

## CHALLENGES TO THE ADVENTIST INTERPRETATION OF APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

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Challenges to established doctrines and Adventist prophetic interpretation have to be expected. Probably all Christian denominations and even non-Christian world religions have to live with the phenomenon that their tenets are being questioned by parts of their own communities. To a certain degree this may be beneficial, because it is good that people wrestle with theological issues and are not just indifferent or accept established doctrines with blind "faith."

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### 1. Introduction

Truth must stand the test. Sometimes challenges to biblical interpretations may be correct and better explanations need to be formulated. Furthermore, challenges to Adventist interpretations have often led to further research and have confirmed and strengthened the position of the Church. Thus, there are positive aspects.

However, we also detect negative sides. It makes quite a difference, if someone wrestles with issues and is open to counsel, if someone in all humility suggests another interpretation of a biblical passage without being dogmatic about his or her insights or if someone vehemently criticizes the Church. If major positions of the Church are attacked, it can be quite discomfoting. It may lead church members astray, unduly occupy pastors, administrators, and theologians, and distract the Church from her mission, including the proclamation of her message.

In this paper we will limit ourselves to challenges to the interpretation of apocalyptic prophecy in the Adventist church, although we take a brief look at outside influences. There is more to be said about challenges to prophetic interpretation at large, as, for instance, found in classical prophecy, but this issue must wait for another paper. Adventists are strongly interested in apocalyptic prophecy. Therefore, it may be justifiable to limit ourselves to this aspect of prophecy.

## 2. Theological and Quasi-Religious Influences from Outside the Adventist Church

The Adventist Church and Adventist theology do not live in a vacuum. Society and its philosophies, as well as Protestant theology, to some degree Catholic theology, and even non-Christian religions exert their influences on the Adventist Church. Some Adventists think these influences must be welcomed and espoused. Others are opposed to them. Still others hold that they may contain a kernel of truth, which has been blown out of proportions. The good should be kept and what is not helpful discarded.

### 2.1 General Influences

Before moving to theological influences, there is a need to turn for a moment to current trends and philosophies encountered, especially in Western societies. These trends are able to exert an enormous influence on Christians. The problem is that these philosophies are seldom directly promoted or discussed. Yet, one is confronted by them and subconsciously may accept them. They are espoused by the vast majority of the people—even within a Christian setting, including Adventist congregations—and have become part of the cultural heritage. Therefore, it is not easy to be opposed to them. Some of these current philosophies and trends may directly influence the interpretation of prophetic literature:<sup>1</sup>

(1) *Individualism*. People are mainly interested in their own world and tend to disregard the corporate aspect of the body of Christ. They are driven by the desire to be absolutely autonomous. Norms and regulations imposed on them by others are normally rejected.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, they may not listen to others even while attempting to interpret Scripture. They may want to get approval of their theses by the Church or her institutions but disregard suggested corrections.

(2) *Pragmatism*. This philosophy is interested in what is feasible and doable and what benefits the individual.<sup>3</sup> Knowledge about historical developments may seem to be less important than what currently happens. Therefore, interpretations of prophetic texts may read the present political, economic or ecclesiastic situation back into a biblical text, even if the text indicates otherwise.

<sup>1</sup> See, Peter Schmiechen, *Christ the Reconciler: A Theology for Opposites, Differences, and Enemies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 14-15, 54-55.

<sup>2</sup> This may contribute to the lack of interest in biblical doctrines and theological topics.

<sup>3</sup> In applied theology the danger is to "baptize" and accept non-Christian models and methods without studying whether or not Scripture and theology allow for them, because they seem to work.

(3) *Pluralism*. According to pluralism all views are equal. This includes religious views and various interpretations of biblical and especially prophetic texts. Therefore, a number of different approaches to apocalyptic prophecy are simultaneously applied to a biblical book. For instance, some people subject the Book of Revelation to a two layers interpretation, that is, a historicist approach and a futurist approach, although such a procedure violates the very nature of apocalyptic literature.

(4) *Ecumenism*. Those who follow an ecumenical agenda shrink back from associating certain prophetic images with religious entities of our days and try to maintain political correctness.

(5) *Emotionalism*. Emotionalism is in vogue. Decisions are made on the basis of what feels good, not on the basis of what may be right or good.<sup>4</sup> What counts are personal experiences. This may also directly or indirectly affect prophetic interpretation. Personal experience can certainly be helpful, but they should not be used against Scripture to force a so-called relevant interpretation upon the Bible.

## 2.2 Theological Influences

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, liberal Protestantism dominated theology. Revelation and inspiration were rejected. Scripture became a purely human product. Miracles and a physical resurrection from the dead became unacceptable. Such a view strongly affected prophetic interpretation.

Liberalism was followed by Neo-Orthodoxy. At that time the historical-critical method, which had already started in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, continued to flower and was also reinforced by the Catholic Church, while the *sola scriptura* principle was being rejected.<sup>5</sup> Some evangelicals have reacted against historical criticism by rejecting it completely.<sup>6</sup> Many others, however, decided to use it in a modified form. In the document "Methods of Bible Study" the Adventist Church dismisses even a moderate use of this method.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This affects also Christian worship and especially Christian lifestyle. Biblical positions are less important than personal feelings.

<sup>5</sup> See, Jörg Hausteiner, "Die Interpretation der Bibel in der Kirche: Zum neuen Dokument der Päpstlichen Bibelkommission vom April 1993," *Materialdienst des Konfessionskundlichen Instituts Bensheim* 4 (1994): 73-77.

<sup>6</sup> Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990); Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977); Idem., *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> "Methods of Bible Study," October 12, 1986, General Conference Committee, Annual Council. See [http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/other\\_documents/other\\_doc4.html](http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/other_documents/other_doc4.html).

Today we find a plurality of even contradictory theologies and a multitude of hermeneutical methods in biblical studies. Although many differ from the historical-critical method, the basic presuppositions of these various methods remain largely the same. These include the insistence on naturalism, which rules out any supernatural influence, an evolutionary approach to the formation of Scripture, the cultural or historical conditioning of Scripture,<sup>8</sup> and the principles of methodological doubt, analogy, and correlation.<sup>9</sup>

The critical approach to prophetic interpretation has espoused preterism in which apocalyptic prophecy is fulfilled during the time in which it is written. On the other hand, conservative Christians often favor futurism as the preferred approach to interpreting apocalyptic prophecy. The historicist approach is discredited these days. One reason may be that historicist interpreters have come up with fanciful ideas that can hardly be justified with the biblical text. Also historicism requires a high view of Scripture.

### 3. Challenges from within the Adventist Church

In this section we will use some examples to illustrate the challenges to the interpretation of apocalyptic prophecy that have come up in the Adventist Church. More could be cited, but the ones being used are representative for many other and similar approaches. The challenges to Adventist prophetic interpretation from within the Church include the following: (1) departure from the historicist interpretation, (2) time setting for the second coming of Jesus Christ, (3) opposition to the concept of recapitulation, (4) arbitrary switching from symbolic to literal interpretations, (5) abandonment of the year-day principle, (6) multiple fulfillments of apocalyptic prophecy, (7) a local geographic scenario, and (8) interpretations not derived from Scripture. There are others, but we will focus on these.

<sup>8</sup> This is challenged by William J. Larkin, Jr. *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics: Interpreting and Applying the Authoritative Word in a Relativistic Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), 199; Frank M. Hasel, "Reflections on the Authority and Trustworthiness of Scripture," in *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1992), 208-209; and Kwabena Donkor, "Is Scripture Historically Conditioned?" *Reflections: A BRI Newsletter*, April 2006, 3-5.

<sup>9</sup> A classic work to describe the historical-critical method is Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989). See also Peter Stuhlmacher, *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments: Eine Hermeneutik*, Das Neue Testament Deutsch, Ergänzungsreihe, Band 6 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979).

### 3.1 Departure from Historicism

Toby Joretteg, M.D., Ph.D., and a church member, has published a book with the title "Revelation."<sup>10</sup> It is a kind of commentary on the Apocalypse. In this book he apparently uses a mixture of preterism and futurism. While according to his understanding the seven trumpets are still in the future and should not be understood in the historicist way, the time spans of 1260 days or 42 months mentioned in Rev 11-13 are understood literally and placed in the first century A.D. The woman that is in the desert because she is persecuted by the dragon for three and a half times or 1260 days (Rev 12:6, 13-14) is understood as referring to the house of Israel. The time span is supposed to last from A.D. 31 to A.D. 34. "When the time of the Jewish nation as a chosen nation was over in A.D. 34 the devil targeted his attacks on the Spiritual Israel, the faithful Christians, here called the 'offspring.'"<sup>11</sup> The sea beast of Rev 13 is understood as the Roman Empire.<sup>12</sup>

Adam Cirkic, a church member from Croatia, writes: "The General Conference has clearly stated that the trumpet prophecies have to be applied to the last days, that is to the time after the 144,000 are sealed. Thus the trumpet prophesy [sic] was understood as a prophecy with double meaning."<sup>13</sup> However, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists has not issued a statement on the futuristic interpretation of the seven trumpets.

Margaret Sturgill Jeys also interprets the trumpets futuristically. She understands the fire associated with the first trumpet in connection with a nuclear blast, which places this trumpet at least in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>14</sup> The second trumpet would be "a terrible eruption of a volcanic island or chain of islands."<sup>15</sup> The "man-made star" – as she calls the star of the third trumpet that fell from heaven – points to missiles launched from space platforms.<sup>16</sup> The fourth trumpet may refer to "the depletion of the ozone layer."<sup>17</sup> With the fifth trumpet she shifts to a symbolic understanding. ". . . at this time, multiplied thousands of demons will descend like a swarm of locusts upon the earth."<sup>18</sup> "Satan receives permission to loose his demons upon the world in visible form . . . They torture their own subjects

<sup>10</sup> Toby Joretteg, *Revelation* (Brushton, NY: Aspect Books, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 210. See also, 193-194, 209.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>13</sup> Adam Cirkic, *Great Light Has Lighten up the Prophecy about Seven Seals* (n.p. and n.d.), 2.

<sup>14</sup> Margaret Sturgill Jeys, *The Revelation: A Gift to the Bereans*, vol. 1 (n.p., 2005), 94-95.

<sup>15</sup> Sturgill Jeys, 99.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-102.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 104, and also 106.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 109

for five months" – she takes the time span literally. "Satan's purpose is to prepare the wicked psychologically to enact and execute a death decree against the one hundred forty-four thousand."<sup>19</sup> The sixth trumpet has to do with the death decree. "From the mouths of the horses—wicked human beings—comes 'fire, smoke, and brimstone,' which symbolize the death decree against God's saints."<sup>20</sup>

Franklin S. Fowler Jr. is a medical doctor who publishes the journal *EndTime Issues* and maintains his own ministry. Here again one encounters futurism. For instance, in his interpretation of the seven heads of the scarlet beast of Rev 17 he rejects the view that they are major political or religious-political powers of the past and identifies them with the popes that have reigned since 1929. The five heads that are fallen are, according to his view, Pius XI, Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul I.<sup>21</sup> Thereby he disregards also the biblical testimony that heads represent powers and not individual rulers. When it comes to the seven heads historicists tend to agree that they represent empires rather than individual kings.<sup>22</sup> For Fowler, the "one who is" represents John Paul II – Fowler wrote this in 1999. The seventh pope's reign will be short. The eighth is the papacy.<sup>23</sup> But so is the beast. "The woman (the Catholic Church), the beast (the papacy, the Holy See, the Vatican state) and the heads (the popes, leaders of the Holy See) are all next to each other."<sup>24</sup> But Fowler suggests also that the eighth is Satan. Protestantism supposedly represents the ten horns consisting of "orthodox churches, Evangelicals

<sup>19</sup> Sturgill Jeys, 111-112.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>21</sup> Franklin S. Fowler Jr., *The Final Years of the Papacy: Revelation 17* (Granite Falls, WA: Christian Heritage Foundation, 1999), 9.

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth A. Strand, "The Seven Heads: Do They Represent Roman Emperors?" in *Symposium on Revelation—Book II*, Daniel & Revelation Committee Series, vol. 7, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 177-206. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 875, states, "The attempt to identify the seven kings with particular respective world empires may be more successful [than the attempt to identify the heads with Roman emperors], since it is more in keeping with the 'seven heads' in Dan. 7:3-7 which represent four specific empires. The first five kings, who 'have fallen' are identified with Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece; Rome is the one who 'is,' followed by a yet unknown kingdom to come." On page 560 he had stated: "Just as the kingdoms with seven heads in Dan 7:4-7 spanned history from Babylon to the end, so the seven-headed beast in Revelation 17 likewise spans many centuries and likely all of history . . ." Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 471, holds that "the seven hills point to world powers that have their place in history."

<sup>23</sup> Fowler, 12.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

(including Assemblies, Pentecostals, Four-Square), Episcopal/Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Christian Reform, Jehovah's witnesses, Church of the Nazarine."<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that the Orthodox Churches are not Protestants, neither are the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Ralph Myers came up with a specific interpretation of the number 666. His assumptions are: The beast of Rev 17 is the Papacy and is the same as the sea beast of Rev 13. The heads of this beast are not individual popes but names of popes. The number 666 and the seven heads of Rev 17 are combined in order to come up with a new interpretation of this cryptic number. The seven heads are portrayed in Rev 17:10-11: "And they are seven kings; five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain a little while. The beast which was and is not, is himself also an eighth and is of the seven, and he goes to destruction." Apparently, since 1798 only seven papal names have been used, namely Pius, Leo, Gregory, Benedict, John, Paul, and John Paul. During the entire history of the church until the time when Myers wrote his article these papal names were used as follows: Pius 12 times, Leo 13 times, Gregory 16 times, Benedict supposedly 14 times, John supposedly 21 times, Paul 6 times, and John Paul 2 times. Some adjustments have been made by Myers while counting the papal names, since some popes had been deposed. By adding  $1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8+9+10+11+12$  for the twelve times that the papal name "Pius" has been used throughout church history one comes up with the number 78 for the name "Pius." For "Leo" one has to add  $1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8+9+10+11+12+13$  which makes 91, because the papal name Leo has been used thirteen times. Doing the same with all seven papal names and adding the figures results in the number 665. Consequently, Myers considered John Paul II to be the seventh head having received a deadly wound (the attempt to assassinate John Paul II) from which he recovered. He claimed that one pope would still be missing. When he would come, he would use a name not employed by any pope before him and would be the antichrist and the eighth head. Therefore, his name would be counted as "one." This would complete the number 666. If the new pope, however, would take a name used previously, as Benedict XVI has done, he would be an "antipope" who would be deposed and would be followed by the real antichrist. Then the end would come. Needless to say that such a scenario is based on speculation and reminds one of a soft time setting. In the meantime, holding that the present pope is an antipope Myers teaches that "Joseph Ratzinger, AKA Benedikt XVI (XV) will be deposed, and attacked by an angry mob in the

<sup>25</sup> Fowler, 13-15.

Vatican courtyard and trampled to death. I have no idea when this will happen. It was in the vision."<sup>26</sup>

Employing a completely different approach, Reinder Bruinsma, an Adventist scholar and retired administrator, thinks that the Adventist understanding of prophecy, as it relates to the Roman Church, is wrong and has to be changed.

The rapidly growing church is still remarkably united, both organizationally and theologically, but it manifests an increasing pluralism. Unfortunately, this seems to lead to a significant degree of polarization. Where one current seeks to find ways of making Adventism more relevant to this generation, others insist that "the old landmark" of the Adventist faith must be zealously guarded and are unwilling to re-think or modify traditional views. These more conservative Adventists insist that Adventism must continue to subscribe to its traditional interpretations of prophecy, with the corresponding condemnation of Roman Catholicism and other Christian churches. The more "progressively" inclined are increasingly open to emphasizing the common bond with other Christians and tend to feel uncomfortable with traditional attitudes.<sup>27</sup>

Sometime soon the Church must decide unequivocally whether it is a Christian church – with its own unique witness – amidst other Christian churches, or whether it must stand alone over against all other Christian bodies.<sup>28</sup>

Steve Daily adds, "It is a sobering and scary thought to conclude that our eschatology has been built on an unsound foundation, and that it has ultimately done us more harm than good."<sup>29</sup>

### 3.2 Opposition to the Concept of Recapitulation

The seventh seal of Rev 8:1 mentions silence in heaven for half an hour. Joretég understands this time reference according to the year-day principle and calculates it as seven literal days associating it with the trumpets.<sup>30</sup> Since in his opinion the seven trumpets are contained in the sev-

<sup>26</sup> Available from <http://english.sdaglobal.org/research/666beast.htm>, accessed October 25, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Reinder Bruinsma, *Seventh-day Adventist Attitudes Toward Roman Catholicism 1844-1965* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1994), 301.

<sup>28</sup> Reinder Bruinsma, "Adventists and Catholics: Prophetic Preview or Prejudice?" *Spectrum* 27.3 (1999): 52.

<sup>29</sup> Steve Daily, *Adventism for a New Generation* (Portland: Better Living Publishers, 1993), 314.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, ed. Francis D. Nichol (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2002), 7:787.



enth seal, the trumpets last about seven days. They depict God's wrath during this short period.<sup>31</sup> "During that time the saints were on their way to their reward in heaven."<sup>32</sup> This approach does not allow the seals and the trumpets to be parallel and the trumpets to recapitulate the seals from a different perspective. In other words, the trumpets are not referring to the period from the first century A.D. to the final consummation. They depict only the very last events that will take place in one week.

On the other hand, Joretég assumes that the seven trumpets and the seven plagues are the same.<sup>33</sup> But in spite of close similarities the trumpets have to be distinguished from the bowls. With the trumpets mediation is still happening as depicted in their introductory scene (Rev 8:3-5), while with the bowls the sanctuary can no longer be entered (Rev 15:8). The trumpets largely affected a third, while no such limitation is given with the bowls. With the bowls the wrath of God is completed (Rev 15:1). The trumpets are found in the historical section of Revelation (Rev 1-14), while the plagues belong to the eschatological section (Rev 15-22).

When it comes to the seven trumpets Sturgill Jeys follows a futuristic approach, which does not allow the trumpets to recapitulate the seals. One gets the impression that for her the trumpets and plagues take place simultaneously, with the plagues being God's counter attacks against the evils brought about by humanity. God must protect the 144,000. If however, the seals are not followed by the trumpets chronologically, a quite different understanding of history and the end time emerges.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Joretég, *Revelation*, 129-130.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 307-308.

<sup>34</sup> Sturgill Jeys, 90-130. Some support their futuristic approach by a reference to Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 3 (Washington: Review & Herald, 1958), 426, when she states, "The battle of Armageddon will be fought. And that day must find none of us sleeping. Wide awake we must be, as wise virgins having oil in our vessels with our lamps. The power of the Holy Ghost must be upon us and the Captain of the Lord's host will stand at the head of the angels of heaven to direct the battle. Solemn events before us are yet to transpire. Trumpet after trumpet is to be sounded; vial after vial poured out one after another upon the inhabitants of the earth." This quotation shows that Ellen G. White used many and various allusions to biblical passages. Her writings and speeches were filled with biblical references. However, this does not mean that she interprets, for instance, the trumpets. In this case, she does not treat the trumpets exegetically. On the other hand, in *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press 1950), 334-335, it looks as if she would support J. Litch's historicist interpretation of the trumpets.

### 3.3 Arbitrary Switching from a Symbolic to a Literal Interpretation

Sturgill Jeys understands, for instance, the first trumpet in literal terms and in order to support her claim argues as follows:

"Hail," "fire," "blood," "earth," "trees," "green grass"—all these words name literal entities and may be taken literally. When God shows His prophets representations such as, for example, a lion with eagle's wings . . . the Bible student knows they are symbolic and are to be taken symbolically. On the other hand, literal representations are to be taken literally. The disaster predicted to follow the blowing of the first trumpet is given in literal terms, and therefore, it is to be taken literally.<sup>35</sup>

Unfortunately, she overlooks that typically symbolic passages contain a mixture of symbolic and non-symbolic elements. While in Dan 7 the various beasts and the little horns are symbolic depictions of earthly powers, the myriads of the heavenly court are not symbolic. Furthermore, trees, green grass, and even the earth are used as symbols, even in the Old Testament.

### 3.4 Abandonment of the Year-Day Principle

Cirkic maintains,

150 days or [5] months from Revelation 9:5 should be understood as a time period still placed in the future, because the fifth trumpet, like all others, is still a future event. According to this the 150 days or [5] months should be understood as the literal five months.<sup>36</sup> "Revelation 9:15 never suggested the use of the day-year principle. This text is meant to discern the exact moment in history. It looks like that from this moment (that is the start of the sixth trumpet) we should start to count the 1260 period (the witnessing of the two witnesses), and add the 1290 period (the human authority placed over God's authority, the little horn, the Sunday's law in its mild and severe form) and the period 1335 after that the freeing God's voice is heard and Christ is about to come (nobody knows about the day and hour). At the end of 1335 days Daniel resurrects and receives his heritage with all the save.<sup>37</sup>

Joreteg interprets the 42 months in the following way:

During 42 months, the three and half years of Christ's ministry on this earth, the Two Witnesses were rejected in a very special way. This time

<sup>35</sup> Sturgill Jeys, 90.

<sup>36</sup> Cirkic, 11.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12. Editorial changes have not been made to the text.

period was from A.D. 27–A.D. 31. The 1,260 days is the time period from A.D. 31–A.D. 34, which is the time when the Two Witnesses were mourning. The Word of God and the Spirit of God were rejected by the Jewish nation.<sup>38</sup>

This is not astonishing since he has laid the foundation for this interpretation in his book on Daniel. There he mentions the three and a half times of Dan 7:25 almost in passing, moving quickly to Revelation and stating that there are three and half years. However, he spends more time on the 1290 days of Dan 12:11 and the 1335 days of Dan 12:12. He understands them as literal days, abandoning the year-day-principle. Daniel 12:11 states, "From the time that the daily (sacrifice) is abolished and the abomination that causes desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days." Here is his commentary:

According to the text above, 1,290 days will pass, and then the abomination will be set up. That means the Gentiles will be accepted 1,290 after the death on the cross. When Stephen was stoned, step two in this process was fulfilled. God not only divorced His bride [Israel], but He also accepted the unholy, the primarily nonchosen, the Gentiles. In other words, the abomination is set up. This means full acceptance of the unholy woman, the unmarried woman. The unmarried woman or the Gentiles were now adopted instead of the Israelites . . . If we rephrase verse 11 in Chapter 12 of Daniel, we will find the following: "From the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished (Christ's death on the cross) and the abomination (the unholy) that causes desolation (the unmarried woman/Gentiles) is set up, there will be 1,290 days." These days represent 3 and ½ years plus one month, to be very accurate.<sup>39</sup>

From the death of Jesus in A.D. 31 he counts the 1290 days which brings him to the year A.D. 34. He understands this as the second part of the seventieth week of Dan 9. The difference between the 1,290 days and the 1,335 days, namely 45 days, are added to this time span. He suggests that during this time span most likely the Samaritans received Jesus, the Ethiopian eunuch and Paul were converted, and the Gentiles became Christians. This was "happening to open the way for salvation to the Gentiles."<sup>40</sup> When it comes to the 2,300 evenings and mornings, he takes this time element as 1,150 literal days or three years, two months, and ten days and understands them as the duration of the ministry of Jesus beginning after his 40 days in the desert following his baptism and his visits to Nazareth and Capernaum.<sup>41</sup> Others who apply the time prophecies found in

<sup>38</sup> Joretteg, *Revelation*, 193.

<sup>39</sup> Tobi Joretteg, *Daniel and the Visions about the End Time* (Brushton, NY: Aspect Books, 1998), 32-33.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-88.

Daniel 12:5-13 to the future include Marian Berry, Ronald Stickney, and Robert Smith Jr.<sup>42</sup>

Another form of abandoning the year-day principle is found with the late Samuele Bacchiocchi, formerly professor at Andrews University. He spiritualized the time spans so that they do not refer to days nor to years but to a period of dominion of the antichrist and simultaneously a period of protection of God's people in time of persecution.<sup>43</sup>

### 3.5 Acceptance of Multiple Fulfillments of Apocalyptic Prophecy

Turning to the 1,260 days that are mentioned in Rev 11:3 and 12:6, Cirikic writes, "The multiple expressions for the same period of time alone shows that there could be a multiple meaning of it." So there are 1,260 literal years but also 1,260 days which correspond to three and a half literal years.

Joretteg interprets the sea beast of Rev 13 as the Roman Empire and goes on to suggest, "The widened lesson from this part of Chapter 13 is that any secular power persecuting the offspring of the Woman, the New Testament Christians, fits under the 'Beast out of the Sea.'"<sup>44</sup> In his book on Daniel he states, "The interpretations given in this book do concentrate on the spiritual fulfillment of the temple but in no way exclude dual application or many applications, like fulfillment on behalf of the literal temple."<sup>45</sup> Obviously the abomination refers (1) to the Gentiles that may be saved after A.D. 34 and (2) to the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70.<sup>46</sup>

A dramatic fulfillment of apocalyptic prophecy has been suggested by Bacchiocchi. After September 11 Bacchiocchi began studying Islam. The problem of militant Islam triggered his search for Islam in Scripture. Here is his result:

The preceding analysis of the identifying marks of the prophetic Antichrist, represented in Daniel 7 by the imagery of the Little Horn and in Revelation 13 by the symbol of a Beast, has shown that both the Papacy and Islam fulfil the qualifying marks of this prophetic power. . . . We have found that both powers fulfil the prophetic identifying marks of

<sup>42</sup> Marian G. Berry, *Warning!* (Brushton, NY: Teach Services, 1990), 154; Ronald Gary Stickney, *The Prophecy of Daniel 11 and Revelation* (Grand Junction, MI: Proclaim the Prophecy "Now" Seminar, n.d.); Robert N. Smith, Jr., *Sunday vs Rapture* (Ft. Worth, TX: Roheka Books, 2002).

<sup>43</sup> Samuele Bacchiocchi, "Endtime Issues No. 86: 'Islam and the Papacy in Prophecy'" (his newsletter in electronic form). For details see below.

<sup>44</sup> Joretteg, *Revelation*, 229-230.

<sup>45</sup> Idem., *Daniel*, 91.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 91-92.

the Antichrist. Both powers emerged out of the divided territories of the Roman Empire, both promoted false worship, both persecuted God's people, both attempted to change the sacred Sabbath time of worship, and both are to last until the fulfillment of the prophetic three and a half years. It is unfortunate that our Adventist pioneers did not consider the prophetic role of Islam, as the counterpart of the Papal Antichrist.<sup>47</sup>

Such an interpretation challenges automatically the understanding of various time spans in Daniel and Revelation according to the year-day principle. Here is his comment:

Historically, our Adventist church has interpreted this prophetic period as representing the 1260 years of Papal domination from 538 to 1798. . . . This interpretation poses two major problems, which thinking Adventists have long recognized. . . . The first problem is the questionable significance of 538. . . . The second problem with the traditional interpretation is its failure to account for the basic meaning of this prophetic period, namely, a time in which God's people are persecuted on the one hand and are protected on the other hand. . . . A more satisfactory interpretation of the prophetic period of three and half years, is suggested by its symbolic usage . . . to represent, on the one hand the time of domination of the Antichrist, and on the other hand the protection of God's people in time of persecution. Why do Daniel and John the Revelator use the three and half years period to represent the persecution and protection of God's people during the time of the Antichrist? Most likely because three and half is half of seven, which is the number of God's completion and perfection. Half of seven suggests incompleteness and limitation. In other words, the forces of the Antichrist are limited, and will not reach their scope of the complete destruction of God's people. God will have the final word and triumph over the forces of evil. This is the final message of Daniel and Revelation. . . . In the light of this symbolic interpretation of the three and half year as the time of the domination and persecution of the Antichrist during which God's people will be protected, this identifying mark of the Little Horn applies equally well to the Papacy and Islam.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Bacchiocchi, "Endtime Issues No. 86: 'Islam and the Papacy in Prophecy.'"

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. This approach forced him to limit the authority of Ellen G. White. See Samuele Bacchiocchi, "Endtime Issues No. 87: 'The Use of Ellen White to Interpret Scripture'" and "Endtime Issues No. 88: 'Reply to Criticism, Part 2: A Plea for a Balanced Understanding of EGW's Writing.'"

### 3.6 A Local Geographic Scenario

A literal and local setting of end time events instead of a symbolic and universal scenario is common in evangelical circles.<sup>49</sup> It seems to be less frequently used by Adventists but it still occurs. Joretteg holds, "Since the four angels [of the sixth trumpet] are bound to Euphrates before they get released, it is very likely that the battle will start in the Middle East area."<sup>50</sup>

### 3.7 Interpretations Not Derived from Scripture

With regard to the sixth trumpet Joretteg holds, "In these verses possibly some military machines are described, and it seems that the wicked are destroying themselves."<sup>51</sup> Fortunately, the author remains tentative. Nevertheless, such an approach is not a biblical approach. Instead of reading modern military equipment back into the text of Revelation, one should interpret Scripture with Scripture. The question would be, What are the Old Testament and New Testament backgrounds of Revelation from which concepts and imagery were taken and again utilized in Revelation? Approaches, which use modern phenomena to interpret biblical texts are completely subjective and change with the passing of time.

Joretteg's tentativeness disappears when he comes to the beast out of the earth. He claims that this beast cannot represent a nation or power since it comes out of the earth and not out of the sea. It "mainly contains leaders of false Christian churches." The question is whether or not such a conclusion is justified and matches the biblical data. He goes on to identify the first horn of the lamblike beast with the papacy, which is a power, and the second again with "false Christian church leaders."<sup>52</sup>

## 4. Adventist Prophetic Interpretation

### 4.1 The Historicist Interpretation

We propose to use the historical-biblical approach to the interpretation of Daniel and Revelation which is interested in the text as well as in history, which takes the self-testimony and the claims of Scripture seriously, and

<sup>49</sup> E.g., Hal Lindsay and Carole C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1970).

<sup>50</sup> Joretteg, *Revelation*, 151.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 251-252.

exegetes the text carefully and meticulously. This approach accepts Scripture as the Word of God and as authoritative.

After having chosen a basic method of interpretation, one is faced with additional choices. One can choose a preterist approach, a futurist approach, and idealist approach, or a historicist approach. The preterist interpretation of the Book of Daniel would locate the events depicted in the book in the second century B.C. during the reign of Antioch IV Epiphanes. A preterist approach to the Book of Revelation claims that so-called prophecy contained in it was more or less fulfilled in the first century A.D., that is, during the Roman Empire in its earlier stage. The idealist approach correctly perceives important messages in the book addressed to each new generation but denies the existence of subsequent historical developments leading to the establishment of God's kingdom of glory. In contrast to the preterist approach the futurist interpretation sees the fulfillment of Revelation's prophecy predominantly in the future and constructs an end time scenario without leaving much room for developments reaching from the first century A.D. to and beyond the second coming of Christ. Finally, the historicist approach holds that Revelation portrays the history of the Christian Church up to the consummation.<sup>53</sup>

The historicist approach seems to be demanded by the books Daniel and Revelation themselves, although it is no longer common among exegetes. Dan 2 provides a paradigm of how to interpret the apocalyptic chapters of the book. Apocalyptic prophecy begins in the time of the prophet, in this case with Daniel and the Neo-Babylonian empire, and reaches to the times when all human empires will be replaced by the kingdom of God.

Revelation 1:3, 11 indicates that the book was written for people in the first century, but Revelation also mentions events that must happen "after these things" (Rev 1:19). In Revelation the paradigm for interpreting the apocalyptic part is chapter 12. In Rev 12 a woman, the church, gives birth to the Messiah, the Messiah is taken to heaven, the woman is persecuted by Satan, and finally Satan makes war against the remnant of her offspring. This final war is further described in Rev 13. Satan's activity leads to a yet future universal worship of him and the sea beast and to the persecution of God's remnant people. The vision ends with a depiction of Christ's second coming. This center of the Apocalypse clearly points out that the Book refers to events at the beginning of the first century A.D., runs through historical times, and ends with the final consummation. A

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2002), 9-12. Unfortunately, he has opted for an eclectic approach which considers that parts of the book must be interpreted preteristically, others historically, and still others futuristically. We would suggest that these different perspectives are included in the historicist approach.

preterist or futurist interpretation does not do justice to the character of the Apocalypse. A historical interpretation is implied by the book itself. However, "we will need to avoid the kind of historicizing interpretation which emphasizes minute details and 'newspaper' exegesis, while ignoring the plain meaning of the symbols in their original context."<sup>54</sup> Such interpretations have unfortunately discredited the historicist interpretation of apocalyptic prophecy.

Some have attempted to mix a historicist with a futurist approach. They would, for instance, interpret Dan 7 historically and Dan 12 futuristically. This is inconsistent because the same terms and the same time span would have to be understood differently within the same biblical book without having a clear indication in the text that the author has shifted his meaning of certain terms and phrases.<sup>55</sup>

## 4.2 The Issue of Time Setting

The Millerite movement had been engaged with time setting which led to the great disappointment. Although individual church members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church have set dates, the church as a whole has not accepted fixed or soft dates for the second coming of Jesus. While Adventists count on Jesus to come soon and hope that this generation will be the final generation, they stay away from time setting.

Attempts to set dates may be well-intentioned but are typically counterproductive, discredit the message of the church, and are unbiblical. Jesus warned against time setting (Matt 24:42, 44). Christians need to know that the time of the Second Coming is near, and they need to watch, but they refrain from setting times.

## 4.3 The Concept of Recapitulation

The Book of Revelation resembles the Book of Daniel in using the principle of recapitulation or repetition. Daniel 2, 7, 8, 10-12 are clearly parallel, although not in every detail. But the chapters discuss world history from the time of the prophet to the end. However, recapitulation is not a mere duplication, but each time the flow of history is repeated a different perspective, with additional details, is added. For instance, Dan 2 focuses on the political aspect of world history. This aspect is still found in chapters 7

<sup>54</sup> Jon Paulien, "Eschatology and Adventist Self-understanding," in *Lutherans & Adventists in Conversation: Report and Papers Presented 1994-1998* (Silver Spring, MD; General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2000), 240. This article deals also with the historicist approach to apocalyptic literature.

<sup>55</sup> See Gerhard Pfandl, "The Time Prophecies in Daniel 12," *Reflections—A BRI Newsletter*, Number 4, October 2003, 5-7.



and 8, but chapter 7 adds the perspective of the saints and the heavenly judgment and chapter 8 focuses on the sanctuary.

In Revelation, the center of the book, Rev 12-14, clearly points out events beginning in the first century A.D. and reaching to the final consummation. The vision of the seven seals (Rev 4-8:1) focuses on the same time period. It begins with the slaughtered Lamb, the crucified Christ who appears before God the Father. The opening of the seals is related to these events, beginning on earth in the first century A.D. With the sixth seal humanity encounters the cosmic signs of the time, the Second Coming, and the redeemed being in heaven (Rev 6:12-7:17). The seventh seal moves to the time beyond the *parousia* (Rev 8:1), most likely referring to the final judgment and/or the new creation. The seven trumpets (Rev 8:2-11:18) contain the time period of 1,260 days (Rev 11:2-3) equaling 1,260 years according to the year-day principle, which locate this vision in church history, even though there is a strong emphasis on last events. Finally, the last trumpet leads the reader and hearer again to Christ's second coming. Therefore, we find a clear case of recapitulation with the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the vision of the satanic trinity in Rev 12-14.<sup>56</sup> Even if details vary, the main flow of history is preserved in all these visions. The seals are more closely related to the people of God, while the trumpets refer predominantly to those who dwell on earth, a negative term throughout the book, describing the enemies of God's people. Chapters 12-14 open the view to a universal perspective, describing a heavenly and earthly conflict, which Adventists refer to as the great controversy theme.

#### 4.4 Literal or Symbolic Interpretations

This raises the question; must Apocalypse be understood literally or symbolically? Generally speaking the Bible must be interpreted literally. Jesus' approach to Scripture, as well as that of the apostles, point to a literal interpretation. However, in Revelation the symbolical understanding is the predominant one. This may be indicated in Rev 1:1 by the use of the word *sēmainō* which points to Jesus "symbolizing" the Book of Revelation to John. Indicators in the text must be carefully studied in order to notice when a shift from the symbolic to the literal understanding takes place. For instance, the comparison of the sun with sackcloth and the falling of the stars with the falling of the figs from the fig tree in the sixth seals (Rev

<sup>56</sup> One of the major questions is whether Rev 8:2-6 forms the introduction to the trumpet vision and is somewhat independent of the seven seals or whether the seven trumpets grow out of the seven seals and follow the seals chronologically. If the second case would be true, there would be no recapitulation. For a discussion of the issue, see Ekkehardt Mueller, "Recapitulation in Revelation 4-11," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 9/1-2 (1998): 260-277.

6:12-13) shows that the author switches from a symbolic to a literal depiction of events.

In any case, one should be able to justify the choice of a literal or a symbolical interpretation with the text of Revelation itself. Such a choice should not depend on personal preference or current social, religious, or political developments which supposedly are found in the text of Revelation. It must also be kept in mind that normally a mixture between symbolic language and literal language prevails. If biblical texts were completely symbolical, probably it would be extremely difficult to understand them. Oftentimes God is described with non-symbolic language. Also in Revelation the letter frame comprising Rev 1-3 and Rev 22 is less rich in symbols and may be closer to classical prophecy than to apocalyptic prophecy.

#### 4.5 The Year-Day Principle

The year-day principle for the interpretation of certain prophetic texts is clearly found in Scripture. Although texts such as Num 14:34 and Ezek 4:6 present cases where days were related to years, Adventists are not relying solely on these texts. Rather some of the chapters that contain important time prophecies include within themselves a key to understand prophetic days as years. This is true for Dan 8 where the time element begins with the Medo-Persian empire and extends to the time of the end. A literal interpretation of the 2,300 evenings and mornings does not lead anywhere.

In an article on the year-day principle, Gerhard Pfandl has listed a number of reasons in favor of the year-day principle. Here are some:

1) Since the visions in Daniel 7 and 8 are largely symbolic . . . , the time periods (7:25; 8:14) should also be seen as symbolic. 2) The fact that the visions deal with the rise and fall of known empires in a history, which extended over hundreds of years, indicates that the prophetic time periods must also cover long time periods. 3) The peculiar way in which the time periods are expressed indicates that they should not be taken literally. . . . 4) . . . Three and a half literal years for the struggle between the little horn and the Most High [in Dan 7] are out of proportion to the comprehensive scope of salvation history portrayed in this vision. . . . 10) In Dan 9:24-27 the 70-week time prophecy met its fulfillment at the exact time, if we use the year-day principle to interpret it. Many interpreters, who in other apocalyptic texts do not use the year-day principle, recognize that the 70 weeks are in fact "weeks of years" reaching from the Persian period to the time of Christ. Thus the

pragmatic test in Daniel 9 confirms the validity of the year-day principle.<sup>57</sup>

## 4.6 Fulfillment of Apocalyptic Prophecy

Classical prophecy is found in the major and minor prophets of the OT. It contains straightforward predictions that are normally conditional and at times may have more than one fulfillment. However, apocalyptic prophecy uses extensive symbolism, frequently visions and dreams, has a cosmic sweep and a strong eschatological emphasis. It also contains striking contrasts, such as the seal of God and the mark of the beast, the marriage supper of God and the bird's supper of humans, and the virgin and the harlot.<sup>58</sup>

Apocalyptic prophecy is not conditional prophecy and does not contain more than one fulfillment. While classical prophecy indicates what the future may look like, apocalyptic prophecy shows what the future will be. The paradigms for the interpretation of the apocalyptic sections of Daniel and Revelation, which are Dan 2 and Rev 12-14 make it clear that there is no dual fulfillment of apocalyptic prophecy. There may be an application in the sense that practical and personal lessons can be learned from a specific passage, but an application is not an interpretation. To interpret, for instance, Revelation both historically and, in a second step, futuristically does not do justice to the text. Typically, such a futuristic layer of interpretation destroys at least partially the historical understanding.

## 4.7 The Universal Scenario

Although apocalyptic prophecy mentions various powers during world history, its end time outlook is universal and not local. References to local geographic places have to be understood as types that find their fulfillment in the larger antitype.

Judah's exodus from the Neo-Babylonian Empire becomes a model for the exodus from universal end time Babylon which demands universal worship. Cyrus, with his army who dried up the Euphrates river and liberated Judah, becomes a model for the intervention of Jesus with his army (Rev 16:12-16; cf. Rev 19b). Israel's enemies Gog and Magog of Ezek 38 and 39 become all the people that are opposed to God and wage war against the New Jerusalem (Rev 20:8-9). Armageddon is not restricted to

<sup>57</sup> Gerhard Pfandl, "The Year-Day Principle," *Reflections—A BRI Newsletter*, Number 18, April 2007, 2.

<sup>58</sup> Kenneth A. Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation: Hermeneutical Guidelines, with Brief Introduction to Literary Analysis* (Naples: Ann Arbor Publishers, 1982), 18-19.

the valley of Megiddo in the Middle East (Rev 16:16) but is fulfilled when in Rev 19 the Rider on the white horse liberates his people and brings to an end the major evil powers, apart from Satan who will be judged in Rev 20. Revelation 15-22 is clearly depicting end time events culminating in a new heaven, a new earth, and a new Jerusalem in which God and the Lamb are present. They are the temple and illumine the city and its inhabitants. Revelation's end time scenario is universal and not local.

#### 4.8 Principles for Doing Responsible Exegesis

To avoid pitfalls of interpretation the common steps to do exegesis must also be applied to apocalyptic literature. They include, among others, a study of the historical context, a careful study of the literary context, and a thorough analysis of the text itself which is under investigation. Details will not be discussed here but can be found in the current literature.<sup>59</sup>

After having employed all exegetical steps, then and only then, are expositors ready to carefully identify the symbols of the text with historical realities and developments. It is dangerous to read back into the Bible events described in newspapers and found in the internet. Shortcuts can lead to false identifications, false excitement, and fanaticism which at the end only damage the church and question the credibility of the Christian message and the authority of Scripture.

### 5. Evaluation and Implications

Without question the Church is challenged by misleading and strange interpretations of the books of Daniel and Revelation through church members, professionals, pastors, and some of her scholars. This is not to say that in some areas of study the Church could not gain a deeper

<sup>59</sup> See Ekkehardt Mueller, "Guidelines for the Interpretation of Scripture," in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. G. W. Reid, Biblical Research Institute Studies, vol. 1 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2006), 111-134; Richard M. Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, Commentary Reference Series, vol. 12, ed. by Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 58-104; and Gerhard Pfandl, *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture* (Wahroonga, Australia: South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, n.d.); David Alan Black, *Using New Testament Greek in Ministry: A Practical Guide for Students and Pastors* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993); Robert B. Chisholm, Jr. *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998); Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1993); and Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981).

understanding of Daniel and the Apocalypse. It could, and it should. However, it becomes problematic when approaches are used that contradict the nature of the biblical documents, in this case primarily Daniel and Revelation.

The reasons why such views are held and propagated may vary greatly. There is certainly a genuine desire among many Adventists to understand in a better and deeper way biblical apocalyptic literature. This is laudable.

Sometimes it seems that events in every-day life trigger new interpretations of Scripture. In itself not being wrong, such interpretations get out of hand, if wishful thinking replaces a sound biblical method of interpreting Scripture. Sometimes Adventists are embarrassed about the eschatology of their Church and wish it were different. Ecumenical concerns do not fit well with the Adventist end time scenario. Therefore, Adventist eschatology may be either ignored or reinterpreted. Sometimes it seems that the historicist Adventist approach has little to say to our present situation and does not satisfy the curiosity of church members. Futurism and conspiracy theories seem to open new and exiting vistas which are readily espoused by some.

This raises some troubling questions. Why are some church members more interested in interpreting the symbolism and sometimes horrifying scenes of Daniel and Revelation than in a personal relationship with the Godhead? Why can they hotly debate the number 666 and who the 144,000 are but do not proclaim to their neighbors the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ and do not live a Christlike life? It is certainly not wrong to study these issues. On the contrary! But they are no replacement for the "weightier matters."

So what has gone wrong? Certainly, the Church is not directly responsible for the decisions of her members, but one must ask, Have we sometimes laid a wrong emphasis in our pastoral and evangelistic proclamation? Was it at times too sensationalistic? Have we in our public campaigns too strongly focused, for instance, on the mark of the beast and the coming Sunday law and too little on the Lord of the books of Daniel and Revelation?

Challenges are calling us not only to defend the biblical position but to reflect on what we are doing and look out for better options. Therefore, why should we not talk about the Son of God and the Son of Man in the book of Daniel? Why should we not paint a wonderful mental picture of the Lamb in the Apocalypse before our audience? Why should we not talk about God the Father and the Holy Spirit in Revelation, about the sanctuary and the Second Coming, about salvation and ethics? If our proclamation becomes more balanced, if our sermons are fresh with new insights into the Word of God, if the message is applied in a meaningful way to

our current situation, we may ground our church members in God and his Word, contribute to their and our maturing process, and protect them against fanciful but false interpretations. From this perspective, challenges are not only problems but opportunities to be grasped and utilized