This published version of Denis Kaiser’s Ph.D.-dissertation is a comprehensive treatment of what the subtitle promises: A thorough analysis of the understanding of divine inspiration in early Seventh-day Adventist history, mainly during the 50 years from 1880 to 1930. The author compiled material from many years of research, collecting even numerous hitherto unexamined primary sources from archives outside of the SDA library network. Among these, for instance, articles of the United Methodist Church on Ellen G. White, authored by Dudley M. Canright, or early Adventist periodicals like the Hope of Israel from the General Conference of the Church of God (Seventh Day), a SDA faction of the 1860s, containing articles denigrating Ellen White’s prophetic ministry. Besides these unpublished sources Kaiser went through more than 50 published primary serials and 210 primary books and pamphlets of the time under investigation, including 54 works of Ellen G. White. This vast amount of primary material is complemented by about 95 secondary works and 21 secondary journals. Needless to say, in consequence, the book is built on a broad and stable foundation of footnotes backing up the historical and theological analysis given throughout the book.

The author was adjunct professor from 2012 to 2016 at the Department of Church History in the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. Since 2017 he has been assistant professor of church history in the same department. From 2011 to 2015 he was assistant annotator and since 2016 annotation project editor of The Ellen G. White Letters and Manuscripts with Annotations, vol. 2, 1860–1863. Also, he is coeditor of the Oxford Handbook of Seventh-day Adventism and subeditor of the “History of Theology and Ethics” section of the Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists.
The treatise is divided into four main chapters, introduction and summary excluded. The first one provides the historical, theological, and socio-cultural background for different perceptions of inspiration in 19th century USA, leading the reader to the early Adventist understanding from the time of the Millerite movement’s disintegration after the great disappointment in 1844, down to 1880.

The second part discusses the perceptions of inspiration in the period from 1880 to 1895, a particularly interesting time because of the increasing acceptance of higher biblical criticism in Protestant denominations. The development within Adventism is investigated by reference to four main representatives expressing the clearest statements on inspiration: Uriah Smith, George I. Butler, Dudley M. Canright, and Ellen G. White.

Chapter three leads to twenty years (1895–1915) with three other “protagonists:” Alonzo T. Jones, William W. Prescott, and Stephen N. Haskell – again completed by clarifying and correcting statements of Ellen G. White. This time is of special importance since Ellen G. White’s masterpiece “The Great Controversy,” originally published in 1888, was revised in 1911 and thus raised a number of questions and critiques regarding her claims to be an inspired author – who apparently needed “corrections.” Furthermore, this was the last time span of the Adventist church with a living prophetess guiding through theological disputes like the one about inspiration.

The fourth and final part deals with the last 15 years under investigation (1915–1930), again exemplifying the discussions within the American Seventh-day Adventist church by examining statements of Arthur G. Daniells, Judson S. Washburn, Francis M. Wilcox, and the prophetess’s son, William C. White, profiting from his unique life experience as secretary and assistant to his mother’s prophetic ministry.

The huge and complex topic of inspiration is not easily put into clear, unambiguous terms. As Kaiser demonstrates, it is always important to keep in mind the theological (hermeneutical) background of the different authors, since this largely determines the words used to describe what we call “inspiration.” In his final, concluding chapter Kaiser further honestly explains the methodological challenge to generalize what the selected, renowned Adventist leaders said in particular situations. Lost sources, misconstrued contexts, or the overestimation of certain statements may lead to a distorted view of history. This study deals with the perceptions of great leaders of Seventh-day
Adventist history and thus gives fresh insights into an under-investigated subject of the denomination’s past. Yet, it neither scrutinizes all the material available in the church’s archives nor does it claim to catch all the views given in the church’s broader spectra. Of course, the prominent names chosen for this study most likely represent the church’s mainstream(s), but they still leave room for further investigation of smaller niches of the denomination. Also, the years beyond 1930, especially until 1970, would be of interest as a prelude to the inspiration debates in the 1970s and 1980s prompted by the rediscovery of the 1919 Bible Conference reports.

In summary, Kaiser’s book yields a much deeper insight into the perceptions of the investigated persons and many interesting aspects that were not dealt with as comprehensively before. Particularly impressive is the vast number of primary sources used to break new ground in this field of Adventist historical research. This is the convincing basis for his conclusions, as e.g., the finding that Adventists never encouraged any disbelief whatsoever regarding the divine inspiration of the Scriptures, while candidly discussing the (un-)reliability concerning minor details of no theological consequence, like historical data. The main issue under discussion was Ellen G. White’s ministry and prophetic claim, far more than the inspiration of the Bible. This, in turn, led to conclusions that might be drawn from Ellen G. White’s inspiration experiences in comparison to biblical prophets, and vice versa. The lessons learned through the living prophet were, in many respects, illuminating the inspiration process even of biblical writers. It can be postulated that none of the traditional views (verbal-plenary inspiration, personal inspiration, thought inspiration, degrees of inspiration) any longer fitted the experiences the SDA church was privileged to undergo through Ellen G. White’s prophetic ministry.

Among the resulting tensions, Kaiser mentions some individuals holding that Ellen G. White was inspired on any topic, even with non-theological content; or that some clung to the conviction that all writings are verbally inspired, something she strictly rejected; others thought that her writings must be the “last word” on any interpretation of biblical passages, or that all of the historical data she took from lexica and other Bible reference works must be correct to the uttermost. These misconstrued views later became a matter of intense dispute, not only at the 1919 Bible Conference.
Book Review

The numerous blurbs on the back cover and the book’s first pages from the Universities of Harvard and Notre Dame to different Adventist Universities, the Ellen G. White Estate, and the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference, all commend Kaiser for his outstanding research covering not only Adventist history, but even some areas of the wider American (Protestant) religious history. Some even acknowledge it as the standard reference on the topic of inspiration in 19th and early 20th century Adventism.

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