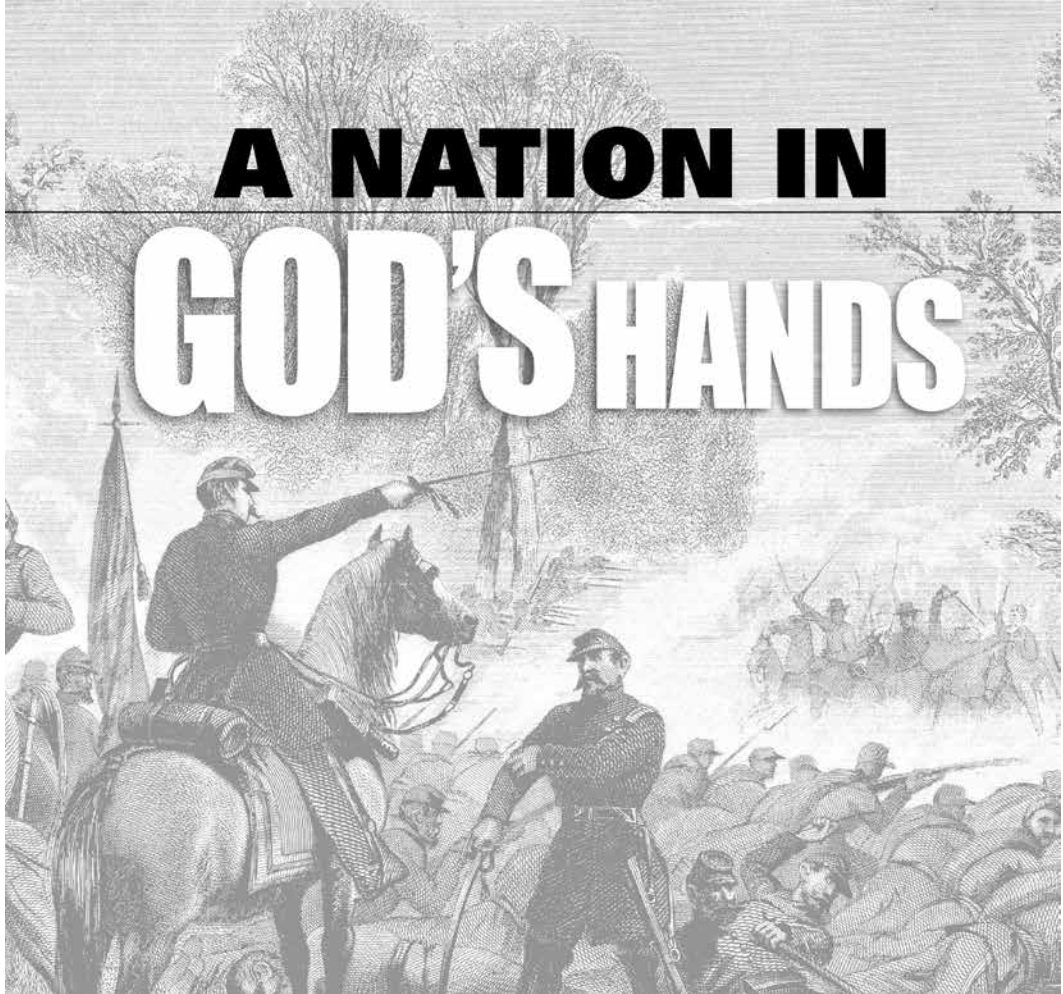


J U D L A K E



A NATION IN GOD'S HANDS

 **Pacific Press**[®]
Publishing Association
Nampa, Idaho | Oshawa, Ontario, Canada
www.pacificpress.com

CHAPTER 1

ELLEN G. WHITE: A PROPHET TO THE ADVENTIST PEOPLE

Ellen Gould Harmon White was a Yankee—born above the Mason-Dixon Line, raised with New England values, and sympathetic to the antislavery cause—a Northerner to the core.¹ She received her prophetic calling in Maine, the northeasternmost part of Yankee New England. Her Yankee parents, Robert and Eunice Harmon, had resided in Maine for many years and were loyal New England Methodists. She married a Yankee from Maine, James White, and raised her children in Yankee Michigan. Her prophetic ministry thus began in Yankee territory, but it would one day extend beyond the Mason-Dixon Line to the Deep South and to the rest of the world.

The first three decades of Ellen’s life (1827–1857) were part of a fascinating and turbulent period in American history known as “antebellum America” (literally, “before the war”).² Historians often date this period from Andrew Jackson’s victory at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815 to the Civil War in 1861.³ It was characterized by chaotic social, theological, territorial, and political forces that repeatedly clashed with each other and caused an antagonistic sectional rift between the North and the South. By the end of 1860, this intense ideological conflict had established a national

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psychological mind-set that inevitably led to open hostilities in the Civil War. This period was also a time of unprecedented social reforms and spiritual revivals that swept across the American landscape. Ellen White, like all other Americans during this era, was impacted by these events. This chapter will provide the historical framework for the story of how Ellen White became a prophet to the Adventist people.

The Missouri Compromise of 1820

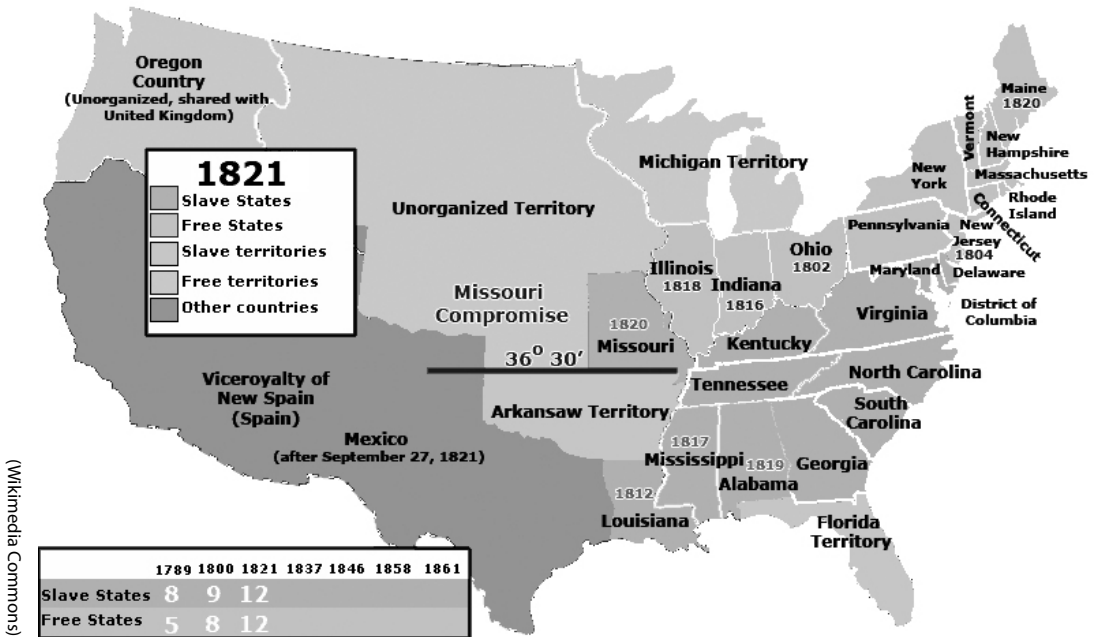
Seven years before Ellen's birth in 1827, her home state of Maine entered the Union as a result of the Missouri Compromise of 1820. This significant political event was the nation's first major crisis over slavery and is recognized by historians as planting the seeds for the Civil War that occurred forty years later. During the years of 1802 through 1819, as new states joined the Union, they did so essentially in pairs: one free state from the North, and another slave state from the South. By the close of 1819, the sectional divide over slavery in America was geographically evident in the twenty-two states: eleven slave, and eleven free. This balance was disrupted with the application of Missouri, a slave state, for admission to the Union.

The controversial aspect of Missouri's admission to statehood was that it would mean the first slave state completely west of the Mississippi River. Slavery had existed in North America for more than 150 years before the ratification of the Constitution in 1788 and was legal in every one of the thirteen colonies. The North had developed a more diverse economy that was not dependent on slavery and gravitated away from it as fundamental to its society. The South had, in contrast, organized its entire economic and social life on human bondage; the slave states "were not merely societies with slaves but 'slave societies' " themselves.⁴ Politically, the issue of slavery proved to be volatile with regard to congressional representation. Because of the growing populations in the Northern free states, the North had more votes in Congress than the Southern slave states, so the South constantly fought for an equal vote.

It was in this context that the free state of Maine applied for statehood in the Union and complicated the concern over slavery and freedom in Missouri. The debate was intense, but the compromise ultimately admitted Missouri into the Union as a slave state and prohibited any more slave states to be admitted from the Louisiana Purchase north of Missouri's southern border, the latitude 36°30'. In this context, Maine entered the Union as a free state and maintained the balance between

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the free states and the slave states.⁵ The compromise of 1820 was passed through the House, and nationalists on both the North and South sides accepted the settlement.



On April 22, 1820, the aged Thomas Jefferson wrote to John Holmes of Maine that the Missouri Compromise, “like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union.” The idea of “a geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle, moral and political, once conceived and held up to the angry passions of men, will never be obliterated; and every new irritation will mark it deeper and deeper.”⁶ These words would ring true with almost prophetic accuracy. Each debate over the issue of slavery would deepen the geopolitical division in the country. When the Missouri Compromise was repealed years later in 1854, many in the country saw it as a call to war. Historian Robert Pierce Forbes believed that the Missouri Compromise is best understood “as a flash of lightning that illuminated the realities of sectional power in the United States and ignited a fire that smoldered for a generation” and then, when circumstances were right, “burst into flame.”⁷ Such was the politically charged atmosphere into which Ellen White was born.

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Religious and reform movements

Americans in general were optimistic during this antebellum period, especially since the War of 1812 had placed them in the family of nations and provided a hero in the person of Andrew Jackson, who was a symbol of progress and individualism. With social and technological developments, an expansion of the territory, and religious freedom, Americans looked at their country and wondered at “what hath God wrought.”⁸ This climate of optimism helped spawn the many reform movements that sought to help America fulfill its destiny and usher in the millennium. Temperance, education, women’s rights, abolitionism, and other issues all became part of the reform movements in America during that time; each with its own leaders and societies.

Because of America’s democratic stance, its soil was ripe for the birth of numerous religious movements. During Ellen White’s childhood years in the 1830s, America experienced a great revival. From approximately 1790 to the mid-1840s, a Great Awakening, sometimes referred to as the Second Great Awakening,⁹ swept through the United States and became the most influential revival of Christianity in American history.¹⁰ From approximately 1825 to the late 1830s, the revival found its momentum in Charles Grandison Finney, the Presbyterian turned Congregationalist who, according to historian Mark A. Noll, “may have had a greater impact on the public life of antebellum America than any of the nation’s politicians.”¹¹

Finney developed his own style of revival that impacted the masses as he traveled from place to place.¹² Because he taught that slavery was a national sin and was against God’s moral law, abolitionist activity increased dramatically after his revival campaigns. Although Finney never participated directly in the abolitionist movement, his preaching provided the theological foundation for antislavery views. He believed that converting souls through revival, rather than political activism, would bring about abolitionism. His message of holiness and perfection in this life encouraged the antislavery activists to believe that they could perfect society and usher in Christ’s millennial reign.¹³ This postmillennial understanding (that Christ would return after the millennium) was characteristic of Protestant theology in antebellum America and fueled the many reform efforts of that era.

Outside of evangelical churches, utopian communities, such as the Shakers and Oneida Perfectionists, endeavored to perfect American society with their unique

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religious beliefs. Universalists, with their benevolent view of God, and Unitarians, with their focus on the nature and rationality of humankind, both cast their presence across the New England landscape. Spiritualism, with its birth in 1848 at the home of Kate and Maggie Fox, proliferated into a significant presence in America by the time of the Civil War. Mormonism, with a theocracy centered in its prophet, Joseph Smith, was a constant controversial presence in antebellum America. Finally, the restorationists and Millerites, more biblically oriented than the others, were seminal influences on the founders of Seventh-day Adventism.¹⁴

On a more intellectual level was the influential Transcendentalist movement that put emphasis on the inherent goodness of man. “Innately present in each individual,” said the Transcendentalists, “is a spiritual principle that, of itself, without any external stimuli, allows one to distinguish between right and wrong, good and bad, God and Satan, and it supersedes any outward laws or injunctions.”¹⁵ Leaders of the movement, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, and Henry David Thoreau, viewed slavery as inherently wrong and thus participated in the abolitionist movement.¹⁶ The spiritually charged atmosphere created by all these movements impacted Americans, including the family of the young Ellen Harmon.

Tumultuous events of 1831

The year that Ellen turned four years old, 1831, was a year full of tumultuous events that would influence America’s destiny.¹⁷ On January 1, William Lloyd Garrison published the first issue of *The Liberator* and emerged as the most outspoken and radical abolitionist in the antebellum United States. “I am in earnest,” Garrison declared in his opening editorial, “I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—and I will be heard.”¹⁸ Prior to this, abolitionists advocated for a gradual emancipation of slavery in the United States. But Garrison launched what would come to be known as “immediate emancipation”—a new movement in abolitionism that would agitate the slavery issue in the United States. The next chapter will look at the movement of abolitionism in more detail as the context to understand Ellen White’s strong antislavery stance better.

February 12, 1831, was a day many Americans anticipated with a sense of impending danger. It was heralded by the media as the “Great Eclipse of 1831” and would be the darkest day in the history of the United States, and the day the earth would “tremble on its axis.” When the fateful day finally arrived, Americans searched

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the heavens to witness the solar eclipse, but the day passed and the spectacle was rather unimpressive. Nevertheless, preachers capitalized on the event and preached on the “signs in the sun” from Luke 21:25.¹⁹

In Southampton County, Virginia, one preacher saw the February 12 eclipse as a sign to begin an insurrection.²⁰ Nat Turner had escaped from slavery in 1821 but returned to his former plantation to plot and plan a slave revolt. As a preacher, he was allowed to speak at different plantations and used this opportunity to rally other slaves to his cause. Turner interpreted the eclipse as a sign to begin his rebellion, and he watched for the opportune day. On August 22, he launched the revolt, and after slaying some sixty whites, his followers were apprehended; though Turner himself escaped capture until October 30. Turner was sentenced to death and hanged on November 11. On November 25, Turner’s attorney published *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.²¹ American slavery historian Eugene Genovese suggested that “Turner’s revolt was a turning point in the movement towards the United States Civil War because it stiffened the resolve of both abolitionists and proslavery advocates.”²²

Falling of the stars in 1833

On November 13, 1833, while young Ellen slept through the night, many Americans again watched another spectacle in the sky. This one was much more impressive than the solar eclipse of 1831. On this night, the stars fell from the sky. One eyewitness wrote, “No language, indeed, can come up to the splendor of that magnificent display; . . . no one who did not witness it can form an adequate conception of its glory. It seemed as if the whole starry heavens had congregated at one point near the zenith, and were simultaneously shooting forth, with the velocity of lightning, to every part of the horizon; and yet they were not exhausted—thousands swiftly followed in the tracks of thousands, as if created for the occasion.”²³ Another described the display throughout the night: “The meteors began to attract notice by their unusual frequency or brilliancy, from nine to twelve o’clock in the evening, were most striking in their appearance, from two to five, arrived at their maximum, in many places, about four o’clock, and continued till rendered invisible by the light of day.”²⁴

A young Frederick Douglass, the escaped slave who would become the most famous black abolitionist and civil-rights activist in nineteenth-century America, awoke that morning and peered into the sky. “I witnessed this gorgeous spectacle, and was awe-struck,” he later recalled. “The air seemed filled with bright

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descending messengers from the sky. It was about daybreak when I saw this sublime scene. I was not without the suggestion, at the moment, that it might be the harbinger of the coming of the Son of Man; and, in my then state of mind, I was prepared to hail Him as my friend and deliverer. I had read, that the ‘stars shall fall from heaven’; and they were now falling.”²⁵ Interestingly, years later, Ellen White wrote in *The Great Controversy* that the falling of the stars on November 13, 1833, directed the attention of many people “to the fulfillment of prophecy, and many were led to give heed to the warning of the second advent.”²⁶

Rise of the Millerites

The falling of the stars provided credibility to one preacher in particular. William Miller, a former military officer in the War of 1812, concluded, after an intense study of the Scriptures from 1816 to 1818, that Christ was coming back around 1843. This successful farmer and abolitionist was reluctant to share his views, but he finally began preaching and publishing his message in 1831.²⁷ Throughout the rest of the 1830s, Miller heralded the soon return of Christ; this message of the premillennial return of Christ was in stark contrast to the postmillennialism of the day. Preachers welcomed Miller because he was a church-growth agent; wherever he went, revival ensued.²⁸ In 1839, Joshua V. Himes, the dynamic preacher and radical abolitionist at the Chardon Street Chapel in Boston, took up the Second Advent cause and provided momentum for Miller’s ideas by organizing giant camp meetings and Second Advent conferences, landing Miller in the large cities. Eventually, Miller’s message swelled into a national movement, and he became one of the greatest evangelistic influences in the northeastern United States between 1840 and 1844.²⁹

It was during this time that young Ellen first heard William Miller preach. “In March, 1840, William Miller visited Portland, Maine,” she recalled, “and gave a course of lectures on the second coming of Christ.” She remembered vividly how “Mr. Miller traced down the prophecies with an exactness that struck conviction to the hearts of his hearers. He dwelt upon the prophetic periods, and brought many proofs to strengthen his position. Then his solemn and powerful appeals and admonitions to those who were unprepared, held the crowds as if spellbound.”³⁰

Struck by the contrast of Miller’s message with what she had heard in her own church, Ellen pondered, “I had been taught that a temporal millennium would take place prior to the coming of Christ in the clouds of heaven; but now I was listening

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to the startling announcement that Christ was coming in 1843, only a few short years in the future.”³¹ Again, two years later in 1842, she heard Miller preach in Portland and was stirred. These meetings and a series of other events led to Ellen’s conversion, and she rejoiced in the soon return of Christ.³²

Miller never set a specific date for Christ to come. Instead, he was always approximate, “about the year 1843.” After this time period passed uneventfully, one of his followers, Samuel S. Snow, convincingly demonstrated in August 1844 that the fulfillment of the 2,300-day prophecy of Daniel 8:14 would take place in the autumn of 1844. Specifically, Snow showed that Daniel’s prophecy about the cleansing of the sanctuary in Daniel 8:14 would meet its completion on the Jewish Day of Atonement—the tenth day of the seventh month of the Jewish year (Leviticus 23:27). That day in 1844 was October 22. Christ’s coming was just two months away!³³

For the teenaged Ellen, this was a time of glad expectation. She remembered the revival that took place in the believers’ hearts during this time: “We assembled in the orchards and groves to commune with God and to offer up our petitions to Him, feeling more fully in His presence when surrounded by His natural works. The joys of salvation were more necessary to us than our food and drink. If clouds obscured our minds, we dared not rest or sleep till they were swept away by the consciousness of our acceptance with the Lord.”³⁴ Ellen, along with tens of thousands of Millerites on that chilly day of October 22, 1844, searched the skies, looking for the coming King. But the time “passed unmarked by the advent of Jesus,” she recalled. “It was a bitter disappointment.”³⁵

Meanwhile, the rest of the country was focused on the national presidential campaign during the fall of 1844. The Democratic nominee, James K. Polk, ran on a platform that supported territorial expansion, later known as “manifest destiny”—America’s right to expand its territory and destiny. Polk supported the annexation of Texas, which was a hot issue during the campaign, and the Whig nominee, Henry Clay, opposed it. James Gillespie Birney ran as the antislavery Liberty Party nominee; Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet, ran as an independent, but his campaign ended abruptly when he was killed in a jail riot on June 27. On December 4, Polk won the presidency in a very close election,³⁶ and his victory would be significant in terms of America’s territorial expansion—an issue that would inflame the slavery question in the 1850s.