

Israel Dammon Trial Account - My Thoughts

I first heard of this incident in 2003 while researching what others were saying about Ellen White. Some of my friends had left Adventism after a period of study, and it was said that they had found information on the Internet. I vowed to research what was being said, and to study to give an answer.

The original sources are limited – there is a single newspaper account about the Israel Dammon trial, which is an eyewitness transcript of the testimony. This, of course, is very similar to court reporting today where a reporter attends a trial and reports either on T.V., or a publication. This particular article gives a rare and unique insight into one of the “fanatical” meetings of these post-1844 Adventist groups, and a rare third-party view of Ellen Harmon and James White during this period. The only other original source that I know of is Ellen White’s own recounting.

Some years ago this story fed the controversy about early fanaticism among Adventists, and in particular, Ellen White’s involvement. For 100 years or more Adventists officially claimed that Ellen White had no involvement or participation other than to attempt to squelch it and refocus energy on communication of the last-day warnings. Yet, this newspaper account appears to offer a conflicting view, and indicates that she may have been more directly involved than she was later willing to admit.

For me, this is almost inconsequential. The activities that they were engaged in are somewhat extreme to our sensibilities. More perplexing, however, is the contrast between this article and her account of this day. On the one hand we have the account that for 140 years has stood as our primary witness. This is her own testimony from 1860 in *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 2, pp 40-42. The day in question was in March of 1845, and 15 years later Ellen White is recounting for us what a younger Ellen Harmon experienced. In her description the saints were meeting to rejoice in the truth. She was speaking when men rushed in to take hold of one of the audience. God manifested His power and disrupted the attempts of the officer to take “Elder D.”. The officer repeatedly sent for reinforcements and even 12

men failed to remove him from the room, so powerful and overwhelming was the Spirit of God.

This, like so many other stories retold by Mrs. White and others, I had grown to love. It recounted the power and support that God had bestowed upon our early founders. Oh how I wished on many an occasion that God would work like this again in our day, and how I looked forward to the day when God found us worthy enough and poured out His Spirit in the latter rain.

The newspaper account should have provided support for her version, and a rare insight into this event. Here was a window into the lives of Ellen Harmon and James White. What it does provide is a dilemma. On the one side we have Ellen's published account in an Adventist book, while on the other we have a published account in a public newspaper, one that contradicts her story.

Whereas her version shows Elder D. falling under the influence of the Spirit, the newspaper quotes the officer of the court saying that it was a throng of women who descended upon him and prevented his removal from the room. Ellen was not simply speaking to the room in a dignified and stately manner, recounting the vision that God had given to her, but rather she was lying on the floor and occasionally arising to pronounce the eminent condemnation of God upon a person should they decide not to be baptized that very night. Rather than coming to suppress fanaticism, she was there as one of the "visionists" – young women who fall onto the ground in fits and recount for people visions and their "cases".

People today have offered their interpretations of this situation, into which I add my own. There is the official "spin" from the White Estate offering little more than slight answers counter the impression that Ellen and James were participating in fanaticism. There also is a rather long and rambling defense written by James Nix – and published on the White Estate web site – that does little more than attempt to distract away from the real issues and offer supposition of what potentially *could* be possible answers. Then there are the few angry souls who want to believe that this account shows that her and James were involved with

not only fanaticism but also immoral behavior. In my opinion, this is not supported by the newspaper story.

What is clear from reading the newspaper account and comparing with Ellen White's own "official" version is that they are different. Dramatically different. They are so different that on certain points there can be no resolution – one must be wrong, though logically, both could be wrong as well. They can not both be right. Either the Spirit of God fell on Israel Dammon and the officer of the court was unable to remove him because of a supernatural manifestation that overwhelmed him, or the women and men noisily delayed the arrest as his court testimony recounts.

So a question: If you and several men were trying to remove a person from a room and you were unable to lift that person, who weighed, say, 200 pounds – would you not stop and wonder about this? If there was a "spirit" or presence in the room that was so powerful that you could not endure it for more than a few moments, would you return again and again to try to arrest this person, especially since he was wanted for little more than minor character flaws? If you and four others could not lift him, and even up to 12 men could not lift him, would that not strike you as strange? Add to this the supernatural presence that you could not withstand – would you not seriously consider that something extraordinary was taking place?

Another question: If this officer was simply making up a story for court, would this man – these men – make up a story that they were prevented in arresting this man by women? Never mind that they also admitted that other men helped – would there not be a more plausible story to invent should you want to deny the supernatural and create another story?

Speaking of creating stories and the court testimony, another question presents itself. If the situation *had* happened as Ellen White described and this supernatural manifestation *was* present and all attending felt and witnessed it – if, then, the officer presented testimony in court two days later that was a total fabrication, would not someone have objected? In fact the officer gave his

account, and not one person even offered a differing explanation. Further, he was not even cross examined. I would think that had the other witnesses who were there all given a different account than the officer, this would have provided the defense with evidence that there was some sort of conspiracy against his client.

Speaking further of testimony, viewing the day through the pen of Mrs. White we observe God powerfully testifying about her and about Elder Dammon, and about the people – “His people” – gathered there. The meeting is in His name and she shows God coming in to prevent this heathen officer from disturbing His people. For 40 minutes He prevents Elder Dammon from being removed from this room. She says,

“Their number increased to twelve, still Elder D. was held by the power of God about forty minutes, and not all the strength of those men could move him from the floor where he lay helpless. At the same moment we all felt that Elder D. must go; that God had manifested his power for his glory, and that the name of the Lord would be further glorified in suffering him to be taken from our midst.”

Interesting, then, that Ellen Harmon and James White left town for other parts when God was so interested in manifesting his Glory. If God had testified so powerfully, why did His servant not remain in town to also testify. Yet she and James did not. Instead they left town. Seems to me that had she been truly a prophet and had the day’s events happened exactly as she later recounted that she would have felt the need to offer her voice in testimony along with God’s and that of the other people – especially since she and James were not on trial and there was no direct danger of arrest. She could have been a voice to object to the “false” account by the officer of the arrest.

More interesting still is that God would actually have offered His power in testimony that day, yet later Ellen White would denounce Israel Dammon and fanaticism like what happened that day. In fact, one gets the distinct feeling that she later wanted desperately to distance herself from these early fanatical meetings. She could not disprove that she had associated with these people, and since she had left town she may not have known that a large newspaper account

of the day had been published – could it be that she simply created a more dignified account of her role at the meeting? Indeed it appears that this article was not widely known until the late 1980's when Bruce Weaver discovered it while researching another topic.

Finally, let's suppose that there was a supernatural force at work and indeed these men of the court could not move Israel Dammon. Let's further suppose that there was this power that they could not endure. Question: what evidence is there that this was God's power and not a malevolent force? Is the testimony of Ellen White sufficient to prove that this was God at work? It seems almost blasphemous to ask this question, but I've also asked the question of Ellen Harmon herself. Supposing that she experienced the visions she says she experienced, what proof is there that this was God and not one of the prophesied deceptions Jesus said would come in the last days? We see in the newspaper article the testimony that the "visionists" would rise up and declare that someone would be lost if they were not baptized that night – is this Biblical? Would we be comfortable in teaching this today? Can what we know of baptism from the Bible support this activity?

I would suggest that the newspaper account is the more accurate, and that the testimony of Joseph Moulton, who arrested Israel Dammon, is much more plausible and believable than hers. For her account to be true and the newspaper account false requires a much wider conspiracy. The writer, the publisher, those in attendance of the meeting, the court officers, and the judge – all of these would need to either participate in the conspiracy or stand by silently. And all of this because these noisy and strange people were, in the words of Benjamin Smith, "living upon certain citizens of said town – and that they were liable to become town charge." In other words, they were slothful. And so this huge conspiracy was concocted to discredit this Advent movement.

When I recounted this story to other Adventists the reaction was predictable – I myself at first thought the same way. This must all be part of Satan's deceptions that we heard would be coming. The fallen churches would go to any length to

prevent God's commandment-keeping people from testifying. Yet, remember: these people were not God's commandment-keeping people. They were shouting, kissing, creeping, falling into visions, baptizing in the middle of the night and ranting about keeping the devil at bay. Ellen Harmon was mostly unknown, and there was not an organized Adventist movement at this time. One can hardly expect that there would be such an organized opposition to such a scattered and chaotic group of people.

To my knowledge, no one else has corroborated her account of the incident. Whereas on the one hand there is a very public recounting of the day and of the trial, one that could have been refuted by any of the eye witnesses, her account has no one to stand behind it. It is simply the testimony of a single person who has a motive in presenting herself and her role in the best possible light. Frankly, her account lacks credibility and plausibility.

In Romans 13 Paul instructs Christians to subject themselves to the civil government. In this case the duly appointed representative of the local civil government was coming to make an authorized arrest, one that later resulted in a fair and organized trial, and in turn in his release. If God wanted to manifest His power, why did He do it against such a minor court action, and why for only 40 minutes? What did He achieve in this? This is not a situation where His appointed messengers risked death. Paul and the other apostles were arrested, beaten, and tossed in and out of jail repeatedly. God was able to use these experiences and they continuously witnessed of the power of the Spirit and of the truth of Christ. Foxes book of Martyrs tells of countless people killed for their faith. In this story there is a fanatical group conducting themselves contrary to Paul's exhortation about confusion in the Church. It just doesn't make sense to this writer that God would immobilize Israel Dammon for 40 minutes.

And so we return to the facts. There are two stories of the day and two stories of the subsequent arrest and trial. In these stories there are facts that correspond and facts that conflict – I haven't even gone into the facts about the trial. There are enough that agree that we know that the same incident is being discussed,

yet enough differences that we must question one or the other as a fabrication. True, her version is written 15 years later and one could become hazy about an event that long ago. But there is a wide gulf between a supernatural presence and screaming women.

Because of the documented evidence of plagiarism along with other questionable accounts of facts about those early days, this writer feels uncomfortable in giving Ellen White a “pass” on this story. Normally, had there been no other character issues and had there been no doctrinal questions about her theology when compared with the Bible, I would have to insist that there must be some explanation. But in this case, I simply can not ignore the evidence and brush aside the testimony of this newspaper account.

Was I sitting on a jury presiding over this case examining her recollection and the newspaper article I would have to cast my vote against her and accept the account of the journal. I would have to pass down a verdict of “guilty” on her for misrepresentation.

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