

Ellen White Spoke to Her Dead Husband

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In the article, ["Do God's Prophets take advice from the Dead?"](#) Sidney Cleveland attempts to show that Ellen White spoke with her dead husband and received guidance from him in a dream. In this charge, Cleveland cites a published portion of Letter 17, 1881, written by Ellen White to her son, Willie, on September 12, 1881, five weeks after James White had died. In this letter Mrs. White describes a dream about James. Cleveland claims that in this dream "Ellen White communicated with and received advice from her dead husband, James White—even though God said communicating with the dead (necromancy) is 'detestable' to Him, and worthy of being stoned to death." He cites Isaiah 8:19-20 and Deuteronomy 18:10-12, which condemns the practice of communicating with the dead, and goes on to say, "Don't you think Ellen White should have instantly known that any communication with the dead is prohibited in Scripture – especially when she wrote widely on this topic? If Ellen White was actually inspired by God, why would she take advice from a dead person, thinking it came from the Lord?" He concludes: "The truth about Ellen White is this: she was a false prophet. There is no light in her whatsoever, because a lie cannot be made into the truth, and a false prophet cannot be made true."

Answer:

Mr. Cleveland claims that Ellen White violated what she taught about the state of the dead; therefore she is a false prophet and none of her dreams or visions can be trusted. Underlying this charge is the assumption that Ellen White **believed** she was actually talking with James who died five weeks earlier. Is this assumption supported in Cleveland's argument? Did Mrs. White really believe she conversed with her dead husband and then received guidance from him, as our critic charges? **I suggest that a careful analysis of this letter in its context will lead to a completely different conclusion.**

First of all, please read carefully the section of this letter under question (remember this is a letter to her son, Willie):

"A few days since, I was pleading with the Lord for light in regard to my duty. In the night I dreamed I was in the carriage, driving, sitting at the right hand. Father was in the carriage, seated at my left hand. He was very pale, but calm and composed. "Why Father," I exclaimed, "I am so happy to have you by my side once more! I have felt that half of me was gone. Father, I saw you die; I saw you buried. Has the Lord pitied me and let you come back to me again, and we work together as we used to?"

He looked very sad. He said, "The Lord knows what is best for you and for me. My work was very dear to me. We have made a mistake. We have responded to urgent invitations of our brethren to attend important meetings. We had not the heart to refuse. These meetings have worn us both more than we were aware. Our good brethren were

gratified, but they did not realize that in these meetings we took upon us greater burdens than at our age we could safely carry. They will never know the result of this long-continued strain upon us. God would have had them bear the burdens we have carried for years. Our nervous energies have been continuously taxed, and then our brethren misjudging our motives and not realizing our burdens have weakened the action of the heart. I have made mistakes, the greatest of which was in allowing my sympathies for the people of God to lead me to take work upon me which others should have borne.

"Now, Ellen, calls will be made as they have been, desiring you to attend important meetings, as has been the case in the past. But lay this matter before God and make no response to the most earnest invitations. Your life hangs as it were upon a thread. You must have quiet rest, freedom from all excitement and from all disagreeable cares. We might have done a great deal for years with our pens, on subjects the people need that we have had light upon and can present before them, which others do not have. Thus you can work when your strength returns, as it will, and you can do far more with your pen than with your voice."

He looked at me appealingly and said, "You will not neglect these cautions, will you, Ellen? Our people will never know under what infirmities we have labored to serve them because our lives were interwoven with the progress of the work, but God knows it all. I regret that I have felt so deeply and labored unreasonably in emergencies, regardless of the laws of life and health. The Lord did not require us to carry so heavy burdens and many of our brethren so few. We ought to have gone to the Pacific Coast before, and devoted our time and energies to writing. Will you do this now? Will you, as your strength returns, take your pen and write out these things we have so long anticipated, and make haste slowly? There is important matter which the people need. Make this your first business. You will have to speak some to the people, but shun the responsibilities which have borne us down."

"Well," said I, "James, you are always to stay with me now and we will work together." Said he, "I stayed in Battle Creek too long. I ought to have gone to California more than one year ago. But I wanted to help the work and institutions at Battle Creek. I have made a mistake. Your heart is tender. You will be inclined to make the same mistakes I have made. Your life can be of use to the cause of God. Oh, those precious subjects the Lord would have had me bring before the people, precious jewels of light!" I awoke. **But this dream seemed so real.** Now you can see and understand why I feel no duty to go to Battle Creek for the purpose of shouldering the responsibilities in General Conference. I have no duty to stand in General Conference. The Lord forbids me. That is enough." (emphasis mine).

(Letter 17, 1881, pages 2-4; published in Arthur White, *Ellen G. White, The Retirement Years*, 161-162, and *Manuscript Releases*: Vol. 10, 38-40.

In understanding any document of the past, its **historical context** must be considered:

The above description of the dream is part of a five-page letter written to Ellen's son, Willie, on September 12, 1881 (Letter 17, 1881). I have carefully studied the entire letter, although it is not yet published (it eventually will be). Here is the historical background to this letter:

James had died on August 6, 1881, five weeks earlier.

Ellen was staying with Mary, Willie's wife, at the cottage they owned in the mountains near Rollinsville, Colorado.

Willie, recipient of this letter, had remained in Battle Creek to work with his brother, Edson, in taking care of the financial affairs concerning James White's estate.

G. I. Butler, General Conference president at the time, was urging Ellen to attend the General Conference session back in Battle Creek being planned for November or December.

Ellen was struggling with illness and the grief of losing her husband. Thus, she was in a weakened condition physically and emotionally.

She had been pleading with the Lord as to whether or not she should yield to Butler and attend the upcoming General Conference session, in spite of her physical and emotional condition.

On page one of this letter, before discussing the dream, she relates to Willie how much she misses James and intensely feels "his loss while here in the mountains" (see A. White, *The Lonely Years*, 182-183).

With this background in mind, please consider the following contextual evidence ignored by Mr. Cleveland.

1. **Ellen White believed communicating with the dead is against Scripture and a Satanic deception.** Mr. Cleveland does make a reference to the fact that Ellen White wrote about death, but he does not specify what she said. Type in "Spiritualism" or "communication with the dead" at the White Estate site search engine and the results will show you that she was adamantly opposed to any form of communication with the dead. The external literary context of her writings is very clear on this issue. From the time she first accepted the biblical doctrine of conditional immortality as a youth (*Testimonies for the Church*, 1:39-40), she consistently taught that death is a state of unconsciousness until the resurrection and that communication with them was not possible. **When understood in its internal literary context, the account of this dream does not show Mrs. White violating in practice a teaching so basic and fundamental to her thinking (see *The Great Controversy*, chapter 34, "Can Our Dead Speak to Us?," 551-562.**

2. The **internal literary context** of the letter provides evidence that Ellen understood this conversation with James as nothing more than a dream. **After relating the entire experience of conversing with James to Willie, she exclaimed, "But this dream seemed so real"** (see the emphasized sentence in the last paragraph of the letter

above). **This statement is completely overlooked by Cleveland, yet it is the interpretive key to understanding the entire experience.** Notice she did **not say** this dream “**was real,**” but that it “**seemed so real.**” **When you describe a vivid dream to me and say, “it seemed so real,” your obvious meaning linguistically is that the images in the dream had the feel of reality, but were only that—dream images. Thus, this statement reveals Mrs. White understood that she was *not* really talking with James.**

3. **While knowing this conversation with James was only a dream, Ellen nevertheless believed it was a message from God in answer to her prayer for guidance.** As such, she understood God was communicating with her through symbolic imagery in this dream, **not through her real husband in spirit form or brought back from the grave.** God often spoke through vivid symbolic imagery in Scriptural prophetic dreams (see Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, “Dreams, Visions,” in *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 217-219). Mrs. White was familiar with vivid imagery in the many prophetic dreams she received. **This particular dream imagery was relevant to her situation in light of her husband’s recent death (see historical context above).** The editor of this website, Dirk Anderson, makes the statement that nowhere in the Bible do we find God speaking through a dead person. This remark avoids the real issue: Ellen White believed God conveyed his message to her through the **imagery** of her husband James, not his disembodied spirit. **Thus, Necromancy (consulting the spirits of the departed) has no application to this dream.**

4. If Ellen was communicating with James in this dream, why did she feel so lonely in the mountains at this time? On page one of this same letter Ellen wrote to Willie:

“I miss Father more and more. Especially do I feel his loss while here in the mountains. I find it a very different thing being in the mountains with my husband and in the mountains without him. I am fully of the opinion that my life was so entwined or interwoven with my husband’s that it is about impossible for me to be of any great account without him. We have tested the mountains under most unfavorable circumstances” (this paragraph published in A.White, *The Lonely Years*, 182-183).

Please notice that this statement is within the same letter. **If she were communicating with her husband in a dream, why did she say in the same letter that she misses him “more and more?”** Why did she speak as if he were absent in her life? It is obvious that she was having no contact with her husband, alive or dead.

Notice the timing of the dream: **“A few days since I was pleading with the Lord for light in regard to my duty. In the night I dreamed...”** According to the grammatical construction of her wording, this dream took place within a few days prior to the writing of this letter. **This dream obviously brought Ellen no consolation. Why? The idea that she had actually communicated with James was completely foreign to her thinking. He was asleep in the grave.**

5. **This was a private letter written to Willie.** Parts of it contain, for example, personal

items such as descriptions of Ellen's health, the selling of two horses, and the weather conditions, etc., as do most of her letters. Thus, the intended audience of this letter was only the son of Ellen White. The White Estate chose to publish parts of it they felt would be beneficial to others, as they have often done with her unpublished letters over the years. Presently, a project is underway to publish all of her unpublished writings.

The guidance she received from the dream was only for her personal life, not for other individuals or the church. As such, it was **not** a "testimony" for the church and did not carry the same weight. **She was writing only to her son, Willie, who understood the circumstances of the letter.** He knew how much she missed James. He knew that Butler was urging her to come to General Conference. **He knew his mother was not telling him she actually spoke with his dead father.** Ellen, therefore, had no need to clarify to Willie the background and nature of this dream. **The chances are great that if this letter been written to a larger audience, Ellen would have explained the nature and context of this dream in order to avoid any misunderstanding. But Willie needed no such explanation.**

6. As noted above, Butler's urging Ellen to attend General Conference and her present state of physical and emotional health were the real issue behind this dream. In this letter, immediately after the section describing the dream, she wrote:

"I have stood through two General Conferences to the gratification of my brethern, but ran the risk of my life. What I endured through these meetings, the sufferings of mind, the anxiety, the pain of heart, I know my good brethren knew nothing about. If they did, they would not now put me to the torture and risk to bring me to the general meeting again, and at such a time, when my heart is like a raw sore, bruised and torn. No, no, no. God is too merciful to place upon me any such burden" (page 4).

Both Willie and Ellen knew the Lord was telling her in this dream not to risk her health by attending the upcoming General Conference. This is the historical circumstance behind the dream. **Hence, she understood this dream as God's answer to her prayer, bidding her to not go to the General Conference session.** In her mind, this dream was simply God's medium of communicating his guidance. The fact that the imagery involved her deceased husband intensified the message all the more.

In light of the above analysis of the literary and historical context of this letter, the charge that Ellen White believed she was actually conversing with her dead husband and receiving guidance from him is completely false. She believed God was conveying a personal message to her through dream imagery relevant to her present situation. It was God she was responding to and obeying, not her dead husband! She believed that James, from the time of his death, was resting in the grave until the morning of the resurrection. In her mind, contact with him prior to that event was impossible.