

# THE HISTORY OF THE 1888 MESSAGE

By Paul Penno Jr.

Sep. 14, 2011

George Santayana wisely said, “A nation that does not know its history is fated to repeat it.”<sup>1</sup> We could well paraphrase him to say that a denomination that does not know its own history “is fated to repeat it.” We must know it before the gospel commission can be finished: “The Lord has declared that the history of the past shall be rehearsed as we enter upon the closing work.”<sup>2</sup>

If the time is near for “the closing work”, as we hope, we may also believe that the time is here when the “history of the past” must be faithfully, honestly “rehearsed.” “We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history.”<sup>3</sup> For once in history we must not repeat history.

Ancient Israel failed on the borders of the Promised Land, to turn back for forty years of wandering. The New English Bible says that Moses sent twelve “leading men” to “explore” the Canaanites’ land, “whether it is easy or difficult country in which to live.” Ten “explorers” thought it was “difficult,” and two thought “it is easy. . . . Let us go up at once and occupy the country.”<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Edith Hamilton in *Saturday Evening Post*, Sept. 27, 1958.

<sup>2</sup> *2 Selected Messages*, p. 390 (MS. 129, 1905).

<sup>3</sup> *Life Sketches*, p. 196.

<sup>4</sup> Num. 13:3, 16, 18, 30, NEB.

Seventh-day Adventists understand this episode as a “type,” and our 1888 history and its aftermath as the “antitype.” The Lord sent two “messengers” to “explore” the finishing of the gospel commission, who brought a report that it is “easy” rather than “difficult if only we believe the word of the Lord; and He sent the message first to ‘leading men’ at the 1888 General Conference Session.”<sup>5</sup>

Throughout her seven decades of service as special messenger to the remnant church, Ellen White revealed more than human ability to discern true issues beneath the surface. Never is her prophetic gift more clearly enhanced than in her comprehension of the 1888 message and its history. For example:

The Lord in His great mercy sent a most precious message to His people through Elders [A. T.] Jones and [E. J.] Waggoner. . . . This is the message that God commanded to be given to the world, . . . proclaimed with a loud voice, and attended with the outpouring of His Spirit in a large measure.<sup>6</sup>

The “Beginning” of the Fourth Angel’s Message Jones’ and Waggoner’s message was “good news” of deliverance from sin, an “easy” conquest by faith of the only remaining hurdle between God’s people and entering their Promised Land. Ellen

---

<sup>5</sup> E. J. Waggoner communicated his convictions to the General Conference president, George I. Butler, in a letter dated Feb. 10, 1887, and published “nearly two years later” (*The Gospel in Galatians*), p. 1. The opportunity to accept the light was given the “leading men” at an official session of the church.

<sup>6</sup> *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 91, 92.

White soon recognized it as the “beginning” of the long-awaited “Loud Cry” that is to lighten the earth with glory:

The time of test is just upon us, for the loud cry of the third angel has already begun in the revelation of Christ, the sin-pardoning Redeemer. This is the beginning of the light of the angel whose glory shall fill the whole earth.<sup>7</sup>

Frequently she referred to the message as the initial outpouring of the Latter Rain of the Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup> As a farmer’s crops need rain if the harvest is to come, so the Latter Rain is to ripen the “grain” and prepare “for the sickle.” This is “the completion of the work of God’s grace in the soul . . . that prepares the church for the coming of the Son of man.”<sup>9</sup> And Satan’s slanderous charges against God can never be silenced and the “great controversy” resolved for the government of God, until His people receive this “completion” of grace “in the soul.” Ellen White and the 1888 messengers spoke openly and frankly about getting ready for “translation” then and there.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> RH Nov. 22, 1892.

<sup>8</sup> See Letter S-256, Aug. 30, 1892; RH July 26, 1892; Special Testimonies, Series A, No. 6, p. 20; A. V. Olson, *Through Crisis to Victory* (hereafter TCV) p. 296 (MS 15, 1888); MS 10, 1889; RH Extra, Dec. 11, 1888; RH May 27, 1890; ST Dec. 22, 1890; ST May 26, 1890; RH Feb. 18, 1890; Letter B2-a, 1892. See also GCB 1893, pp. 183, 377, 463; L. E. Froom, *Movement of Destiny* (hereafter, MD), p. 345; RH Nov. 29, 1892.

<sup>9</sup> *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 506.

<sup>10</sup> Compare GCB 1893, pp. 185, 205; RH Mar. 4, 1890.

She also said that Israel’s “leading men” refused the message so that it was shut “away from our people in a great measure” and “by the action of our own [leading] brethren has been in a great degree kept away from the world.”<sup>11</sup> God’s plan was to give the message first to the leadership; they were to give it to the laity; and the church unitedly was to give it to the world.<sup>12</sup>

Had the purpose of God been carried out in giving the message of mercy to the world, Christ would have come, and the saints would have received their welcome into the city of God.<sup>13</sup>

As Israel’s history at Kadesh-Barnea, can any aspect of our history be more important than our preparation for the sealing, our reception of the Latter Rain, and giving of the Loud Cry, and a preparation for the coming of Christ?

#### Why Was This History Been Neglected?

Yet there has been a strange reticence to investigate and to recognize the facts of our own 1888 history.<sup>14</sup> Two vitally important facts have generally been either ignored or actually denied: (1)

---

<sup>11</sup> 1SM 234, 235 (1896).

<sup>12</sup> See Letter B-2a, 1892; TCV 291, 292 (MS 9, 1888), pp. 297, 301 (MS 15, 1888); compare 1SM 234, 235; see RH Extra Dec. 23, 1890.

<sup>13</sup> RH Dec. 24, 1903.

<sup>14</sup> As early as 1893, a General Conference president recognized that animosity toward facing the history of 1888 had become a serious problem, so that even talking about it was resented (O. A. Olsen, GCB 1893, p. 188): “The very idea that one is grieved over the mention of 1888 shows at once the seed of rebellion in the heart.” This continued resentment is well known today.

that the 1888 message was the “beginning” of the Latter Rain and the Loud Cry; and (2) that it was “in a great degree rejected by our “leading men.” It has been a situation similar to what prevails among the Jews today, who picture Jesus as a clever and gifted rabbi but ignore or deny that He was the Son of God, the true Messiah and who maintain that their ancestors did not reject or crucify Him, but lay the blame instead on the Romans.<sup>15</sup>

Speaking of the 1888 history, Ellen White often said that we were “just like the Jews.”<sup>16</sup> Our “official” histories have generally maintained: (1) The 1888 message was merely “the same doctrine that Luther, Wesley, and many other servants of God in the popular churches had been teaching,”<sup>17</sup> “the recovery, or the restatement and new consciousness, of their faith in the basic doctrine of Christianity,”<sup>18</sup> “a re-emphasis” of what the Evangelical churches had believed all along and that Seventh-day Adventists had finally gotten wise enough to believe.<sup>19</sup> (2) Our “leading men” in

---

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Max I. Dimont, *Jews, God, and History* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1962), pp. 138-142.

<sup>16</sup> See RH April 11 and 18, 1893; Special Testimonies, Series A, No. 6, p. 20; CWE 30; (MS. 13, 1889); FCE 472; 5T 456, 457; TM 78, 79; Special Testimonies to Review and Herald Office, pp. 16, 17; TCV pp. 292 (MS. 9, 1888), 297, 300 (MS. 15, 1888); RH Mar. 11 and Aug. 20, 1890.

<sup>17</sup> L. H. Christian, *The Fruitage of Spiritual Gifts*, p. 239.

<sup>18</sup> A. W. Spalding, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists*, Vol. 2, p. 281.

<sup>19</sup> M. E. Kern, RH Aug. 3, 1950, p. 294; N. F. Pease, *By Faith Alone*, pp. 138, 139, 207, 227; *The Faith That Saves*, pp. 22, 39; Froom, *Movement of Destiny*, pp. 319, 320.

general gladly accepted the message; “the rank and file of Seventh-day Adventists workers and laity accepted the presentations at Minneapolis and were blessed,”<sup>20</sup> and the 1888 Conference “stands out as a glorious victory, . . . the final outcome was good, . . . rich in both holiness and mission fruitage.”<sup>21</sup>

In recent years there has come a change. Many Seventh-day Adventists have been shocked to discover that the 1888 message was in fact the “beginning” of the Loud Cry rather than a mere “re-emphasis” of Lutheranism or Calvinism. The first clear and force recognition of this to come from our presses occurs in L. E. Froom’s recent Movement of Destiny (1971):

1888 truly signaled the beginning of the “time” of the Loud Cry and Latter Rain—and significantly of the inception of the added light and power of the Augmenting Angel of Rev. 18:1.<sup>22</sup>

We entered the “time of the Latter Rain and Loud Cry” in 1888 as verily as in 1798 we entered “time of the end.” . . . He who denies that the Loud Cry began to sound in 1888 impugns the veracity of the Spirit of Prophecy. He who asserts the Latter Rain did not then begin to fall

---

<sup>20</sup> “Second General Conference Report” (Further Appraisal of the Manuscript 1888 Re-examined), General Conference, Sept. 1958, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Christian, *The Fruitage of Spiritual Gifts*, pp. 219, 225, 245.

<sup>22</sup> Christian, *The Fruitage of Spiritual Gifts*, p. 570.

challenges the integrity of God's message related to us.<sup>23</sup>

### THE COMMON DENOMINATOR OF ALL HISTORY

This blindness has hidden from us a significant factor that is a common denominator in Israel's ancient history and in our denominational history. This factor is the reality of man's basic "enmity against God"<sup>24</sup> which is evident even among religious people like those who murdered the Prince of Life.<sup>25</sup> This is always the essence of sin; and it is demonstrated all through Israel's history. When the "leading men among the Israelites" at Kadesh-Barnea rejected the appeal of Caleb and Joshua, "the Lord said to Moses, 'How much longer will this people treat Me with contempt?'"<sup>26</sup> Israel's constant tendency was "to deride the messengers, scorn His words and scoff at His prophets"<sup>27</sup> for this reason, until their "enmity" finally blossomed into ultimate expression in crucifying the Son of God. This same enmity is demonstrated in our own denominational history!

Had Ellen White not rescued the 1888 "explorers" from their opponents, they would have suffered the modern equivalent of the fate that threatened Caleb and Joshua by "the leading men among the Israelites." As A. W. Spalding says, "the preaching of Waggoner and Jones was trying to some of the

---

<sup>23</sup> Christian, *The Fruitage of Spiritual Gifts*, p. 667.

<sup>24</sup> Romans 8:7.

<sup>25</sup> Compare Acts 3:14, 15; 1 Cor. 2:7, 8; Rom. 3:19; TM 38.

<sup>26</sup> Num. 14:11, NEB.

<sup>27</sup> 2 Chron. 36:16 NEB.

older men in the cause . . . [and] seemed to them like treason." There was "personal pique at the messengers," and a "tumult of clerical passions . . . let loose." But Ellen White intervened and "championed" the cause of the two young messengers, "and it was chiefly this support, indeed, which won for it the hearts of the people."<sup>28</sup> Modern Israel's opportunity to enter the "Promised Land" of the Loud Cry was as decidedly rebuffed as ancient Israel's at Kadesh-Barnea. Speaking eight years later "of the opposition manifested at Minneapolis against the Lord's message through Brethren [E. J.] Waggoner and [A. T.] Jones," Mrs. White declared unequivocally that

Satan succeeded in shutting away from our people, in a great measure, the special power of the Holy Spirit that God longed to impart to them. The enemy prevented them from obtaining that efficiency which might have been theirs in carrying the truth to the world, as the apostles proclaimed it after the day of Pentecost. The light that is to lighten the whole earth with its glory was resisted, and by the action of our own brethren [the "leading men"] has been in a great degree kept away from the world.<sup>29</sup>

Until quite recently, the standard view maintained by our official publications has been that our "leading men" gladly received the 1888 message and that the entire episode of our history is one we can rejoice over as a definite "plus." We have fulfilled precisely our Lord's prediction of us as it is

---

<sup>28</sup> A. E. Spalding, op. cit., pp. 291, 293, 295, 297.

<sup>29</sup> 1 SM 234, 235.

in the original Greek: “Because thou sayest, Rich I am and I have been enriched.”<sup>30</sup> The concurrence of our historians’ view with the idle boast of Laodicea is so striking that we note a few examples:

The General Conference at Minneapolis . . . in 1888 is a notable landmark in Seventh-day Adventist history. . . . It stands out as a glorious victory. . . .

. . . The final outcome was good. . . . The Lord gave His people a marvelous victory.

. . . It marked the beginning of a new era of spiritual awakening and growth.

It was really at the General Conference session of 1893 that light on justification by faith seemed to gain its greatest victory. . . .

. . . The aftereffect of the great Minneapolis revival was . . . rich in both holiness and mission fruitage.<sup>31</sup>

The last decade of the century saw the church developing, through this 1888 gospel, into a company prepared to fulfill the mission of God.<sup>32</sup>

The rank and file of Seventh-day Adventist workers and laity accepted the presentations at Minneapolis and were blessed.<sup>33</sup>

Does this mean that the church as a whole, or even its leadership, rejected the 1888 message?

Not at all. Some rejected it—a vocal minority. Others accepted it gladly. Others were at first confused, but soon accepted it. . . . The new leadership wholeheartedly endorsed the new emphasis.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, the strongest assertions of “acceptance” and “victory” ever published appear in the volumes, *Through Crisis to Victory 1888-1901*, by A. V. Olson, and *Movement of Destiny*, by L. E. Froom.<sup>35</sup>

This is in spite of the inconsistency of maintaining on the one hand as Froom does that the 1888 message was the beginning of the Loud Cry, and being forced on the other hand to recognize that many decades of inexplicable delay have followed.

The candid reader soon recognizes that something somewhere must have gone drastically wrong similar to Israel’s reaction against the message of Caleb and Joshua. Where Ellen White said, “Satan succeeded . . . in a great measure,” these historians say we enjoyed “a glorious victory.”

#### THE BACKGROUND OF THE 1888 MESSAGE

For those who have not had time to read deeply into the history of the 1888 message, here is a brief outline. Due to space limitations, we cannot attempt to document each item except to refer the reader in the end notes to sources where he can verify the facts:

---

<sup>30</sup> Literal Greek of Rev. 3:17, *legeis hoti plousios eimi kai peplouteka* (“I have been enriched” or “I have become rich”).

<sup>31</sup> L. H. Christian, *The Fruitage of Spiritual Gifts*, pp. 219, 223, 225, 237, 241, 245.

<sup>32</sup> Spalding, op. cit., p. 303.

<sup>33</sup> “Second Gen. Conf. Report,” pp. 7, 11.

---

<sup>34</sup> Marjorie Lewis Lloyd, *Too Slow Getting Off*, pp. 19, 20.

<sup>35</sup> See Olson, pp. 7, 233-239 (the ministry has accepted and preached the message with power—the laity hold back; see Froom, *Movement of Destiny*, pp. 357-374, 445, etc.

1. The Seventh-day Adventist church was “born” in an experience of true love for Jesus which was evident in the 1844 movement.<sup>36</sup>

2. Although our people had become aware as early as 1856 that the Laodicean message applied uniquely to the remnant church, the message had not done its work. By the 1880’s the church had settled into a generally lukewarm condition.<sup>37</sup>

3. In the 1880’s, Ellen White wrote burning messages of appeal to the church at large to accept the counsel of the True Witness.<sup>38</sup> She often said that we had “left [our] first love.”<sup>39</sup>

4. While the church was retrograding spiritually, it was advancing financially, in number of adherents, and in the prestige of its institutions. A heart-preparation for the coming of Christ receded into the background.

5. Our ministers and evangelists enjoyed almost uninterrupted success in arguing and debating the doctrines of “present truth” before the people. Pride and self-esteem flourished in the ministers and leadership.

6. As early as 1882, the Lord began to prepare two messengers who in His providence would be ready by 1888 to call the church to repentance and

---

<sup>36</sup> See GC 369-373; EW 238; SR 369-74; GC 398, 400, 402.

<sup>37</sup> See A. G. Daniells, *Christ Our Righteousness*, pp. 27-40 (not to be confused with Waggoner’s *Christ and His Righteousness*).

<sup>38</sup> For example, RH Nov 2, 1886; July 24, 1888; Oct. 28, 1884; Aug. 31, 1886; Jan. 31, 1888; July 3, 1888.

<sup>39</sup> For example, TM 167-173; RH Sept. 3, 1889; Dec. 9, 1890.

revival, and thus to present a clearer understanding of “the third angel’s message in verity.”<sup>40</sup> Passing by those whom He could not use, He gave these young men “heavenly credentials.”<sup>41</sup>

7. The Lord educated and disciplined them so that they were able to honor His name at the time of the 1888 Conference.<sup>42</sup> Ellen White supported them unequivocally.<sup>43</sup> Their message was pure, beautiful gospel truth.<sup>44</sup>

8. Although most of the “leading men” rejected their message,<sup>45</sup> Ellen White’s support made it possible for Jones and Waggoner to visit institutes

---

<sup>40</sup> Compare E. J. Waggoner’s account of his “vision” of “Christ crucified” in 1882 (“Last Confession of Faith,” written before his death May 28, 1916) with 5T 81, 81 (also 1882); and *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, article on Jones.

<sup>41</sup> Ellen White, RH Mar. 18, 1890; May 27, 1890; Sept. 3, 1889, TM 413.

<sup>42</sup> Jones’ diligent study pre-1888 is described in *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, article on A. T. Jones, also in Spalding, op. cit., p. 291. Both Jones and Waggoner received reproof from Ellen White (cf. CWE 75-82, Letter Feb. 18, 1887) and apparently accepted it in humble spirit.

<sup>43</sup> It is impossible to document all the Ellen White endorsements of their message which keep coming to light. The total is now well over 200.

<sup>44</sup> See the following chapter, “What Was the 1888 Message?” After 1890 and even through 1896, we do not find an Ellen White statement questioning the basic theological understanding shared by Jones and Waggoner.

<sup>45</sup> See TCV pp. 290, 291, 292 (MS. 9, 1888); p. 301 (“at this meeting. . . . opposition, rather than investigation, is the order of the day”, MS. 15, 1888); Letter B-21-1888 (“The spirit and influence of the ministers generally who have come to this meeting is to discard light”, Oct. 14); 1 SM 234, 235.

and camp meetings with her after the 1888 Conference, where the message demonstrated its “credentials” in phenomenal revivals and reformation.<sup>46</sup> “Like a wave of glory, the blessings of God swept over us,” said Ellen White. “We felt the deep movings of His Spirit.”<sup>47</sup> Never since the “Midnight Cry” of 1844 had the Holy Spirit so wonderfully endorsed a message among us.<sup>48</sup> This created a new problem: a spirit of “jealousy” came in among the “leading men” and now “they hated it the more, because it was a testimony against them. They would not humble their hearts to repent, to give God the glory, and vindicate the right.”<sup>49</sup> They “stood to bar the way against all evidence.”<sup>50</sup> In the midst of these stirring revivals, Ellen White wrote plaintively in the *Review & Herald*, “How long will those at the head of the work keep themselves aloof from the message of God?”<sup>51</sup> Due to their opposing influence, “the people . . . do not know whether to come and take hold of this precious truth or not.”<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> See Olson, pp. 58-81.

<sup>47</sup> RH Mar. 18, 1890.

<sup>48</sup> Some examples of the intensity of this revival can be found in RH Feb. 12, 1889, and following issues of Feb. 19, Mar. 5, July 23, Sept. 3. Nothing like it was known before nor has been known since in the Seventh-day Adventist church.

<sup>49</sup> Letter S-24, 1892 (“Some of our brethren . . . are full of jealousy . . . and are ever ready to show in just what way they differ with Elder Jones or Waggoner”); compare TM 80.

<sup>50</sup> Letter 10, 1892.

<sup>51</sup> RH Mar. 18, 1890.

<sup>52</sup> RH Mar. 11, 1890.

9. Although “many” of the leading brethren in fact rejected the message and only a “few” in heart accepted it,<sup>53</sup> some later confessed how mistaken they were.<sup>54</sup> These “confessions” are the basis for most of the historians’ insistence on a “glorious victory.”<sup>55</sup> However, many previously unknown Ellen White statements now disclose how leaders who “confessed” later returned to their spirit of unbelief and rejection, or failed to help in the crisis.<sup>56</sup> As the

---

<sup>53</sup> No statement exists in which Ellen White refers to those who accepted the message as “many”; invariably they are “few.” The rejectors are always “many.” (“Some” is indefinite and can mean either unless context is clear.) See TM 64, 65, 76, 77, 89-97; her Diary for Jan. 29, 31, Feb. 1, 8, 1890; Daniells, *The Abiding Gift of Prophecy*, p. 369 (“The Lord’s messenger took her stand almost alone [with Jones and Waggoner] . . . amid either hesitancy or active opposition on the part of many.”) The fact that “some” accepted must not be minimized; but the “many” who rejected overwhelmed them (see TM 80, 89-97; RH Mar. 18, 1890; MS. 2, 1890, p. 3).

<sup>54</sup> See Olson, pp. 81-114.

<sup>55</sup> See Froom, *op. cit.*, pp. 367-370, Spalding, p. 297. Christian does not even mention the “confessions,” as he assumes Minneapolis to be a “glorious victory.”

<sup>56</sup> Most of these Ellen White statements are as yet unreleased, but can be checked in the manuscript vaults. See Letter S-24, 1892 addressed to Uriah Smith, and RH May 10, 1892 for evidence that he was still opposing the message after his confession; Ellen White Letter to Jan. 9, 1893 (“This blind warfare [against Jones and Waggoner] is continued,” speaking of Smith.) See Letter S-256-1892 which mentions “Elder Smith, Elder Van Horn and Elder Butler” as still opposing and who “will meet with eternal loss; for though they should repent and be saved at last, they can never regain that which they have lost” (Aug. 30, 1892).

nineteenth century at last turned into the twentieth, “not one” of the initial rejectors was helping to proclaim the message effectively!<sup>57</sup>

10. Ministers who lived through that era generally reminisced their personal assumptions that the 1888 message was well accepted.<sup>58</sup> Their “affidavits” allegedly prove that “there was no denomination-wide or leadership-wide rejection, these witnesses insisted.”<sup>59</sup> Were these brethren who lived through that era able rightly to discern the real significance of what was happening?

We wish to afford the honored brethren of that era the utmost respect and deference which they are due. But do we dare accept their assumption in clear contradiction to the testimony of the Lord’s messenger who exercised the gift of prophecy? To doubt or contradict Ellen White’s judgment here is to discredit her life ministry, for never was she so emphatic about any stand she ever took as she was regarding the 1888 message and history.

---

<sup>57</sup> See Letter B2-1, 1892, where she says that “not one” of those who opposed the light at Minneapolis had to date come to the light. This was after most of the confessions. Pease says “no Elishas were in evidence by 1900 ready to assume the mantle in case something should happen to the three principal champions . . .” (*By Faith Alone*, p. 164). This is true.

<sup>58</sup> See C. McReynolds, “Experiences While at the General Conference in Minneapolis . . .” D. File 189; Froom, pp. 255-268. R. T. Nash in his “Eyewitness Report” is an exception (“The speakers Jones and Waggoner met a united opposition from nearly all the senior ministers,” and says nothing about any later confessions).

<sup>59</sup> Froom, p. 256.