

The Development of Ellen G. White's Concept of Babylon in *The Great Controversy*

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One of the liveliest topics of discussion among nineteenth-century American Christians, particularly toward the year 1844, was the identity of Babylon in the book of Revelation.¹ At this early period, there was frequent disagreement about the meaning of Babylon in Rev 14:8 and Rev 17.² However, both the Millerites and other Protestants, up through the summer of 1843, identified Babylon with the Roman Catholic Church.³ This discussion was especially popular among the members of the Millerite Movement.⁴ The early Sabbatarian Adventists,⁵ who were

¹ William Miller, *Dissertations on the True Inheritance of the Saints and the Twelve Hundred and Sixty Days of Daniel and John with An Address to the Conference of Believers in the Advent Near* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1842), 36. Cf. P. Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 46-48; Reinder Bruinsma, *Seventh-day Adventist Attitudes toward Roman Catholicism 1844-1965* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1994), 45; Charles Fitch, *"Come Out of Her, My People": A Sermon* (Rochester: E. Shepherd's Press, 1843), 1-4.

² Damsteegt, 179.

³ *Ibid.*, 46-47. Cf. Moses Stuart, *Commentary on the Apocalypse* (New York: Allen, Morill and Wardwell, 1845), 296-297.

⁴ The Millerite Movement was an interdenominational movement that flourished in the United States from 1840 to 1844. The movement got its name from William Miller, a farmer from upstate New York, who preached that Jesus' second coming would be around the year 1843. See *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 1976 rev. ed., s.v. "Millerite Movement"; Richard W. Schwartz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, rev. ed. (Boise: Pacific Press, 2000), 35-49.

⁵ The Sabbatarian Adventists were one of the three splinter groups that came out of the Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844. Of the three divisions, the Sabbatarian

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all former Millerites, shared in this lively discussion.⁶ This was Ellen White's immediate religio-political milieu when she wrote the book *The Great Controversy*.

In this study, we will consider four things. We will trace the development of Ellen White's concept of Babylon in the book *The Great Controversy* from the 1858 edition to the 1911 edition. We will compare her view with that of her contemporaries. We will also compare her view with that of selected 20th-century and 21st-century scholars. Finally, we will determine whether there is a progressive development (from narrow to broad) of her understanding of Babylon in *The Great Controversy*. Her ideas on this issue are especially important as *The Great Controversy* is considered to be one of her most influential and important works.⁷ Of all her books, this book has the longest history of development.

Ellen White's Concept of Babylon Vis-à-vis Her Contemporaries

The interpretation of Babylon became more significant in the context of the preaching of William Miller and his associates prior to October 22, 1844. Miller, in his lectures on prophecy, identified Babylon with the papacy. This was his interpretation of the "little horn" in Dan 7:25 and the harlot woman in Rev 17.⁸ However, Charles Fitch, in his famous sermon of 1843, identified Babylon with the Antichrist and identified Catholics and Protestants as constituting the Antichrist.⁹

The Millerites' change of concept on Babylon was due to a widespread opposition from Protestant churches against the Millerite teachings.¹⁰ This was Ellen White's immediate background when she received

Adventists emerged the last and was the smallest, but it came to see itself as the true successor of the Millerite Movement. See George R. Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Hagerstown: Review & Herald, 1999), 28-30.

⁶ Samuel Kibungei Chemurtoi, "James White and J. N. Andrews' Debate on the Identity of Babylon, 1850-1868" (M.A. thesis, AIIAS, Silang, Cavite, Philippines, 2005), 1-2.

⁷ Arthur L. White considered *The Great Controversy* to be Ellen White's most important book. A. White, *Ellen G. White: The Later Elmshaven Years* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1982), 6:305.

⁸ Miller, 36. Cf. Joshua V. Himes, *Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology: Selected from Manuscripts of William Miller, With A Memoir of His Life* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1842), 46; Sylvester Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1853), 190.

⁹ Fitch, 15.

¹⁰ George Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Beliefs* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000), 141.

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the great controversy vision of 1858. Interestingly, her first attempt to write this vision became the beginning of the book *The Great Controversy*.

Spiritual Gifts, Volume 1, 1858 Edition. The Great Controversy vision of 1858 happened in Lovett's Grove, Ohio. On March 14, 1858, there was a funeral, and James White was to give the message of comfort. As James closed his message, his wife stood up to speak.¹¹ While Ellen spoke she was caught up in vision. When the vision ended, the friends and relatives of the deceased bore the casket to the cemetery. With great solemnity, others remained to hear Ellen White relate what was shown to her.¹² In her own words she described what she saw: "In this vision at Lovett's Grove, most of the matter of the Great Controversy which I had seen ten years before, was repeated, and I was shown that I must write it out."¹³

Many considered that in this one short paragraph Ellen White introduced what was the principal topic of the Lovett's Grove vision: a view of the age-long Great Controversy in its broad sweep. In writing that she had seen most of this ten years earlier, was she referring to a particular vision ten years before or was she referring to many phases of several visions received in the late 1840s? Arthur White posed this question and gave a viable answer. He said that in the absence of a reference to a specific, all-inclusive Great Controversy vision in 1848, the second alternative was left as the only viable choice. In fact, many of the visions Ellen White received in the late 1840s gave glimpses, and even at times detailed accounts, of the controversy and the triumph of God's people over the forces of Satan.¹⁴ The 1858 *Great Controversy* edition better known as *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 1, was a diminutive book of only 219 small pages and 41 short chapters. This was published only six months after the March 14 Lovett's Grove vision. It touched the high points of the entrance of sin, the fall of man, and the plan of salvation. Then it jumped

¹¹ Ellen White states that she spoke "upon the coming of Christ and the resurrection and the cheering hope of the Christian." Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts: My Christian Experience, Views and Labors: In Connection With the Rise and Progress of the "Third Angel's Message* [vol. 2] (Battle Creek: James White, 1860), 265.

¹² Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Years, 1827-1862* (Hagerstown: Review & Herald, 1985), 1:367-68. For Ellen White's own detailed account, see *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2, Chapter 35, "Visit to Ohio," 265-272. For her concise account, see *Life Sketches*, 161-163.

¹³ E. G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2, 270.

¹⁴ A. White, *Ellen G. White*, 1:372-73.

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to the life and ministry of Jesus. From that point onwards it treated briefly the work of the apostles, the apostasy in the Christian church, the Reformation, the Advent Movement, and the events up to the second coming and the new earth.

Spiritual Gifts, volume 1, was one of the three earliest books of Ellen White incorporated into one volume.¹⁵ In the volume *Spiritual Gifts*, she already touched on the concept of Babylon in the chapter, “The Loud Cry.” Here she made a statement in which she equated Babylon with the fallen churches of her day. She wrote, “The message of the fall of Babylon, . . . have been entering the churches since 1844. The work of this angel comes in at the right time, and joins in the last great work of the third angel’s message, as it swells into a loud cry.”¹⁶

Ellen White added, “The light that was shed upon the waiting ones penetrated every where, and those who had any light in the churches, who had not heard and rejected the three messages, answered to the call, and left the fallen churches.”¹⁷ Here Ellen White portrayed the fallen churches of her day as Babylon. Her comment on this chapter refers to Rev 14:8, and it is in connection with her 1844 experience. Babylon here must refer to the Protestant churches of her time. Prior to her 1858 Great Controversy vision, her husband, James White, in 1850, stated that the Protestant churches, having rejected the first angel’s message, had fallen spiritually and consequently had become Babylon.¹⁸ But John Nevins

¹⁵ Arthur L. White, “The Story of the Great Controversy,” *Review and Herald* (RH), August 1, 1963, 2-3. This one volume edition, published in 1882, was called *Early Writings*. Ellen White’s first three books, which composed this volume, are *Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White* (1851), *A Supplement to Experience and Views* (1854), and *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 1 (1858). In 1945 *Spiritual Gifts* was reproduced in a facsimile reprint and is currently available.

¹⁶ Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts: The Great Controversy Between Christ and His Angels and Satan and His Angels* [vol. 1] (Battle Creek: James White, 1858), 194.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁸ James White, “The Third Angel’s Message Rev xiv 9-12,” *The Present Truth*, April 1850, 65-69. Here are some of the reasons why James White excluded the Roman Catholic Church as Babylon in Rev 14:8: (1) The Roman Catholic Church is a “unit,” whereas Babylon signifies “mixture or confusion.” It means that the Roman Catholic Church “is one in name, and doctrine, ordinances, and all her works.” James White, “‘What is Babylon!’—The Fall—Come Out,” *RH*, Dec. 9, 1851, 58. This being the case, the Roman Catholic Church cannot qualify since Babylon is characterized by disorder. *Ibid.* (2) The second angel’s message announcing the fall of Babylon could not be applied to the Roman Catholic Church since this church has always been corrupt. James White, “The Angels of Rev xiv,” *RH*, Dec. 9, 1851, 63-64. (3) God’s people were not in the

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Andrews, one of the Sabbatarian Adventists' leading biblical expositors, did not agree with James White. He argued that Babylon comprises all corrupt religious systems that had ever existed in the history of the Christian Church. This included the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant churches.¹⁹ He maintained that "we cannot restrict the term Babylon to the Papal church, for it evidently includes all those religious bodies which have become corrupt like the 'mother of harlots.'"²⁰ In 1865, classic Adventist expositor Uriah Smith identified Babylon as "the great mass of confused and corrupt Christianity."²¹

Subsequent to Ellen White's 1858 *Great Controversy* edition, some of her contemporary Protestant expositors identified Babylon with imperial Rome. Moses Stuart, for example, commented that Babylon in the book of Revelation refers to imperial Rome, specifically the city of Rome and its great power:

Babylon, not literal but figurative, i.e. Rome. . . . Babylon of old was the enemy of God's people, and persecuted and destroyed them. Babylon was then the metropolis of a most extensive empire, and itself an exceedingly great city. It was idolatrous and was noted for impiety; as the book of Daniel fully shows. On all these accounts it might well represent Rome, specially Rome in Nero's day; and particularly so, when the writer of the Apocalypse, as we have already seen on

Roman Catholic Church but in Protestant churches at the time of the proclamation of the second angels' message. *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁹ J. N. Andrews, "Thoughts on Revelation XIII and XIV," *RH*, May 19, 1851, 81. In another article, he identified Babylon with all the corrupt religious bodies that have ever existed. This included the corrupt Jewish Church, the Papal and Greek churches, and the Protestant churches. Andrews, "What is Babylon?" *RH*, Feb. 21, 1854, 36.

²⁰ Andrews, "Thoughts on Revelation," 81.

²¹ Uriah Smith, *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Revelation* (Battle Creek, Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1865), 233. In his 1907 edition, Smith was clearer in his description: "Babylon is not confined to the Romish Church. That this church is a very prominent component part of great Babylon, is not denied. The descriptions of chapter 17 seem to apply very particularly to that church. But the name which she bears on her forehead, 'Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth,' reveals other family connections. If this church is the mother, who are the daughters? The fact that these daughters are spoken of, shows that there are other religious bodies besides the Romish Church which come under this designation." Uriah Smith, *Daniel and the Revelation: The Response of History to the Voice of Prophecy A Verse by Verse Study of these Important Books of the Bible* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1907), 728.

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several occasions, designed to speak of Rome in a somewhat concealed, rather than in an open manner.²²

Putting Ellen White in the context of her time, we can see that her concept of Babylon in the 1858 edition was not influenced by either her contemporary Protestant expositors nor by Sabbatarian expositors like Andrews and Smith. She, however, seemed to have a view similar to that of her husband, James White.

The Spirit of Prophecy, Volume 4, 1884 Edition. In the 1870s and 1880s, more than ten years after the 1858 comprehensive vision at Lovett's Grove and after many more visions containing detailed information, Ellen White was now ready to undertake the presentation of the great controversy story in four volumes of about 400 pages each. Each of the volume had the general title *The Spirit of Prophecy* and a subtitle, *The Great Controversy*.

The Great Controversy book as we know it today is contained in *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 4, published in 1884 by both the Pacific Press and Review and Herald. The new title was *The Spirit of Prophecy: The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan From the Destruction of Jerusalem to the End of the Controversy*, volume 4.²³ The Great Controversy 1884 edition, like its three other companion volumes, was written essentially for Seventh-day Adventists who understood Ellen White's role in the church.²⁴ Volume 4 (492 pages) was especially popular and far excelled the three others in interest.

²² Moses Stuart, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, vol. 11, (New York: Allen, Morill and Wardwell, 1845), 295-296. Barnes seemed to follow partly Stuart's idea, but added that the term Babylon "may well be applied either to Babylon or Rome, literal or mystical." See Albert Barnes, *Notes Explanatory and Practical, on the Book of Revelation* (London: Routledge, Warne, and Routledge, 1862), 388-389.

²³ A. White, *RH*, August 1, 1963, 3. The three other volumes in this series are as follows. (1) *The Spirit of Prophecy: The Great Controversy Between Christ and his Angels and Satan and His Angels*, volume 1 (1870). This was later amplified to become *Patriarchs and Prophets*. (2) *The Spirit of Prophecy: The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan. Life, Teachings, and Miracles of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, volume 2 (1877). This was later amplified to become *The Desire of Ages*. (3) *The Spirit of Prophecy: The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan. The Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, volume 3 (1878). The eleven chapters dealing with the life and work of the apostles later became *The Acts of the Apostles*. Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid. In another work he said, "The plan was to reach all Adventists in six months." See Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Lonely Years, 1876-1891* (Hagerstown: Review & Herald, 1984), 3:243.

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Here Ellen White displayed a wider understanding of the concept of Babylon when she placed a distinction between the term Babylon used in Rev 14:8 and the one used in Revelation 17. In this volume she saw the Babylon symbolized by the harlot of Revelation 17 as the Roman Catholic Church, while she applied the Babylon in Rev 14:8 to the fall of the Protestant churches of her day.²⁵ She wrote,

In Revelation 17, Babylon is represented as a woman, a figure which is used in the Scriptures as the symbol of a church. A virtuous woman represents a pure church, a vile woman an apostate church. . . . The Babylon thus described represents Rome, that apostate church which has so cruelly persecuted the followers of Christ.²⁶

Of Rev 14:8 she stressed,

The first angel was followed by a second, proclaiming, “Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city, because she made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication” [Rev. 14:8]. This message was understood by Adventists to be an announcement of the moral fall of the churches. . . .

The term Babylon, derived from Babel, and signifying confusion, is applied in Scripture to the various forms of false or apostate religion. *But the message announcing the fall of Babylon must apply to some religious body that was once pure, and has become corrupt. It cannot be the Romish Church which is here meant; for that church has been in a fallen condition for many centuries.* But how appropriate the figure as applied to the Protestant churches all professing to derive their doctrines from the Bible, yet divided into almost innumerable sects.²⁷ (Emphasis supplied)

It is interesting to note that in 1868, James White, Ellen White’s husband, who earlier insisted that Babylon could not be the Roman Catholic Church, seemed to contradict himself by stating that Babylon in Rev 14:8

²⁵ At this early period of the Sabbatarian Adventist existence, there was frequently a disagreement between the correct interpretation of Babylon in Rev 14:8 and Rev 17, but generally they saw Rev 14:8 in the context of their 1844 experience and referring to the Protestant churches, while Rev 17 was applied to the Roman Catholic Church (Damsteegt, *Foundations*, 179).

²⁶ Ellen G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy: The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan from the Destruction of Jerusalem to the End of the Controversy*, vol. IV (Battle Creek: Steam Press, 1884), 233.

²⁷ Ellen G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4, 232-33.

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Rev 14:8 symbolized the Protestant churches, while Babylon in Rev 17 represented the Roman Catholic Church.²⁸ He said that Babylon included “all the false and *corrupted systems of Christianity*. That the Romanish and *Greek* churches are included in these . . .” (italics his).²⁹ Ellen White’s view in the 1884 edition did not contradict her view in the 1858 edition, but rather progressed from a narrow view to a broader one. This means that her view in the 1858 edition was included in the broader view contained in the 1884 edition. She maintained that although the term Babylon applied to every false and apostate religion, the message of the fall seemed for her specifically fulfilled in the proclamation of the second angel’s message through the Millerite movement.

Below is a table portraying Ellen White’s understanding of the concept of Babylon in comparison with her contemporaries. Where understandings parallel those of Ellen White at different periods, they are shown in the same rows. Those understandings that find no parallel with Ellen White are listed separately in the final row.

Table 1

Ellen G. White	Authors Contemporary with Ellen G. White				
<i>Ellen G. White</i> (1858, 1884, 1888)	<i>Moses Stuart</i> (1845)	<i>James White</i> (1850)	<i>J. N. Andrews</i> (1854)	<i>Albert Barnes</i> (1862)	<i>Uriah Smith</i> (1865, 1867, 1907)
<i>First edition</i> (1858) Babylon referred to the Protestant churches in her day		Babylon referred to the fallen, apostate churches			
<i>Second edition</i> (1884) Protestant churches are referred to in Rev 14:8 while Rev 17 refers to the Roman Catholic Church					
<i>Third edition</i> (1888) Babylon is a universal and eschatological entity					Babylon is the great mass of confused and corrupt Christianity (1865, 1867). Babylon signifies the universal worldly

²⁸ James White, “Signs of the Times,” *RH*, Sept. 8, 1853, 67.

²⁹ James White, *Life Incidents, in Connection with the Great Advent Movement, as Illustrated by the Three Angels of Revelation* xiv (Battle Creek: Steam Press, 1868), 231. Although James White did not give any specific reason why he changed his position, Chemurtoi gave three possible factors: (1) The need for Sabbatarian Adventist leadership to forge a common understanding on issues affecting them; (2) their developing understanding of Babylon of Rev 14:8 as separate from the fall of Babylon in Rev 18:2; and (3) White may have seen that Andrews’ view did not negate his belief that Sabbatarian Adventists are the historical fulfillment of the third angel of Rev 14. Chemurtoi, 72-74.

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					church in the process of complete fulfillment in the end-time (1907)
(No parallels)	Babylon refers to imperial Rome		Babylon referred to all religious bodies that existed at that time	Babylon may either be applied to literal or mystical Rome or Babylon	

We will now go to the final edition of *The Great Controversy*, published in 1888. In this edition, Ellen White gave her fullest understanding on the issue at hand.

The Great Controversy, 1888 Edition. In 1885, Ellen White responded to an invitation to visit Europe and stayed there for two years. Adventist leaders in Europe who knew of the success of the 1884 *Great Controversy* made plans with Ellen White for the translation of the book into some of the leading languages there. Sensing that her largely Adventist readership had expanded to include a large number of non-Adventists, and wishing to present the story in greater detail, plans were made to rewrite and enlarge the volumes.³⁰ Out of this plan to enlarge the volume came the 1888 revision of *The Great Controversy*, the first to be revised and enlarged among the four volumes. Ellen White began the work in 1886 while she was residing in Basel, Switzerland, and completed it when she went back to her home in Healdsburg, California, in May, 1888.

In volume 4, she not only enlarged the presentation but also improved the phraseology. The words “Revised and Enlarged” appeared on the title page. The page size was now enlarged, and the number of pages increased. The number of chapters also climbed from 37 to 42, and the text was extended from 492 to 678 pages. The new volume bore the title *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan During the Christian Dispensation*.³¹ In this volume she displayed a much more comprehensive view of the concept of Babylon. Here is the rendering:

The message of Revelation 14, announcing the *fall* of Babylon, must apply to religious bodies that were once pure and have become corrupt. *Since this message follows the warning of the Judgment, it must be given in the last days*, therefore it

³⁰ A. White, *RH*, August 1, 1963, 4.

³¹ Arthur L. White, “Ellen G. White’s Portrayal of the Great Controversy Story,” supplement to reprint ed., *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4, facsimile reproduction (Washington: Review & Herald, 1969), 522-23.

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cannot refer to the Romish Church, for that church has been in a fallen condition for many centuries.³² (Emphasis supplied)

The italicized words capture the distinctive thought that was missing in *The Spirit of Prophecy*, volume 4, 1884 edition. Their addition indicated that Ellen White's concept of Babylon had enlarged.³³ The revision of those words from her 1884 work showed that Ellen White had added a major insight into her interpretation of the text, that of the future eschatological and final fulfillment of mystical Babylon.

Another example of a reworded line from her *Spirit of Prophecy*, volume 4, 1884 edition is found in page 232. Here is the rendering: "The proclamation, 'Babylon is fallen,' was given in the summer of 1844, and as the result, about fifty thousand withdrew from these churches."³⁴

The Spirit of Prophecy, volume 4, 1884 edition wordings were limited both in words and in concept. They were basically intended for the believers at that time. The reworded line in *The Great Controversy* 1888 edition was a lot longer, much more comprehensive, and eschatological. Here is the statement:

The second angel's message of Revelation 14, was first preached in summer of 1844, and it then had a more direct application to the churches of the United States, where the warning of the judgment had been most widely proclaimed and most generally rejected, and where the declension in the churches had been most rapid. But the message of the second angel did not reach its complete fulfillment in 1844. The churches then experienced a moral fall, in consequence of their refusal of the light of the advent message; but that fall was not complete. . . . Not yet, however, can it be said that "Babylon is fallen, . . . because she made *all nations* drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication." *She has not yet made all nations do this. . . . the work of apostasy has not yet reached its culmination* (emphasis supplied).³⁵

Ellen White further commented that what happened in her time was only a part of the great and final eschatological fulfillment in the future. She mentioned some specific things that did not happen then that must

³² Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan During the Christian Dispensation*, rev. and enl. (Battle Creek: Review and Herald, 1888), 383.

³³ *Ibid.*, 390.

³⁴ E. G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4, 232.

³⁵ E. G. White, *The Great Controversy* (1888 edition), 389.

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first transpire before the grand and final fulfillment of the prophecy. She argued,

The Bible declares that before the coming of the Lord, Satan will work “with *all* power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness; “. . . [2 Thess 2:9-11]. *Not until this condition shall be reached, and the union of the church with the world shall be fully accomplished throughout Christendom, will the fall of Babylon be complete.*³⁶ (Emphasis supplied)

Ellen White further emphasized that “the change is a progressive one, and that *the perfect fulfillment of Rev 14:8 is yet future*” (emphasis supplied).³⁷ Again in this statement, as in the previous statement, the universal application and the eschatological consummation of the prophecy is deliberately added and placed with emphasis. Ellen White finally gave her concluding statement to close this very interesting and insightful chapter entitled “A Warning Rejected.”

Notwithstanding the spiritual darkness and alienation from God that exist in the churches which constitute Babylon, the great body of Christ’s true followers are still to be found in their communion. There are many of these who have never seen the special truths for this time. Not a few are dissatisfied with their present condition and are longing for clearer light. They look in vain for the image of Christ in the churches with which they are connected. As these bodies depart further and further from the truth, and ally themselves more closely with the world, the difference between the two classes will widen, and it will finally result in separation. The time will come when those who love God supremely can no longer remain in connection with such as are “lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof.”

Revelation 18 points to the time when, as the result of rejecting the threefold warning of Rev. 14:6-12, the *church* will have fully reached the condition foretold by the second angel, and the people of God, still in *Babylon*, will be called upon to separate from her communion. This message is the last that will ever be given to the world; and it will accomplish its work. When those that “believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness” [2 Thess 2:12] shall be left to receive

³⁶ Ibid., 389-90.

³⁷ Ibid., 390.

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strong delusion and to believe a lie, then the light of truth will shine upon all whose hearts are open to receive it, and all the children of the Lord that remain in Babylon will heed the call, “Come out of her, My people” [Rev 18:4].³⁸ (Emphasis supplied)

In comparing this closing paragraph with her closing paragraph in *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4, 1884 edition, one can readily see the difference both in wordings and emphasis. Here is the 1884 rendering:

At the proclamation of the first angel’s message, the people of God were in Babylon; and many true Christians are still to be found in her communion. Not a few who have never seen the special truths for this time are dissatisfied with their present position, and are longing for clearer light. They look in vain for the image of Christ in the church. As the churches depart more and more widely from the truth, and ally themselves more closely with the world, the time will come when those who fear and honor God can no longer remain in connection with them. Those that “believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness,” will be left to receive “strong delusion,” and to “believe a lie” [2 Thess. 2:11,12]. Then the spirit of persecution will again be revealed. But the light of truth will shine upon all whose hearts are open to receive it, and all the children of the Lord still in Babylon, will heed the call, “Come out of her, my people.”³⁹

³⁸ E. G. White, *The Great Controversy* (1888 edition), 390. The closing paragraph on the subject of the second angel’s message is entitled “The Loud Cry” in the 1858 *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1, and did not have a similarity in either wording or ideas. See E. G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1, 196.

³⁹ E. G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4, 239-40. In the 1858 *Spiritual Gifts*, vol.1, the chapter, “The Loud Cry,” is the chapter that talks about the identity of Babylon. Its closing paragraph is quite different from that of either *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4, or *The Great Controversy*. It did not touch on either the eschatological aspect or the comprehensiveness of the concept. Here is how the closing paragraph is rendered: “Servants of God, endowed with power from on high, with their faces lighted up, and shining with holy consecration, went forth fulfilling their work, and proclaiming the message from heaven, Souls that were scattered all through the religious bodies answered to the call, and the precious were hurried out of Sodom before her destruction. God’s people were fitted up and strengthened by the excellent glory which fell upon them in rich abundance, preparing them to endure the hour of temptation. A multitude of voices I heard every where, saying, Here is the patience of the saints; here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.” E. G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1, 196.

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With this comparison, we can see that her *Great Controversy* 1888 edition statements on the concept of Babylon were much more substantial and had more depth and insight than her *Spirit of Prophecy*, volume 4, 1884 edition statements. With her *Great Controversy*, 1888 edition statements, Ellen White seems to have reached her broadest understanding on the concept of Babylon. Babylon included the whole world that rejects the three angels' messages in the last days. In that edition she used the word *church* in singular form to accommodate all the apostate religious political agencies against God's people. To her, *church* represented Babylon in its entirety in the final hour of this earth's history.

With this presentation, we can deduce that her *Great Controversy* 1888 edition statements on the concept of Babylon must be seen as her highest and final analysis of the subject under consideration. Furthermore, the *Great Controversy* 1888 edition is the basis of the *Great Controversy* 1911 edition presently in circulation to complete her Conflict of the Ages series.⁴⁰ The changes that transpired in the *Great Controversy* 1911 edition will be considered next.

The Great Controversy, 1911 Edition. In 1907, repairs were made to the badly worn plates, and improvements were made in the illustrations. A subject index was added, and in a sense the whole book was cosmetically dressed up.⁴¹ But from the standpoint of the texts, the 1911 revision is still the 1888 edition.⁴² In early January 1910, Pacific Press manager C. H. Jones felt that it was "necessary to print another edition." As plans to reset the types for the new edition were laid out, Ellen White thought not only of improving the physical features but also the text itself.⁴³

Since the *Great Controversy* is Ellen White's most important book, and she regarded it as a means of winning readers to the truths presented, the matter of revision was to be above the mechanical production of the

⁴⁰ The Conflict of the Ages series is Ellen White's five-volume commentary on the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation. This is the final result of the evolution of the great controversy vision that started with *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1 of the four-volume *Spirit of Prophecy* books. The books in this set in their proper order and original titles are: *The Story of Patriarchs and Prophets as Illustrated in the Life of Holy Men of Israel* (1890), *The Story of Prophets and Kings as Illustrated in the Captivity and Restoration of Israel* (1917), *The Desire of Ages: The Conflict of the Ages Illustrated in the Life of Christ* (1898), *The Acts of the Apostles in the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (1911), and *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan: The Conflict of the Ages in the Christian Dispensation* (1911).

⁴¹ A. White, *Ellen G. White*, 6:302.

⁴² A. White, "Ellen G. White's Portrayal," 530.

⁴³ A. White, *Ellen G. White*, 6:302, 304.

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book. So starting in early 1910, Ellen White worked together with her staff and the publisher to polish the text. Her aim was to depict the great controversy story in the most accurate and winning way. Words acceptable to both Catholics and Protestants were employed, and the aim was perfecting the text through more precise expression.⁴⁴ Here are her words:

When I learned that *Great Controversy* must be reset, I determined that we would have everything closely examined, to see if the truths it contained were stated in the very best manner, to convince those not of our faith that the Lord had guided and sustained me in the writing of its pages.

As a result of the thorough examination by our most experienced workers, some changing in the wording has been proposed. These changes I have carefully examined, and approved.⁴⁵

At last the work was done, a work a lot more demanding than what was anticipated a year earlier. But it was a joyous day on July 17, 1911, when copies of the new 1911 edition were received at Elmshaven. It was under the title *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan: The Conflict of the Ages in the Christian Dispensation*.⁴⁶

The Great Controversy 1911 edition was not really a new edition in the strictest sense. As Arthur White stated, “neither Ellen White nor her staff considered what was done as actual ‘revision’, and all studiously avoided the use of the term, for it was entirely too broad in its connotation.”⁴⁷ The changes were so few and minor in nature that C. C. Crisler considered the 1911 edition as “a *reset* edition “ rather than “a *revised and improved* edition.”⁴⁸ The most notable change in the 1911 edition that one can see in regard to her concept of Babylon is the insertion of the word *alone* on page 383.

The message of Revelation 14, announcing the *fall* of Babylon, must apply to religious bodies that were once pure and have become corrupt. Since this message follows the warning of the judgment, it must be given in the last days;

⁴⁴ Ibid., 6:305.

⁴⁵ Ellen G. White to F. M. Wilcox, 25 July 1911, Letter W.56, 1911, EGWRC-AIIAS, Silang, Cavite, Philippines.

⁴⁶ A. White, *Ellen G. White*, 6:321.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 6:305.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 6:323.

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therefore it cannot refer to the Roman Church *alone*, for that church has been in a fallen condition for many centuries.⁴⁹

The insertion of the word *alone* intensified and clarified Ellen White's universal understanding of the concept of Babylon, even though it drew a lot of controversy and criticism.⁵⁰ Arthur White mentioned that one of the reasons for the revision was for the "selecting [of] words [to be] more precise in their meaning . . . [and] to set forth facts and truths more correctly and accurately."⁵¹ If that be the case, then the insertion of the word *alone* has indeed done its job well. That insertion has clearly stated Ellen White's position in 1911.

Her concept of Babylon in the 1911 edition did not contradict her previous view of Babylon in Rev 14, but rather clarified the whole context of her statement. Her previous statement, without the word *alone*, could be misconstrued to mean that the message was only in the context of the 1844 Millerite preaching. However, she did not deny the broader application of Rev 14 as found in her other writings. Hence, the 1911 edition solidified and clarified her whole view of Babylon. Thus, there is a progression rather than a contradiction of her concept of Babylon from the 1858 *Great Controversy* edition to the 1911 edition.⁵²

⁴⁹ E. G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 1911 ed., 383 (emphasis supplied).

⁵⁰ Arthur White answered this issue in his letter to G. A. Roberts. He said, "This change, which had the full approval of Mrs. White in 1911, not only harmonizes with other parts of Great Controversy, but is in harmony with other utterances written by her on the same subject. Note, for instance, Patriarchs and Prophets [1890], page 167, par. 1. Where the term 'Babylon' is used to designate 'the religious world' in its state of corruption and apostasy. This statement was written two years after the first [1888] edition of Great Controversy. Again, in Testimonies to Ministers [an 1893 statement], pages 61-62, where it is stated that 'the fallen denominational churches are Babylon.'" Arthur L. White to Elder G. A. Roberts, 15 April 1949, DF 84e 2, EGWRC-AIIAS, Silang, Cavite, Philippines. See also A. White, *Ellen G. White*, 6:326-28.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6:306.

⁵² Damsteegt has also noticed this progression, although he does not stress its universal and eschatological dimension. He states, "A distinction between Rev. 14:8 and Rev. 17 was also seen by E. G. White. In 1884 she applied Babylon, symbolized by the harlot of Rev. 17, to the Roman Catholic Church and interpreted Rev. 14:8 as a description of the fall of the Protestant harlot daughters (SP, IV, 232, 233). Later she enlarged her view of Rev. 14:8, stating that "it cannot refer to the Roman Catholic Church alone" (GC, 1911, p. 383). This implied an inclusion of both Protestant and Roman Catholic churches" (Damsteegt, 179).

**Ellen White's Concept of Babylon Vis-à-Vis
That of 20th- and 21st-Century Scholars**

Since the 1911 edition is already in the 20th-century, it is logical to cite some of the 20th- and 21st-century scholars regarding their view of Babylon. Many of these scholars identify the Babylon of Rev 14 and 17 with imperial Rome.⁵³ Mark Wilson supports this view:

Babylon made the whole world drunk when the nations drank her wine. Which first-century city does John refer to? Peter's use of Babylon (1 Pet. 5:13) provides a clue. His probable referent is Rome, the place from which he is writing. Historical tradition dates Peter's martyrdom to the Neronian persecution of 65-66. This would place the writing of 1 Peter before A.D. 70 and thereby attest to the use of Babylon for Rome before the destruction of the temple. Because of Rome's persecution, the early church names their adversary Babylon, a city opposed to God and His people.⁵⁴

Some go beyond identifying Babylon with pagan and papal Rome.⁵⁵ Others, like Alan Johnson, believe that Babylon is found wherever there

⁵³ Here is a sampling of these scholars: Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, The General Epistles and the Apocalypse (New York; London: Harper and Brothers, 1933), 6:430-431; W. A. Criswell, *Expository Sermons on Revelation*, Five volumes, complete and unabridged in one (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 184; Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1911); repr., Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 215-216; Leon Morris, *Revelation*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Bicester: InterVarsity; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 207; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 273, 310; David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52B (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 829; Craig Keener, *Revelation*, The NIV Application Commentary, vol. 66 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 406.

⁵⁴ Mark W. Wilson, *Revelation*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 4:333. Other Protestant evangelicals suggest that, "in the context of Revelation, it probably is best to see Babylon as a 'type' of worldly and idolatrous power under satanic control and in rebellion against God and 'antitype' of the heavenly Jerusalem" (Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. [2001], s.v. "Babylon").

⁵⁵ E. W. Bullinger, *The Apocalypse*, 3rd ed., rev. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1935); repr., *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1984), 506-510. Bullinger died in 1913, and the third edition may be the work of later editors. His second edition was published in 1907.

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is Satanic deception.⁵⁶ On the other hand, Adventist scholars⁵⁷ like Ranko Stefanovic view Babylon from a universal and eschatological perspective:

Babylon is a religious-political power opposing God and oppressing his people. . . . This indicates that Babylon in Revelation must be something other than the secular and political powers of the world. It rather represents the end-time worldwide religious confederacy made up of the satanic trinity (Rev. 16:19) arrayed against God and his people.⁵⁸

Stefanovic’s view is the same as Ellen White’s final view and echoes the explanation of the Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia.⁵⁹

The table below summarizes Ellen White’s position in relation to 20th- and 21st- century scholars.

Table 2

<i>Ellen G. White (1858, 1884, 1888)</i>	<i>Henry Barclay Swete (1911)</i> ⁶⁰	<i>E. W. Bullinger [1907] (1935)</i>	<i>Alan Johnson (1981)</i>	<i>Mervyn Maxwell (1985)</i>	<i>Ranko Stefanovic (2002)</i>
<i>First edition (1858)</i> Babylon was the Protestant churches in her day					
<i>Second edition (1884)</i> The Protestant churches are referred to in Rev 14:8 while the Roman Catholic church is					

⁵⁶ Further, Johnson believes that Babylon is a transhistorical reality that includes the idolatrous kingdoms of earth’s history. It is also an eschatological symbol of Satanic deception and its powers. Babylon represents the total culture of the world apart from God. Alan Johnson, “Revelation,” *The Expositor’s Biblical Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 556-557.

⁵⁷ Adventist historian Mervyn Maxwell is more typical and specific when he says that “Protestants since Luther’s day had correctly seen Babylon as a symbol of the Roman church, a Christian body whose leaders at worst rejected elements of Bible truth and persecuted Christians who chose to believe them. . . . Babylon’s daughters are Protestant churches which, like the Roman church, reject Bible truth and harass those who accept it” (C. Mervyn Maxwell, *God Cares, Volume 2: The Message of Revelation For You and Your Family* (Nampa: Pacific Press, 1985), 367-368.

⁵⁸ Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 2002), 446-447.

⁵⁹ *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 1976 rev. ed., s. v. “Babylon, Symbolic.”

⁶⁰ Henry Barclay Swete represents those who identified Babylon with imperial Rome.

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referred to in Rev 17					
Third edition (1888) Babylon as a universal and eschatological entity				Babylon refers to the universal end-time Roman church and her daughters to the apostate Protestant churches, who reject Bible truth and harass those who accept it	Babylon is an end-time religious confederacy made up of a satanic trinity
(No parallels)	Babylon refers to imperial Rome	Babylon in Revelation goes beyond pagan and papal Rome. It represents all religions that rely on human merit	Babylon is found wherever there is satanic deception. Transhistorical reality including idolatrous historical kingdoms. Eschatological symbol of satanic deceptions and powers. Represents the world apart from God		

Summary and Conclusion

The two-hour vision at Lovett’s Grove, Ohio, on March 14, 1858, spanned the entire history of God’s activity in regard to man. The result of this vision was the small volume called *Spiritual Gifts*. The succeeding four-volume 1884 *Spirit of Prophecy* set and the other later editions of 1888 and 1911 were major expansions of the 1858 work.

In these editions, Ellen White’s use of the term Babylon was very much consistent with her time and within the prevalent religio-political milieu of her day. As those early periods of the 1850s have considerable differences in the interpretation of Babylon,⁶¹ Ellen White based her first interpretation of Rev 14:8 on the light from her 1844 experience. She therefore interpreted Babylon in *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 1, 1858 edition, as the “fallen churches” of her day, which had direct reference to the Protestant churches of her time. When she published *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 1, Ellen White devoted only 219 pages to the great controversy theme. Of these, only four pages made up the chapter entitled “The Loud Cry,” dealing with the concept of Babylon, which basically was her commentary on Rev 14:8. At the time *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 1 was written, there were only about 2,500 Sabbath-keeping Adventists. This could

⁶¹ Damsteegt, 179.

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have been part of the reason why the book was brief and the presentation condensed, since this volume was primarily for Seventh-day Adventists.⁶²

The second development in Ellen White's understanding is seen in her treatment of the subject in *The Spirit of Prophecy*, volume 4, 1884 edition. She gave more space and depth in treating the subject in comparison to her first volume. Here she made a clear distinction between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant churches of her day. She held that the fall of Babylon in Rev 14:8 referred to the Protestant churches and that the harlot in Rev 17 referred to the Roman Catholic Church.⁶³ In 1884, when she published the expanded form of the great controversy vision under the title, *The Spirit of Prophecy: The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan from the Destruction of Jerusalem to the End of the Controversy*, volume 4, the number of pages had grown to 506. Of these, eleven pages made up the chapter devoted to the concept of Babylon entitled "The Second Angel's Message."

Finally, in 1888, when a revision was made under the title, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan during the Christian Dispensation*, Ellen White reached her fullest and broadest perception of Babylon. The book, now reaching a total of 678 pages, devoted sixteen pages to the fall of Babylon in the chapter entitled "A Warning Rejected." Here we see the concept of Babylon woven into the grand theme of the final and universal conflagration where all the forces of evil will be geared against the remnant people of God. She depicted the whole world as divided into only two groups: Babylon versus God's people. Here Ellen White added two distinct dimensions to the concept: (1) Babylon is a universal entity, and (2) the events surrounding the fall of Babylon are eschatological. The final edition in 1911 only clarified her emphasis on Babylon's universal and eschatological nature. This edition bears the final title of the book, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan: The Conflict of the Ages in the Christian Dispensation*.

As we have observed, there was a growing progression and an encompassing dimension in Ellen White's concept as she grasped more of the theme of the great controversy in relation to the coming of the end. There is no indication that she repudiated her former stance. Instead, her later enlarged view just embraced the former limited perspective and

⁶² A. White, *RH*, August 1, 1963, 2.

⁶³ E. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4, 232-33.

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moved on to the larger picture of the great controversy in its universal and eschatological consummation.

There are three reasons why Ellen White's concept of Babylon is progressive in nature rather than contradictory. (1) There was no indication in her statements that the concept of Babylon she gave in the 1858 edition was *exhaustive*. By exhaustive, we mean that the meaning she gave to Babylon then was *all* the meaning of the term. (2) Her broader and unfolding understanding of the meaning of Babylon in *The Great Controversy* 1884 edition in no way negates her narrower 1858 edition understanding. (3) In the same sense, her final understanding of the concept of Babylon displayed in *The Great Controversy* 1888 edition likewise did not negate her former stance.

With so many conflicting views on Babylon before, during, and after her time, her own view did not change in the sense that she did not repudiate her earlier statements. Instead, her final understanding absorbed her earlier statements and gave the concept a comprehensive, universal, and eschatological dimension. Her view grew with the passing of time, encompassing her earlier views and integrating them into her major motif of the great controversy between Christ and His people versus Satan and his confederacy, which escalates and culminates in the end time. The principle of progressive revelation expounded by Solomon is beautifully illustrated in this development: "But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day" (Prov 4:18).

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