

Book Review

Donald Edward Casebolt. *Father Miller's Daughter: Ellen Harmon White.* Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022. 318 pp.

Donald Edward Casebolt's book, *Father Miller's Daughter: Ellen Harmon White*, is part of a new wave of critical publications countering Ellen White's claim of having the modern manifestation of the gift of prophecy, and by extension against the Seventh-day Adventist denomination that accepts her prophetic gift as true and genuine. The book is the second and more extensive treatment of Casebolt's shorter and more popular version, *Child of the Apocalypse: Ellen G. White*.¹ While the topics are identical, this volume is comprised of nearly 300 pages with hundreds of footnotes and references. Furthermore, the verbosity and content of the book may be more challenging for most readers and those who are not familiar with the history of Millerism, Seventh-day Adventism, and their theologies.

In general, Casebolt makes at least three major assertions. First, he critiques Miller's hermeneutical methodology and teachings that led to multiple failed predictions of the second coming of Christ. Although Miller never set the exact day of October 22, 1844, he was ultimately responsible for such attempts by other Millerites, the author claims. Besides, Casebolt alleges that Miller's interpretation of the Scriptures was not based on a "literal" and "commonsense" approach relying solely on the plain reading of the Bible and his concordance (p. 2, 5). Rather, Miller utilized a "fanciful, arbitrary, allegorical-typological historical 'methodology'" that contradicted the Bible and led him to wrong readings and interpretations of history and Biblical prophecy (p. x). As he put it at the end, "Miller was not only demonstrably wrong; he was *systematically and consistently wrong*" (p. 288).²

¹ Donald Edward Casebolt, *Child of the Apocalypse: Ellen G. White* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2021).

² Italics in the text.

Second, Casebolt argues that Ellen Harmon (White) endorsed Miller's calculations as being divinely inspired. While she did not accept all of his schemes and assertions, she was "intellectually dependent on Miller for the overwhelming majority of them" (p. 75).³ In contrast to some other critics of Ellen White, however, Casebolt argues that her acceptance of Miller's date-setting and other interpretations was a result of her inability to understand and grasp the biblical misconceptions and reasoning of Miller. After all, she was an immature teenager at the time (p. 20). It is in this sense, that according to the author, she was "Father Miller's spiritual daughter" and his "most important convert" (p. 1).

After the Great Disappointment, Ellen Harmon and other "shut door" believers continued to use the same "allegorical-typological" historical method to resolve their disillusionment. The first thirteen chapters of the book document what Casebolt argues to be "Ellen White's dependence upon erroneous Millerite eschatological themes" (p. 17). She utilized the teachings and prophetic methodology of William Miller, S.S. Snow, Joseph Turner, and O.R.I. Crosier. As such, she was intellectually dependent on erroneous statements and interpretations from human sources and not on visions or divine guidance as she claimed (p. 20, 287–288).

This leads us to the third assertion of Casebolt's thesis. Not only did Ellen White employ William Miller's wrong interpretations, but she also influenced the future Seventh-day Adventist Church and its theological reasoning and beliefs. All of Miller's "faulty conclusions became the collective intellectual property of Ellen White's church," Casebolt pens. Moreover, until today Seventh-day Adventists have retained the "historically and hermeneutically inaccurate paradigm of Miller," his Bible study method, and interpretations (p. xiv).⁴ Thus, the author is not only sceptical of Ellen White's prophetic claims but critical of the whole theological package of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.

The content of the book, based on the above three assertions, would not shock, or provide unknown critical examples of Ellen White or the Seventh-day Adventist theology. The narrative, however, looks at the controversial

³See other examples on pp. 101, 114, 284, 287 for similar conclusions.

⁴The term, "Ellen White's church," is inaccurate, although she was one of the three main founders of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.

questions from the lenses of the Millerite hermeneutics, which Casebolt sees as faulty. He critiques themes such as: the October 22, 1844 date and its prophetic significance; the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1840 as argued and predicted by Josiah Litch; the year-day principle; the Heavenly sanctuary and the ministry of Jesus; the “shut door” theory; the eschatological significance of the Sabbath; the meaning of “the daily” in the book of Daniel; the historical implication of the Waldenses; the role of the Papacy within Christian history; Ellen White as a source of Seventh-day Adventist doctrines. Casebolt even includes a chapter on “solitary vice” – an issue that is not directly related to the main purpose of the book but exposes one of the authors main presuppositions – namely that Ellen White did not receive visions from God but got her “light” from human sources (p. 284).

The book ends with a “Summary of Evidence” and a confessional “Epilogue.” The Seventh-day Adventist church, Casebolt concludes, must face reality, and admit what he thinks has been “demonstrated beyond a reasonable doubt” – the evidence that Ellen White was “taught by men” who were “erroneous.” “It will be extremely difficult for the SDA community to admit such facts. But it is the only intellectually honest thing to do,” he writes. “And a commitment to the Truth is a very important moral value for Seventh-day Adventism” (p. 288). In other words, the Seventh-day Adventist theological system is built upon inaccurate visionary statements that contradict empirical and Biblical facts. Then, the epilogue explains Casebolt’s own understanding on the meaning of the “spirit of prophecy” – God’s love displayed “in action” by his followers (p. 293).

Evaluations and Assessments

Based on the above overview of the book, here are a few general observations. First, those who read the book will note that Casebolt has done extensive research on the topic. The book is well referenced although he could have used many more primary sources that are available today. His arguments are not necessarily new, but they must be taken seriously since they touch the core of Seventh-day Adventist theology and its peculiarity. On the other hand, the book lacks any logical organization. There is not a clear progression of arguments that one can follow. One will find a lot of repetitions and duplications of similar thoughts and ideas in almost every chapter of the book. The author

is passionate about certain critical positions, and he echoes them over and over again.

Second, Casebolt comes across as having very strong personal presuppositions. He has already pre-determined that Ellen White's prophetic claims are false, and that Seventh-day Adventist theology is based on wrong hermeneutics, that of William Miller. Moreover, Casebolt approaches the spiritual dimension of Ellen White's prophetic claims from a purely humanistic (horizontal) perspective neglecting the spiritual (vertical) reality of human experience.⁵ But secular methodology cannot adequately explain spiritual realities. Paul was aware of that when he wrote that spiritual things are "discerned only through the Spirit" (1 Cor. 2:14, NIV). If Casebolt's reasoning is applied to the Bible, one could easily reject its divine revelation, too.

This leads me to my third and final observation. Because of his obvious presuppositions, Casebolt seems to be very partial and selective in his narrative. It seems, he intentionally chooses only certain aspects of William Miller's and Ellen White's thoughts and writings while neglecting others. Historical publications of this type should consider the *totality* of Miller's and White's works, development, and ministry. It is only then that more definite and specific conclusions could be established. It is also by taking such a wholistic approach that one can begin to understand better many of the raised issues concerning the adequacy of Miller's hermeneutical principles, Ellen White's "shut door" position, the meaning of "the daily," the eschatological significance of the Sabbath, and other controversial subjects raised in the book. A number of recent works addressing these issues in more balanced way have been published.⁶ Unfortunately, most of the time, Casebolt gives only "half" of the story and robs the reader of getting a fuller picture and context.

⁵ See for example pp. 119–122.

⁶ Examples include: Frank B. Holbrook, ed. *Daniel & Revelation Committee series* (DARCOM), 7 volumes (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference Biblical Research Institute, 1986–1992); George R. Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993); Herbert E. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1998); Alberto R. Timm, "A History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on Biblical and Prophetic Inspiration (1844–2000)," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 10, no. 1/2 (1999): 486–542; Rolf J. Pöhler, *Continuity and Change in Adventist Teaching: A Case Study in Doctrinal Development* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000); George R. Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000); Jeff Crocombe, "A Feast of

Let me illustrate my point. An underlying motive in Casebolt's chapters is his claim that Seventh-day Adventists treat Ellen White's writings and theological positions as Scripture (p. 166). Illustrative are two paragraphs in his summary at the end. Casebolt writes: "Although the SDA church has always denied that she [Ellen White] is inerrant, for all practical purposes she is at least semi-canonical" (pp. 288–289). In a way, Casebolt wants to leave the reader with such impressions. Of course, Casebolt's claim is not new or unique. Similar arguments were brought and published by the "Messenger Party" in the 1850s and have continued to be raised until today.⁷ Yet, the Adventist church, at its best, has maintained a very balanced position on the role of Ellen White's prophetic gift and its relationship to the Bible. While Ellen White is accepted to have the same divine inspiration, her writings are not considered to be equal to the Bible. Her gift is a part of the biblical description of the gifts of the Spirit for the church. Seventh-day Adventists do not have "another Canon" or "an addition" to the Bible. Rather, a major role of Ellen White's gift was to bring people back to the Scripture and its teachings. As early as 1851, James White noted, "The gifts of the Spirit should all have their proper place. The Bible is an everlasting rock. It is our rule of faith and practice. . . . Every Christian is therefore in duty bound to take the Bible as a perfect rule of faith and duty. He should pray fervently to be aided by the Holy Spirit in searching the Scriptures for the whole truth, and for his whole duty. He is not at liberty to turn from them to learn his duty through any of the gifts. We

Reason': The Roots of William Miller's Biblical Interpretation and its Influence on the Seventh-day Adventist Church," Ph.D. Diss. (University of Queensland, Australia, 2011); Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, eds., *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013); Merlin D. Burt, ed. *Understanding Ellen White* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2015); Alberto R. Timm and Dwain N. Esmond, eds., *The Gift of Prophecy in Scripture and History* (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald, 2015); Theodore N. Levterov, *Accepting Ellen White: Early Seventh-day Adventists and the Gift of Prophecy Dilemma* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2016); Denis Kaiser, *Trust and Doubt: Perceptions of Divine Inspiration in Seventh-day Adventist History* (St. Peter am Hart: Austria: Seminar Schloss Bogenhofen, 2019); Frank M. Hasel, ed., *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2020); Kwabena Donkor, *The Pillars of Adventism in the World Today: Being Seventh-day Adventist and Knowing Why* (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald, 2024).

⁷ Levterov 2016, 34–35.

say that the very moment he does, he places the gifts in a wrong place, and takes an extremely dangerous position.”⁸

Ellen White herself has shown a strong opinion on this topic, too. “Many come to us with the inquiry: Shall I do this? Shall I engage in that enterprise? Or, in regard to dress, Shall I wear this or that article,” she wrote in 1868. “I answer them: You profess to be disciples of Christ. Study your Bibles. Read carefully and prayerfully the life of our dear Saviour when He dwelt among men upon the earth. Imitate His life, and you will not be found straying from the narrow path. We utterly refuse to be conscience for you. If we tell you what to do, you will look to us to guide you, instead of going directly to Jesus for yourselves.”⁹

Now, I have to say that Casebolt has the freedom to disagree with the Adventist position and reject Ellen White’s prophetic claims. This is his right. However, those who read the book must be aware of his presumptions and partiality. After all, a reasonable conclusion is based only when one knows all of the facts. Seventh-day Adventists have had a long history with Ellen White’s prophetic claims and have concluded, based on evidence and spiritual experience, that she was given the true prophetic gift. Many have been blessed and have experienced spiritual renewal by reading her writings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Donald Casebolt has written a book that may be of interest to those who know Millerite and Seventh-day Adventist history. The book repeats previously raised objections against Ellen White and Seventh-day Adventist beliefs. What is unique about Casebolt’s work is that he does his critical examinations through the lenses of Millerite hermeneutics. The book is well-researched but lacks coherence and unity of thought. Furthermore, Casebolt’s subjectivity and presuppositions against the gift of prophecy and Adventist theology are clearly noticeable.

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⁸ James White, “The Gifts of the Gospel Church,” *Review and Herald*, April 21, 1851, 70.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1948), 2:119.