

What Prophecy Means to This Church

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What is a Seventh-day Adventist? A common description is that a Seventh-day Adventist is a Christian who observes the seventh-day Sabbath and who is preparing for the Saviour's second coming. That is true, but the perspective is larger.

The real distinctive frame holding together the picture of truth as perceived by Seventh-day Adventists is their understanding of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. In these apocalyptic prophecies Adventists have found their times, their identity, and their task.

Seventh-day Adventists arrive at their interpretations of Bible prophecy by employing the principles of the 'historicist school' of prophetic interpretation. This historicist view (also known as the 'continuous historical' view) sees the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation unfolding at various points in historical time, often encompassing the sweep of history from the times of Daniel and John (the human authors of these books) to the establishment of God's eternal kingdom.

A biblical illustration of this unrolling of the prophetic scroll along the continuum of human history is the prophetic dream given to the Neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar and its interpretation by the prophet Daniel (see Dan. 2:31-45). In his dream the king saw an image of a man composed of various metals of descending values: golden head, silver chest and arms, bronze belly and thighs, iron legs, feet and toes made of iron and clay. The dream concluded with a large stone, mysteriously quarried without human assistance from the side of a mountain, that fell with devastating force upon the statue, smashing it to pieces. As the wind blew these metallic elements away 'like the chaff of the summer threshing floors,' the stone 'became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth' (Dan. 2:35).

Daniel clearly identified the golden head as symbolizing the empire of Babylon under

Nebuchadnezzar (vss. 37, 38). It was to be followed by three successive world kingdoms corresponding to the three different metals. History records that these were Medo-Persia, Grecia, and the 'iron monarchy' of Rome. In the latter part of the fifth century A.D. the empire of Rome in the West was fully broken up. Its parts came to form the nations of Western Europe-symbolized by the strengths and weaknesses of the feet and toes composed of iron and clay. The 'stone,' which will ultimately destroy these and all other human, political entities, is the eternal kingdom that 'the God of heaven will set up' at the end of human history (see vss. 44, 45, RSV).*

Thus the historicist system of interpretation sees in the apocalyptic prophecies of Daniel and Revelation the hand of Divine Providence moving across the ages, overruling events to bring about the fulfillment of God's purposes.

Jesus, our Lord, saw a similar unrolling of the prophetic scroll in Daniel 9:24-27, part of a much longer prophecy given to Daniel by the angel Gabriel in the early years of the Medo-Persian empire. In this portion, several important predictions were made. A period of 'seventy weeks' was to be allotted to Israel subsequent to their release from Babylonian captivity. On the principle that in apocalyptic prophecy a symbolic 'day' equals a literal year, this period translates into 490 years (70 weeks of seven days each equals 490 days, or 490 actual years). Near the close of this time the long-awaited Messiah would appear. This could and should have been Israel's finest hour when the Saviour of the world would 'make an end of sins,' would 'make reconciliation for iniquity,' and would 'bring in everlasting righteousness' (vs. 24).

But there was a shadow-a dark side to the prophetic picture. It implied a rejection of the Messiah, who would 'be cut off, but not for himself.' Tragic retribution would follow in the destruction of both Jerusalem and its Temple (vs. 26).

The Messianic aspects of this prophecy met their respective fulfillments in the life, ministry, and atoning death of Jesus Christ. But the destruction of the city and the Temple

were still future events when the Saviour gave His important discourse on Olivet two days prior to His passion (see Matt. 24). On the basis of the prophecy recorded in Daniel 9, our Lord pointed to the impending national ruin (see Matt. 24:15; cf. chap. 24:1, 2; Luke 21:20-24), which met a fiery fulfillment by Roman arms about forty years later, in A.D. 70.

Daniel 9:26, to which Jesus alluded, is a part of a much larger vision occupying chapters 8 and 9 of Daniel's book and symbolizing events that extend from Persian times to the onset of God's final judgment (see chap. 8:13, 14). Here again is another striking example of the historicist perspective of apocalyptic prophecy that serves to confirm and to strengthen faith in God's leading across the centuries through all the play and counterplay of satanic opposition and human pride and ambition.

Historicism and the Reformation

The Millerites, the immediate spiritual forebears of Seventh-day Adventists, were historicists; that is, they interpreted Daniel and Revelation in harmony with the principles of the 'historical school' of prophetic interpretation. But the method was by no means original with the Millerites of mid-nineteenth-century America; they simply reflected and elaborated upon the labors of many earlier Bible students of the Reformation and post-Reformation eras.

Sixteenth-century-Reformation preaching of the apocalyptic prophecies of Daniel and Revelation tended to center on what the Reformers believed to be a Christian apostasy that had arisen within European Christendom and which they saw symbolized in the little horn (chap. 7), the leopard beast (Rev. 13), and the woman seated on the scarlet-colored beast (Rev. 17). This preaching had a telling effect upon Europe.

In the Counter-Reformation, which inevitably followed, Rome, rising to the challenge, sought to divert the damaging import of these applications. The result was the publishing of the initial argumentation for what would later become two distinctive, but diverse, methods of prophetic interpretation: the futurist and the preterist systems. Catholic and Protestant scholars

alike agree on the origin of these two distinctively different systems, both of which are in conflict with the historicist method and the interpretations derived thereby.

Futurism

Toward the close of his life, the Spanish Jesuit Francisco Ribera (1537-1591) published a 500-page commentary on the book of Revelation. He assigned the first few chapters to ancient Rome but proposed that the bulk of the prophecies would be fulfilled in a brief three-and-one-half-year period at the *end* of the Christian era. In that short space antichrist (a *single* individual, according to Ribera) would rebuild the Jerusalem Temple, deny Christ, abolish Christianity, be received by the Jews, pretend to be god, and conquer the world. Thus the Protestant contention that the apocalyptic symbols of antichrist denoted an apostate religious *system* was countered, and the focus of the prophecies was diverted from the present to the far distant future.

Preterism

Another Spanish Jesuit, Luis de Alcazar (1554-1613), also published a scholarly work on Revelation, this one posthumously in 1614. The result of a forty-year endeavor to refute the Protestant challenge, Alcazar's publication developed a system of interpretation known as preterism (from the Latin *praeter*, meaning 'past'). His thesis, the opposite of Ribera's, was that all the prophecies of Revelation had been fulfilled in the past, that is, by the fifth and sixth centuries A.D., the early centuries of Christianity. He asserted that this prophetic book simply described a two-fold war by the church-its victory over the Jewish synagogue on the one hand (chaps. 1-11) and Roman paganism on the other (chaps. 12-19). Chapters 21, 22 Alcazar applied to the Roman Catholic Church as the New Jerusalem, glorious and triumphant.

With the passage of time, these distinctive systems of counterinterpretations began successfully to penetrate Protestant thought. Preterism was the first; it began to enter

Protestantism in the late eighteenth century. Its present form is linked with the rise and spread of higher critical methodologies and approaches to Scripture study. Preterist interpretations of the prophecies have today become the standard view of liberal Protestantism.

The seeds of Catholic futurism, although refuted at first, eventually took root in the soil of Protestantism during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Futurism, amplified with other elements (for example, many futurists teach a secret, pretribulation rapture), is currently followed in some form by most conservative Protestant bodies.

Thus in the centuries following the Reformation, Rome's countermoves to deflect the Reformers' application of the apocalyptic prophecies from herself have been largely successful. The futurist system of interpretation, as it functions today, wipes the Christian era clean of any prophetic significance by removing the bulk of the prophecies of Revelation (and certain aspects of Daniel) to the end of the age for their fulfillment. The preterist system accomplishes the same objective by relegating the prophecies of both books to the past. According to preterism, the significant prophetic portions of Daniel are assigned to second-century-B.C. events and the times of Antiochus IV Epiphanes; Revelation is restricted to Judaism and Rome in the first five hundred years of our era. Thus for most Protestants and Catholics the Christian era from the sixth century until the end of time stands totally devoid of prophetic significance as far as the books of Daniel and Revelation are concerned.

Seventh-day Adventists stand virtually alone today as exponents of the 'historicist school' or prophetic interpretation. If our interpretations of prophecy and our self-understanding differ from those of Christian friends outside our ranks (or from some critics who may arise from within our communion), it is largely because we as a people have been and are committed to a historicist system of prophetic interpretation, which we believe is soundly biblical.

Our times and task

In Daniel 7 the prophet records the first of several visions given to him personally. This vision parallels the prophetic dream given many years earlier to Nebuchadnezzar. However, instead of a metal image to symbolize the sequence of history, Daniel is shown the same world empires of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Grecia, and Rome as wild beasts-lion, bear, leopard, and a fourth creature, which bore no similarity to anything in nature. In Daniel 7 the division of Rome into the nations of Western Europe is symbolized by ten horns that rise from the head of the fourth beast. Two new elements, however, are introduced into this vision: (1) a little horn that rises among the nations of Western Europe with 'eyes like the eyes of man, and a mouth speaking great things' (vs. 8)-namely, the antichrist-(2) the opening phase of the final judgment.

Two things are immediately noteworthy about the prophetic description of the judgment. First, it takes place *in heaven*. 'I beheld,' Daniel says, 'till the thrones were cast down [placed], and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: his throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire. A fiery stream issued and came forth from before him: thousand thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him: the judgment was set, and the books were opened' (vss. 9, 10).

Second, this heavenly court scene occurs *before* the advent of Jesus. It is a preadvent judgment that begins and functions in probationary time. At its close Daniel sees another scene in heaven that confirms this observation. 'I saw in the night visions, and behold, one like the son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed' (vss. 13, 14). At His trial Jesus Christ identified Himself with this heavenly 'Son of

man' described by Daniel (cf. Matt. 26:63, 64).

According to Daniel 7, it is at the close of this heavenly judgment scene that Christ will receive His kingdom and all those worthy to be His subjects under His eternal reign. *Then* He will descend the second time to this earth, not as a lowly babe, but as 'King of kings, and Lord of lords,' to bring the rule of Satan and sin to an end and to take His people to Himself.

But when will this preadvent judgment phase take place? Does prophecy specify a time for this awesome event other than in general terms-at the end of the age? Seventh-day Adventists believe that it does. In Daniel's second vision (Dan. 8 and 9)-which again parallels and further elaborates on the dream and vision given earlier in chapters 2 and 7-the preadvent judgment is described as a 'cleansing' of the heavenly sanctuary or temple.

A time element of 2300 prophetic 'days' is given, or a period of 2300 years according to the year-day principle. Beginning with the 70-week prophecy (an integral part of the vision and interpretation of Dan. 8 and 9) in 457 B.C. at the time of Artaxerxes' decree that restored Jewish autonomy, these 2300 years span the centuries, extending to the fall of A.D. 1844. At that time, in heaven 'the judgment was set, and the books were opened' (Dan. 7:10), and the process of cleansing the heavenly sanctuary, or restoring it to its rightful state, was begun (Dan. 8:14).

It is these lines of prophecy found in Daniel chapters 2, 7, 8, and 9, interpreted along historicist principles, that cause Seventh-day Adventists to sense the seriousness of the era in which the world now lives since 1844. The preadvent judgment is in progress, the first phase of the final judgment. In 1844 the world entered as it were the last inning in the game of life, the last lap of the race. Christ entered His final phase of priestly mediatorial ministry. Mercy began making her last plea to a doomed planet. The sands of probationary time have nearly run through time's hourglass, and Jesus Christ is about to lay aside His role as man's intercessor and to come as the rightful owner and ruler of this world.

It is in the awesome setting of this preadvent judgment that Seventh-day Adventists believe

that Daniel's companion book, the book of Revelation, identifies their movement and end-time task. According to the prophet John the gospel invitation, along with certain specific emphases, is to be proclaimed worldwide just prior to our Lord's return (see Rev. 14:6-14). This special end-time work is symbolized by three angels who each have a message for the inhabitants of earth as they fly through the sky. Note some of the specifics:

The first angel is described as preaching 'the everlasting gospel' to a global audience, crying in a loud voice, 'Fear God, and give glory to him; *for the hour of his judgment is come* [Greek, 'has come']: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters'" (vs. 7). The second angel announces the fall of mystical Babylon, and the third warns against the worship of the beast, its image, and the receiving of its mark.

In these prophetic scenes, Seventh-day Adventists see delineated their task-a global outreach to announce to their fellow men that the hour of God's judgment has come, that the pre-Advent judgment in heaven, as described by Daniel, has begun and is now in progress. As probation inexorably moves towards its close, their appeal to every race and culture is to accept the salvation that is offered in Jesus Christ, to come back to the worship of God who created mankind and to respect and to give honor to Him by living in harmony with His law, including the observance of His Sabbath as stated in the fourth precept. This task involves warnings, as well, against apostasy and the substitution of false worship and institutions in the place of what God has commanded.

The world today is like that of Noah. There is a strange abandonment to every form of wickedness and pleasure with little thought for the future. It will not be long before the solemn pronouncement will be made: 'He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still. And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be' (Rev. 22:11-12). Consequently, while Adventists seek to present Christ as the center of every doctrine and to emphasize the centrality of His

atoning death, yet it is the urgency and the seriousness of the present judgment hour that impels this people to reach out by every possible means 'to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people' (chap. 14:6) with Heaven's balm of healing grace.

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