

What the Three
Angels Really Mean

Do the Prophecies
Apply in Africa?

Prophecy's Most
Misunderstood Number

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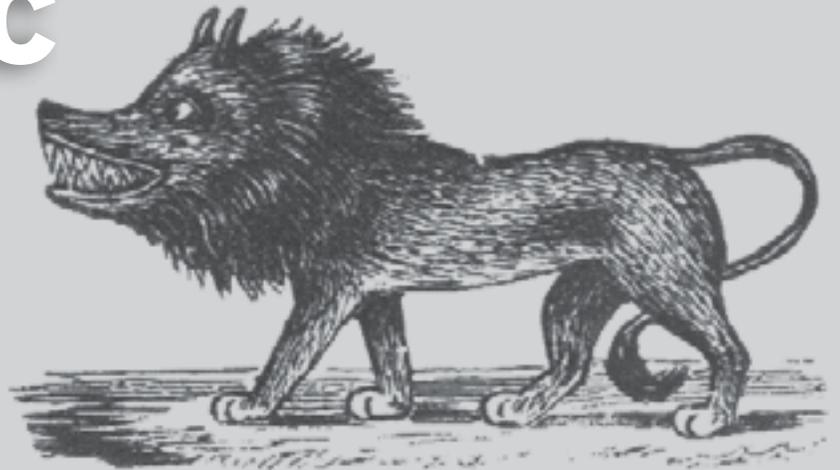


PAGAN ROME



PAPAL ROME

HOW
PROPHETIC
ARE WE?



PROTESTANT AMERICA



THE LAST MESSAGE



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How Prophetic Are We, Really??

By Loren Seibold

“It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards,” the Queen remarked. “What sort of things do you remember best?” Alice ventured to ask. “Oh, things that happened the week after next,” the Queen replied in a careless tone.
—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

FOR ALL OF MY LIFE, PROPHECY WAS AT THE CENTER of everything we Seventh-day Adventists did. If you had asked us what was most important in our faith, the answer would not have been confidence in salvation through faith in Christ, but a hodgepodge of diet, the Sabbath, Ellen White, and the remnant church, all bound together by a terrifying expectation of imminent and horrible end-time events.

As a young person, I accepted without question that Seventh-day Adventists knew the future perfectly, even if the timing was a bit loose. By starting with the history of the Christian church, then moving seamlessly from the past through the present and into the future, *The Great Controversy* presented the illusion of history remembered in advance, as certain as if it had already happened. Uriah Smith’s *Daniel and the Revelation* was even more specific, showing the major prophetic symbols fully realized precisely when expected.

Although I spent my childhood and youth terrified about the time of the end, it took me a long time to question these interpretations. They had been taught to me by people who read Greek, wrote books, and used long words to describe their interpretative methods.

I wish now that I had trusted my doubts.

Minimal Use

The first time I conducted a Revelation seminar, I realized how few texts are required. Only a handful of passages from that book need to be referenced to support our entire prophetic message. Chapters 13, 14, 20, and 21 are central, and many of the remaining proof texts are used in isolation from their context.

Had I tried to explain the whole of Revelation in my seminar, my “interests” would have fled, because

countless variations of “we don’t know precisely what this means” statements would have shown just how little we know precisely.

Prophetic interpreters keep interpreting, of course, because it’s a body of literature we Adventists can’t let go of. Still, while a new book on prophecy might arouse a soupçon of interest, in terms of what we say we mean by prophecy—a glimpse into God’s plans for the world—we repeat the same few themes in every evangelistic meeting.

If we’re really to brag that we’re the people who understand prophecy, why do we require so little of it? Two reasons: we don’t actually know what many of the passages mean, nor do they matter very much.

Historicism

These two reasons are linked by a prophetic interpretive principle known as historicism. Contrary to what many of us believed was the purpose of prophecy—to foresee coming events—historicism says that much of Daniel and Revelation portray past eras of history. Since these passages are as cryptic and symbolic as history is long, that leaves lots of room for creativity. And who’s to say you’re wrong that the fifth and sixth trumpets were ancient Islam—because, really, does it matter?

Historicism effectively gets us off the hook for our failure to make most of our prophecies prophesy. It’s easy to say that something was predicted to happen once it has already happened. By the time Uriah Smith wrote *Daniel and the Revelation*, what he identified as the terminus of the 1260-day prophecy in Revelation 11—the Council of Five Hundred’s 1793 decision allowing French Christians to “assemble by the sound of bells”—was already a century in the past.

The seven trumpets in Revelation 8-9, 11 are a useful case study. Uriah Smith paces them out as time periods in the Christian era leading to the present. He shoehorns the history to fit the descriptions: the events in chapter 9 Smith identifies as “Mahometanism,” because the Islamic fighters were said to wear their hair long (9:8) and ride horses

I believe that we have oversold our knowledge of prophetic events. Yes, Jesus is coming again. But I suspect we don’t know much at all about when—or about which events will herald it.



Uriah Smith, author of *Daniel and Revelation*



(9:7), and some wore red, yellow, or blue clothing (9:17). He fails to tell us how they could have wings (9:9) and tails like scorpions (9:10), why their horses had snakes for tails (9:19) and heads like lions out of whose mouths “issued fire and smoke and brimstone” (9:17), or how there could possibly be 200 million of them (9:16).

Fortunately, the trumpets are largely irrelevant to our end-time message. Ellen White mentions them once in her entire corpus,¹ and that is in approval of Josiah Litch’s interpretation of the “hour and day and month and year” (9:15) passage to say that the Ottoman empire would end on August 11, 1840. She never, as an inspired interpreter, unpacks any more of their meaning, and our traditional evangelistic message hasn’t suffered a bit for it.

I have a friend, a well-known Adventist author, who theorizes—at least partially because of the many holes in Smith’s historicism—that the trumpets apply to the future rather than the past. Since he is an author with some stature in the denomination, he has been prohibited from publishing. And so, far from studying the prophecies to see what “present truth” they might reveal, we are locked into a church-approved orthodoxy, fearful of any new interpretations, even should they prove innocuous.

Failure to Help

It is difficult to say that our prophecies have failed, though, because we really have had only one of consequence.

Although the 2,300 days/years didn’t culminate in Jesus’ return in the clouds, it was self-fulfilling in that it did succeed in bringing into public awareness the hope that Jesus would return. The disappointed Millerites were laughed at, but the idea that Jesus was coming again didn’t go away, and Adventists can take some credit for that. Another version of the end times, propounded by Darby and Scofield and given flesh by fundamentalists and charismatics, not only dominates conservative Christianity but has even shaped American policy, particularly with regard to Israel.

As the dispensationalists advanced their eschatology, we retreated into smug, wide-eyed fearmongering. We went from the biblical teaching of Jesus returning someday—we hope soon—to crying “persecution!” every time the pope has heartburn. We have since failed to anticipate anything meaningful. The “people of the book” haven’t given prophetic guidance concerning even one major event of the 20th and 21st centuries. Two world wars, deaths estimated at 50 to 80 million. 50 million dead from the Spanish flu. Nuclear stockpiles large enough to destroy life on Earth. Climate change. The rise of communism and fascism. Genocides in Central Europe, Russia, Turkey, Uganda, Rwanda, Yugoslavia, and Cambodia. Terrorist Islam. Chinese economic domination. Vietnam, Afghanistan, the World Trade Center, and COVID-19.

Not one was anticipated. When tragedies occurred, some of us would say: “See? We told you things were going to be

bad.” But we didn’t need cryptic prophecies with numbers and beasts for that: Jesus had already said, “In this world you will have trouble.”

So mostly, as we watched people die by the millions, we muttered: “But just keep your eye on the Vatican! They’re going to start legislating Sunday laws and persecuting us.”

And that, the heart of our prophetic horror story, has never happened. So here we still are. Did anyone expect to see the 175th anniversary of 1844? Jesus is still in our hearts, but where is he in the clouds of glory? How long can you say “soon” and still have it be meaningful?

As I said in a previous editorial,² I have my doubts whether we Adventists really want Jesus to return. Why have we spent so little time talking about going to heaven, and so much anticipating the horrible things that are about to happen to American Adventists when our religious liberty is stripped away?

Meanwhile, as Jeanne Mogusu points out later in this magazine, African, Asian, and Latin American Adventists have lived for decades with denial of religious liberty, Sabbath challenges, even religious persecution. That’s what the mission stories were about! I once asked an African Adventist friend whether the prophecies were ever given a local meaning there. “No,” he said. “They only matter when they happen in the United States. Some of our countries already have Sunday laws, but that doesn’t count. We’re waiting for you to get them.”

Today the United States has roughly 5 percent of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist membership. Does it make sense that Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans, who already are facing religious liberty challenges, are still waiting for that 5 percent to be persecuted so that Jesus can come again?

What the Three Angels Mean

In one of our recent Adventist Today Sabbath Seminars, one of my seminary professors said that when he preaches in churches, he often asks people: “Do you know what the three angels’ messages mean? Can you explain them?” He seldom gets even a single satisfying answer. Everyone knows that they’re important, but they’re not sure why.

Perhaps that’s for the best. How many modern North American Adventists would feel happy gazing up at their “three angels” stained glass windows if they knew and had to articulate the message those angels were meant to give? I

imagine it would be few, because essentially the message of the three angels, as taught by our church, is this: “Because we worship on the Sabbath, we are the only church approved by God; other churches, even though they believe in Jesus, are biblical Babylon—disciples of the pope and by extension of Satan—whether they know it or not. We are to separate ourselves from them and have nothing at all to do with their expressions of faith. In fact, they will soon begin to persecute us, because they know that we’re right and they’re wrong.”

Interpretive Difficulties

Those of us studying for ministry at Walla Walla College years ago took classes from J. Paul Grove, a professor who used a surprising methodology to teach us Scripture. In his Life and Teachings of Jesus course, Grove asked students to spend the whole of a year interpreting Matthew without the help of any commentaries—to merely rely on the context and organization of the book.

What a concept! The Bible as an accessible document, rather than one that has to be interpreted by experts!

I’m not saying that Revelation is inaccessible. What I *am* saying is that you’ll have a very hard time reproducing the Adventist prophetic scheme by reading Revelation for yourself.

The first thing you’ll have to abandon is thinking that Revelation is a chronological narrative. Take, for example, the events of Jesus’ return. The picture of Jesus returning to joyful acclaim in the clouds of glory, where every eye sees him, opens the book of Revelation (1:7) but doesn’t reappear in it. The closing narrative moves from the defeat of God’s enemies (the woman, the beast, Babylon) in a gruesome battle, with Christ himself leading the armies from the back of a white horse (chapters 17-19), to the binding of Satan for 1,000 years and the saints reigning with Christ (chapter 20).

The judgment, far from being already concluded in its investigatory phase, as we were taught, would appear from its placement in the text to happen *after* the 1,000 years in heaven—and not in heaven’s data processing center, but with people lined up before a great white throne. The cubical New Jerusalem spaceship is seen “coming down from God out of heaven” (21:2) to the new Earth *only after* this is all concluded, meaning that to make our scheme

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ANOTHER LOOK AT THE THREE ANGELS

BY HEROLD WEISS

APOCALYPTIC ENTHUSIASTS THROUGH 20 centuries of Christian history have operated on a very simple premise; they believed, first, that what an ancient prophet said was not written for the ancient prophet's contemporaries but for the time of the end, and second, that they themselves were at that moment living at the time of the end. Paul, John the Revelator, the authors of First and Second Peter, and Jude all used the scriptures in this way.

Apocalyptic movements have done this ever since. Their writings are eager to establish that even though God's power and justice may appear to be in question, God is still at work in his world. In this way, the authors gave to their contemporaries motivation for remaining faithful under trying, confusing circumstances.

This happened when people were afraid that the Protestant English throne of Charles II would become occupied by his Catholic brother, James. It happened again in New England when the founders of the Adventist movement adopted the message of the three angels of Revelation 14:6-12 as the gospel for their time. In England, apocalypticism energized resistance to a Catholic revival. In America, Adventists were reacting to the arrival of Catholic immigrants. What the apostle John had said about Babylon, the harlot who sits on seven hills (Rev. 17:9), was

transferred from ancient imperial Rome to contemporary papal Rome as the current recipient of God's vengeance.

Yet, the time has come when the Adventist prophetic message ought to no longer revolve around the three angel's messages as we have generally interpreted them.

What Is Revelation About?

Revelation was written when John the prophet, on "Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus," wrote to the elect in seven churches in Asia an epistle that he says was sent through him by an angel.

John received the message "in the Spirit." It was the "spirit of prophecy" manifesting itself *in John* that transmitted the "testimony of Jesus" to these seven churches (Rev. 1:1), which helps to explain John's frequent repetition of those phrases. The book was sent to the members of these churches whose names, said the angel, "had been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life" (Rev. 1:1-2, 9-10; 13:8; 17:8; 21:27).

The first three chapters of Revelation are letters describing the conditions prevalent in these churches; the remainder announces things that would come about shortly (4:1). The message is quite succinct: the God who created all that is, and who sits on the throne, is the only one worthy of worship. He will ultimately

judge every person who lives in his universe.

According to the opening letters (chapters 2-3), Jesus knew the believers to be in one of two situations. Some are commended, because their "latter works exceed the first" or because they "have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan." They "have little power, and yet ... have kept my word and have not denied my name"; they "have not soiled their garments" and, as a result of their faithfulness, some of them are in prison. Others, though, have taken up strange teachings, have lost their way, pretend to be what they are not, and are in danger of having their names blotted out of the book of life.

Being a good communicator, John tailors his message to his audience. To those who are suffering on account of their perseverance in the way of the Lord, his advice is to endure and "hold fast what you have." To those who are going the wrong way, he advises that they repent and change course. Since they are all the elect of God, he reminds them that they need to be conquerors.

Only those who persevere and overcome will not have their names blotted out of the book of life (Rev. 3:5). To all of them, Jesus says, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10, RSV). "He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as

I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne” (Rev. 3:21, RSV).

The Conquering Christ

The central icon in Revelation is the throne of God. Jesus Christ has conquered and already sits with his Father on the throne.

In Job and Zechariah, Satan shows up as an accuser of the righteous in the heavenly court of the sons of God (Job 1:6, 9; Zech. 3:1). But in the last book of the Bible, he has been defeated by Michael and thrown down from heaven (Rev. 12:7-9). Upon Earth, he tried to kill the one born from a woman, but he failed (verses 5, 13). The defeated dragon then went to “make war on the rest of her offspring” (verse 17, RSV).

The war between a defeated dragon and the living offspring of the woman is the drama Revelation describes. Those now having to conquer are told that the dragon has been left standing on the narrow strip of sand between the land and the sea (Rev. 12:17). But he “gave his power and his throne and great authority” to the beast that came out of the sea (Rev. 13:1-2, RSV). As a result, all of those “whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain” worshiped the beast (verse 8, RSV).

The only option left to these losers is to become deceivers, and that is how the dragon is repeatedly identified in Revelation. Satan had been an accuser in heaven, and after his rebellion he turned into a deceiver who uses surrogates to carry out his deceptions. He is a defeated interloper who has been left frustrated in No Man’s Land. To conquer the devil’s lies—as Jesus did, along with the martyrs who already stand by what looks like a sea of glass (Rev. 15:2) and fire—is the goal to which the faithful must aspire.

The Three Angels

John’s contemporaries were being pressured to participate in the civic and religious life of their towns, if they wanted to benefit from the available social and economic prosperity of the Roman empire. Christians in the provinces of Asia Minor were experiencing difficulties because of their faithfulness to a God who demanded obedience and exclusive worship.

Under this pressure, John directed the attention of his fellow Christians to the power of their God. Revelation was written to empower them to be victorious over the deceptions of the surrogates of the dragon—that ancient serpent, in particular—to stand fast against those who demand that they worship idols.

John reminds them that Jesus Christ is sitting with God on his throne, so “Worship God,” the book counsels repeatedly (Rev. 14:7, 19:10, 22:9). He is the Creator God who has control of the whole cosmos and the future, and the time for God’s vengeance on those who oppose his chosen ones is near.

John’s “gospel,” therefore, takes on a very peculiar tone. It announces, “Babylon is fallen.” This message is repeated three times, and every time it is accompanied by lurid descriptions of divine vengeance, which today we would consider sadistic (Rev. 14:8; 18:1-3, 21-24). Revelation is full of angels crossing the skies, and most of them announce the punishment of evildoers in the different regions of the author’s symbolic universe.

The first angel announces that finally, God will execute judgment. In view of this fact, it is imperative “to worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the fountains of water” (Rev. 14:7, RSV).

The second angel, who announces the fall of Babylon—which no doubt is a euphemism for Rome—justifies the punishment of the empire by pointing out (in chapter 18) that it has been a source of corruption and injustice by empowering kings, merchants, and sailors to oppress others and bring about idolatry.

The third angel in the group describes in horrific detail the consequences of worshiping anyone or anything other than the Creator God. Those who do “shall be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name” (Rev. 14:10-11, RSV).

We today also confess that we live in the world created by God and that only the Creator God is to be worshiped. We, too, believe that we will face God’s judgment. But, since we no longer live in a society where people delight in going to amphitheatres to watch human beings dismembered and killed by beasts from faraway lands, it is harder for us to stomach that the angels and the Lamb find it edifying to watch the wicked being tormented in fire and brimstone for ever and ever.

But let us not allow that to make us lose focus on the central message of Revelation: that we worship the Creator of the three-story universe composed of the heavens above, the earth below, and the waters under the earth.

The Adventist Interpretation

Philo of Alexandria found a way to make the Pentateuch, written to an agricultural, sedentary, patriarchal, and oriental society, resonate in a cosmopolitan society of artisans and merchants by using the

concept of allegory. Following Philo, the fathers of the early Christian church used allegory to make the Hebraic traditions of the Bible meaningful to those living in Greek cultural settings.

The founders of Adventism did something similar. They took a book, sent by the apostle John to seven churches in Asia, not as a message to the prophet's contemporaries about what was to happen "soon" (Rev. 1:1; 22:20), in John's time, or what "must take place after this" (Rev. 4:1) in that setting, but as an allegorical description of 19 centuries of history. As others had done before them, the founders of the Adventist church saw themselves as a prophetic movement because they were the fulfillment of John's prophecy. They had a message for their contemporaries, with prophetic credentials lent by John the Revelator.

In their prophetic role they saw, allegorically, the government of the United States as the "beast which rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon" (Rev. 13:11, RSV). This beast was allowed to work wonders "and to cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain" (verse 15, RSV).

The allegorical interpretation of the texts of Daniel and Revelation as descriptions of serious tests of loyalty to God's law that would be imposed by the government of the United States was, to say the least, parochial.

A Schizophrenic Gospel

In the 21st century, the Adventist denomination finds itself needing to re-evaluate how to frame the gospel. Rather than "the little flock" living under the beastly government of the United States, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a global institution. The apocalyptic beasts of Daniel and Revelation make sense only to

church members who are not participating in the intellectual life of the times—and that's no longer true of most of us.

Identification of the gospel with the dire tripartite message of the angels of Revelation 14:6-12 made the members of the Adventist Church a bit schizophrenic. On one hand, they congratulated themselves on being the chosen remnant taken out of apostate Christianity to be the agents for the redemption of humanity. On the other, they were to live in constant fear of committing a sin that would blot their names from the Book of Life. This understanding of the "gospel" puts the final judgment at the center of its message and causes Adventists to live in fear of failure.

The gospel, being "good news," should spark faith in God's promise of life. The Creator God worthy of our worship is not the god of Revelation, who finds pleasure in supervising the torture of those who fail to acknowledge him and seeks vengeance rather than justice. I find the symbols of John the prophet and his depiction of God sadistic and vengeful. They are not, as we often suggest, good news.

While the original apocalypticists did, on occasion, speak truth to power as the classical Hebrew prophets had done, their main task was to be motivational speakers to those who needed encouragement to suffer martyrdom. We are martyrs no longer; today the church finds itself enjoying the blessings of democratic governments and doing what it can to keep itself in their good graces around the world. While seeing government as the problem to be solved is still a popular point of view among some in the United States, many Adventists in this country have joined other Christians as nationalistic defenders of "the American way of life" and worshippers of government power.

A Hopeful Prophetic Message

If the church is to have a message for today, it must be a truly prophetic one that brings all ways of life under God's judgment. The beasts and the idols of today must be identified: injustices of the social, economic, and political cultures that prioritize greed, fame, and interminable wars; religious nationalism, militarism, libertarian capitalism, and ecclesiastical authoritarianism; and indifference to injustice, hateful exclusivity, and hypocritical piety.

I believe that the prophetic message our church must put before the world today is that living for ourselves is not God's will. God is not for himself, as the god of Revelation appears to be. God is love, and love seeks the benefit of others. The gospel empowers those who have faith in God, because it demonstrates that God loved us first, and we cannot but respond to his love by loving our neighbors. The gospel energizes agents of justice and peace on Earth.

We are creatures in a world created by God, and our worship must be only to the Creator God. I joyfully sing praises to God the Creator with the acolytes who sing the hymns quoted by John. **AT**

An Apostate Like Me

By Debbie Hooper Cosier

Occasionally the Bibles I handed out like half-time snacks landed in the hands of non-Adventists, and we'd earmark those people for our most earnest hellos and cheek-splitting smiles.

I RAISED MY HAND AND SAID ALOUD WHAT I had been thinking: that I found the overly complicated explanations of Adventist prophecy frustrating to understand and difficult to accept. The Avondale College professor, who had been about to launch into another explanation of another end-time prophecy, seemed to me to wince.

But I had to say it. I was at a low point in my Christian experience, tired of withholding my questions and hiding my spiritual struggles, and I thought I deserved an answer.

He moved on without replying.

Emotional Uncoupling

My emotional uncoupling from Adventist prophecy occurred long before I came to a final, intellectual one.

I was born in the mission fields of Papua New Guinea. My family returned to Australia, where my father was a pastor and evangelist, and some of my most vivid childhood memories are of the evangelistic programs my father presented there. When I was 11, traveling evangelist Billy Bain came to run a crusade in an outback border town where we were living. I was so deeply affected by the joy and kindness of this gentle man that I asked him to baptize me.

I was a dedicated pastor's kid (PK) and a true believer—a secondary but hard-working character in a story arc not of my devising, a minor subplot in the rising action of Nebuchadnezzar's dream and the apocalyptic denouement affecting us all.

I would trudge miles to deposit flyers into letterboxes, set up and pack down audiovisual equipment, and carry towers of Bibles from car to registration desk and back again. My sisters and I ate warm, squashed sandwiches backstage and on the sticky vinyl backseats of our '70s-era cars.

The people who came through the doors of the theaters and town halls of my youth were, in actual fact, mostly already converted Adventists. Ushers carefully filled empty seats with them so that visitors would not feel alone on this epic journey. Occasionally the Bibles I handed out like half-time snacks landed in the hands of non-Adventists, and we'd earmark those people for our most earnest hellos and cheek-splitting smiles. Practically glowing with sincerity and love for each newcomer, we hoped they would be thinking that whatever it was we had, could they have it too?

Why So Complex?

As the years passed, though, it all began to weigh heavily on me. Bible prophecy was meant to be a well-lighted path to Christ's second coming, a tool to help us be ready and help others be ready. It troubled me that something so core to my Adventist identity was convoluted—practically inaccessible without a comprehensive explanation from someone in the know.

Something in me rejected its labyrinthine complexity, but I also blamed myself. Was something wrong with me?

If everyone else could grasp and accept it, was I just too stupid? Had I allowed Satan to stop my ears? Had I hardened my heart against the truth?

Even as a PK who'd heard it many times, the whole messy thing was fragmented in my mind, like tiny pieces of iron and clay from the statue's shattered feet hastily stuck back together. Those feet might look okay from the outside, but they would never take a step on their own. I hoped that if I could just get through another retelling—without allowing my mind to wander or doubts to creep in—it would finally click for me, too.

By my university years, an intense weariness would descend on me every time I encountered Nebuchadnezzar's statue, the day-year principle, or a prophetic timeline with 1844 highlighted as a pivotal moment for believers.

After taking that Bible Prophecy course at Avondale College and faithfully reproducing its key points in my final exam, I felt no less spiritually fatigued or alone in my struggles.

Intellectual Unriddling

My intellectual disconnection from Adventist prophecy began in earnest when I was in my 40s, but now I see that it was inevitable; it was always going to end like this.

“History is written by the victors” is famously attributed to Winston Churchill, and witty versions of it were trotted out by him numerous times over the years. Yet, it would appear that the phrase can actually be traced back to a relatively unknown Scottish biographer in the mid-1700s!¹ That we'd prefer to attribute it to Churchill is, well, because he's one of our victors. Needless to say, this illustrates the problem of bias: the winners (the survivors, or at least those in power) select

the details that suit them and apply their own interpretation of events, decisions, and actions of the past. The lesson: if we want an account that is closer to the truth, we should rely upon primary sources, rigorous research, and data.

The 21st-century culture war is over this very thing. The internet brought us into the Information Age, but that same vehicle plunged us into the Disinformation Age. Along with fake news, various actors have done their best to erode faith in objective, scientific practice. We are innovative with truth, so that “right” now seems closer to “what's right for me.”

That's why, when I looked at Adventist prophecy, it was the provenance of our “truth” that troubled me most.

Following the Great Disappointment of 1844, when Jesus did not return, many fell away. A few, though, saw their first interpretation as a mere miscalculation, a problem to be solved. They went back to the drawing board, recalculating and rereading. Ellen White, following a specious logic suggested by Hiram Edson, Uriah Smith, and others, joined some of the more obscure dots into what seemed to be a semicoherent picture. Hitherto unheard of, the *investigative judgment* let Adventists say that they hadn't been wrong as such, just slightly mistaken. What had *really* occurred in 1844 was invisible to earthly eyes and, for this reason, impossible to disprove.

In this way the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, which sprang from the ashes of the Great Disappointment, distanced itself from the Millerites' embarrassing mistake. Adventists now insist that we shouldn't set a date for Christ's second coming, though instances of it regularly pop up throughout our history.

Is Prophecy for Everyone?

Our prophetic scheme has, in one way, helped its believers feel more confident about their choices and justified the restraints they impose on their lives. It has enabled them to claim their gratifying place as the remnant, in lone possession of complete Truth.

This uniquely Adventist eschatology is buttressed by a myriad of supporting doctrines, such as the mark of the beast, Sunday laws, the ultimate time of trouble, the unpardonable sin, and the close of probation. Looking at this mountain of assertions, you'd expect to find high levels of confidence among believers—but you would be mistaken. In fact, many adherents are fearful and uncertain. Will they too, like “the very elect” (Matt. 24:24, KJV), be deceived?

Eschatological Adventism is essentially a complex legalism, filled with expectations and requirements. The legalistic Adventist is forever troubled by the “deep-down” place in our hearts, unknowable to anyone but God. We are the enemy of our own salvation, because we fear that our thoughts and intentions may betray us, may keep us from effectively surviving the spiritual threat posed by the trials and tribulations that lie ahead. Although the Bible promises that the full price for our salvation has been paid and that Jesus said simply to “Believe in me and you will be saved,” yet our relationship with him remains ambiguous and uncertain as we look at it in light of that tense, troubled future.

Adventist eschatology may, in fact, be perfectly designed for destroying confidence in eternal salvation.

A Conversion Tool

Without a doubt, fear-based prophecy has brought people into the church. My

parents-in-law joined in the late '70s after being convinced during an evangelistic series that their own Methodist beliefs were not as biblically sound as Adventist doctrines. For some audiences, Adventist prophecy still carries a lot of weight.

But does it still motivate contemporary audiences? Some point out that, at best, prophecy seems to draw people who are already converted Christians and already churching, not those without an established faith base.

Adventist eschatology may, in fact, be perfectly designed for destroying confidence in eternal salvation.

In her research about similar end-times prophecies, author Amy Frykholm found something quite revelatory (pun intended).² She researched the conversion effect of the widely published *Left Behind* series, a fictional rendering of the evangelical rapture doctrine wherein true believers suddenly and without warning (in the “twinkling of an eye”) are taken heavenward.

In the 16 novels published between 1995 and 2007, *Left Behind* focused on the terrifying experiences of bewildered believers marooned on Earth during a tribulation period of seven years. This was the ultimate, grueling test in which they had to prove themselves finally and fully worthy of salvation. Their experiences mirror much of what Adventists expect during the dreaded time of trouble: arrest, murder, persecution, separation.³

With more than 80 million copies sold, independent Christian publisher Tyndale House claimed that the *Left Behind* series has been a highly successful evangelistic tool. At first glance, this would seem a valid claim: 80 million is a lot of copies! However, when Frykholm asked Tyndale House if she could review evidence of the large numbers of conversions, they forwarded a few emails that had tenuous, mostly secondhand accountings of the impact of the books on nonbelieving readers. Attempting to follow up the rumors circulating among evangelicals, of people converted as a result of reading the books, she was unable to track down a single individual. In digging deeper, she discovered that a large proportion of the 80 million sold books were, in fact, purchased by churches for their own congregations to read—or to give away, letterbox, or hand out for evangelistic purposes.

It appears that unchurched people were not as engaged as Tyndale had boasted. On the other hand, churching people were absorbed—and this was where Frykholm noted their lack of confidence in their own salvation. She said in an interview: “I expected readers—especially believers who were also readers—to have a very confident worldview that they would then attempt to tell me about.... And that turned out to not at all be the case. I think it points to something very interesting. Evangelicalism is based on accepting Jesus into your heart, and then you are changed, and that change happens somewhere in your being, and then nothing you can do afterwards can prove that that transformation took place... What I realised is that *that* uncertainty raised a huge amount of anxiety.”

Is Prophecy for Anyone?

For radicals such as David Koresh and his followers, attempting to understand enigmatic passages of Bible prophecy has proved perilous. But even for the rest of us, I have to wonder how helpful our detailed conceptualization of them really is, especially if only a few gatekeepers can make sense of them.

If prophecy works for you, gives your life meaning, and makes you excited for Christ's return, then I say, without irony, that I am very happy for you. But if prophecy induces fear and doubt for you, as it did for me, I pose these questions:

- Do Christians need to conclusively establish a theory of end-time events? Isn't it enough to believe that Jesus is returning someday?

- Is fear a helpful motivator for belief, especially in the face of so many unambiguous messages of hope and promises of salvation in the Bible?

Am I the only one who thinks that it's worth discarding these fearful projections in favor of giving a more optimistic, hopeful version of salvation? Do we really need this negative, dread-inducing entanglement of interpretations if it potentially does more to sap confidence and joy from life and faith? I think not. **AT**

¹ Matthew Phelan, “The History of ‘History Is Written by the Victors,’” *Slate.com* (Nov. 26, 2019).

² Amy Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (2004).

³ Interview with Amy Frykholm on *With Friends Like These* podcast “Scared to Believe?” (Aug. 7, 2020).

ARE WE USING PROPHECY CORRECTLY?

By William McCall

ADVENTISTS HAVE ALWAYS CONSIDERED THEMSELVES PEOPLE of prophecy, but I don't know of any Adventist preachers who predicted COVID-19—one of the most serious crises for the church in modern times—nor have I heard any cogent analysis about what these current events mean from a prophetic standpoint.

Most Adventists will tell you that we are historicists, as opposed to futurists or preterists. We have charts and dates that argue for a stream of historical fulfillments leading up to “now.” The problem is that “now” ended in the 19th century, meaning that functionally we are preterists—that is, almost all of Revelation happened in the past, and no one can show how our current problems fit into a timeline. Considering that some of the most seminal occurrences in history happened in the 20th century—with world wars and the Holocaust—does that mean we've totally missed the boat?

Present Truth

Many of us still assume that the purpose of prophecy is to tell us what's going to happen. This in itself is debatable, especially since God's people have always noted prophetic fulfillment *after* the fact (John 14:29), if at all. We claim a reputation for knowing exactly where we are in Earth's timeline, but we don't.

And maybe that's just fine. Because if we would focus on the broad themes of Revelation and other applicable Bible prophecies, we would more likely be bearers of “present truth.”

We would find more agreement with other biblical scholars if we'd stay out of the weeds of prediction and instead focus on the key spiritual themes of prophecy. These broad themes are not subject to changing situations, and they hold true even with the reality of conditional prophecy—something we seldom mention (Ezekiel 18).

Abolitionism

Early Seventh-day Adventists had a message of “present truth;” they spoke to their times. Among the first causes they addressed was slavery.

It is hard for us to imagine that a relatively short time ago, Christians were defending slavery. Before the American Civil War, Christians had so divided on this issue that it necessitated the formation of institutions such as the Southern Baptists, who used fundamentalist, hyperliteralistic methods of interpretation to champion the cause of white supremacy and slavery. In *A Scriptural View of Slavery*, Thomas Stringfellow wrote: “Jesus Christ recognized this institution [slavery] as one that was lawful among men, and regulated its relative duties.... I affirm then, first (and no man denies) that Jesus Christ has not abolished slavery by a prohibitory command; and second, I affirm, he has introduced no new moral principle which can work its destruction.”

Denominational co-founder Ellen White, who was familiar with civil disobedience, counseled Adventists to disobey the fugitive slave law. She wrote: “The law of our land requiring us to deliver a slave to his master, we are not to obey; and we must abide the consequences of violating this law. The slave is not the property of any man. God is his rightful master, and man has no right to take God's workmanship into his hands, and claim him as his own.”¹

Adventists here applied the great principles of the gospel and recognized slavery as a sin of Babylon (e.g., Gal. 3:28; Rev. 18:13). During the American Civil War, White wrote: “The people of this nation have exalted themselves to heaven, and have looked down upon monarchical governments, and triumphed in their boasted liberty, while the institution of slavery, that was a thousand times worse than the tyranny exercised by monarchical governments, was suffered to exist and was cherished. In this land of light a system is cherished which allows one portion of the human family to enslave another portion, degrading millions of human beings to the level of the brute creation. The equal of this sin is not to be found in heathen lands.”²

It was in this context—with at least half of the Protestant nation supporting slavery—that early Adventists viewed the rest

of Christianity to be apostate. They would point out to people that “judgment must begin at the house of God” (1 Pet. 4:17, KJV).

The Broad Themes

Increasingly, in our obsession with dates and progressions, we Adventists have neglected the broader spiritual and moral implications of prophecy.

It is to our shame that as a whole, Seventh-day Adventists in Europe did not apply prophecies about persecution of Sabbath-keepers in the end time to the Jewish people. Instead, some Adventists turned their Jewish acquaintances over to the Gestapo. Had we taken the moral implications of prophecy to heart, we would have defended them with our own lives, because that was the test for which we had been waiting.

The Bible never separates prophecy from a call to moral and spiritual renewal. Matthew 24 is the quintessential exposition of Jesus on the end times. It begins with a question from the disciples: “As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the

so when he returns. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions” (Matt. 24:45-47, NIV).

This parable, it seems to me, should set the tone for all of our prophetic understandings, both in Matthew and Revelation. Are we, like our Adventist pioneers, doing our *current* duty, applying our *present* truth?

Jesus then shares the parable of the virgins, which emphasizes a continual and present need of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 25:1-13). Next, the parable of the talents is also a parable of present behavior, because we really don’t know when Jesus is returning (verses 14-30) to evaluate our faithfulness with what he’s given us.

The last parable (verses 31-46) is one of end-time judgment, but it is also about how we treat others here and now. The King will say, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (verse 40, NIV).

These parables all point to the ethical and moral responsibility of who we are *now* and how we live *now* in preparation for Christ’s return. They are built around Christ’s moral emphasis:

INCREASINGLY, IN OUR OBSESSION WITH DATES AND PROGRESSIONS, WE ADVENTISTS HAVE NEGLECTED THE BROADER SPIRITUAL AND MORAL IMPLICATIONS OF PROPHECY.

disciples came to him privately. “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (verse 3, NIV).

Jesus follows this question with a summary of signs that bear striking similarity to those mentioned in the book of Revelation. But he doesn’t stop there. He follows the signs with a set of parables designed to keep us focused on our duties as disciples.

Parables of Preparation

He starts with the parable of the faithful servant: “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing

love to God and our fellow humans. Their importance doesn’t depend on predictions of future events, but on present moral imperatives.

Dispensationalist Historicism

In modern times, a new kind of prophetic interpretation that grew in Southern Christian churches has come to dominate conservative Protestantism. The basic outlines came from the Scofield Reference Bible and got a new expression in Hal Lindsey’s *The Late, Great Planet Earth*. Lindsey interpreted the book of Revelation in a fairly literal way, not comparing scripture with scripture, but by reading the Bible through the eyes of modern Southern Christianity. (Christian media today is dominated by such preachers, some of whom are more political activists than evangelists.)

The values in Lindsey's writing reflect Southern American biases: distrust of the federal government; militarism, and antipathy to the secular world. Instead of Babylon being identified as the Christian church itself, it was represented as communism. If "Armageddon" were a literal battle in the Middle East, as he predicted, the only way to prepare for it would be to build up the military. If Israel is God's people, most of the prophecies in the book have nothing to do with the Christian church. In fact, dispensationalists say that the Christian church will be "raptured" before the end unfolds.

This makes Revelation's prophecies irrelevant to most Christians. Yet, through the influence of modern dispensationalism, many Seventh-day Adventists are enamored by unbiblical concepts such as "one world government." The Bible never predicts a single world government; in fact, it denies it (Dan. 2:43).

In less than 50 years, Lindsey's interpretation has become ridiculous. Lindsey taught that Gog and Magog—names that do not occur in the book of Revelation until *after* the millennium—are Soviet Russia. Needless to say, none of the dispensationalists predicted the fall of the Soviet Union.

Such facts do not discourage his followers, for whom these prophecies have become orthodoxy. In spite of the false predictions of Hal Lindsey—a simple Google search will show dozens of them—books based upon them, including the enormously popular *Left Behind* series, are the most widely spread alternative to Adventism's prophetic interpretation.

Adventists are the only major denomination to teach that the enemy, as the comic strip Pogo quoted, is us. Revelation 17 provides a startling image: "Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries" (verses 3-4, NIV).

Using the Bible as its own interpreter, this image—a woman in scarlet riding on a beast—seemed to our pioneers to be a corrupt church supported by the power of the state. Separation of church and state became the rallying cry for early Adventists, seeking to avoid this unholy collusion. Ellen White wrote, "The prediction that it will speak 'as a dragon' and exercise 'all the power of the first beast' plainly foretells a development of the *spirit of*

intolerance and persecution that was manifested by the nations represented by the dragon and the leopardlike beast" (emphasis mine).³

Freedom of Conscience

For various historical reasons, modern Adventist interpreters have become obsessed with the Roman Catholic Church; however, this was not the focus of some of the early Adventists. The book of Revelation puts the action on the "second beast," which Adventists are virtually alone in identifying as the United States. Adventism's beef with Rome was in line with the anti-Catholicism of the Reformers, who also identified the papacy as an example of coercion of conscience. The term "freedom of conscience" appears over and over in the writings of Ellen White, who predicted it would be American Protestantism that would lead the way in promoting religious intolerance. "The Protestants of the United States will be foremost ... in trampling on the rights of conscience."⁴

By contrast, Hal Lindsey sees "no apparent mention" of the United States in Bible prophecy and theorizes that it will be off of the world scene when the closing acts of Earth's history occur. Meanwhile, Christian dominionism, the idea that the Christian church has a *duty* to try to take over the government and impose Christian principles by force of law, continues to gain acceptance.

By focusing on the broad principles of our belief, such as separation of church and state and freedom of conscience, Adventists can always be a prophetic voice in the United States of America, regardless how world events may transpire.

Whether or not we will choose to do so remains to be seen. 

¹ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 1 (1868), p. 201.

² *ibid.*, pp. 258-259.

³ White, *The Great Controversy* (1888 ed.), p. 442.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 588.

BLACK LIVES MATTER AND THE APOCALYPSE

By Christopher C. Thompson

HISTORY.COM LISTS EIGHT PRIMARY reasons why the Roman Empire collapsed: invasions by barbarian tribes, economic troubles, overreliance on slave labor, the rise of the Eastern Empire, overexpansion, military overspending, government corruption, and political instability.¹ In an interview with History TV channel on the subject, Dr. Patrick Hunter explained, “If your system is built improperly on acquiring slaves, or acquiring quick gain from loot and booty, eventually you’re gonna run out of territory to conquer.”

I had to scroll back to the top and make sure I wasn’t reading about the collapse of the *American* empire. History repeats itself, as it has since ancient times. Wise king Solomon wrote:

“That which has been is that which will be, And that which has been done is that which will be done.

So there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl. 1:9, NASB).

When Nebuchadnezzar attempted to defy God with his golden statue in Daniel 3, he didn’t have the wealth of world historical context that we have today. Yet what is clear is that there has been a trajectory for empires throughout the course of history: humble and hostile beginnings, a rise to power, peak, decline—and collapse.

The Empire in Revelation

When Babylon falls, we get a peek into the effect this has on the world economic and socio-political scene. Chapter 18 describes the kings of the earth, the merchants, sea captains, and sailors all mourning—not just because of the demise of Babylon, but for the collective, devastating loss they will sustain as a result of their entangled investments.

The source of Babylon’s prosperity can help us clarify some of the less recognized elements of the great controversy at the time of the end. In vision, John “saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints” (Rev. 17:6, NASB). The very last verse of Revelation 18 explains her modus operandi: “in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all who have been slain on the earth” (verse 24, NASB). Notice that Babylon is portrayed as not simply an oppressive religious system, but a political power that is responsible for the deaths of innocent people—globally.

Revelation 18:12-13 describes the luxurious cargo with which she and the merchants have enriched themselves, and last on the list, after horses and carriages, precious stones, metals and spices, are the “bodies and souls of men” (verse 13, NKJV).

The empire described sustains itself by disempowering as many people as possible, commodifying their actual bodies and their life force in labor. This is what it means for her to drink their blood.



Countless individuals have made soapbox speeches on why Adventist Christians ought to shun “Black Lives Matter,” thus proving that they don’t understand history or prophecy.

Their very life force is what sustains and empowers her. She keeps her knee on their necks and steals their land, labor, and their very lives. She robs them of their resources and their physical strength until they are good for nothing other than to be heaped with the masses of other fallen prophets and martyrs.

Revelation 13 describes the empire’s last-ditch effort to save itself and quell the rebellion. To cite a passage familiar to

us, “He provides that no one will be able to buy or to sell, except the one who has the mark” (verse 17, NASB). The cash-strapped empire resorts to squelching the dissenters and consolidating resources by affording the right to participate in the mainstream economy to only a select few, while criminalizing the rest. The words of author and Egyptologist Dr. Kara Cooney in reference to the fall of Rome seem so appropriate here: “The system is broken. The system can’t sustain itself anymore. There are no returns on this investment any longer. There’s no value in keeping an empire together anymore. It’s too expensive to do so.” Yet try they must, even if it means criminalizing those who simply want to buy themselves a hamburger or a tank of gas.

The Empire Today

What we should see here is that all empires—those foretold in Revelation and those in power throughout the ages and still today—have used this common strategy to ensure the nation’s strength and prosperity. Empires establish and exalt a ruling class and aristocracy while denigrating, subduing, and enslaving a peasant class. Such oppression only works if it’s comprehensive; it must include a lack of access to the mainstream economy, lack of representation in the legal system, and lack of access to quality educational resources.

While a myriad of people groups experienced elements of this kind of subjugation within the United States alone, the American brand of this oppression has been consistently directed at African Americans, who were ripped from the repose of the African continent and forced to build the infrastructure and economic power of the American empire. Who we are descendants of the African peoples in America have been consistently excluded from the spoils and profits for which our ancestors bled and died. Reparations are simply not going to happen.

End of an Empire

When the angels described in Revelation 14 show up, this will be the beginning of the reversal of the empire’s influence. The angels will proclaim that victory, justice, and deliverance has come to all mankind, that the machinations and systems of Babylon are defeated, and that those who are wise will break ranks with the empire.

This, then, is the very core of the great controversy. Satan will seek to empower himself by enslaving the angels and the masses, who will become entranced by his deceptive schemes; however, the heavenly garrison will be dispatched to defend them and ultimately rescue the masses from Satan’s grasp.

Countless individuals have made soapbox speeches on why Adventist Christians ought to shun “Black Lives Matter,” thus proving that they don’t understand history or prophecy. Jesus described his own ministry saying, “The Lord has put his Spirit in me, because he appointed me to tell the Good News to the poor. He has sent me to tell the captives they are free and to tell the blind that they can see again. God sent me to free those who have been treated unfairly and to announce the time when the Lord will show his kindness” (Luke 4:18-19, NCV).

I’m not sure why it’s taking us so long, in these perilous times, to realize that Jesus’ ministry prioritized oppressed people. But I believe we don’t have a lot of time left to figure it out. **AT**

¹ Evan Andrews, “8 Reasons Why Rome Fell,” History.com (Jan. 29, 2019), online at www.history.com/news/8-reasons-why-rome-fell.

THE PECULIARITY PLAGUE

Our Faith Should Be Informed by a Love for People Rather Than Mere Distinctiveness

By Thandazani Mhlanga

CHRISTIANITY—PROTESTANTISM, IN particular—is built on a foundation of theological and moral absolutes. These absolutes are at the heart of why we have so many denominations; we seem to have made a tacit agreement that we cannot peacefully coexist unless we have the same absolutes in common.

This agreement, notwithstanding its arguable merits, has limitations, particularly in how we relate to each other and how we relate to those who aren't Adventists.

Consider this scenario: Imagine that you woke up one Sabbath morning only to realize that a family is moving in next door to you. Would you rather be late—or miss out on church altogether—to help your new neighbors move in, or would you go to church and try connecting with them on another day?

Another: Your non-Christian neighbors invite you to their 20th wedding anniversary dinner on a Friday night. Would you go to the function and share in their joy, or would you take a theological

stand? Would you put more value on a perceived theological absolute, or recognize our shared human condition and desire the best (an encounter with God's love, by means of your kindness shown to them) for all?

The Case for Humanity

This, I argue, is basic humanity. Humanity is not the same as humanism, which is a philosophy that promotes rational thinking as the source of knowledge and morality. Humanity is a thoroughly Christian idea, for it reflects the value we place on people vs. beliefs.

Many strange human inventions happen under the sun, but few are more hurtful than our categorizing of people. We differentiate and classify one another according to race, language, nationality, and religion—forgetting that regardless of all categories, present or yet to be invented, our shared humanity binds us together.

This willful amnesia of our shared humanity is commonplace among Adventists. Many of us struggle to see

even our fellow Adventists as more than the theological positions they hold. In practice, it means that we place law-keeping or doctrinal affirmation above kindness, decency, and love. Jesus said to the religious establishment of his time—those who thought their religious distinctiveness outvalued humanity—“The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27, ISV).

The most authentic expression of religion—yes, even of Adventism—focuses on people and not on distinctiveness. Whenever we find ourselves having “enough religion to make us hate, but just not enough to make us love one another,” to quote Irish essayist Jonathan Swift, at that moment we have disconnected from what an authentic religious experience is about.

The apostle James articulated this well when he said that “anyone who sets himself up as ‘religious’ by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the

homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world” (James 1:26-27, MSG).

What It Means to Be “Special”

The toxic value we place on religious peculiarity can also be seen in how we relate to other religious groups.

In Adventism, this sense of specialness and peculiarity reaches its apogee in our prophetic understanding. We use passages such as Revelation 12:7 to identify ourselves as a special people—separate and, frankly, a bit better than everyone else. We are the people who “keep the commandments of God” and “have the testimony of Jesus Christ.”

Whether or not we actually, personally, keep the commandments of God, which in Jesus’ teaching would include “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” and “love your neighbor as you love yourself,” is something we don’t spend as much time contemplating. It is enough that our *church* has the Sabbath and Ellen White, and we often act as though that makes us, to quote Peter, a “peculiar people” (1 Pet. 2:9, KJV).

Yet the thing that Peter says should identify us as peculiar is not our remnant theology, but our willingness to “declare the praises of” Jesus. We live, to use the words of The Message Bible, “to tell others of the night-and-day difference he made for you—from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted” (verse 10, MSG). At the end of the day, the important questions are: “Which of my actions represent the virtues of Jesus, versus merely defending my uniqueness? Which of my actions will communicate unconditional acceptance and not rejection?”

The demeaning, disrespectful, sometimes abusive rhetoric that we share with our members concerning Christians of other denominations does not declare

the praises of Jesus. Can we win people to Christ with a spirit that doesn’t reflect the essence of Christlikeness?

When we act as though whoever has the largest body of knowledge—and the skill to weaponize it—wins in religion, we treat one another as foes, not as brothers and sisters in Christ. This theological arm wrestling does not help us fulfill the Great

AN ARGUMENT FOR HUMANITY AMONG CHRISTIAN GROUPS IS NOT A PLEA FOR ECUMENISM, BUT LOVE.

Commission of Matthew 28:19-20. It doesn’t get us talking about our differences and possibly learning from each other. All it does is to pit us against each other and leave a bitter taste concerning Christianity among those who have not yet said “yes!” to Jesus.

Jesus promised, “If I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people unto myself” (John 12:32, ISV). Interdenominational theological warfare is hard to defend or classify as “lifting up Jesus.”

Community, Not Camps

An argument for humanity among Christian groups is not a plea for ecumenism, but love. Consider the love shown by Jesus to Judas: He never shamed

or embarrassed Judas, even though he knew that his disciple would betray him. Our Lord loved people. We were the reason why he came and died. And, therefore, it is incumbent upon us as Christians to laminate our religiosity with love.

Jesus often faced situations where he had to choose between humanity and religious peculiarity. Like many Jews, Jesus knew the Torah and its interpretations. But when it came to choosing between strict adherence to the law and humanity, he always chose people. The law said that women were inferior to men, but Jesus interacted with them and healed one who had a female problem that made her an outcast (Mark 5:25-34). Although the law prohibited healing on a Sabbath, Jesus healed a man with a withered hand (Mark 3:1-6). And Jewish religious practice regarded Samaritans as unclean, yet Jesus interacted with them without discrimination (John 4:1-42).

Jesus showed us that any religious practice that doesn’t have the love for people at the center is not a genuine and authentic expression of faith. We dare not weaponize God’s laws against humanity, because all of them have the good of humanity in mind.

I believe it is our Christian mandate to build community, not camps. Building community means working for the common good of all people. The alternative is to opt for camps: fostering religious peculiarity that results in homogeneity.

This tireless mirroring of God’s love will flavor our identity theology. We will see that the “remnant” is always a product of God’s grace, unconditional acceptance, and love, and not just a group of religious relics who are singled out for special recognition. **AT**

AN ADVENTIST HISTORY LESSON

By Lindsey Abston Painter

WHEN YOU GROW UP ADVENTIST, YOU LEARN THAT YOU'RE PART of the remnant church, the one and only true way to God and, therefore, to salvation. In more extreme cases, you may have been taught that anyone outside the Adventist Church would not be saved. Many gatekeeping issues would be the deciding factor for salvation, from vegetarianism to jewelry wearing to Sabbath-keeping to adhering to the implications of the sanctuary doctrine. The Great Disappointment was so emphasized that you probably had the date October 22, 1844, deeply engraved into your brain.

Central to all of it was Ellen White, her unique history and her visions from God. But *was* Ellen White's story unique?

Prophetic Movements

Recently I listened to the Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*, and Joseph Smith's history sounded some familiar notes.

Joseph Smith was chilling one day in 1820 in New York when he had a vision from God telling him about some holy golden plates buried in his backyard. These plates were so holy and secret that Joseph never showed them to anyone—ever—but they totally existed. (Don't be so cynical, people!) The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was founded 10 years later, in 1830.

And here's where the story gets interesting. A little over a decade later, a group of young hopefuls would be disappointed by William Miller's prediction of Jesus' return. Some had sold or given away everything they owned and were left not only heartbroken, but destitute. They went back to searching the scriptures to understand where they had gone wrong.

And thus, in 1863, the Baha'i faith was established.

That's not where you thought I was going, was it? But it's true. The Baha'i faith took seriously the Millerite prophecies



Baha'is believe William Miller unknowingly prophesied the 1844 emergence of "The Báb," Siyyid `Alí Muḏammad Shírází.

and is now a hugely influential denomination, especially in the Middle East. (As a point of interest, Rainn Wilson, famous for portraying Dwight Schrute on the TV comedy series *The Office*, is a practicing member of the Baha'i faith.)

Of course, you're acquainted with another denomination that began with a female prophet in New England, who received visions from God and wrote them down. She was a prolific writer who is credited with founding a new denomination.

Her name was Mary Baker Eddy, and she founded Christian Science around 1879. Did I take you by surprise again? Let's take another pass at it.

A group of people acquainted with William Miller's failed prophecies began searching Scripture to try to find where he had gone wrong. In their fervor, they held tent revivals and published pamphlets and literature to bring people into their fold.

In the mid 1870s, they formed the predecessor to what is known today as the Jehovah's Witnesses. Oh, no! I did it again!

How about this one: a group of people in New England had some major theological disagreements with their established church. They began searching Scripture to find the truth, and in 1825 they founded the American Unitarian Association.

The Burned-over District

Seventh-day Adventism is part of a major religious revival in the 19th century, known as the Second Great Awakening. New England, and New York state in particular, was the center of all of this. So much was happening that historians refer to this region at this particular time as the Burned-over District, meaning that so many religious upheavals and movements were happening that it was like fires ravaging the cultural landscape.

In addition to the Millerites and the Mormons, the Burned-over District was home to the Fox sisters of Hydesville, New York, who conducted the first table-rapping séances just a few miles from Hill Cumorah, where Joseph Smith found his golden plates, and only a few miles in the other direction from the barn and cornfield where Hiram Edson first suggested that the events of October 22, 1844, had happened in heaven.

The Shakers established their first settlements in central New York in this time frame. The Oneida Society, a strange group-marriage cult whose name got attached to the silverware they manufactured, also originated in this region.

The concept known as the Social Gospel was formulated here by pastors Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch. Abolitionism was strong, and this region had many stops on the Underground Railroad. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, an early feminist, came from Seneca Falls and in 1848 organized the Seneca Falls Convention to promote women's suffrage.

The Times Were a-Changin'

This was a busy time all over the world, in fact—a time of vast cultural change.

- Louis Pasteur was popularizing germ theory within the European medical community. Germ theory had long been understood in India and other countries, but it was largely rejected by Western society until Pasteur proved it true in the 1850s.
- Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species* in 1859.
- In 1877, Nellie Bly released her exposé of the cruel and

inhumane conditions in mental asylums.

- In 1869, the first transcontinental railroad was finished.
- Gregor Mendel formulated the foundation of the science of genetics in 1865.
- Dmitri Mendeleev created the modern periodic table in 1885.
- The Impressionist art movement went public in the 1870s.
- Karl Marx published *Das Kapital* between the 1860s and the 1890s, and this book became the seed of a major political movement called communism that affects us to this day.

Not all of those events happened in New England, or even in the United States, but they all took place within the same general time frame. And my list doesn't even take into account the American Civil War, which deserves its own separate treatment. Together, these events represented major cultural shifts that changed the way the United States thought about God, itself, its people, and the natural world.

Obviously, the world was ripe for new ideas, revival, and reform. It was a time in history perfectly poised for new movements to spring into existence—new movements that would ultimately lead to established religious denominations such as the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1863. (Look—I finally made it to us!)

What About Us?

So what can all of this tell us about Adventism today?

When I first learned about the religions and social movements that had sprung up around the same time as Adventists were coming into being, and all of the scientific, creative, social, and medical advances that were happening then, I felt both confused and humbled. If we aren't unique, can our message be true? Does this mean Ellen White was a fraud? Is it possible that she and the Seventh-day Adventist Church have the truth but that all of the other prophets and schools of religious thought that sprang up—not only from the same time and place but some even from the exact same historical event, the Millerite Movement—are false?

I don't believe that Ellen White was a fraud, and I think she has some pretty important things to share with the world. But I think a good dose of humility and perspective is good for any religion, ours included. Maybe we should stop calling ourselves the only "remnant church." Maybe we should consider that other ideas besides our own have merit.

As we examine how we should move forward into the future, perhaps we can look to our past and realize that even our precious origin story is part of a historical context. Where we came from matters. It doesn't invalidate us, but maybe it can make us slightly less dogmatic about protecting the specific ideas our founders had and open our minds to a more present truth. **AT**



From “Me” to “Thee”— JESUS IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

IN MY JUNIOR YEAR OF ACADEMY, MY BIBLE TEACHER EXPLAINED Revelation in a way that made me feel I had a roadmap for the end of the world. He poured into my open mind the traditional Adventist teachings about Revelation. The time charts and the decoded symbols gave an inside scoop to God’s special people. And I was one of them!

Even though I became a youth pastor, my interest in Revelation experienced a gradual deconstruction as years passed. For about two decades, my Bible might as well have had only 65 books in it, because I quit reading number 66. I was a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, but Revelation didn’t seem to fit into my reality.

Through God’s providence, or maybe his sense of humor, I was asked to conduct a series of Bible studies on the book of Revelation for my home church. Those who knew of my disinterest in Revelation were surprised. And indeed, even with the seminar date set, I felt paralyzed by the assignment. A pastoral colleague, Dan Wyson, asked if he could help me, and he proved to be a godsend.

Dan and I intentionally discarded all of our previous baggage about Revelation and sought God afresh. What did we discover? In a word: Jesus!

I was a little embarrassed that I hadn’t seen this previously. It’s not that I didn’t already know Jesus or love Jesus. But seeing Jesus in Revelation made me feel utter amazement, awe, and silence—something quite unusual for me.

The Starting Point

The topical sentence of Revelation is its first verse, which begins: “The revelation of Jesus Christ.” Instead of blowing past the introduction, we saw it as the governing concept for everything that follows.

The first chapter provides the clue that the message will be in symbols. If only we had the key to the code! It turns out that we do: John’s Bible, the Old Testament. The common approach, which is to guess at a symbol by matching it with current events and dreaming up plausible interpretations, starts from the wrong

direction. We should look back to the Old Testament first, rather than jumping to current headlines. “Jesus revealed through the symbols of the Old Testament” could be the opening line of Revelation. Jacques Doukhan says that the last book of the Bible contains more than 2,000 Old Testament allusions.¹

For example, Revelation includes the familiar salutation “grace and peace”; however, unlike the Pauline epistles, this message is from “him who is, and who was, and who is to come” (Rev. 1:4, NIV). Who is that? After what I just told you, you might be tempted to say, “Jesus.” But going back to Old Testament roots, God told Moses at the burning bush that Yahweh’s name was “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex. 3:14). God is always present; the past, present, and future are all “now” to God. The one “who is, and who was, and who is to come” isn’t Jesus; it’s God the Father.

The verse continues, “and from the seven spirits before his throne.” This may be confusing, since Jesus mentions only one Holy Spirit. But we’re dealing in symbols here, and the number seven symbolizes perfection. Still, for those who need a literal seven rather than a mere symbolic perfection, Isaiah 11:2-3 breaks down seven characteristics of the Holy Spirit, and perhaps that’s what Revelation had in mind.

So we have God and the Holy Spirit. Then the verse continues, “And from Jesus Christ...” (verse 5), which shows that Jesus is presented in the context of the Trinity.

Sets of Three

To further illustrate how Jesus is God, the revelation continues with three descriptions of *who* he is: “the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (verse 5, NIV).

There’s a sermon—probably several—in that description. A “faithful witness” was as necessary in John’s day as it is today, in the era of “fake news” and conspiracy theories galore. Jesus is that faithful witness. The “firstborn from the dead” means that death isn’t an issue for Jesus, even though it is for every human on Earth. Our lives are safely in the hands of the one who is

“resurrection and life.” As the “ruler” of the kings of Earth, Jesus is both the sovereign (monarch) and the beginning (archetype) of all kings on this planet.

Keeping with the symbolic number three representing God, Jesus next gets presented for *three things he does*: He “loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father” (verses 5-6, NIV). I envision three more sermons!

He loves us! In Greek, this is in the continuous present tense: he is continuously loving us. But when it says he has freed us from our sins by his blood, it changes to the past tense. *That* already happened. Christ’s actions in the past have freed us in the present, which opens the way to freedom, confidence, gratitude, and worship.

Finally, he has made us a kingdom of priests to serve his God and Father. Because of Jesus, you are a priest—the highest and holiest role known on Earth. Why? In order to serve God.

The description of Jesus in the first chapter of Revelation shows him walking among the candlesticks—the churches—with intimate knowledge of each church’s idiosyncrasies. That was true in John’s day, and it’s equally true today. Where in the world is Jesus? He’s with us in the churches.

From “Me” to “Thee”

Like many of you, I had been taught this book more as a revelation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church than a revelation of Jesus. They aren’t the same. We Adventists typically take a verse or two out of Revelation that features sensational metaphors, then we springboard to various Adventist doctrines, and then we baptize people. I’ve been guilty of this.

Yet, that’s building the Body of Christ without a head. No wonder such an approach scares people. A fresh look at these prophecies requires a transition from “me” to “thee.” Instead of looking for *me* or *my church* in Revelation, I began to look for Jesus.

Here are examples of some of the things I found.

The Beasts: In late 19th-century America, anti-Catholic sentiment made the Catholic Church an easy target for the beast label. Using the same methodology today, the beast might be some other thing that you want to demonize—perhaps China, or Islam, or Black Lives Matter, or police brutality—something that incites fear.

But let’s instead stick with the litmus test for Revelation: what does this reveal about Jesus? Revelation 13:1-10 describes a beast from the sea that tries to imitate Jesus. This beast resembles the dragon, as Jesus resembles God the Father. The beast rules for 42 months, equivalent to the three-and-a-half-year ministry of the Messiah. Mirroring the story of Jesus, this beast receives a deadly wound and then comes back to life.

The second beast, which comes from the earth (verses 11-18), tries to imitate the Holy Spirit. It is “lamb-like” and exercises all of the authority of its predecessor, performing great signs and even bringing fire down from heaven—perhaps mimicking the Day of Pentecost.

Combine the two beasts of Revelation 13 with the dragon of Revelation 12, who seeks to imitate God the Father, and you have the description of a false trinity right in the heart of the book of Revelation. The imitation of the true Godhead by a false trinity happens repeatedly through Christian history. Satan worked through political and religious powers to persecute and crucify Christ, to harass the early Christians, and to thwart biblical truth

7 Keys for Interpreting the Book of Revelation

Key #1 - The literary context.

Read what comes before and what comes after the portion you choose to study.

Key #2 - The historical/cultural context.

What was life like when John wrote this book to a particular target group? After you determine that, make a contemporary application of it.

Key #3 - Key words. Look for words that contain key portions of the message. Compare how those

words are used in other places in Revelation and in the Bible as a whole.

Key #4 - Compare themes with the rest of Scripture.

Beyond key words, look for biblical themes that the book recaps—perhaps in words, liturgies, or symbols.

These first four keys are helpful for studying any book of the Bible. The remaining three are somewhat specific to Revelation.

Key #5 - Look for Old

Testament roots. Where are Revelation’s symbols used in the Old Testament? Try to connect the symbol to its roots rather than projecting forward to an unknown future.

Key #6 - The structure of the

book. Look for repetition and parallels, such as sets of sevens. Note how scenes are assembled. You can identify a pyramid structure that clarifies the flow of the book, its symmetry, and

its high point. As for numbers, consider first their symbolic quality rather than their literal quantity.

Key #7 - Jesus changes

everything. Jesus is the center of the entire Bible. The Old Testament points to him, and the New Testament grows out of him. What is true of the Bible is also true of Revelation. In this book, what was literal is expressed symbolically, even as what was local becomes global.

in the Middle Ages. Even today, Satan's influence can be seen in religion and government.

Knowing the real Trinity lays bare the fake.

The Three Angels' Messages: Why do we assume that these have nothing to do with other Christians? Although these messages are sometimes portrayed as uniquely Adventist, the message of the very first angel in this series is labeled as the "everlasting gospel," which means that this message precedes Adventism and will last after Adventism. Because the "everlasting gospel" is clearly the good news about Jesus, it's available to all believers.

The Seal of God: The idea of a seal containing three elements—name, territory, and right to rule—might convince some that the Sabbath is the seal of God. But that superimposes a political symbol on a spiritual one. In the New Testament, Paul identifies the seal: "When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit," he explains in Ephesians 1:13. The question shouldn't be, "Do you have the seventh-day Sabbath?" but "Do you have God's Spirit?"

The Commandments of God and the Testimony of Jesus: This phrase yields two identifying marks of God's people: they keep the commandments of God, and they have the testimony of Jesus (Rev. 12:17). And "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Rev. 19:10). Seventh-day Adventists, we have often said, are the only Christians who keep all of God's commandments including the fourth, and we have Ellen White—the spirit of prophecy.

But for a Jew like John, the "commandments of God" wouldn't be limited to just the Ten found in Exodus 20:3-17. It would include the entire Pentateuch, and probably the entire Old Testament. So one could "keep" the Ten Commandments and still ignore God's command "to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (Micah 6:8, KJV).

Did John foresee Ellen White as the fulfillment of Revelation's testimony of Jesus? That may be going too far. In fact, the phrase "the testimony of Jesus" occurs repeatedly in the book of Revelation, and John says that the entire prophecy was "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev 1:2, NIV). Even John's exile on Patmos happened because of "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (verse 9). In chapter five, John saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had. In chapter 20, they sit as judges during the millennium—these souls who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and the word of God.



So John himself had the spirit of prophecy (i.e., testimony of Jesus), along with all of those through the ages who spoke for Jesus Christ and died for him. Both Joel (2:28-29) and Peter (Acts 2:17-18) proclaimed that in the last days, God's spirit of prophecy would be poured out on lots of people, of all ages, and of more than one gender. Clearly, this isn't about one trophy person gifted with the spirit of prophecy. What matters is the actual testimony of Jesus.

Revelation Today

So what are Seventh-day Adventists to do with Revelation? We had an interpretation that made a lot of sense in 19th-century America, but looking for a Sunday law in America today will lead us to miss the Messiah as badly as the Jews missed him 2,000 years ago.

With less than 5 percent of Adventists living in the United States, it's time to abandon our nationalistic, time-warped interpretations. Let this be the moment when American Adventists pick up a towel, as Jesus did, and ask how we can better serve the rest of the world, as well as our neighbors in our own communities. That would be more Christlike than isolating ourselves as though God cares only about us.

The book of Revelation can change the distraction of self into the magnetic pull of Jesus, when we see it as a revelation of "thee" rather than of "me." That's when we will experience it as "the revelation of Jesus Christ." **AT**

¹ Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Revelation: The Apocalypse Through Hebrew Eyes* (2002), pp. 10-11.

Prophecies Unfolding Before Our Eyes:

WHAT WE ARE MISSING IN OUR INTERPRETATIONS

BY JEANNE MOGUSU

THE CURRENT WORLD SITUATION, NO matter where you are right now, is so unusual that the phrase “living in unprecedented times” has become a cliché. Naturally, many are turning to the Bible for answers, and for Adventists that means a deeper examination of end-time prophecy.

Adventist eschatology has long been focused on the United States, no matter where in the world you live. Although the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been a global movement for over a century and 95 percent of Seventh-day Adventists are outside of the United States, the messaging around end-time prophecy has always been that regardless of what is happening in your local context, you must keep your eyes on developments in the United States.

What’s going on in other parts of the world, which could just as easily fit the narrative of end-time prophecy, is largely ignored because of where it is occurring. The emphasis on American politics and the worldwide preoccupation with

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the search for the antichrist has been detrimental to our church. Outside of the United States, there is a constant focus on the activities of the pope. Seemingly endless media clips tease the possibility of impending persecution of believers, of Sunday blue laws, and other such last-day events—somewhere else. Members keep circulating the same clips year after year, over and over again, and the misinformation and mischaracterization of the pope’s words only serve to create panic rather than the peace and assurance that come from a correct understanding of prophecy.

Overlooking Local Fulfillment

This focus on the American landscape and the Vatican has led us to overlook the modern-day Nebuchadnezzars and prophetic fulfillments happening closer to our homes. If God is universal and his prophecies all-encompassing, doesn’t it stand to reason that what happens in local contexts around the world is just as important—perhaps more so—than what is happening in the United States?

A quest for a global perspective on prophecy is what I present here for your consideration.

As Americans talk about the *possibility* of persecution for Sabbath-keepers and about losing their religious liberty, at this moment in parts of the “mission field,” religious liberty is *already* heavily curtailed and Sabbath worship is not allowed. In some places Adventist students can’t graduate because tests are on Sabbath, or Adventist employees are fired if they don’t work on Sabbath—with far fewer options for redress than are available to Americans. In other places

the people of God live in fear of arrest because of their faith, and gathering together in worship is a criminal offense.

There is another side to this, too. Worldly power, as the prophecies warned, has in some places advanced boldly into the church. While Americans are obsessed with the slightest sign of the blending of church and state, church leaders in some regions bend over backward to accommodate the whims of political leaders, with little consideration for the gospel they profess or for the people of God to whom they are called to minister. Sometimes the distinction between politics and religion is blurred; churches are conduits through which unscrupulous political leaders launder illegitimately gained funds, and pulpits are podiums for political rhetoric.

Meanwhile, religious leaders are deathly silent about the oppression and subjugation of the people of the land. Conflicts dominate some churches, where certain members and leaders are more aligned with their tribal and political identities than their Christian identity. Although the Bible tells us that “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28, NIV), often little difference exists between the attitudes of the people of God and those who are of the world.

The Time of Trouble

In lands far from America, the time of trouble is a current reality for some Adventists. While we talk prophetically

about what is happening thousands of miles across the ocean, in our own backyards the very problems warned of in the prophecies are happening. We have restrictive Sabbath laws, dangerous alliances between church and state, as well as tribal and political fights in congregations. Here and there, Christians are persecuted for their faith. Rarely is it spoken about, except perhaps as a prayer

The emphasis on American politics and the worldwide preoccupation with the search for the antichrist has been detrimental to our church.

point in an already packed church bulletin.

Could it be that in this global economy, which defines our current existence, our understanding of the time of trouble is incomplete? Is it possible that while we have looked toward the American narrative of eschatological events, we have missed the fulfillment of prophecy under our own noses? Dulled by affluence and complacent in our own beliefs, might we have missed all of the places around the world—far from the American shores where these interpretations originated—where the beast and his ideology have gained power?

I am suggesting to you that the time of trouble may not happen just in America and that it may not even take place all at once throughout the entire world. I am suggesting that it could happen as a series of prophetic fulfillments experienced at different times, in different places. I am suggesting that when Revelation tells us to “Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins” (18:4, KJV), we in Africa, Asia, and Latin America ought to take that warning seriously—right now, on whichever continent we live and worship.

The prophecies weren’t given for America alone. They were given for God’s people around the world. What would happen if we were to begin to study them as a guide to how we should live right now, wherever we are? **AT**

666:

THE STORY OF AN ENIGMATIC NUMBER

BY REINDER BRUINSMA

IN MY EARLY TEENAGE YEARS, I STAYED for a week of vacation with a pastor's family who had a son about my age.¹ I dutifully went with them to church on Sabbath morning, then I learned that we would also attend an evangelistic meeting in a nearby town on Sabbath afternoon. I could hardly protest, but to say that I was enthusiastic would be stretching the truth.

However, once the pastor got going, I found the topic quite fascinating. It was about the beast of Revelation 13 and, in particular, about 666, the "number of the beast." The pastor wrote on a blackboard with big letters the Latin words VICARIUS FILII DEI. This, he told his audience, was a popular title of the pope. Its blasphemous meaning was VICEREGENT OF THE SON OF GOD. And in this title, he explained, was hidden the mysterious number of the sea beast of Revelation 13. By adding up the value of the Roman letters of the title, one would arrive at the mysterious number 666.

The fact that Roman letters had a numerical value was not new to me. I lived in a village with a big church in its center that had been dedicated in 1636, with the date rendered by the Roman numerals MDCXXXVI above the main door. Thus, the explanation given for 666 seemed convincing to me; it was proof that the papacy is the ultimate villain in the great controversy between God's true church and apostate Christianity.

Many Adventists are still convinced of this. Yet, Adventist scholars who write about Revelation have become increasingly hesitant to endorse such an explanation of 666, and some openly warn against using this dubious argument for the traditional position. Nonetheless, many Adventist evangelists are reluctant to drop such a spectacular argument for "prophetic truth" from their apocalyptic lectures.²

An Age-old Riddle

We assume that when the apostle John wrote the words we find in Revelation 13:8—"This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666"—his contemporaries understood what he meant. If so, the key to deciphering its meaning was soon lost, and as early as the second century of the Christian era, church father Irenaeus wondered what 666 could possibly denote.

Numerous attempts to decipher the number have been made since that time, mostly using a technique known as gematria (i.e., the principle that in ancient languages, each letter has a numerical value). One popular explanation was that 666 was linked to Emperor Nero, because the gematrical value of the words *Neron Kaisar* in Greek added up to 666.

The number was linked to other Roman emperors as time passed, and in later years, ingenious calculations were made to connect this enigmatic number with a broad range of civil and religious leaders.³ During the Second World War, some suggested that 666 referred to Hitler, if A=101; B=102; C=103; D=104, and so on.

To illustrate the adaptability of this method, even the name Ellen Gould White could deliver the number of the beast, if the value of the Roman numerals in her name are added up, assuming that the Us are taken as Vs, and the W ("double U") as two Vs.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Ellen} &= L+L = 100 \\ \text{Gould} &= U+L+D = 555 \\ \text{White} &= U+U+I = 11 \end{aligned}$$

$$= 666$$

The underlying problem, however, is that there is no indication that the numbers in Revelation 13:8 are meant to be explained using gematria, which can yield extremely far-fetched results. It is also highly questionable to employ whatever language (ancient or modern) acquires the desired result.

666 in Early Adventism

The views of William Miller with regard to the apocalyptic portions of the Bible had a strong influence on the development of the Seventh-day Adventist interpretation of the books of Daniel and Revelation. For example, the little horn of Daniel 7 and the sea beast of Revelation 13 were viewed as symbols for the religio-political power of Roman Catholicism—a view Miller shared with many earlier religious leaders, as well as his contemporaries. Miller was aware of the various attempts to explain the meaning of 666, the cryptic number of the beast. He wrote, somewhat hyperbolically: “This text [Revelation 13:18] has caused as much speculation as any text in the whole Bible; rivers of ink have been



An illustration altered to show Vicarius Filii Dei on a papal tiara.

shed to explain its meaning. Brains have been addled in trying to find some great mystery, which the wisdom of this world, as was supposed, could not discover.”⁴

Miller did not agree with the many attempts to discover the identity of the bearer of this number by scrutinizing the numerical value of the names of historical figures. He linked the number with the imperial Roman beast of verses 1-3 and suggested that the reference was to a period of 666 years of pagan hegemony, from 158 B.C. to A.D. 508. Miller was looking for a period that would end in A.D. 508, which he saw as the starting point of the prophetic periods of 1,290 and 1,335 days/years. Calculating

backward, he arrived at the year 158 B.C. as the beginning of the 666 years when, according to Miller, paganism received a major boost from a treaty concluded between the Romans and the Jews.

Miller was not the first nor the last to understand 666 as a particular date. In the early 17th century, a significant number of divines in Britain believed that 666 pointed to the year 1666, “the year of the beast,” in which Babylon would see its final demise.⁵

Another idea floated among early Adventists was that 666 was linked to the second beast—the beast from the earth in Revelation 13—rather than to the sea beast and that it represented the total number of Protestant sects that were under the influence of Babylon. It seems, based on something Ellen White wrote in 1847, that she initially believed in this interpretation, as did a number of other Advent pioneers.⁶

The Pope’s Title

It took a while before the early Adventist opinion leaders began to feel more certain about the meaning of the number 666. In

1866 Uriah Smith, editor of the *Review and Herald*, thought it was still unclear what the number 666 meant but that future development would no doubt clear up the issue. Just a few years later, Smith tentatively suggested an explanation that would soon become the standard Adventist view on the matter.⁷

Writing in 1868 about the topic of 666, Smith rejected some of the alternative theories about the numerical value of the number of the beast and concluded that one of the titles of the pope provided “the most plausible” solution: *Vicarius Filii Dei*. This had already been suggested by a few other authors. Smith wrote in 1872 that “the pope wears upon his pontifical crown, in jeweled letters, this title: *Vicarius Filii Dei* (which means: *Viceregent of the Son of God*), the numerical value of which title is just six hundred and sixty-six.” Smith found it “the most plausible supposition we have ever seen on this point.”

One of the sources Smith quoted was a book titled *The Reformation*, published in 1832 by an unknown author, which makes reference to a person who later testified that “the Pope passed him in the procession, splendidly dressed in his pontifical robes.” This person then reportedly saw in “full, blazing letters in front of his miter: ‘VICARIOUS [sic] FILII DEI.’”

Smith asserted that he had no reason to doubt the accuracy of this information, but whether or not the story was completely factual wasn’t important to him. “What counted,” Smith stated, “was the well-established fact that the pope does claim to be the Vicar of Christ and this Latin title is a faithful rendering thereof.”

Gradually other Adventist authors adopted this view, such as John N. Andrews in 1877. Even the 1912 edition of a more scholarly work of Andrews, *The History of the Sabbath*, mentioned it without any documentary evidence. But some uneasiness about the scanty sources for the alleged presence of the *Vicarius Filii Dei* title on the papal tiara remained. The popular (and voluminous) *Bible Readings for the Home Circle*, which

William Miller wrote that “rivers of ink have been shed to explain its meaning. Brains have been addled in trying to find some great mystery, which the wisdom of this world, as was supposed, could not discover.”

was first published in 1914 and contained most of the traditional Adventist approach to apocalyptic prophecy, remained silent on the topic.

Some continued to defend the use of *Vicarius Filii Dei* arguments, including D. E. Scoles, who claimed in 1906 in an article in the *Review and Herald* that he had met two persons who had actually seen the words inscribed on the papal crown.

Just a year earlier, however, Charles T. Everson, an English evangelist and missionary, reported from Rome that he had succeeded with the help of personnel at the Vatican in getting a close look at the papal tiaras and had found no inscription on any of the crowns he inspected.⁸ He acquired some photographs of the tiaras and sent these to W. W. Prescott, who was involved with editorial assignments and had wanted to use a picture of a tiara to illustrate an article. One of the photographs that Everson sent was subsequently “photoshopped” by the Southern Publishing Association. When the General Conference discovered that the words *Vicarius Filii Dei* had been added to the pope’s crown by an artist and that this picture was going to be used in a revised edition of Uriah Smith’s book *Daniel and Revelation*, they took immediate action and stopped the printing.⁹

Our Sunday Visitor

One source that inevitably emerges, whenever the link between 666 and the papal title is defended, is a statement by the editor of *Our Sunday Visitor* (April 18, 1915), a Catholic journal, in answer to a question of a reader about “the letters supposed to be in the Pope’s crown.” The editor confirmed that the words *Vicarius Filii Dei* were indeed inscribed on the pope’s tiara, and a year earlier the same journal had admitted that the numerical value of these words was 666. However, in 1941 the journal denied that the alleged papal title was on the papal crown.

Due to the uneasiness of some leaders about the validity of the 666 interpretation that had become broadly accepted in our church, the General Conference requested prominent authors to gather evidence for the traditional standpoint from libraries around the world. This exercise proved fruitless.

One of the men whose help was enlisted, the renowned Dr. LeRoy E. Froom, reported from London that he had consulted hundreds of documents but had only found the title *Vicarius Filii Dei* in a forged document, the so-called *Donatio Constantini*, known to be a counterfeit fabricated in the eighth century in support of papal claims. Froom later wrote to one of the General Conference leaders that he hoped “we would find it unnecessary to make use of the material from the *Donations*.”

In 1939, at the initiative of newly elected General Conference president J. L. McElhany, the matter was once again investigated. A small committee was formed, and its 42-page report admitted that the main source for the *Vicarius Filii Dei* title was indeed the forged *Donatio Constantini*, but they concluded that this document had gained considerable prestige and that “the practice of the Roman Catholic Church affords a substantial basis for our interpretation of 666 as the number of the beast.”

Doubts and Dismissals

Further research in the 1940s and 1950s indicated the need for prudence with regard to the Adventist interpretation of 666. It was duly noted by many that, after

Ellen White’s initial musings about the meaning of 666, she never again in her extended corpus of writings supported that view. As the years went by, most Adventist authors writing on Revelation became hesitant to endorse the traditional interpretation. The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* that appeared in the 1950s cited precedents for the Adventist interpretation but concluded that it would be inadvisable to make dogmatic statements about the gematrical 666 interpretation.

Among the prominent authors who still gave credence to the *Vicarius Filii Dei* applications were Roy Allan Anderson¹⁰ and C. Mervyn Maxwell,¹¹ but both of them also presented other options. One of the suggestions, which continues to gain ground among Adventist interpreters, is that the number 6 (and thereby 666) is closely linked to the symbol of Babylon. Archaeologists have discovered Babylonian amulets inscribed with a series of horizontal and vertical numbers that add up to 666. Several Adventist scholars have also suggested that while 7 is a symbolic number for perfection, 6 is a human number, which falls short of the divine.¹²

Ángel Rodríguez, principal author of the *Adult Bible Study Guide* (Sabbath School lesson) for the second quarter of 2002, cast doubt on the view that has long been dominant and advocated a symbolic interpretation. He opined that 666 stands for “intensified rebellion, six used three times, and total independence from God.” Jacques B. Doukhan follows a similar path, saying that the number 6 is a key figure in the construction of the grand statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had erected (Dan. 3:1). He says that “the triple repetition of the number 6 alludes to the creature’s desire to usurp God’s role.... The

repeat of the human number three times amounts to promoting the human level to the divine, who is three times holy (Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8).¹³

I may have been excited by what I heard on that Sabbath afternoon some 60 years ago, but having studied the history of the interpretation of the enigmatic number 666 in the Adventist faith community, I must admit that I am much more attracted to the symbolic explanation that has gained support in recent years. **AT**

¹ This article is based on sections of my Ph.D. dissertation (University of London, 1993), which deals with the Adventist approach to the number 666: Reinder Bruinsma, *Seventh-day Adventist Attitudes Toward Roman Catholicism 1844-1965* (Berrien Springs, MI, 1994). See, in particular, pp. 143-150; 226-231. Some footnotes have been omitted.

² For one of many examples, see a lecture by Doug Batchelor, online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9rxsQygs2c>

³ For a very informative survey, see Michael Scheifler, 666, *The Number of the Beast*, online at <http://www.moellerhaus.com/666SCH/666.htm>

⁴ William Miller, *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ* (1842), p. 76.

⁵ David Brady, 666: *The Year of the Beast* (1979), pp. 314-335.

⁶ “The Number of the Beast,” in *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2 (1996), pp. 221-225.

⁷ Ellen G. White, *A Word to the Little Flock* (1847), pp. 8-9.

⁸ More than 20 different papal crowns have been given to the popes over the centuries. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_papal_tiaras_in_existence.

⁹ For the involvement of W. W. Prescott with the 666 issue, see the biography by Gilbert M. Valentine: *The Shaping of Adventism: The Case of W. W. Prescott* (1992), pp. 273-275.

¹⁰ Roy Allan Anderson, *Unfolding the Revelation* (1961 ed.), pp. 125-134.

¹¹ C. Mervyn Maxwell, *God Cares: The Message of Revelation for You and Your Family*, Vol. 2 (1985), pp. 413-416.

¹² See Roy C. Naden, *The Lamb Among the Beasts* (1996), pp. 200-201; Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (2002), pp. 427-429.

¹³ Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Revelation: The Apocalypse Through Hebrew Eyes* (2002), p. 138.

The “Spirit of Prophecy” in Revelation

BY OLIVE J. HEMMINGS

Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”

—Revelation 19:10, NRSV

THE BOOK OF REVELATION FALLS UNDER the genre of apocalyptic literature—that is, it emerges from a period of crisis and suffering within the Christian community. The original audience of Revelation is an oppressed community: marginalized people within a culture of Roman domination.

Worship as singular allegiance to God is what caused problems for believers in the early church (who were called Christians, even though it was not yet an official religion of the empire), and it’s why the prophet John was imprisoned on the Isle of Patmos, where he received this vision. Although the Greco-Roman empire at that time was known for its piety and religious liberty, the imperial cult was mandatory for all citizens of the empire and demanded the act of worshipful homage to the Roman emperor as a “son of god.” The imperial cult was Rome’s instrument of loyalty to the state, through which Rome maintained the *Pax Romana*.¹

The Judaic community, ever in search of religious freedom, negotiated its way out of this idolatrous cult. However, when the early Christian church was—involutarily—separated from the

synagogue, it had three options: it could compromise the gospel preached by Jesus, Paul, and the Hebrew prophets before them and remain in the synagogue; it could capitulate to the imperial cult; or it could maintain the faith of Jesus and suffer persecution.

It chose the third option.

The Three Angels

John, from his exile, writes to the small churches in Asia Minor, which were being harassed and murdered by the powers of Rome because they chose not to bow to the empire. The apostle’s words are worshipful acts of defiance against those who usurp the sovereignty of God.

The language, of course, is heavily symbolic. The symbols that we now see as shadowing historical events actually codified a subversive message of hope to the faithful, which assured them of the eventual downfall of a system of injustice and oppression.

The three angels’ messages of Revelation 14 express the same concern as Revelation 19:10: standing for the Creator against the empire. They caution the church against the influence of an idolatrous culture of domination and oppression that threatens to eliminate it, should it not conform. The angels’ appeal to the church is to worship God rather than yield to the easy road of imperial worship or Judaic ethnocentrism.² They describe the culture of domination and oppression as “Babylon” and the head of that system as “the beast.”

The worship of the beast and his image is in reference to the imperial cult. To participate in that cult is to “drink of the wine of the wrath” of Babylon’s “fornication”—to capitulate to the empire and all of its corrupting influences. The pronouncement of the second angel that “Babylon the great” is fallen assures the church of the vindication of God’s people. John calls upon them to resist: “Here is the patience of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus” (Rev. 14:12, my own translation).

It is in light of this fear of the emperor’s cult that we interpret Revelation 19:10. Revelation, far from addressing our time, is actually a warning against imperial cult worship, which Revelation 14 characterizes as drinking the wine of the wrath of the fornication of Babylon. Revelation 19 depicts the other side of that: a great multitude in heaven worshipping God, and an angel blessing those who partake in the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Revelation 19:10 is a reiteration of Revelation 14:12, because it identifies the nature of allegiance to God. And allegiance, in this case, is having the spirit of prophecy.

The Commandments of God

What, then, is the spirit of prophecy? According to the passage, it is the “testimony of Jesus.” Those who have the testimony of Jesus have the spirit of prophecy.

Revelation 14:12 and 19:10, taken in literary and historical context, are parallel and identical in purpose. The commandments of God are the spirit of prophecy, which is the testimony of Jesus, which is the faith (or faithfulness³) of Jesus. In Revelation 14:12, it is John who invokes the spirit of prophecy against the evils of empire. In Revelation 19:10, an angel uses the phrase to talk about allegiance to God in the context of the worship event happening in heaven.

The phrase “the commandments of God” in Revelation is subversive. It registers resistance to those who identify themselves by the commandments of God but do not embrace the spirit of them. The early church involuntarily separated from the synagogue, and in Asia, many synagogues expelled Jesus’ followers for fear of being identified with a community that was not purely Jewish (Rev. 2:9; 3:7-9). Because the followers of Jesus had accepted Gentiles and embraced diversity, their presence in the synagogue meant the presence of non-Jews and non-Jewish culture. Separated from the synagogues, churches in Asia were left without the exemption status that the Jews enjoyed.

The point of this passage is not the necessity of commandment-keeping. True commandment-keepers (i.e., true worshipers of God) are not just rule followers, but those who also have “the testimony of Jesus,” which goes beyond the letter to the spirit in which Jesus worked.

Justice in Revelation

According to the early church, the testimony of Jesus was first expressed when the Messiah, filled with the Spirit after his baptism, entered the synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16-20) and read from the scroll of Isaiah: “The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because he has

anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Isa. 61:1-2, my own translation).

Revelation 19:10’s spirit of prophecy and commandments of God don’t stand on their own. They must be understood in light of Isaiah’s broad imperative to go beyond ritual and obedience to justice: “New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation...solemn assemblies with iniquity...Your new moons and appointed festivals my soul hates. ... Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isa. 1:11-17, NRSV; cf. Amos 5:21-24).

When the author penned his vision, he believed that the end of it all would be in his generation (Rev. 1:7), so the message of the early church was an end-time message. To the first Christians, the latter rain wasn’t some future event, but the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost.

But Rome hijacked the church and so eclipsed the testimony of Jesus—the spirit of prophecy. The church became the instrument of Roman imperialism and, later, of European expansionism.

A Distorted Prophetic Message

Just as in the early Christian church, the advocacy for justice to the oppressed still poses a threat to the foundations of Babylon. It is a message of just resistance to an idolatrous culture of domination, oppression, and consumerism—not only among pagans, but even among the so-called people of God. It is this testimony, in favor of the unempowered, that led to stoning of the prophets and the execution of Jesus and other apostles, and so Revelation urges the church in Asia Minor to hold fast to this testimony.

Today, a vast sector of Christendom distorts the message of Revelation as the triumph of Judeo-Christian nationalism. This is a mask for a massive power-and-money grab through ideological supremacy. Revelation would warn that those who join hands with these selfish ideologies against the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, and the prisoners align themselves with Babylon and the beast.

Revelation speaks not for those who can marshal huge tax cuts for the rich and lobby for keeping out destitute immigrants. Revelation speaks not for the right to own guns in order to protect their privilege, nor for the right to fire LGBT people or deny a sincere worshiper a Sabbath exemption, nor for the power to ban the right to terminate a pregnancy in the interest of a mother’s health.

Similarly, Revelation 19:10 doesn’t ask us to look for a single prophet, but to reassert Jesus’ message of justice as expressed at his reading of Isaiah 61. The spirit of prophecy advocates for the marginalized and oppressed people who seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before God. **AT**

¹ *Pax Romana* means “Roman peace.” In practice, it meant that an uprising or nascent revolution was brutally crushed. It was the justification for Jesus’ execution.

² The synagogue required proselytization of anyone who sought to join. Jesus’ followers opposed this mandate, asserting that all religious and ethnic differences dissolved in Christ (Gal. 3:28; Romans 14). Judaism saw this as a dilution of Jewish principles, so Christian Jews were expelled from the synagogue.

³ The Greek word *pistis*, which translators render “faith,” really means “faithfulness” as expressed in the life of a “just” person (Hab. 2:4, KJV). It is not referring to a belief system, but to living a life rooted in justice and integrity.

CAN LEADERSHIP BE CHRISTIAN?

THIS MAY SEEM A STRANGE QUESTION. After all, books on this subject abound. And if *those* aren't enough, university professors teach dozens of courses on Christian leadership. Entire organizations are devoted to the topic. For example, Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, operates a Christian Leadership Center. Yet, some of the language we find in the New Testament makes this question worth exploring.

The word for "leader" or "ruler" used in the New Testament, *αρχων* (*archon*), appears 36 times and is used in several different ways. It can refer to the leader of a Jewish synagogue (Matt. 9:18); a leader of the Pharisees (Luke 14:1); a member of the Jewish ruling council (John 3); the Jewish high priest (Acts 23:5); Gentile political leaders (Matt. 20:25); Beelzebul, the prince of demons (Matt. 12:24); and Satan, the ruler of this world (John 14:30). It can be used synonymously with the "kings of the earth" (Acts 4:26) or to denote Jesus Christ as "the ruler of the kings of the earth" (Rev. 1:5). However, it is never used for anyone who serves as a disciple of Christ or who ministers for him. Rather, Jesus contrasts his disciples with the leaders or rulers of the Gentiles when he tells them: "You know that those who are regarded as rulers [*archein*] of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever

wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45, NRSV).

The Role of an Overseer

Disciples who minister for Christ are servants and slaves, not "leaders" or *archons*. But does the Son of God really forbid his disciples the kind of authority generally assumed as a part of leadership? After all, another word that is used for a Christian minister, *episkopos* (*επισκοπος*), is often translated "bishop" or "overseer." Certainly, the term "overseer" implies the authority of traditional leadership. Or does it?

One way to understand a word's connotation is to examine others from the same root. For example, *episkopos* comes from two Greek words: *epi* (meaning "upon") and *skopos* (meaning "goal" or "mark"). That etymology may not seem very helpful, but viewing two verbs that come from the same words, and are thus related to the noun *episkopos*, is more enlightening. The first is *episkopeo* (*επισκοπεω*), which is used once or twice in the New Testament and means "to look at" or "to take care." It appears in Hebrews 12:15, which the NRSV translates as "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God." It is also

used in some but not all manuscripts of 1 Peter 5:2, in the context of tending the flock of God.

The second related verb, *episkeptomai* (*επισκεπτομαι*), is used 11 times in the New Testament and is more telling. This verb form shows us what the *episkopos* does and clearly reveals that this "overseer" is not a position of authority. It can refer to God looking favorably on someone, as the following texts illustrate:

- "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them" (Luke 1:68, NRSV).
- "God has looked favorably on his people!" (Luke 7:16, NRSV).
- "Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name" (Acts 15:14, NRSV).

In reference to human activity, the term was used in Acts 7:23 when Stephen spoke of Moses visiting his relatives, the Israelites, once he reached the age of 40. More often, however, it has the connotation of taking care of someone or giving care. Notice the following passages:

- Referring to those on his right side in the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus said, "I was sick and you took care of me" (Matt. 25:36, NRSV).
- "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them?" (Heb. 2:6, NRSV).

- “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27, NRSV).

James is not exhorting his readers to exercise authority over the widows and orphans, nor is Jesus saying that the sheep on his right exercised authority over the sick. Usage of the verbal form of the word suggests that the role of the *episkopos* is not one of authoritative oversight, but of compassionate care. This is consistent with what Jesus said about discipleship and ministry in the Mark 10 passage quoted above.

Solving the Dilemma

Is this role of caring, however, consistent with the administration that must be exercised in any organization, including the church? In the book of Acts, we see an example of the kind of leadership exercised by Jesus’ disciples that gives us several clues about how to translate compassionate caring into the task of administration.

At the Jerusalem Council, the apostles were confronted with a dilemma that threatened to split the young church. Jewish Christians held onto the importance of circumcision, whereas many Gentile Christians had not been circumcised. In Galatians 2, Paul says that he saw a living example of such Christians in the person of Titus.

Notice the personal concern the leaders demonstrated in their response. One thing they did was to listen to personal stories. Paul and Barnabas recounted the wonderful ways God had blessed their ministry among the Gentiles. Compassionate caring meant that they were interested not only in policies and rules, but in the actual lives of people as God worked among them (Acts 15:12). Peter shared his experience and showed compassionate concern that no

burdensome “yoke” be placed on the Gentile believers. He said: “Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (Acts 15:10-11, NRSV).

This led the apostles to the conclusion that they would allow for diversity and respect the consciences of both groups. Jewish Christians could continue to practice circumcision; it would not be forbidden. But Gentile Christians would not be forced to be circumcised. There would be no compulsion in either direction. This compromise respected both the cultures and consciences of all believers and showed the compassionate administration of the true servant ministry Jesus had set before them when he was with them.

The use of the term “yoke” is interesting. The leaders’ refusal to place a “yoke” on the believers is in sharp contrast with an example of a different kind of administration that we find in an interesting Old Testament passage. It happened after Solomon died. The people came to his son, who was now on the throne, and asked that the “yoke” Solomon had placed on them be eased. In 2 Chronicles 10:4, the people pled with Rehoboam: “Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke that he placed on us, and we will serve you” (NRSV).

Rehoboam asked for time. He sought counsel from the older men, who advised that he be kind to the people, but ultimately, he went with the advice of the younger advisors, who advocated the opposite approach. Rehoboam went with their advice and said: “My father made

your yoke heavy, but I will add to it; my father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions” (verse 14, NRSV).

As a result, the people of the northern part of Solomon’s kingdom revolted, and Israel and Judah split, never to reunite. What a contrast with the disciples who, by not placing a yoke on the early believers, held the church together!

Christian Leadership in Practice

Back to our original question. Can effective leadership be Christian? Jesus and his disciples show us what truly Christian leadership looks like. I do wonder at times if the very term “leadership” has so many connotations of authority that it may not be appropriate for the compassionate guidance given by the disciples. However, we probably can’t get around using the term today. Perhaps we should always add an adjective, such as “servant,” to make sure we remember that Jesus’ idea of leadership is different from the usual sense of the word.

I leave it to each reader to think about the implications of this study by contemplating the following questions. Are some of the terms we hear today, such as “warning,” “compliance,” and “reprimand,” consistent with Jesus’ way of compassionate caring? If we truly saw ministry and “leadership” in the church as compassionate caregiving and not as authority, would we want to exclude women? Can simple either/or majority votes without nuanced and principled compromise reflect the example the disciples gave in Acts 15? **AT**



NEWS BRIEFS

BarelyAdventist (barelyadventist.com) is a satire and humor blog on Adventist culture and issues. It is written by committed Adventists who have no interest in tearing down the church but don't mind laughing at our idiosyncrasies.

Fundamental Beliefs Back Down to 27

SILVER SPRING, Md. — Adventist leaders have decided to condense the steadily growing number of denominational fundamental beliefs to 27, in response to a push to slash budgets. “We now realize that we could have said what we believe more succinctly,” admitted General Conference director of tree felling, Guy Printalot.

“The fundamental beliefs are costing more and more to disseminate, and there are always Scrooges who point out that John 3:16 sums up the essentials of what people need to know,” said Printalot. “Also, we’ve had all of these old 27 fundamental beliefs books sitting in the GC basement unused. It’s time we showed them some love.”

SDA Man Warns of Plot by CDC

ADVENTIST WORLD — Adventist Bo Runfer has spent the last several months on social media in a bold crusade against the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Regardless of what the CDC recommends, this modern crusader finds a way to label it a religious rights denial.

Runfer has told everyone he knows that wearing a mask proves you are buying into the CDC ploy to hamper face-to-face witnessing. What does he say about global warnings that a COVID-19 vaccine is urgently needed? It’s just a way to get everyone microchipped with the mark of the beast. His take on social distancing? That’s a clever scheme to ban church services and the distribution of GLOW tracts.

When he’s not trashing the CDC, Runfer finds a way to turn any news headline or Domino’s menu offer into a sign of the times. It’s gotten so bad that the magazine *Signs of the Times* has created a submissions spam filter to counteract Runfer’s email blitzes.

Beer Lover Is a Fan of Adventist History

RIVERSIDE, Calif. — Interviewed immediately after attending an Adventist online evangelistic campaign from his living room, 52-year-old construction worker Kent

Brauser admitted that he “had no idea Miller Lites had been so disappointing back in 1844.”

Brauser said he was grateful for the chance that Adventist TV programming gave him to “brush up on beer trivia and hear music back from before America was a country.” The local multitasker boasted that he’d successfully paid several bills, demolished a bag of nachos, and caught up on the news during the Adventist evangelistic broadcast.

The Inland Empire resident said he empathized with the 19th-century Americans and others who had to suffer through a time of such terrible recreational beverage options.

Brauser placed the blame squarely on some guy called William Miller, saying he had learned Miller had gotten his wires crossed on an important formula. “The rest is history,” said Brauser with a sage smile.

Trump Attacks China With EGW Quotes

WASHINGTON, D.C. — President Donald Trump has used a brand-new weapon in his ongoing war of words and trade with China: Ellen G. White quotations.

Trump prefaced his recent UN General Assembly comments by saying, “I laid off tweeting for hours to make sure I picked all of the best one-liners from these little red books I found in Ben Carson’s library.”

The president proceeded to recite dozens of reproofs from various volumes of *Testimonies for the Church*, calling out China on everything from indulgence of appetite to dress and competitive sports.

“Everything China does, I’ve got a quote for,” said Trump, answering questions from reporters after the speech. “Where have these books been all of my life?”

World Church Stuck on Old White Males

SILVER SPRING, Md. — The white sheet cake traditionally served at the annual gathering of Adventist Heritage Enthusiasts was absent this year, due to the difficulty of sharing refreshments via Zoom and because of the cake’s uncomfortable resemblance to 157 years of denominational leadership.

“At the peak of the Adventist denomination’s diversity and international reach, one embarrassing fact remains: we trust only old white men to lead us,” said White Estate archivist Blanca de Blanco, addressing the online gathering. “It doesn’t seem to matter how well represented we are in parts of the world that are anything but white,” she added. “When it comes to calling the shots, we still seem to need an aging Caucasian male.”

Speaking to a computer screen dotted by dour faces, Blanco insisted that something had to change. “We’ve got to do better than this,” she said. “At this rate, there will be a female pope before a non-white GC president.”

Will Ancient Statue Be Next One Down?

ROME, Italy — The Statue Preservation Association released a statement today announcing an imminent threat to another statue. “This time the statue slated for toppling doesn’t depict a racist old white guy, but a powerful ruler with famously troubling dreams who lived during the period of the Neo-Babylonian Empire,” said the association spokesperson.

To date, the ancient statue of Nebuchadnezzar is the most expensive image headed for destruction. Its head, made entirely of pure gold, is reportedly the most valuable, while the statue’s materials get cheaper the closer you get to its toes.

The association describes the digits as “basically a messy tangle of mud and clay somehow associated with a region of great pasta down south, Santa Claus up north, and a rebellious, rainy island that doesn’t want to play ball.”

The statue will not be destroyed by protesters. “Something meteor-like will take out this statue,” explained

the association spokesperson, adding that its board members didn’t know any further details, since the Adventist prophecy preacher they’d been watching had ended his sermon on a cliffhanger, urging everyone to tune in tomorrow for more.

Let’s Just Assume It’s All Been Solved

SILVER SPRING, Md. — Over the last few months, nobody’s been saying much about women’s ordination. We’re guessing that’s because we Adventists have the whole thing officially worked out. Who knew that we had it in us to solve what, just a year or two ago, was THE hot potato vexing just about anyone following Adventist policymaking?

It seems like just yesterday church members were dedicating serious bandwidth to arguing about something as petty as appropriate punishment for fellow believers who didn’t toe the party line. MAN, are we glad that nonsense is over!

We don’t know who made this whole thing go away, but congrats, for REALS. It was such a loaded issue. Nobody seemed to be able to think outside their preconceived notions when it came to voting about it. The fact that we’ve moved on to other things is quite frankly amazing.

We’ve gotta say: Now that we have successfully closed this chapter, there is simply no mountain that we as a church can’t scale. We could even start caring about mission.

Prophet Giving Up on Drawing Straws

ANCIENT NEWS — Moments after he hit dry land, an Israelite man named Jonah, who is a well-known man of God, asked shocked bystanders for directions to Nineveh. Jonah said that he was turning a page, as far as drawing straws was concerned. The repentant prophet from Galilee told those gathered that the practice was a fundamentally risky way to make decisions.

“Listen, it’s best to stay away from casting lots or drawing straws—unless you want to be thrown head-first into a stormy sea and get swallowed by a big fish,” said Jonah, drying off. “There are far better ways to think up next steps.” With that, he excused himself to work on his sermon notes for what he called “an even bigger warning.”

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work, you'd need to put at least part of chapter 21 sometime *before* the events of chapter 20.

Revelation 12 presents similar chronological difficulties. The rebellious angels are cast out of heaven, but then—poof!—thousands of years pass without a trace and we see the birth of Jesus, and then—poof!—the early Christian church is skipped entirely and God's people are hiding in the wilderness. If you follow the order of the story as presented, it is only after centuries of their eclipse that there is “war in heaven,” which leads to the suppression of truth in the Dark Ages and ends with the persecution of those “who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (12:17), making it appear that Seventh-day Adventists were the conclusion of the religious persecutions of the Dark Ages!

That is to say, one must jump back and forth endlessly to overlay the Adventist prophetic scheme on Revelation. We even transport a verse from the book's last chapter—“He who is unjust, let him be unjust still; he who is filthy, let him be filthy still; he who is righteous, let him be righteous still; he who is holy, let him be holy still” (22:11)—back into the pre-advent period to say that there is a close of probation *before* the second coming, though the rest of the chapter has nothing to do with that earlier period.

The interpretive problems are innumerable, and the contradictions and discontinuities aren't difficult to spot. Sometimes days are years; sometimes they're just days. Sometimes water is people, sometimes it's simply water, and sometimes it's persecution. Sometimes pictures are treated as realistic

descriptions, sometimes as metaphors, and sometimes as allegories or poems or liturgies. Some sections start in the distant past and end in the present, but others threaten at this moment and stretch into the future—and the narrative can switch from one to the other with little warning. The one thing that is not mentioned in Revelation (i.e., keeping the Saturday Sabbath) is read into it everywhere, even where the word “seal” seems clearly to refer to the Holy Spirit.

All of this is developed at great length and considerable redundancy by our expositors, insisted upon by denominational leaders, and generally accepted by the Adventist people.

Yet it fails the basic Protestant test of discoverability. If the prophetic books are so difficult that we cannot understand them without Uriah Smith and Ellen White, if new interpretations of even such irrelevant passages as the trumpets must be suppressed by church leaders, and if we are locked into one possible way of seeing the future—even when the future is uncooperative—then we are as dependent upon our church councils and traditions as are the people of our prophetic *bête noire*, the Roman Catholic Church.

I believe that we have oversold our knowledge of prophetic events. Yes, Jesus is coming again. But I suspect we don't know much at all about when—or about which events will herald it. It may be wise for us to come clean about that and to move into the future as people who are hopeful, rather than fearful and arrogant. **AT**

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (1911 edition), pp. 334-335.

² Loren Seibold, *Adventist Today*, Vol. 27, Number 4 (Fall 2019), pp. 3-7.

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Adventist Today

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