. The 'Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world' (John 1:9), is shining in his soul; and this light, if heeded, will guide his feet to the kingdom of God."²⁹

In this chapter Ellen White also wrote, "Wherever there is an impulse of love and sympathy, wherever the heart reaches out to bless and uplift others, there is revealed the working of God's Holy Spirit. In the depths of heathenism, men who have had no knowledge of the written law of God, who have never heard the name of Christ, have been kind to His servants."³⁰ White leaves no doubt in the mind of her readers that she is referring to people who do not have knowledge of God's law nor of Christ. This does not keep them from living lives that show they are

²⁸ Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* vol. 4, 175.

²⁹ White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, 385.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

TOMPKINS: HEATHEN BEING SAVED

being influenced by the Holy Spirit. This seems to imply that they are saved people.

Below this quote Ellen White writes the following, “The glory of heaven is in lifting up the fallen, comforting the distressed. And wherever Christ abides in human hearts, He will be revealed in the same way. Wherever it acts, the religion of Christ will bless. Wherever it works, there is brightness.”³¹ The use of the term “wherever” is important here because it implies that these things happen all over the place and often outside the person having explicit knowledge of the law of God or of Jesus. Keep in mind that these works are never done outside the influence of the Holy Spirit, but rather display proof of the working of the Holy Spirit in the lives of people around the world who act in ways of service towards those around them.

Prophets and Kings Chapter 31

Speaking in the present tense, but commenting on the prophecies concerning the heathen in the Old Testament, Ellen White gives the following example:

Among all nations, kindreds, and tongues, He sees men and women who are praying for light and knowledge. Their souls are unsatisfied; long have they fed on ashes. See Isaiah 44:20. The enemy of all righteousness turned them aside, and they grope as blind men. But they are honest in heart and desire to learn a better way. Although in the depths of heathenism, with no knowledge of the written law of God nor of His son Jesus, they have revealed in manifold ways the working of a divine power on mind and character.³²

This sounds a lot like the language used in the *Desire of Ages* passage quoted above. Based on the “manifold ways,” which can be loosely understood as “works,” these people show that the Spirit of God has been at work in their lives, even though they do not explicitly realize it.

The very next paragraph states the above in even clearer language:

At times those who have no knowledge of God aside from that which they have received under the operations of divine grace have been kind

³¹ White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, 386.

³² White, *Prophets and Kings*, 376.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

to His servants, protecting them at the risk of their own lives. The Holy Spirit is implanting the grace of Christ in the heart of many a noble seeker after truth, quickening his sympathies contrary to his nature, contrary to his former education. The 'Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world' (John 1:9), is shining in his soul; and this Light, if heeded, will guide his feet to the kingdom of God.³³

The reference to John 1:9 is used by White to strengthen her argument that God is reaching out to all humanity. This act of "divine grace" can probably be understood on a salvific level, although this is again not explicitly stated in the quote. Ellen White is again clear that God is working among those who have never heard His name, and that this is evident through the actions of people in varying circumstances.

Other Relevant Passages from Ellen White's Writings

Manuscript 130 written in 1899 contains a very strong quote in regards to those who have not known Christ. "God's test of heathen, who have not the light, and of those living where the knowledge of truth and light has been abundant, is altogether different. He accepts from those in heathen lands a phase of righteousness which does not satisfy Him when offered by those of Christian lands. He does not require much where much has not been bestowed."³⁴ The same quotation is also found in the much more accessible fifth volume of the SDA Bible commentary.³⁵

The context of this quotation, as found in its original form in MS 130, is very different from the passages discussed above. The focus is not actually on the heathen (for most of the manuscript), rather it is on the use of our bodies for God. Within this discussion Ellen White felt it necessary to include this quotation on the heathen, probably in order to show how God was fair to all humanity in His requirements. This statement makes more sense when read within the theme of the great controversy over God's character that is found in much of Ellen White's writings.

³³ White, *Prophets and Kings*, 376-377.

³⁴ Ellen G. White, MS 130, 1899, Center for Adventist Research, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

³⁵ Francis D. Nichol, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1976-1980), 5:1121. Ellen White makes a similar statement in *Testimonies to the Church* v. 3, page 365.

TOMPKINS: HEATHEN BEING SAVED

In the *Desire of Ages* Ellen White makes a similar point when she writes:

Our standing before God depends, not upon the amount of light we have received, but upon the use we make of what we have. Thus even the heathen who choose the right as far as they can distinguish it are in a more favorable condition than are those who have had great light, and profess to serve God, but who disregard the light, and by their daily life contradict their profession.³⁶

This makes much more sense when read with the understanding that Ellen White wrote on many occasions that God has not left Himself without witness to any person who has ever lived. Therefore, all have had some sort of light shining on them and they are responsible for living up to this light.

Those Who Have Not Heard the Gospel Are Perishing

While it is true Ellen White believed that God had given enough light to all humanity to make a decision to follow Him, she also felt that some would be lost. Not only would they be lost but it may actually be the fault of God's believers who do not go out among the masses that they are lost.

Desire of Ages Chapter 70

In this chapter on page 640, there is a lengthy quote that at first glance seems to contradict the quote from page 638 given above. White writes:

Millions upon millions of human souls ready to perish, bound in chains of ignorance and sin, have never so much as heard of Christ's love for them. Were our condition and theirs reversed, what would we desire them to do for us? All this, so far as lies in our power, we are under the most solemn obligation to do for them. Christ's rule of life, by which every one of us must stand or fall in the judgment, is, 'Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them,' Matthew 7:12.³⁷

³⁶ White, *Desire of Ages*, 239.

³⁷ White, *Desire of Ages*, 640.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Again on the same page, “It is because this work is neglected that so many young disciples never advance beyond the mere alphabet of Christian experience.”³⁸ Both of these quotes lead the reader to believe that it is in the power of human agents to make a major difference in whether or not someone accepts God and is able to grow in their faith in Him. She gets even more explicit on page 641, “The great topic of interest will be, how to save the souls that are ready to perish.”³⁹ These quotes seem to put the responsibility of salvation on the shoulders of human agents.

A closer reading however, may lead in another direction. While the above quotes show Ellen White felt that human agents had a major role to play, the readers should be careful to recognize that nowhere does she state that the work of humans is the means of salvation for the heathen. Rather she is clear that as human followers of God there is a sacred responsibility to share with those who are perishing without a knowledge of God, that He loves them. Towards the end of the chapter Ellen White has written a paragraph that sounds like a theology of mission in a nutshell.

Love to man is the earthward manifestation of the love of God. It was to implant this love, to make us children of one family, that the King of glory became one of us. And when His parting words are fulfilled, ‘Love one another, as I have loved you’ (John 15:12); when we love the world as He has loved it, then for us His *mission* is accomplished. We are fitted for heaven; for we have heaven in our hearts (emphasis added).⁴⁰

For Ellen White the mission is God’s. This is the basic concept of the *missio dei* which was still decades prior to the concept of the *missio dei* becoming popular in the wider Christian study of mission. What this means is that the work of humans is to spread the love of Christ that they have received and experienced in their own lives. This may even lead some who are “perishing” to be saved. A balance must be struck between the early statement Ellen White made on page 638 and the later statements she makes about people perishing and about the mission of

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ White, *Desire of Ages*, 641.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

TOMPKINS: HEATHEN BEING SAVED

God to share His love. When these are all read together it becomes clear that in this chapter Ellen White is exposing the reader to God's mission of love to all humanity, in the midst of the great controversy,⁴¹ in which it is the privilege of human followers of Jesus to be a part of. This may lead some to accept Jesus as their savior and to grow in faith, but this work of humans is not the final judge of who is or is not saved. As Ellen White stated early in the chapter, the Holy Spirit is active in all humanity, and this often manifests itself even among the heathen who know nothing about Jesus or God's law and yet display character traits that are in accordance with both Jesus and His law.⁴²

Prophets and Kings Chapter 31

In Ellen White's chapter entitled "Hope for the Heathen" in *Prophets and Kings*, she is clear that Israel was specifically elected in order to bless the nations surrounding them who did not have a full knowledge of God.⁴³ She comments on the words given to Isaiah regarding the nations as proof of this calling.⁴⁴ Without commenting explicitly on the salvation of the nations surrounding Israel, Ellen White does make it clear that in the eyes of Israel the "heathen came to be looked upon as beyond the

⁴¹ On page 639 Ellen White, commenting on those who neglect the poor says, "Satan had blinded them." Her comments regarding angels going out to minister to humanity on page 638 also presupposes a cosmic understanding of this world and the great controversy at play behind the scenes. Ellen White's understanding of the great controversy as being centered in a dispute over God's character also sheds light on the several instances in this chapter where she makes it clear that God has revealed Himself, through His Spirit to all people in some form or another. This is only fair and is a direct result of His character of love for all humanity that reveals his character of equality which Satan is attacking.

⁴² In the book *Education* Ellen White's discussion of the work of Daniel is mission oriented. She compares this with the then current work of missionaries around the world. It is interesting to note that her emphasis in this passage is on bringing the knowledge of Christ to all humanity because they deserve to hear about Jesus just as much as anyone. The knowledge is the "knowledge of God's love" (ED 262). The spread of God's love does appear to be one of the primary mission motivators in the writings of Ellen White. In some ways this takes away the emphasis that many Evangelicals have put on mission as taking salvation to the world. Ellen White believed that God could save any person who showed that they were following the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Mission is, for her, more about sharing the love of God than it is about carrying salvation. This does not mean that one does not lead to the other, but the focus is on sharing love.

⁴³ White, *Prophets and Kings*, 367-368.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 367.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

pale of His mercy.”⁴⁵ The result was that God’s love “was little known; error and superstition flourished.”⁴⁶ It is interesting that in this particular sentence White does not write that God’s love was completely unknown, but rather uses the terminology “little known.” Significantly this chapter is really about the mission task given to Israel to share the blessing of the knowledge of God, which Israel failed to do for the most part.⁴⁷ Mission was to the nations who were struggling in darkness, much like the perishing heathen found in the *Desire of Ages* chapter above.

This chapter of *Prophets and Kings* makes the additional point that is not found in chapter 70 of *Desire of Ages*. Ellen White brings the prophecies given to the prophets of the Old Testament into her present day situation. After quoting Isaiah 60:1-4,10, 11 and 45:22 she states, “These prophecies of a great spiritual awakening in a time of gross darkness are today meeting fulfillment in the advancing lines of mission stations that are reaching out into the benighted regions of the earth. The groups of missionaries in heathen lands have been likened by the prophet to ensigns set up for the guidance of those who are looking for the light of truth.”⁴⁸ This quotation makes it sound like the great Protestant missionary movement that was in full swing during Ellen White’s lifetime, was to her a fulfillment of the unfulfilled prophecies of the ancient prophets concerning the heathen nations around Israel. Could it be that Ellen White saw a difference in how God treated the heathen prior to the “Great Century” of Protestant missions and how God treated the heathen after? This question deserves a more comprehensive answer which is beyond the scope of this study.

The Great Controversy Theme

A number of scholars have correctly recognized Ellen White’s emphasis on the ongoing conflict between Christ and Satan, which she labeled the great controversy. This theme ran through much of her writing and is especially prominent in her sweeping review of biblical

⁴⁵ White, *Prophets and Kings*, 371.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ White, *Prophets and Kings*, 372.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 375-376.

TOMPKINS: HEATHEN BEING SAVED

and current history found in the five volumes that make up the Conflict of the Ages series.⁴⁹

Desire of Ages Chapter 70

This theme also is a factor in the way Ellen White understands the work of God among the heathen. Chapter 70 of the *Desire of Ages* contains the following quotations regarding the work of Satan among those who are unacquainted with Christ and who neglect the poor and needy among them. “Satan had blinded them.”⁵⁰ It was not purely ignorance but the actual work of Satan that kept some of the heathen from following God. Just as Christ, working through the Spirit, could be seen working among the heathen by their deeds, so Satan was and is also visible among the heathen. She devotes an entire paragraph to point out that many among the rich of the earth have purposefully neglected those around them for their own selfish reasons.⁵¹ These two points together are written to demonstrate that while it is true that God has reached out to all humanity and that some even among the heathen have responded in the Spirit, others have imbibed in the work of Satan which is demonstrated by their actions. It is important to note that just prior to Ellen White’s statements regarding Satan and the rich she is clear that the angels are sent out to all humanity to minister.⁵² There is an ongoing back and forth between God and Satan, being played out among all humanity, all the time.

Because of Ellen White’s Wesleyan approach to freewill she is constrained to demonstrate that God has not left any person without an opportunity to know God in some form or another. This is what has been theologically termed prevenient grace. For Ellen White this grace can be

⁴⁹ For a short and concise description of this theme in the writings of Ellen White see Woodrow W. Whidden II, *Ellen White on Salvation* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1995), ch. 5. For a more in-depth review of this theme see Denis Fortin, “The Theology of Ellen G. White,” in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, eds. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013), 266-268. For another detailed and comprehensive review of this theme in the works of Ellen White see Woodrow Whidden II, “The Triumph of God’s Love: The Optimistic, Theological Theodicy of Ellen G. White,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 53, no. 1, (2015).

⁵⁰ White, *Desire of Ages*, 639.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² White, *Desire of Ages*, 639.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

salvific and is for many who demonstrate that they love Christ, even without explicitly hearing about Him or knowing Him. White's developed understanding of the great controversy gives balance to the issue of the destiny of the heathen. It helps explain why it is that so many who have not heard of Christ fail to live up to the calling of the Spirit. Satan and his followers have blinded them and led them astray.⁵³

Humanity is given a role in this ongoing conflict. This is demonstrated in White's continual calls for mission and outreach to a "perishing world." While there appears to be somewhat of a theological tension between White's recognition that all humanity has been given enough grace to be saved and the need for missionaries to spread the gospel because people are perishing, this may be somewhat reconciled when read within the great controversy theme which is so prominent in her writings.

Christ's Object Lessons Chapter 27

The two sides of the great controversy are discussed in this chapter as well. "It [God's love] lifts out of Satan's circle the poor souls who have been deluded by his deceptions."⁵⁴ White also mentions that the "Angels of heaven were beside the Samaritan who cared for the wounded stranger. Angels from the heavenly courts stand by all who do God's service in ministering to their fellow men."⁵⁵ Satan is busy trying to deceive people into selfish actions while God and His angels are busy guiding and helping those who are reaching out to their fellow human beings with acts of love and kindness. The work of those on behalf of humanity is part of the great controversy and there are unseen players behind the scenes, both evil and good.

Prophets and Kings Chapter 31

The theme of the great controversy is also present in this chapter. It is implied throughout the chapter but there are a few instances where it becomes explicit. One of these instances is found on page 370 where

⁵³ For more on Ellen White and her Wesleyan roots including prevenient grace, see Whidden, "The Triumph of God's Love," 199-200; Fortin, "The Theology of Ellen G. White," 248-255.

⁵⁴ White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, 386.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 388.

TOMPKINS: HEATHEN BEING SAVED

Ellen White writes about the effects of God's love on some heathen. She says, "It [God's love] lifts out of Satan's influence those who have been deluded by his deceptions, and places them within reach of the throne of God, the throne encircled by the rainbow of promise."⁵⁶ This follows the sentence quoted above where it is stated that God's "love is so broad, so deep, so full, that it penetrates everywhere."⁵⁷ So this snatching away from Satan is occurring among the heathen, through the divine grace mentioned above.

Part of God's mission, in the context of the great controversy, involves "sending His angels to those who, while surrounded by circumstances the most discouraging, pray in faith for some power higher than themselves to take possession of them and bring deliverance and peace."⁵⁸ While Satan is not directly mentioned here, it is implied that those doing the praying are under oppression, and that their only hope lies in the deliverance brought to them through the angels sent by God.

From the time of Israel up to Ellen White's lifetime she argued that God was calling his faithful followers to recognize their role in reaching out to all nations. This is not simply a human endeavor, however; it also involves angels. That is because the battle over the heathen is a cosmic battle that includes humans and their choices but is not limited to them or their own power.

Other Relevant Passages from Ellen White's Writings

In the chapter in *Desire of Ages* entitled the "Fullness of Time," Ellen White describes the work of Satan as turning people away from the worship of God towards the worship of the created order. This also led to attempts to reach salvation through works rather than through faith in the grace of God. While she does not say all humanity fell under this spell, she is clear that many if not most were deceived, leaving a pretty bleak picture of humanity at the time of Christ's incarnation. This should be read with the other quotations found above in mind, however. For Ellen White it is not appropriate to see Satan at work throughout the world while God is left to work only within the realm of His people. On the contrary God and Satan are both vying for all humanity at all times. Ellen

⁵⁶ White, *Prophets and Kings*, 370.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ White, *Prophets and Kings*, 378.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

White recognizes that at the time of Jesus' incarnation Satan had done a masterful job of bringing large masses of people under his deceptive sway, but this should not be read to show humanity as a hopeless rabble in which God was not at work.⁵⁹

Although brief, Ellen White's chapter on Naaman in *Prophets and Kings*, does mention the great controversy. "Truth is of God; deception in all its myriad forms is of Satan, and whoever in any way departs from the straight line of truth is betraying himself into the power of the wicked one."⁶⁰ This was in reference to the actions of Gehazi in the narrative of 2 Kings 5, but it is done in such a way so as to juxtapose Gehazi's actions with Naaman's. This is important in light of the fact that Gehazi was an Israelite and had more light than Naaman, yet Naaman's actions displayed the working of God's Spirit in a much more real way than in Gehazi's actions.

Summary

Careful review of the statements of Ellen White concerning the heathen's destiny within the statements wider literary contexts reveals four major themes that are intertwined with each other. First, Ellen White, on numerous occasions, writes of God's light and love touching all humanity. She is clear that no human being who has been created falls outside the influence of God. This does not mean that all have equal access to a clear knowledge of God, but it does mean that all have enough light to make a decision in favor of God through His Spirit. This is what makes the first point above possible. This is reminiscent of language that Wesley used to describe God's work among those who had not heard of Him. This has since been labeled prevenient grace.

Second, Ellen White made unequivocal statements that there are people who have never heard of Jesus name and have not learned about God's law but have acted in accordance with the light that they have received through the Spirit in positive ways. These people will not

⁵⁹ See *Desire of Ages*, 35. It is true that elsewhere Ellen White does state "The class of worshipers who follow the example of Cain includes by far the greater portion of the world; for nearly every false religion has been based on the same principle—that man can depend upon his own efforts for salvation" (PP 73). It is clear that Ellen White felt that Satan had certainly swayed many, according to this quotation a majority, to follow his empty path towards a works focused salvation.

⁶⁰ White, *Prophets and Kings*, 252.

TOMPKINS: HEATHEN BEING SAVED

“perish.” By their actions it is revealed that they belong to God’s people. This is also similar to the way Wesley described the destiny of the “heathen,” some would be lost, but others would most likely be saved due to the hidden work of grace on their hearts, which results in good works.

Third, even though all have a chance to make a decision to follow God, even if they do not explicitly know it, Ellen White is adamant that God’s people must go out in mission. This is often stated in the context of a world that is perishing and in desperate need of the love of God which brings salvation. Some of the chapters discussed above imply that for Ellen White mission was primarily the sharing of God’s love just as He has shared His love with those who know Him. Salvation is a prerogative of the Holy Spirit, but human beings can play a role in sharing this message with the whole world. Ellen White felt that the missionaries who were going out during her lifetime were fulfilling the call of God to share His love with the masses. In some ways this seems to contradict or be in tension with points one and two, but this does not necessarily need to be the case.

Fourth, the great controversy theme found throughout the writings of Ellen White brings these three elements together under one overarching framework.⁶¹ Ellen White demonstrates that among the heathen both God and Satan are at work influencing humanity to make decisions in their favor. Many have fallen into darkness due to the influence of Satan, but others have shown through their actions that they are under the Spirit’s control. The angels are constantly being sent out to any person around the world who shows an inclination to follow God. The ongoing conflict includes the work of human agents who represent Christ as His missionaries. It is God’s character that is under attack in the controversy with Satan, and this worldview is a guiding principle in Ellen White’s theology. When combined with her Wesleyan leanings, points one and two become clearer. Ellen White was concerned that God not be understood as unfair, therefore it is necessary that no human has an excuse as to why they did not choose to follow God. All have enough light to make an intelligent decision to follow God. John 1:9 is a key verse for Ellen White in this regard, because it lends strength to her

⁶¹ According to Whidden there are a number of theological themes that find their fullest meaning for Ellen White when understood within her cosmic conflict framework. See Whidden, “The Triumph of God’s Love.”

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

argument that God has shown His light on all people. God is a fair and just God and cannot be accused of leaving anyone without some level of witness as to who He is, at least as has been manifest in Ellen White's theological framework.

Andrew Tompkins is currently professor of Mission and Intercultural Theology in the Department of World Mission at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. He served for several years as a teacher, pastor, and professor in India before coming to Andrews University.