

# Miles Grant, D. M. Canright, and the Credibility of Ellen G. White: A New Perspective on the Israel Dammon Trial

Michael W. Campbell

## Introduction

In 1983, Fred Hoyt discovered a newspaper account, published in the *Piscataquis Farmer* of March 7, 1845, of the arrest and trial of Israel Dammon (1811-1886). The report includes testimony from witnesses about Ellen G. Harmon, as well as another visionary, Dorinda Baker. It provides a rare glimpse into the early prophetic career of Ellen G. Harmon (later Ellen G. White). The events that unfolded in 1845 were no secret. Ellen G. White described the incident 15 years later in *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2 (1860). Yet the description in the *Piscataquis Farmer* is far more detailed and significantly earlier. It furthermore describes Ellen G. Harmon as an ecstatic visionary caught up in a bedlam of fanaticism.

While previous research, both friendly as well as hostile, has highlighted the differences between the two accounts (which I will not repeat in this article), Ellen G. White, in her later account, described her role as one in which she rebuked early fanatics. The newspaper account makes it appear that she was swept up and very much a part of this fanaticism. While Adventist historians generally accept that Ellen G. Harmon and other early believers were indeed a part of the “shouting Methodist” tradition—perhaps to a greater extent than has been previously acknowledged<sup>1</sup>—the bottom line is an issue of credibility. Was Ellen G. White simply one of many visionaries who was adept enough to suppress other rivals in her quest to found a church, or was she instead trying to share her own unique perspective that included rebuking fanaticism? The two interpretations are diametrically opposite.

Critics furthermore allege that this discovery is the greatest historical discovery about her life since her death in 1915 and that the Ellen G. White Estate “has studiously ignored” its significance.<sup>2</sup> Since that time, James R. Nix, the current director of the Ellen G. White Estate, has published both an extensive paper and, most recently, an article about Dammon in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*.<sup>3</sup> Far more is known about the details of his life, but the issue of credibility remains. New research into a debate in 1874 challenges these allegations from critics.

## The Beginnings of a Debate

Beginning in 1859, the Seventh-day Adventist Church expanded to the west coast of the United States. In 1872, James and Ellen White, when they were not speaking at camp meetings, alternated between the fledgling work in California and their home in Battle Creek,<sup>4</sup> Michigan. On Dec. 29, 1873, they arrived in Santa Rosa, California, where over the coming weeks they helped to strengthen a small church.<sup>5</sup> It appears that, at least for a time, they considered making this their new home, and perhaps even a base for the future publishing house on the west coast that James White envisioned. On Jan. 4, 1874, Ellen G. White was handed a challenge by a Presbyterian minister in Santa Rosa who was going to speak against the Adventists on the change of the Sabbath. James White responded with a sermon the following week about the “perpetuity of the law of God.”

Then on Sabbath, Feb. 14, 1874, after Ellen White finished preaching to the church group in Santa Rosa, the church received another invitation to speak, this time from Miles Grant (1819-1911). A “hasty vote [was] taken,” noted Ellen G. White in her diary. Apparently James White, who was not present due to illness, shared Ellen White’s concern about Grant. “All was not right in this matter,” she observed in her diary. Together they went to the Bowls, leaders of the First Day Adventists, the same denomination that Grant belonged to (spiritual descendants of the Millerite movement, but who repudiated the seventh-day Sabbath and the gift of prophecy). The Whites explained the situation from their perspective and left with them the “responsibility” of extending an invitation for Grant to speak at the Santa Rosa Seventh-day Adventist Church.<sup>6</sup>

After earlier encounters with Miles Grant, James and Ellen G. White were concerned because he was the most forceful antagonist of Ellen G. White and the Seventh-day Adventist Church during the 1870s, which makes it surprising that the church accepted the invitation from Miles Grant to speak at all.<sup>7</sup>

### **Miles Grant Attacks Ellen G. White**

It appears that Grant held a personal vendetta toward James and Ellen G. White. They met for the first time in person on an 1868 train ride.<sup>8</sup> Grant stated to James White: “I can worship with you, but your views will not let you [to] worship with me.” James White later sent a note with his intention to attend an Advent Christian camp meeting in Springfield, Illinois. While there, he adhered to his promise not to distribute tracts or to speak in public, but he did give away tracts in his tent to those who requested them. Advent Christian Church leaders at the camp meeting, the “camp meeting committee,” summoned James White to answer to charges that he had distributed literature on the grounds of the camp meeting. James White agreed not to distribute any literature, even at his tent. Scarcely had James White returned to his tent (and before he could explain the delicacy of the situation to his traveling companions), when a lady stopped by to request more literature. Five minutes later, the “camp meeting committee” was back, requesting them to leave the grounds immediately. Joshua V. Himes intervened and an agreement was made to leave the next morning. A second incident, the timing of which is unclear, also occurred during the camp meeting (presumably before the tract incident) one morning between breakfast and the first meeting of the day. The Whites joined a small group that was praying and singing. Afterward, Ellen G. White began to speak until an estimated 1,000 people listened. Miles Grant constantly interrupted until they were forced to leave. The interaction at this camp meeting appears to be the catalyst for subsequent attacks by Grant against the prophetic ministry of Ellen G. White.<sup>9</sup> Ellen G. White responded with a testimony titled “Opposing Adventists” (3T 36-39) in which she described, “Our most bitter opponents are found among the first-day Adventists.” As a policy, she encouraged Seventh-day Adventists not to be disconcerted by this “unjust warfare.” “Silent contempt” was the “best approach.”<sup>10</sup>

After this encounter, Grant believed that Ellen G. White was possessed by a demon. He then began to develop arguments against Ellen G. White’s prophetic ministry during the 1870s and 1880s (up until D. M. Canright’s final and permanent defection from the denomination in 1887). The animosity of Grant toward Ellen G. White increased dramatically in 1874 as he traveled west to California. When Grant arrived in Napa, California, he held a series of “revival and sanctification sermons.” According to James White, these “discourses took well with a few who came out to hear them. Having gained this foothold, he then proposed a discussion.” James White furthermore observed that since he had no “interest to defend in this city,” Grant came with “the spirit of war, to tear down.” He challenged the Seventh-day Adventists to a debate, and D. M. Canright took up the challenge.<sup>11</sup>

Grant pushed for what he considered Seventh-day Adventist “weak” spots. Whenever he was pushed in a corner, according to James White, he would attack their understanding of the “two covenants.”<sup>12</sup> This subsequently prompted an article by Uriah Smith on the covenants as a direct response to these attacks.<sup>13</sup> As the debate unfolded, Grant alleged that James and Ellen G. White were “wild fanatics.” She “was inspired by a demon, the same as all spirit mediums.” He said that he had a letter from Israel Dammon stating that he had been personally acquainted with the Whites when she had her first visions. At first Dammon had confidence in them, but then later renounced them. Ellen White furthermore saw in vision that Saturday was the Sabbath, and thus introduced it among Adventists. Canright replied:

I stated that I was personally acquainted with Eld. Dammon, and knew him to be a notorious fanatic. While preaching, he will halloo, and jump about, even over the desk into the congregation. He was a leader of a band of fanatics in Maine in 1845 who held that the dead had arisen and gone up. The

visions condemned him for his fanaticism, which caused him to turn against them. He was associated with one Simeon Hall, who disturbed my meetings to that degree that I had to have him arrested to keep the peace.<sup>14</sup>

It appears that Canright's response, at least regarding the alleged testimony of Israel Dammon, was sufficient to squelch any future attacks from Grant, at least on this point. Although Seventh-day Adventists had faced fierce opposition, this aggressive attack by Grant was unprecedented from the perspective of early Seventh-day Adventist Church leaders. At the same time, Uriah Smith saw God's hand in the "recent contest between truth and error" and "resulted in greatly strengthening the friends of truth" in California.<sup>15</sup> A year later, the "first-day Adventists" in California were split because of Grant's harsh attacks upon Seventh-day Adventists.<sup>16</sup> Ellen G. White's counsel of caution and to show kindness to opponents appears to have won over some of the early Advent Christians who lived in California.

### **Observations**

The debate of 1874 between Miles Grant and D. M. Canright certainly provides a rare window into the interactions between Seventh-day Adventists and the Advent Christian Church. The much earlier 1868 saga between the Whites and Grant furthermore helps explain the intense animosity that Grant carried with him the rest of his life toward Ellen G. White and the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Yet I believe the real significance of the 1874 debate for current Ellen White Studies has to do with Miles Grant's use of a letter by Israel Dammon. Canright later went through his own crisis of faith. He permanently resigned from the Seventh-day Adventist Church on Feb. 17, 1887. He subsequently published two major books, *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced*<sup>17</sup> (1887) and *Life of Mrs. E. G. White* (1919).<sup>18</sup> As Adventist historian Jud Lake has ably demonstrated, Canright systematized all previous criticisms as well as adding some of his own. He is thus rightly considered the "father" of Ellen G. White critics.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, if Canright felt there was even the slightest credibility to Israel Dammon's accusations, it would therefore make sense that he would have used this with his arsenal of arguments against Ellen G. White. He was certainly familiar with the criticism and interacted with Dammon at some unknown point during his evangelistic work in Maine (presumably between 1866 to 1868 when Canright "labored" extensively in that state). The fact is that after Canright's apostasy, he never mentions Dammon in his attacks against Ellen G. White and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Obviously, he was familiar with the criticism, and while he presumably would have liked to use it to undermine her prophetic authority, the absence of Dammon in his arsenal of criticisms gives credibility to Ellen G. White's later (1860) version about what transpired. Although historians generally attribute earlier historical sources as being more reliable than later ones, in this particular instance there is no earlier source with which to compare Ellen G. White's account. This incident therefore shows that Ellen G. White's later account should be considered more reliable.

The description of Israel Dammon by D. M. Canright furthermore gives greater perspective to Ellen G. White's later description: Dammon was someone who initially believed Ellen G. Harmon's early visions, but who repudiated them once he was the recipient of one of her visions. Ellen Harmon received a vision when the bedlam occurred. Could it be that he was the recipient of reproof? It seems possible, perhaps even likely, that as Ellen G. Harmon shared her vision that included reproof, their negative response was the catalyst for the pandemonium that ensued.

Altogether, this new evidence from the 1874 debate over Israel Dammon's arrest and trial (as well as Canright's subsequent silence on the topic after his apostasy) showcases the early prophetic role of Ellen G. Harmon during the first few weeks and months of her ministry. She clearly understood her role as one in which she both encouraged the "scattered flock" but, although timid, sought to share messages or reproof through divine revelation.

Michael W. Campbell is Assistant Professor of Historical/Theological Studies at the Adventist International Institute for Advanced Studies (AIAS) in Silang, Cavite, Philippines

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<sup>1</sup>For an overview, see Michael W. Campbell, “Ecstatic Experiences,” in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013), 791-793.

<sup>2</sup>Douglas Hackleman, “A Question of Character,” in *Adventist Currents* (April 1988), 3.

<sup>3</sup>James R. Nix, “Another Look at Israel Dammon,” unpublished paper available at: [http://www.whiteestate.org/issues/israel\\_damman.html](http://www.whiteestate.org/issues/israel_damman.html); idem., “Israel Dammon,” in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*. Ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013), 358-360.

<sup>4</sup>Michael W. Campbell, “California,” in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013), 671-673.

<sup>5</sup>See note, *Review and Herald*, Dec. 20, 1873, 20.

<sup>6</sup>This early reconstruction of how Miles Grant came to Santa Rosa is based upon Ellen G. White’s diary. See Manuscript 3, 1874, entries Jan. 4, 11, and Feb. 8, 1874.

<sup>7</sup>Denis Fortin, “Miles Grant,” in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*.

<sup>8</sup>*Review and Herald*, Nov. 17, 1868., 244-245.

<sup>9</sup>[Uriah Smith], “Springfield Camp-meeting,” *Review and Herald Extra*, April 14, 1874., 2.

<sup>10</sup>Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), vol. 3, 36, 37.

<sup>11</sup>James White, “The Cause on the Pacific,” *Review and Herald*, April 7, 1874, 134.

<sup>12</sup>James White, “Discussion at Napa,” *Review and Herald*, April 21, 1874, 152.

<sup>13</sup>Uriah Smith, “Which is Right?” *Review and Herald*, Dec. 8, 1874, 188-189.

<sup>14</sup>D. M. Canright, “Eld. Grant’s Attack Upon Eld. James White and Wife at Napa, Cal., March 28, 1874,” *Review and Herald Extra*, April 14, 1874, 3.

<sup>15</sup>See comment by U[riah] S[mith], *Review and Herald*, May 26, 1874, 192.

<sup>16</sup>See James White’s description in *Review and Herald*, Nov. 4, 1875, 138.

<sup>17</sup>D. M. Canright, *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced: After an Experience of Twenty-eight Years* (Kalamazoo, MI: Kalamazoo Publishing Co. Print, 1887, 1888).

<sup>18</sup>D. M. Canright, *Life of Mrs. E. G. White, Seventh-day Adventist Prophet: Her False Claims Refuted* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard Publishing Company, 1919).

<sup>19</sup>Jud Lake, *Ellen White Under Fire* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2010), 45-64.