Friendly Fire: George I. Butler’s Theory of Degrees of Inspiration

Denis Kaiser

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by Denis Kaiser

Butler’s series of ten articles on degrees of inspiration in the first part of 1884 has been looked at by Adventist scholars as a significant set of writings because those articles constitute the first set of documents in which an Adventist writer promoted a particular theory of inspiration.² Scholars generally assume that different degrees of inspiration necessitate different degrees of accuracy and the existence of uninspired parts. Some interpret Butler’s views as a higher-critical attempt to undermine the authority of Ellen White’s writings. Thus, Leslie Hardinge argues somewhat anachronistically that Butler “showed a remarkable grasp of neo-orthodox views.”³ George Reid suggests that his articles exhibited

the trend of higher biblical criticism.\textsuperscript{4} Other scholars place Butler’s articles in the context of the power struggle at Battle Creek College in 1882 and 1883. Following Emmett K. Vande Vere’s assertions, they argue that Butler tried to strike a balance between the prophetic authority of Ellen White and the questioning of the inspiration of her \textit{Testimonies} by Uriah Smith.\textsuperscript{5} Butler apparently introduced a divine-human concept of inspiration that did not require absolute perfection but allowed for inaccuracies in content.

This article will show, however, that these suggestions fail to capture accurately the nuances of Butler’s considerations. To understand Butler and his views of inspiration properly, it is necessary to look at the context of his articles, the self-witness of the articles, definitions of the theory in the 19th century, and the reception and the demise of Butler’s theory of inspiration.

THE CONTEXT

First of all, I want to concede that Butler’s articles on inspiration were preceded by the Battle Creek College crisis. The tensions between the president of the college, Alexander McLearn, and its veteran teacher, Goodloe Harper Bell, surfaced in the fall of 1881.\textsuperscript{6} Uriah Smith fully supported McLearn, feared a conspiracy against him,\textsuperscript{7} and was suspi-

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\item \textsuperscript{4} George W. Reid, "Is the Bible Our Final Authority?," \textit{Ministry}, November 1991, 8.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Allan G. Lindsay, "Goodloe Harper Bell: Pioneer Seventh-day Adventist Christian Educator" (Ed.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1982), 198–200. See also, e.g., Eva Bell to [Mary K. White], [1 October 1881], EGWCF, EGWE.
\item \textsuperscript{7} S. N. Haskell and Uriah Smith, "The General Conference: Twentieth Annual Session, Dec. 1, 1881," \textit{Review and Herald}, 5 December 1881, 360; George I. Butler to W. C. White, 19 January 1881 a [sic], EGWCF, EGWE; George I. Butler to W. C. White, 29 January 1882, EGWCF, EGWE; George I. Butler to S. N. Haskell, 30 January 1882, EGWCF, EGWE; George I. Butler to W. C. White, 20 February 1882, EGWCF, EGWE; George I. Butler to W. C. White, 22 February 1882, EGWCF, EGWE; J. H. Kellogg to W. C. White, 21 June 1882, EGWCF, EGWE.
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When he received a letter from Ellen White that contradicted his personal perception, he questioned its inspiration. All the while George Butler stood in constant contact with Ellen White and tried to help those involved to accept her inspired counsel. In the late summer and fall of 1882, many people in Battle Creek embraced the testimonies and confessed their faults. Nevertheless, the College remained closed from the summer of 1882 to the summer of 1883. Left with few like-minded people, Smith confided his inner troubles to D. M. Canright, who had taken a break from pastoral work.

8 Seventh-day Adventist Educational Society and Board of Trustees Minutes, 1877-1890, vol. 1, Battle Creek, MI, Minutes Collection of Battle Creek College, Emmanuel Missionary College, and Andrews University, CAR, 102-105, 111-115 (transcript); George I. Butler, Charges Against Prof. G. H. Bell by Eld. McLearn, 5 January 1882, EGWCF, EGWE; George I. Butler, Copy of Charges Preferred Against G. H. Bell by Prof. E. B. Miller, 5 January 1882, EGWCF, EGWE; George I. Butler, Copy of Charges Preferred Against Eld. A. McLearn by Prof. G. H. Bell, 5 January 1882, EGWCF, EGWE; Butler to W. C. White, 19 January 1881 [sic].

9 Ellen G. White to Uriah Smith, 28 March 1882, Lt 2a, 1882, EGWE.


11 George I. Butler to Ellen G. White, 26 April 1882, EGWCF, EGWE; Butler to Ellen G. White, 3 May 1882; George I. Butler to Ellen G. White, 16 May 1882, EGWCF, EGWE; George I. Butler to Ellen G. White, 12 August 1882c, EGWCF, EGWE; George I. Butler to Ellen G. White, 14 November 1882, EGWCF, EGWE; George I. Butler to Ellen G. White, 18 February 1883, EGWCF, EGWE; George I. Butler to Ellen G. White, 23 March 1883, EGWCF, EGWE; George I. Butler to Ellen G. White, 23 April 1883, EGWCF, EGWE; George I. Butler to Ellen G. White, 18 May 1883, EGWCF, EGWE; George I. Butler to Ellen G. White, 27 May 1883, EGWCF, EGWE; George I. Butler to Ellen G. White, 17 June 1883, EGWCF, EGWE; George I. Butler to Ellen G. White, 4 July 1883, EGWCF, EGWE; George I. Butler to Ellen G. White, 24 July 1883, EGWCF, EGWE; George I. Butler to Ellen G. White, 8 August 1883, EGWCF, EGWE; George I. Butler to Ellen G. White, 26 August 1883, EGWCF, EGWE; George I. Butler to Ellen G. White, 28 November 1883, EGWCF, EGWE.

12 Uriah Smith to D. M. Canright, 31 July 1883, Albion Fox Ballenger, Edward S. Ballenger, and Donald E. Mote Papers, box 10, fl 34, CAR; Uriah Smith to D. M. Canright, 7 August 1883, EGWCF, EGWE. Butler's initiative to put together the Review and Herald supplement in August 1883 documents his desire to defend Ellen White's prophetic role and inspiration against criticism.

13 Butler to Ellen G. White, 12 August 1882; George I. Butler to W. C. White, 16 August 1882, EGWCF, EGWE; George I. Butler to W. C. White, 22 October 1882, EGWCF, EGWE.

ministry. Several experiences at the Michigan camp meeting in the early days of October 1883 led Smith to make a public confession and to express his confidence in Ellen White’s testimonies. Nothing suggests that, when writing his articles in the first part of 1884, Butler attempted to make concessions in order to mediate between Smith and White or that he himself doubted her inspiration.

Another matter occupied Butler’s mind in 1882: the reprinting of Ellen White’s early materials. In May 1882, he requested the reprinting of her early Testimonies for the Church because they were mostly out of print and many people in Battle Creek distrusted Ellen White’s prophetic role. He even asked her whether she wanted to make any changes, something she did want to do. As Ellen White’s critics accused her of suppressing her earliest writings and church members were increasingly desiring to obtain copies of those writings, Butler arranged the reprinting of A Sketch of the Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White (1851) and Spiritual Gifts, vol. 1 (1858) in the form of Early Writings in December 1882. Unaware of the even earlier document, A Word to the Little Flock (1847), he mistakenly claimed that now “the very first of the published writings of Sister White” had been reprinted and that “no shadow of change” had been made “in any idea or sentiment of the

15 Butler to Ellen G. White, 12 August 1882; George I. Butler to W. C. White, 14 November 1882, EGWCF, EGWE; Uriah Smith to D. M. Canright, 22 March 1883, EGWCF, EGWE; Uriah Smith to D. M. Canright, 6 April 1883, EGWCF, EGWE; Smith to Canright, 31 July 1883; Smith to Canright, 7 August 1883.
16 W. C. White to Mary K. White, 1 October 1883, WCWCF, CAR; Uriah Smith to D. M. Canright, 2 October 1883, Albion Fox Ballenger, Edward S. Ballenger and Donald E. Mote Papers, Bx 10 Fld 34, CAR; Uriah Smith to Uriah Wilton Smith, 2 October 1883, Uriah Smith / Mark Bovee Collection, Bx 2 Fld 36, CAR; W. C. White to Mary K. White, 4 October 1883, WCWCF, CAR; [Uriah Smith], “The Michigan Camp Meeting,” Review and Herald, 9 October 1883, 630.
18 Ellen G. White, Early Writings of Mrs. White: Experience and Views, and Spiritual Gifts, Volume One, 2nd ed. (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1882); “Publishers’ Department,” Review and Herald, 12 December 1882, 784.
19 George I. Butler, “A Book Long Desired,” Review and Herald, 26 December 1882, 792. See also Levterov, The Development of the Seventh-day Adventist Understanding of Ellen G. White’s Prophetic Gift, 1844-1889, 161. An example of an earlier document that was not reprinted in Early Writings in 1882 was her letter to Eli Curtis in James White, ed., A Word to the “Little Flock” (Gorham, ME: James White, 1847), 11, 12.
original work.”20 In response, A. C. Long accused Butler of deception and suppression in the columns of the Advent and Sabbath Advocate, the periodical of the Marion Party / Church of God (Seventh Day), as A Word to the Little Flock contained statements that were not reprinted in Early Writings.21 Soon afterwards, Long’s articles were reprinted in the tract Comparison of the Early Writings of Mrs. White with Later Publications.22 Meanwhile, Alexander McLearn and the lawyer J. S. Green, who, during the College crisis, had left the Seventh-day Adventist Church and joined the Marion Party, began to attack Ellen White through the columns of the Advent and Sabbath Advocate in the summer months of 1883.23 The Advent and Sabbath Advocate published an extra on July 17, 1883 to point out the difficulties with Ellen White’s prophetic claim.24 Interestingly, their charges relied on the assumption that true divine inspiration would give specific words and phrases (verbal inspiration). During the camp meetings in the summer of 1883, Butler learned that the tract had been distributed “in almost every church” in the West.25 He was eventually able to procure a copy of the 1847 tract and had it reprinted in July 1883.26 He admitted that there were many Seventh-day Adventists “who do not believe in the visions,” demonstrating the need to issue an able response to these charges against Ellen White’s inspiration.27 As a result, on August 14, 1883, the Review and Herald published

White explained various omissions in Ellen G. White, “Suppression and the Shut Door,” [1883], Ms 4, 1883, EGWE.

20 Ellen G. White, Early Writings of Mrs. White, iv; Butler, “A Book Long Desired,” 792.
21 George I. Butler, “Early Writings and Suppression,” Review and Herald, 14 August 1883, 4. See also Levetrov, The Development of the Seventh-day Adventist Understanding of Ellen G. White’s Prophetic Gift, 1844-1889, 144, 145, 149, 150, 155, 162.
22 A. C. Long, Comparison of the Early Writings of Mrs. White with Later Publications (Marion, IA: Advent and Sabbath Advocate, 1883).
24 On July 31, 1883, Uriah Smith mentioned that Advent and Sabbath Advocate extra as a recent publication. See Smith to Canright, 31 July 1883. The extra itself could not be located. However, a later issue of the Advent and Sabbath Advocate refers to the publication of an extra on July 17, 1883. See Jacob Brinkerhoff, “S. D. Adventists Vision Fanaticism,” Advent and Sabbath Advocate, 3 October 1883, 193.
a sixteen-page supplement with the express purpose to refute the charges in Long’s tract and the *Advent and Sabbath Advocate* extra.28 The majority of the articles in that supplement in defense of Ellen White’s inspiration stem from Butler’s pen.29

Since 1882, Mary Kelsey White had been making grammatical and stylistic changes to Ellen White’s earlier *Testimonies*. Butler felt that about thirty percent of the changes were not necessary and might attract the attention of Ellen White’s critics.30 W. C. White similarly felt that the changes “would be criticized by friends and enemies [sic].” In early November 1883, he outlined the principles of the revision work to the ministers and allowed them to evaluate the changes to preempt prejudices. Their responses to the revision project illustrated two different mindsets. Some people thought that verbal changes were unacceptable which is why they “bitterly opposed any change.” Other people felt that while changes were permissible, they might attract criticism from Ellen White’s opponents.31 Thus, not only the critics of Ellen White thought within the paradigm of verbal inspiration, but a number of Adventist ministers and members did so also. W. C. White feared that the entire project was doomed and that the stylistic changes that his wife had made were all in vain.32 On November 21, the General Conference finally resolved to commission the revision of the *Testimonies for the Church*, nos. 1-30, explaining why a revision was necessary and permissible.

“Many of these testimonies were written under the most unfavorable circumstances, the writer being too heavily pressed with anxiety and labor to devote critical thought to the grammatical perfection of the writings, and they were printed in such haste as to allow these imperfections to pass uncorrected. . . . We believe the light given by God to his servants is by the enlightenment of the mind, thus imparting the
thoughts, and not (except in rare cases) the very words in which the ideas should be expressed."

This resolution has sometimes been interpreted as an affirmation of thought inspiration, overlooking that it allows also, in some cases, for the giving of words. It nevertheless negated the idea of a general inspiration of the words as it surfaced in Long’s tract. The resolution constituted a compromise between those wanting to avoid any changes and those desiring the improvement of language. It prescribed and permitted improvements of “grammatical imperfections only.” Butler was at the forefront of this project and he, as chair of the committee, selected a group of five individuals to oversee the revision of the Testimonies.

THE ARTICLES

Several details suggest that the above criticism against Ellen White’s inspiration and the recent resolution of the General Conference session prompted Butler in the early months of 1884 to outline a biblical teaching of divine inspiration. This observation will be discussed further below. At this point, we will look at Butler’s definition of the degrees of inspiration and of the theory in general as it appears in his articles.

“God has given light to man in various ways:—1. By speaking with his own voice his holy law in the audience of the people; by announcing his Son and commanding the people to hear him; and by writing with his own finger the words of his law upon the tables of stone. 2. By taking Moses and Christ into his especial presence, and fully instructing them relative to the great work to be done in the dispensations he was then inaugurating. 3. By revealing to men in visions and dreams things which they could not have otherwise known, these men afterward writing or speaking the substance of what was thus given them, for the instruction of others. This method of inspiration, however, was not as full and perfect as the preceding. 4. By the influence of his Spirit, the Lord illuminated the memory of those who had been acquainted with important events, so that they could correctly place them on record. The Spirit brought all things “to their remembrance.” 5. It is probable that the Spirit of God rested upon Solomon and others, and especially illuminated their natural faculties, bringing to their minds good thoughts which are left

34 W. C. White to Mary K. White, 20 November 1883, WCWC, Microfilm Collection, reel 2, CAR; Butler and Oyen, “General Conference Proceedings,” 741. 742.
on record for our benefit, in such books as the Proverbs, Job, etc. These books seem to have been given in a different manner from most of the other books of the Bible.”

Butler sometimes employed the terms “revelation” and “inspiration” in a technical sense, yet often he also used them interchangeably. For example, in the above quotation, the first three degrees concern special revelation and the last two describe aspects of inspiration. He considered the first two degrees as the most direct, clear, complete, and impressive manners of giving light, and accordingly as the most superior method of revelation and the highest sense of inspiration. The third degree—visions and dreams—was in his view the most common and ordinary form of inspiration, applying specifically to the production of the prophetic books, large parts of the New Testament, and some Psalms. The fourth degree revived, strengthened, and invigorated the prophet’s memory to remember details clearly (John 14:25, 26) and express them accurately in his own language, but Butler believed this mode of the Spirit’s operation applied generally to all degrees and particularly to situations where biblical writers were already familiar with the facts. In his view, the historical books of the Bible resulted from that degree of inspiration. He vehemently opposed the idea that the Holy Spirit gave the inspired writers “the very words and forms of expression,” turning them into mere machines and robbing their writings of their “stamp of individuality.”

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36 George I. Butler, “Inspiration [No. 2]: Differences in Degrees and Manner of Bestowment,” Review and Herald, 15 January 1884, 41 (emphasis supplied). In his later articles, Butler counted the degrees differently by skipping the first degree and referring to the remaining four degrees as the first to the fourth degree.

37 Ibid., 41.


39 Butler, “Inspiration [No. 2];” 41; Butler, “Inspiration, No. 6,” 249, 250. Following the reading of the King James Version, he interpreted Luke 1:3 as saying that Luke was such an eyewitness of the events described in his gospel. While this is certainly true for the Book of Acts (see the use of the word “we” in that book), Butler seemed to overlook the fact that the Greek text of Luke 1:3 suggests that in the writing of the Gospel, Luke functioned as a historian who carefully collected and investigated the reports of eyewitnesses.

His strong opposition against verbal inspiration was most likely addressing the unrealistic assumptions concerning inspiration prevalent among Ellen White’s critics and some of her defenders. The last degree of inspiration dealt primarily with everyday matters rather than spiritual lessons, something that was evident in the biblical wisdom literature. It should be noted that Butler repeatedly employed the terms “degree,” “manner,” “form,” “mode,” “method,” and “kind” of inspiration interchangeably to describe varying intensities of the Spirit’s revelatory operation.

Butler stated that Scripture was both “perfect” and “imperfect.” Some Adventist scholars interpret these remarks as a claim that inspiration did not require “absolute perfection” and did not produce writings that were “absolutely perfect” or “absolutely trustworthy.” To understand the meaning of Butler’s use of the term “imperfection,” it is necessary to let him define its meaning. He stated, “There is some degree of imperfection, so far as clearness and fullness of light is concerned, in revelations from God through prophecy, ever remembering, however, that what is given is true and good.” Furthermore, he wrote, “The Bible does not profess to be perfect and complete as a history or a prophecy, in the sense that it gives a record of all the past or all that will occur. It tells the truth as far as it goes, but often does not tell all we would like to know.” Butler stressed that inspiration produced “correct,” “true,” and “reliable” accounts. He further stated, “so far as perfection of doctrine and moral instruction is concerned this revelation is perfect; and that as a whole it is perfectly adapted to save men from sin.” Thus, Butler defined “imperfections” in Scripture as a lack of abso-
lute clarity and completeness whereas the recent resolution of the General Conference mentioned “imperfections” of a grammatical nature in Ellen White’s writings. Butler’s remarks about lacking clarity and completeness were certainly in harmony with some of Ellen White’s statements about “the imperfect expression of human language” and progressive revelation, yet employing the term “imperfections” in reference to Scripture was certainly a use of language that could be easily misunderstood.

In his last article, Butler made some remarks that would prove problematic later on. He perceived occasional instances of uninspired statements in the Bible. He concluded that no special divine assistance accompanied the writing of a biblical writer’s recording of his hope or uncertainty about particular matters that never came to fruition, illustrating their humanness and incomplete knowledge. He nevertheless believed that these thoughts were accurately recorded and were beneficial for modern-day believers. This aspect of distinguishing between the inspired and the uninspired realm in the life of an inspired person could be compared with Ellen White’s own emphasis on the need to distinguish between the common and the sacred in her experience. However, she never asked people to apply this distinction to the writings for which she claimed inspiration. Butler, on the other hand, perceived this distinction also within the corpus of inspired Scripture, thus inadvertently encouraging people to look for such uninspired passages in the Bible. Thus, Butler’s theory of degrees of inspiration negated the possibility of inaccuracies and mistakes in the Bible, yet it left room for a few uninspired, albeit accurate, statements within the corpus of inspired writings.

52 See, e.g., Ellen G. White, The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1888), [1888], c, d; Ellen G. White, “Objections to the Bible,” [ca. September 1885 - May 1886], Ms 24, 1886, EGWE.
53 Butler, “Inspiration, No. 10,” 361, 362. Butler referred to passages such as 1 Cor 1:16; 4:19; 7:7, 10, 12, 40; 16:5-9; 2 Cor 1:25-27; 11:21; Rom 15:24; Phil 2:19, 23; 2 Tim 4:9-13.
54 Ellen G. White, “A Confusion of the Sacred and the Common,” 5 March 1909, Ms 107, 1909, EGWE; Ellen G. White to James Edson White and Emma L. White, 10 September 1903, Lt 201, 1903, EGWE; Ellen G. White to James Edson White and Emma L. White, 11 September 1903, Lt 202, 1903, EGWE. See also Arthur L. White, “Common or Uninspired Writings,” 6 April 1982, White Estate shelf document, EGWE.
55 Ellen G. White to R. A. Underwood, 18 January 1889, Lt 22, 1889; Ellen G. White, “The Discernment of Truth,” January 1889, Ms 16, 1889, EGWE.
THE THEORY OF DEGREES IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Butler did not invent a completely new concept of inspiration, but he used an already existing theory in his attempt to capture the diverse modes of the Holy Spirit’s operation in the revelation-inspiration process. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, British theologians conceived the theory of degrees of inspiration, and American scholars subsequently modified it. Noted British advocates of the theory were Philip Doddridge (1702-1751), 56 Daniel Wilson (1778-1858), 57 John Dick (1764-1833), 58 and John Pye Smith (1774-1851). 59 Using slightly different terminology, each person promoted three or four varying degrees or modes of the Holy Spirit’s operation in the inspiration process. In North America, Archibald Alexander and Samuel Wakefield suggested three degrees of inspiration—superintendence, elevation, and suggestion. 60 All of these theologians suggested that the Holy Spirit operated in diverse ways such as boosting the memory, enhancing language proficiency, giving thoughts, providing words, and safeguarding from error. While some of them permitted the existence of different degrees of accuracy, others suggested that the Holy Spirit extended as much influence as needed to ensure the accuracy of the final product. Seventh-day Adventist writers quoted and referred to the writings of most of these scholars as they saw fit to support their own position on particular Bible texts. 61 There is no

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61 For quotations and references to Philip Doddridge see, e.g., J. H. Waggoner, “The Law of God and Baptism,” Review and Herald, 24 October 1854, 84; “Plain Truths,” Review and Herald, 6 August 1857, 106; Oliver Hoffer, “Explanation,” Review and Herald,
evidence that Butler made direct use of the writings of these theologians concerning divine inspiration.

Some Adventist scholars suggest that Thomas Hartwell Horne’s *Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* may have served as Butler’s primary source on the theory of degrees. They seem to overlook that Horne promoted aspects of a partial inspiration, not degrees of inspiration. Admittedly, Butler allowed for uninspired portions in Scripture, yet the theory of degrees does not appear in Horne’s work and there is no evidence that Butler appropriated Horne’s writings in developing his own theory. Butler argued almost exclusively from Scripture; however, there are two exceptions. In two instances, he referred to the Bible commentary by Adam Clarke (1760/2-1832), a British Wesleyan-Arminian theologian who was frequently quoted by Seventh-day Adventist writers. Although these quotations in Butler’s articles do not articulate a particular concept of inspiration, it is inter-


esting that Adam Clarke advocated a particular version of the theory of
degrees that closely resembles Butler’s concept of degrees of inspiration.
Clarke suggested the Holy Spirit operated not merely in “one particular
form,” but “in diverse manners” in the inspiration of the biblical writers.
His discussion of the different modes was largely copied from the An-
glican scholar Daniel Whitby (1638-1726). The first type operated when
the biblical writers had no antecedent knowledge of such things, yet the
Spirit generally suggested only the true intent and meaning. It was only
in rare cases that the very words were suggested; the writers usually
employed their own language. The second mode operated when such an
antecedent knowledge existed by natural reason, education, or previous
revelation such as in the historical parts of the New Testament and mat-
ters of fact relating to the writers themselves or other persons. The Spirit
merely reminded them of these things. Whitby stated that either way the
Spirit guarded the writer from making errors in the transmission. In a
few cases, however, when biblical writers manifested ignorance, doubt,
and personal opinion, such as in Romans 15:24, 28, they had not been di-
vinely assisted. Clarke suggested that the Spirit vouchsafed the accuracy
of the delivered truths by modes of inspiration that varied in intensity,
depending on the existence or non-existence of previous knowledge.65

THE RECEPTION AND THE DEMISE OF THE THEORY

The theory of degrees of inspiration initially received positive re-
sponses from at least some Adventist ministers, yet the perception of
the theory changed drastically after the Minneapolis General Conference
session in late 1888.

At the General Conference session in November 1884, M. H. Brown
moved “that Eld. Butler’s recent articles on inspiration be prepared for
publication in pamphlet form.”66 Nine months later, a question of a cor-
respondent concerning inspiration was answered as follows:

Carefully Printed from the Most Correct Copies of the Present Authorized Version, Includ-
ing the Marginal Readings and Parallel Texts, with a Commentary and Critical Notes, new
66 George I. Butler and Uriah Smith, “General Conference Proceedings,” Review and
Herald, 25 November 1884, 745. Warren John asserts, “Adventists have consistently stood
in opposition to ‘degrees of inspiration.’” Nevertheless, he seems to overlook the point
that some ministers and leaders perceived Butler’s concept as an intriguing model. See
We believe that the whole Bible is the word of God, and that it is all sufficiently inspired to constitute it that word; that its historical statements are absolutely true; its morality, perfect; its doctrines, divine; and its prophecies, infallible. But these results do not involve the necessity of the same degree of inspiration throughout. For instance, in the historical portions of the book, all that is necessary that the record be absolutely correct; and all that is necessary to secure this, would be that the Spirit of God should quicken the memory of the writer to give him a true understanding of the bearing and relation of the events he had in mind, so that he could present a true view of them. This is what Christ promised to the writers of the Gospels: He, the Comforter, “shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance.” John 14:26. But a person thus influenced, would not need to be fully under the power of the Spirit as Moses when he was brought to converse with God as if face to face, or Isaiah or Ezekiel when rapt in holy vision or Paul when let into the profoundest mysteries of conversion and redemption. This subject was clearly explained in Bro. Butler’s late articles on Inspiration, which we hope soon to see issued in book form.67

This answer corresponds with the above observations on the ideas that Butler had promoted in his articles. The Holy Spirit had inspired the biblical writers to the extent needed to ensure the complete accuracy of their literary productions. Despite claims to the contrary,68 however, there is surprisingly no evidence that Butler’s articles were ever published in book form.

As the conflict over the law in Galatians grew in intensity and Ellen White seemed to side with E. J. Waggoner rather than Butler on this issue, Butler had difficulties comprehending where Ellen White stood on this matter. When he and Uriah Smith received her letter on April 5, 1887,69 he felt misunderstood and mistreated. He felt he was loyal to the Testimonies but could not understand why Ellen White reproved him for the way in which he had handled the situation.70

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67 “Notes and Queries,” Review and Herald, 11 August 1885, 504.
68 Lake, Ellen White Under Fire, 97.
69 Ellen G. White to George I. Butler and Uriah Smith, 5 April 1887, Lt 13, 1887, EGWE.
70 George I. Butler to Ellen G. White, 1 October 1888d, EGWCF, EGWE.
Nevertheless, in March 1888, he outlined his ideas on degrees of inspiration before students at Battle Creek College. These talks before the students, along with two publications on the prophetic gift, display his continuing attempts at building trust and confidence in Ellen White’s inspiration and the reliability of her visions and writings. Many years later, W. C. White declared, “[Butler] felt that he had done a great service to the cause in writing these articles, and some others felt the same way.” However, his feelings of confusion over Ellen White’s opposition towards him remained until the General Conference session in the fall of 1888, as is evident from his letter to Ellen White on October 1, 1888. Butler questioned the legitimacy of some of the things that she had written concerning the issue at stake and the condition of the individuals involved.

After the Minneapolis General Conference (October 18 to November 4, 1888), criticism against Butler’s theory began to grow. The first person to oppose Butler’s views was Ellen White. Initially, she made general negative remarks concerning the weighing of inspiration and the judging between inspired and uninspired portions, without mentioning Butler’s name. One month after the session, she criticized the idea that one had to judge “upon the Word of God as to what is inspired and what is not inspired” or to “pass sentence as to how much of this is inspired and how much is not inspired and that this is more inspired than some other portion.” She urged her audience:

Do not let any living man come to you and begin to dissect God’s Word, telling what is revelation, what is inspiration, and what is not, without a rebuke. Tell all such they simply do not know. They simply are not able to comprehend the things of the mystery of God. What we want is to inspire faith. We want no one to say, “This I will reject, and this will I receive,” but we want to have implicit faith in the Bible as a whole and as it is.

71 George I. Butler, “The Visions: Talks to the Students of the ‘Special Course’ at Battle Creek College on March 18-20, 1888,” 20 March 1888, DF 105.06, LLU, 5, 12, 15, 16.
73 W. C. White to E. E. Andross, 21 September 1921, WCWF, EGWE.
74 Butler to Ellen G. White, 1 October 1888.
75 Ellen G. White, “Sermon by Mrs. E. G. White, Delivered in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Des Moines, Iowa, Sabbath, December 1, 1888, at the State Meeting of the...
In January 1889, she wrote more clearly and explicitly concerning George Butler’s condition and his views on inspiration.

Brother Butler is on the wrong track. God has not given the work into his hands to set up his human wisdom to put his hand on the sacred ark of God. When sitting in judgment upon the living oracles of God, did he consider that God had placed upon him the work to pass judgment as to what is inspired in the Word of God and what is not inspired? Has God committed the work to him to state what sort of degrees of inspiration attend some utterances and what is wanting in others? Whatever may be his thoughts in these things, if they are kept to himself they will not harm other souls. . . . These skeptical ideas that undermine all inspiration have been taught in our college and have been printed in our church paper. The seeds have been springing up and you must reap the harvest. These sentiments should never have seen the light of day. They should never have been put into the paper. . . . God designs that men shall take the Scriptures as His inspired Word, and any man that shall venture to distinguish between the portions of God’s Word, exalting one and belittling another, and taking away from another, places himself in a dangerous position.76

Those who received Ellen White’s support after the General Conference session (E. J. Waggoner and A. T. Jones) seemed to notice her criticism of Butler’s theory and began to join in opposing the theory. Thus, the editors of the Signs recommended reading Francois Gaussen’s The Bible: Its Divine Origin and Entire Inspiration because “professedly Christian men [were] sitting in judgment upon the Scriptures, assigning degrees of inspiration to the several books of the sacred volume and to their several parts, electing to reject this, and to receive that.”77 Another article stated, “To assume that there are degrees of inspiration and degrees of importance will lead naturally to the assumption that we may reject as uninspired whatever seems to us unimportant.”78 In 1891, W. W. Prescott reportedly argued:

There can be no degrees of inspiration. We accept the entire word as coming alike from God. As soon as we decide that one portion of the Scripture is more inspired than another, we have a man-made Bible, which is really no standard of right and wrong. While we regard certain texts not so fully inspired as others, those texts cannot have the influence on us that they otherwise would.79

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76 White, “The Discernment of Truth,” MS 16, 1889.
77 “[Note],” Signs of the Times, 20 May 1889, 304.
78 “All Scripture,” Signs of the Times, 7 July 1890, 405.
In the following year, it was probably E. J. Waggoner who wrote about “well-intentioned people” who were carried away by the idea of “degrees of inspiration in the Bible” “and that it is left with them to decide what part of it is inspired and what is not.” In 1893, he made a remark that followed a similar reasoning.

“But how about the historical books of the Bible. They must also come under the head of prophecy, for the writers of those books were invariably prophets. The historical books were inspired, as well as the rest of the Scriptures. Let it be well noted that we are not stating any theory of inspiration,—we are not attempting to show how the Scriptures are inspired, nor to settle any question as to “degrees of inspiration”—but are simply considering what the scriptures themselves say of the fact. We do not profess to tell how much any portion of Scripture is inspired, for it is all infinite and cannot be measured. He who presumes to measure the “degrees of inspiration” might as well set himself to tell how much more power the Lord exerted in creating the sun than in creating the earth, or how much harder work it was for him to make the earth than to make a blade of grass. We simply know that the infinite power of God was required to make the smallest object in nature, and we are content. So we are content with knowing that “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God,” without trying to weigh God’s words in the balances of poor human reason. So in regard to the historical books of the Bible we may not say that they are inspired as much as the rest of the Bible, for that would be to imply a measurement of inspiration; but we can say that they come from the same Divine Source as the rest. All are given by the same inspiration of God.”

Other Adventist writers also opposed theories of degrees of inspiration. Interestingly, all of them, including the above mentioned writers, concluded that the theory of degrees necessarily allows for a human judging between inspired and uninspired portions in the Bible.

CONCLUSION

The present article has shown that Butler’s theory of divine inspiration intended to capture the diverse modes of the Holy Spirit’s operation and to preempt criticism against the envisioned revised version of the Testimonies. His understanding of the “imperfections” of inspired writings concerned the lack of absolute unambiguity and completeness that come as a natural result of human language and progressive revelation. His rejection of a general verbal inspiration and his affirmation of a more dynamic, thought-focused view of inspiration were in harmony with the resolution to revise the Testimonies and Ellen White’s own statements. His understanding of different “degrees” of inspiration did not necessitate the existence of different degrees of accuracy as some scholars have previously asserted. Instead, he perceived different intensities of the Holy Spirit’s working to ensure the reliability of the final product in matters of theology, morals, and history. While allowing for the common and uninspired in an inspired writer’s life is comparable to Ellen White’s insistence on distinguishing between the common and the sacred, Butler’s remarks (that such common, uninspired remarks appeared in Scripture) inadvertently permitted the reader to judge what was inspired and what was not inspired within the corpus of inspired writings. This element resurfaced when Butler voiced his doubts concerning some of Ellen White’s remarks in the context of the conflict over the law in Galatians and at the Minneapolis General Conference. Moreover, it was that same element that Ellen White objected to after the conference—declaring some parts in the corpus of inspired writings (the Testimonies) as uninspired. This is not to argue that Butler’s concept of degrees of inspiration is necessarily biblical, although the aspect of the Holy Spirit operating in multiple and diverse modes and manners certainly is. To attach different degrees or intensities of divine influence to these modes is something that is obviously impossible for uninspired people to determine. Further, in 1887/1888, Butler was certainly troubled and confused by some of Ellen White’s statements, yet one should avoid reading those later doubts into his earlier well-meaning defense of her inspiration. Yet, even well-meaning arguments may contain aspects that may potentially become the feeding ground for questions, doubts, and criticism. More than anything else, this study shows the importance of listening to people themselves to grasp the meaning of their ideas properly and to avoid jumping to hasty conclusions that ultimately misrepresent those people and their views.