

Ellen White and Old English

While working on a project, I recently read a piece by Arthur L. White (“Ellen G. White’s Portrayal of the Great Controversy Story” (May 12, 1969), <https://whiteestate.org/legacy/issues-4sop-supp-html/>) on the development of her cosmic conflict theme. At one point, Arthur included a quotation from Ellen’s *Colporteur Ministry*, a compilation of her sayings on selling religious books. This particular saying originally came from one of her letters in 1890. In it, she mentioned that the Lord gave her a charge, “Write in a book the things which thou hast seen and heard, and let it go to all the people; for the time is at hand when past history will be repeated.”

“Things which *thou hast* seen and heard”! Ellen was quoting a celestial voice (presumably the Lord) not only speaking English – to be expected – but talking in the language used by the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible! I was astounded. Of course, Ellen White usually quoted the Bible from the KJV, a translation that sought to faithfully render the number of the second person pronoun found in the original, underlying languages, where singular and plural forms are used. To do this, the KJV employed the second person pronouns used in Old English, i.e., “thou,” “thy,” and “thee” as singular forms; “ye” and “you” as plural forms. The translation also used the conjugated forms of verbs from Old English, e.g., “thou hast seen” and “he saith.”

Of course, we don’t speak that way today. In fact, almost no one has spoken like that for over four centuries – especially in the United States, including in Ellen’s day. But what she wrote in her 1890 letter seems to imply that she thought that Old English was spoken in heaven or, at least, by celestial figures speaking to Americans in the 19th century!

This led me to wonder if Ellen was consistent in this regard. Did she routinely employ Old English forms outside her quoting the KJV? Because I was working on a project involving her book *The Great Controversy*, I decided to look through not only that book but also its literary predecessors for potential evidence. This provided a slice of White tradition that spanned her entire literary career.

Her *Early Writings* contains three examples of such use of Old English. In the first, she said she heard some former Sabbath keepers at the end of time admitting, “We have believed in Thy coming, and taught it with energy” (p. 37). Two cases involve angels who speak Old English. One said to Ellen, “Remember, thou art on the enchanted ground” (p. 60). Another summoned Jesus from the tomb, “Thou Son of God, Thy Father calls Thee! Come forth.” Apparently, angels were speaking Old English from the 1st to the 19th centuries!

The one example I found in *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 1. essentially repeats the angel’s calling Jesus forth, “Thou Son of God! Thy Father calls thee! Come forth!!” (p. 66) There is no biblical record of this summons.

In *The Spirit of Prophecy*, Vol. 4 (SOP4), Ellen uses non-KJV, Old English language in several settings. Between quotations of Matt 23:37 and John 5:40, she inserts a long, non-biblical statement by Jesus, that matches the Old English of the quotes: “Oh that thou, a nation favored above every other, hadst known the time of thy visitation, and the things that belong unto thy peace! I have stayed the angel of justice, I have called thee to repentance, but all in vain. It is not

merely servants, delegates, and prophets, whom thou hast refused and rejected, but the Holy One of Israel, thy Redeemer. If thou art destroyed, thou art alone responsible” (pp. 21-22). The “Judge of all the earth (presumably God) asks “Satan,” “Why hast thou rebelled against me, and robbed me of the subjects of my kingdom?” (p. 323). God announces the verdict of certain “men in holy office”: “Depart, thou wicked servant” (p. 458).

In this book, she introduces a statement made to Martin Luther and two of his prayers that include Old English. One person, “an old general,” said, “Poor monk! poor monk! thou art now going to make a nobler stand than I, or any other captains, have ever made in our most bloody battles. But if thy cause is just, and thou art sure of it, go forward in God’s name, and fear nothing! He will not forsake thee” (p. 128). She reports that he prayed, “The work is not mine, but thine own . . . ; thou wilt not suffer it to be corrupted by superstition or fanaticism” (148). Luther also prayed, “I know that thou art our Father and our God, . . . and that thou wilt scatter the persecutors of thy children; for thou art thyself endangered with us. All this matter is thine, and it is only by thy constraint that we have our hands to it. Defend us then, O Father!” (p. 168) Because Ellen found these materials, including their Old English language usage, in the English translations of Reformation historians or original English works, they do not provide direct evidence of her own tendencies in this regard.

The Great Controversy (GC) significantly extends *SOP4*’s quoting of Luther with Old English language and adds similar quotes from Jerome, Huss, Zwingli, Calvin, and Wesley, all from various historians. It also includes essentially the same, lengthy insertion of Jesus’ words (p. 22); the statement of “Judge” to “Satan” (p. 503); and God’s verdict on the “men in holy office” (p. 640) as found in *SOP4*.

GC includes two unique examples of Ellen’s practice regarding Old English. After referring to the need for guidance by the “Spirit of truth,” she declares that “Every follower of Christ should earnestly inquire: ‘Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?’” (p. 601) She also predicts that Christ will present his followers to the Father with the words, “Here am I, and the children whom Thou hast given Me.” “Those that Thou gavest Me I have kept” (p. 646).

This slice of Ellen White tradition clearly shows her using Old English language forms when reporting speaking situations from the 1st century to projected speech after the Parousia, i.e., the future return of Jesus. The Old English speakers are on earth and in heaven, including humans, angels, Jesus, and God. In reporting on the Protestant Reformation, she incorporates the Old English language messages, speeches, and prayers of all the well-known reformers as reported by the historians she used. For whatever reason when reporting speech from past, present, and future religiously-related situations, Ellen White chose to convey such speech in Old English. That she would render this in *English* because of her own language and that of most of her readers is understandable. That she consistently conveys such speech in *Old English* is baffling and absurd.