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Apocalypse Now

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In the preceding essay we discussed expectations for the imminent return of Christ that are based upon millennial reckoning and jubilee calculations. Any attempt to set a definite date for Christ's return on the basis of these kinds of factors must introduce external assumptions into interpretation of the biblical text. Such a procedure is hermeneutically invalid; it flies in the face of Christ's statement that no one knows the precise time of His coming (Matt 24:36).

Biblical apocalyptic literature refers to a millennium only in Revelation 20 and alludes to a jubilee cycle only in Daniel 9. But there are a number of other time periods in biblical apocalypses, such as the "time, times, and half a time" (Dan 7:25), the "2300 evening morning" (Dan 8:14), the 1290 and 1335 days (Dan 12:11–12), the "five months" (Rev 9:10), and the 1260 days and "forty-two months" (Rev 12:6 and 13:5).

In this presentation we wish to address the implications of biblical time prophecies, especially the 2300 days, in regard to the imminence of Christ's return. Then I will consider our proximity to the Second Coming in light of the apparent delay following 1844.

Time Prophecies

The Second Coming is not given as the termination point of any biblical time prophecy. It is true that Daniel 12:12 pronounces a blessing on "those who persevere and attain the thousand three hundred thirty-five days."¹ It is also true that William Miller interpreted the cleansing of the sanctuary in Daniel 8:14 as a reference to the cleansing of the earth at Christ's coming, reading into the text his interpretation of

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

“sanctuary” as “earth.” But the Bible does not present time prophecy as a way to pinpoint the precise time of the Second Coming. This has not deterred some eschatologists from attempting to suggest a date for the end of the present era on the basis of biblical time prophecy.

Here is an interesting example. In Daniel 12:6, Daniel asks: “How long shall it be till the end of these wonders?” The answer given in the next verse is: “it would be for a time, two times, and a half a time.” Daniel heard this, but did not understand (vs. 8). So further elaboration was given in verses 11 and 12, referring to 1290 and 1335 days. I now quote from a recent book entitled *Milennium Prophecies*, by Stephen Skinner:

How should we reconcile these conflicting dates? It could be that after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 there were 1290 “days” times one and a half (“time, and a half”)? This would yield 1935 + 70, a beginning of apocalyptic events in 2005 AD . . . Using the same logic on 1335, the final resurrection of the dead should take place halfway through the year AD 2072, when the blessed who have waited will ascend to the stars.²

The idea that the 1290 and 1335 days should start from the destruction of the second temple in AD 70 is simply assumed. Why not start from something closer to Daniel’s time? The most remarkable twist of this eschatological eisegesis is its interpretation of the “time, times,³ and a half” to yield a multiplication factor of one and a half. While it is clear that Daniel is speaking of three and one half times, the modern futurologist takes the middle unit, “times,” in the mathematical meaning: “to multiply,” a meaning completely foreign to the Hebrew text. Then he adds the first and third units in the phrase: “time . . . and a half,” to arrive at “one and a half.” Then he multiplies 1290 and 1335 by one and a half and adds the results to 70 A.D., his assumed starting point. This is just playing games with the text.

We are comfortable criticizing the view just described. But what do we do when Dale Ratzlaff, in his book entitled *The Cultic Doctrine of Seventh-day Adventists*, accuses us of using complicated eisegesis to support 1844, a key pillar of our sanctuary doctrine? Ratzlaff, a former denominational minister, knows that Seventh-day Adventists do not attempt to set a date for the Second Coming, as did William Miller, our ideological forebear. But Ratzlaff recognizes that the sanctuary doctrine is a crucial piece of our eschatology and soteriology.

The sanctuary doctrine affirms the imminence of Christ’s return because the pre-advent judgment in the heavenly sanctuary, beginning in 1844, is the phase of the salvation process which immediately precedes the Second Coming. It comes at the end of human history,

GANE: APOCALYPSE NOW

after domination of God's people by Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Pagan Rome, and Papal Rome. While Christ did not come in 1844, at the end of the 2300 day prophecy of Daniel 8:14, if this is the last date predicted in biblical apocalyptic literature, as we believe, Christ could come any time after 1844. As we noted in the previous essay, Ellen White believed that Christ could have come in her lifetime.⁴

Before launching his full discussion of the 2300 day prophecy, Ratzlaff describes and critiques various early Adventist attempts to unlock biblical time prophecies, some of which are enthusiastic speculations using wrong assumptions and wild proof texting. For example, as part of one of his "proofs" to establish 1843 as the year of Christ's coming, William Miller interpreted the number 666, which is the number of the beast in Revelation 13:18, as a time period under pagan Rome lasting from 158 B.C. to 508 A.D, when the so-called "daily" was taken away.⁵ Having discredited William Miller's hermeneutical reliability, Ratzlaff turns to our interpretation of Daniel 8:14 and the 2300 days, which grew out of William Miller's study. Ratzlaff regards our view on Daniel 8:14 as another example of wild proof-texting.

Ratzlaff encourages the Seventh-day Adventist church to abandon its sanctuary/judgment doctrine and to join evangelicals in proclaiming the true Gospel. He regards our sanctuary doctrine as a "sliver in the foot" which destroys spirituality and acceptance of grace through faith by promoting paranoid, perfectionistic legalism.⁶

Ratzlaff attacks the Seventh-day Adventist sanctuary doctrine from several angles. Aside from associating our interpretation of the 2300 day prophecy (Dan 8:14) with certain wild proof-texting of William Miller, he argues that our approach to the 2300 days is based on a series of unverified "assumptions." He attacks the credibility of Ellen White, upon whose authority our sanctuary doctrine must rest if it cannot be established from the Bible. He questions the integrity of Adventist treatment of doctrinal issues, and he points out that today some Adventists are theologically divided to the extent that they hold mutually exclusive positions. Perhaps most potent is the way in which Ratzlaff chronicles his personal exodus from the SDA church to illustrate his claim that our sanctuary doctrine is damaging and incompatible with biblical salvation theology.

No one can argue with Ratzlaff's experience. It is a fact that our sanctuary doctrine as understood by him has caused him pain. Many can resonate with him. In graduate school, as a student of an authority on Leviticus, I grappled with the sanctuary in the Hebrew text for eight years before I felt really comfortable remaining a Seventh-day Adventist. I am grateful to God that I had the opportunity to study

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

deeply enough not only to have my questions answered, but also to get in touch with Jesus where He is now, in His sanctuary in heaven (Heb 7-10; cf. Ps 11:4).

I agree with Ratzlaff when he emphasizes the foundational nature of the sanctuary doctrine for Seventh-day Adventist theology. However, while his purpose is to argue for a thorough reformation of our theology by the removal of this doctrine, I find that sound exegesis points in the opposite direction: We should cherish the biblical teaching about the sanctuary because it accurately reflects righteousness by faith.

For his biblical objections to our sanctuary doctrine, Ratzlaff relies heavily on issues raised by Desmond Ford almost two decades ago. Ford's questions were good ones, and they have stimulated a lot of research, such as the Daniel and Revelation Committee (DARCOM) seven-volume series, edited by Frank Holbrook. Ratzlaff acknowledges these works in his bibliography, but for some unexplained reason his discussion does not take their arguments into account. Thus his critique is more a reaction to the situation as it stood near the beginning of the 1980s than it is an accurate appraisal of current Adventist scholarship. We have more work to do, but we are making progress which Ratzlaff should recognize.

If Ratzlaff is arousing more interest in the sanctuary than the DARCOM series does, it is because his book is controversial and easily comprehended by non-scholarly readers. The DARCOM series is full of Hebrew and Greek exegesis which even our M.Div. students at the Seminary have difficulty following. In order to bridge the gap between scholars and lay people, we need more books like Clifford Goldstein's *1844 Made Simple*. There also needs to be more communication, open dialogue without fear of recrimination when tough questions are honestly addressed. I am not saying that we should not be accountable for what we teach and preach, but we do need some safe environments to learn from each other and grow together.

To support the idea that our sanctuary doctrine deserves to be studied rather than buried, I would like to suggest some possible answers to a few of the points which Ratzlaff has raised.

Twenty-three Hundred Days. Ratzlaff (p. 176) follows Ford in questioning our interpretation of "2300 days" in Daniel 8:14 on a number of grounds, including the fact that the Hebrew reads literally "evening morning 2300," which many scholars understand in light of verse 26 ("the evening and the morning") as 2300 half days, or 1150 full days. By comparing the syntax of Daniel 8:14, 26 with Hebrew expressions for time elsewhere, I have found that the number 2300 applies to both "evening" and "morning" as an abbreviation for "evenings 2300 and mornings 2300." Therefore, just as the expression

GANE: APOCALYPSE NOW

“forty days and forty nights” (Gen 7:4,12, etc.) refers to forty full days, Daniel 8:14 refers to 2300 full days.

Atonement Not Completed at the Cross. Whereas the Adventist sanctuary doctrine indicates that atonement, in a certain sense, was not completed at the cross, Ratzlaff affirms the evangelical position that atonement was completed there (219-222). Adventists would agree that Christ’s death was the one and only atoning sacrificial death (Heb 9:28; cf. Jn 19:30—“It is finished”). All atonement, that is, reconciliation between sinners and their God, flows from Calvary. But was that the *end* of the atonement process? If atonement is relational, in that it deals with reconciliation between two parties, how can we receive atonement from a historical event which occurred almost two thousand years ago unless we experience a changed relationship with God on the basis of that event? As long as relationships are being healed, atonement is continuing. This concept agrees with the following biblical evidence:

1. Paul said: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished” (1 Cor 15:17-18). Christ’s resurrection, after His death on the cross, is essential for salvation.

2. In Hebrews 7-10, Christ ministers after His ascension as our High Priest in the true sanctuary in heaven, which was foreshadowed by the ancient Israelite sanctuary. There He appears “in the presence of God on our behalf” (Heb 9:24). Having obtained eternal redemption for us by His own blood (vs. 12), He uses His blood (cf. vs. 13—“sprinkling”) to “purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God” (vs. 14). In other words, Christ died to make abundant *provision* for the salvation of all human beings, and then He *distributes/applies* the transforming benefit. By way of analogy, Christ puts the money in the bank (by His death) and then He writes checks to people from that account (by His mediation). For us to receive the benefit of salvation, provision and distribution are both necessary.

3. In agreement with New Testament evidence for the way in which we are saved by Christ’s blood, ancient Israelite sacrifices for sin included personal involvement of sinners and priestly mediation as essential components. A common Israelite sinner was required to bring a female goat or sheep to the sanctuary, lean his/her hand on the head of the animal, and slay it. Then the priest applied its blood to the altar and burned its suet/fat on the altar (Lev 4:27-35). The ritual is summarized: “and the priest shall make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven” (Lev 4:31; RSV; cf. vs. 35).

Atonement was not completed by the slaughter of the animal at the hand of the sinner, which pointed forward to Christ’s death. Death provided the blood which made possible priestly mediation, an act

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

which is called a work of “atonement.” Mediation was *part of* the atoning sacrifice. Since Christ’s sacrifice fulfills the meaning of the animal sacrifices (Jn 1:29), we should include Christ’s mediation as an essential part of His sacrifice rather than regarding it as a separate phase. Does the idea that atonement was not completed at the cross diminish the sacrifice and atonement of Christ? Absolutely not! We magnify what Christ is doing! Christ’s sacrifice and atonement are much bigger than they are commonly thought to be!

4. When an Israelite received complete forgiveness from God through a sacrifice which pointed forward to Christ’s sacrifice (for example, Lev 4:31, 35), that was not the end of the process of atonement. Atonement is larger than forgiveness. There was a further phase of atonement on the “Day of Atonement” (Lev 23:27-28). On this day, Israelites who had already been forgiven were now “cleansed” (Lev 16:30) through purification of the sanctuary from their sins (Lev 16:16,33-34). Until the Day of Atonement, forgiven sins affected God in the sense that He could be regarded as unjust because He had forgiven guilty sinners (cf. 2 Sam 14:9). But the Day of Atonement reaffirmed God’s forgiveness by vindicating the justice of His mercy. However, Israelites who were rebellious and/or failed to accept the provisions which He offered during the year and on the Day of Atonement were sentenced to divine punishment (see, Lev 20:3; Num 15:30-31; Num 19:13, 20; Lev 23:29, 30). So the Day of Atonement was a judgment which separated people who were disloyal to God from those who were loyal. Therefore the Day was an appropriate foreshadowing of an end-time judgment (Dan 7:9-14; cf. 8:14) which benefits God’s true people (Dan 7:22, 27) and condemns those who persist in opposition to God (Dan 7:11, 26; 8:25).

Faith, Works, and Judgment

Ratzlaff reacts to the Adventist teaching that we are judged on the basis of our works: “This teaching, perhaps more than any other, undermines the new covenant gospel of grace” (p. 210). What is the role of works in the context of the judgment?

First, the Bible is crystal clear regarding our salvation: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph 2:8-9). Whatever the purpose of the judgment, it cannot put salvation by works in place of salvation by grace through faith.

Adventists also teach that one purpose of the judgment is to vindicate God. But Romans 3:25-26 says that Christ’s sacrifice already proves that God is just when He justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

GANE: APOCALYPSE NOW

There is no contradiction, however, because God is just when He justifies *those who have faith in Jesus* (cf. Eph 2:8). God cannot save a person who does not have true faith or who abandons faith after receiving forgiveness (cf. Jn 3:18; Col 1:23).

The judgment should identify God's true people on the basis of their faith. But since only God can read thoughts (cf. Ps 139:23), the judgment must use evidence for faith which can be witnessed by created beings if they are to be assured that God is just and that saved human beings will not continue to function as self-replicating moral viruses. Thus the judgment considers records of works (Eccl 12:14; cf. Dan 7:10) which show whether or not living faith exists (Jas 2:26; Gal 5:6). The point is not the works themselves, but whether or not a person has true faith.

The judgment is not about who has sinned. All have sinned (Rom 3:23), so distinctions between people cannot be made on this basis. The judgment is about who is forgiven. For those who are forgiven, it is to reaffirm their assurance, not to take it away. Compare the fact that on the Day of Atonement the Israelite high priest did not cleanse the sanctuary by wiping off bloodstains from earlier sacrifices. Rather, he placed more blood (Lev 16:14-19), representing Christ's blood, in several of the same places (cf. Lev 4:6-7,17-18,25,30,34), thereby reaffirming the forgiveness already granted.

Jesus expressed the need for a sinner to continue accepting forgiveness by maintaining loyalty to Him and His law of love. He said to the woman taken in adultery: "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again" (Jn 8:11). He also told a parable about an unjust steward who was forgiven but repudiated his pardon when he failed to extend forgiveness to his fellow servant (Matt 18:23-35).

Forgiveness which involves no moral change and which cannot reproduce itself for the benefit of others is not true forgiveness of the kind God gives. Fortunately for us, we are not left on our own to change ourselves. Christ gives us peace with God (Rom 5:1). His love, the basic attitude of His character and His law, is poured into our hearts through His Spirit (Rom 5:5; cf. 1 Jn 4:8; Matt 22:36-40). Thus genuine, ongoing obedience is a gift of grace bought by the blood of Christ and received through faith (cf. Jude 24).

We have pruned our eschatology radically since the days of William Miller, but it is by no means clear at this point that we should bury our understanding of the 2300 days as an unbiblical skeleton in our theological closet. Nevertheless, I am grateful to Ratzlaff for raising consciousness regarding the sanctuary and for clearly communicating an agenda for discussion. We didn't even have to pay him for his

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

contribution. Hopefully we will shake off our complacency and return to the biblical text in a vigorous quest for answers. This is no time for apologetic dogmatism or suppression of frank inquiry. Our goal must be to understand the meaning inherent in scripture, regardless of our preconceptions. This kind of thinking requires open-mindedness, discipline, and willingness to test our ideas.

Imminence of Christ's Coming

Thus far, we have considered various approaches to eschatological time relevant to the question of when Christ will come again. The Seventh-day Adventist position on 1844 and Ellen White's acceptance of an approximate 6,000 year age of the earth are complementary, indicating Christ's imminent return sometime after 1844, after approximately six millennia of sin.

Some would say that the 6,000 years and 1844 can be accepted solely on the prophetic authority of Ellen White. This would not be such a problem for the 6,000 years because it is not a pillar doctrine, but it would be a problem for 1844. Can we have one of our pillars established on the basis of Ellen White alone, without full biblical support? But neither Ellen White nor the other pioneers based their interpretation of the prophecies and sanctuary doctrine on her visions.

My present position on the 6,000 years is that without Ellen White, I would regard the connection between the Millennium of Revelation 20 and the sabbatical cycle to be possible, but not clearly established. With regard to 1844, however, I am finding more and more biblical evidence which makes the connections involved in the Adventist interpretation. Like Ratzlaff, I had a hard time with the sanctuary doctrine, to the point that I wasn't sure where my relationship with the church was headed. But during the last decade and a half, as I have clawed my way through the details of the Hebrew text, I have been finding answers to my questions. Some answers come in unexpected places, such as the ancient Babylonian "Dynastic Prophecy," which shows that Babylon was superseded by Persia,⁷ not Media and then Persia, as many scholars hold in their attempt to show that the Hellenistic ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes was the "little horn" of Daniel 7 and 8.⁸

How many details regarding the sanctuary and the 2300 days do we need to know? As many as it takes to give us confidence. Confidence is an important practical matter for the Adventist church. At a recent Seminary faculty retreat, our speaker was Elder Robert Folkenberg, then President of the General Conference. I asked him why evangelism is not going ahead in developed countries as it is in the third world. He replied that in developed countries Seventh-day Adventists do not feel

GANE: APOCALYPSE NOW

confident in what they believe, so they do not feel that they have something special to share with other people.

Besides 1844 and the 6,000 years, there are other “signs of the times” to indicate the imminence of Christ’s coming, as recorded in passages such as Matthew 24. Historians tell us that the world has been bad for a long time, and Ellen White said that Christ could have come in her day.⁹ In some ways the situation is better than it was, for example, in the days of slavery and apartheid or the Second World War. But in other ways there seems to be an inexorable downward spiral. There is no shortage of strife, suffering, and moral decay in perpetually replicating permutations. Partly through expanding electronic media, our world is becoming a cornucopia of concupiscence. The economic problems our leaders face are of biblical proportions. A pessimist could say that things couldn’t possibly get worse. An optimist could respond: “They surely will!” The situation could get a lot worse, and that could happen very quickly . . . or not so quickly. In any case, it appears that Christ could come any time.

Knowing that Christ could come any time does not authorize attempts to pinpoint the time the way stock market speculators attempt to calculate their opportunities. We cannot run the data into a computer and have it spit out the answer. God is going to come when He determines “it is done” (Rev 16:17). Peter said that we have the privilege of waiting for and even hastening “the coming of the day of God” (2 Pet 3:12), but we don’t have the power to trigger it, or even to start the “latter rain,” by what we do, even if we baptize vast numbers of people. Just as Christ’s coming and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost came by God’s initiative, so it will be with the “latter rain” of the Spirit and the Second Coming.

While 1844 implies a kind of imminence, we are left with the problem that it is now 1999, more than a century and a half since 1844. Time prophecy has ended, but we are still “doing time.” There is clearly a delay, as Jesus hinted there could be (Matt 24:45-51). Prophets such as Habakkuk and Peter indicated that apparent delays do not invalidate prophecy (Hab 2:3; 2 Pet 3:8-10). As the late Floyd Rittenhouse quoted to me (F. von Logau, via George Herbert, then Longfellow’s “Retribution”), “Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small.”

A delay, but why this long? The idea that God needs over a century and a half to carry out His judgment challenges our credulity. Consequently, 1844 as the beginning of such a judgment can seem more than a trifle embarrassing. One of our most common explanations is that we had an opportunity to enter the heavenly Canaan, but we have been “wandering in the wilderness” due to our failure, just as the

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Israelites on the borders of literal Canaan turned away at Qadesh-Barnea. The failure most often cited is the unwillingness of the church to whole-heartedly embrace righteousness by faith in 1888. This may be true, but we can't go back to Qadesh-Barnea, or even Minneapolis, and relive them. It doesn't work that way. The Israelites had to go on, and so do we. They came to another opportunity to make a decision, but it wasn't in exactly the same place. Our past history instructs us so that, if we are willing, we do not need to make the same mistakes again. But we are always on the move if we are following God's leading.

Another factor, which may be complementary to the Qadesh-Barnea idea just mentioned, is God's desire to save as many as possible. Peter emphasizes this in the eschatological context to which I referred in my first article:

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance (2 Pet 3:8-9).

This concept is well represented in the Old Testament. For example, in Genesis 15, God told Abram that his descendants would be oppressed in another land for four hundred years (vs. 13), but that they would return "in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (vs. 16). So God kept His people uncomfortably waiting all that time because He was concerned about the Amorites, the western Semites who inhabited Canaan. Four hundred years was allotted for the benefit of a fairly small group of people. When we're talking about the entire population of Planet Earth, maybe 154 years since 1844 isn't such a long time after all.

Conclusion

We cannot set a date for the Second Coming on the basis of biblical time prophecies any more than we can predict Christ's return on the basis of millennial or jubilee cycles. But Daniel 8:14, as interpreted by Adventists, does indicate that we are living in the "last days." Nevertheless, while we long to see our Lord end the present age, we are troubled by His apparent delay. The reason is not completely clear to us, or it wouldn't be an apparent delay. However, we are comforted by the idea that God is doing things this way at least partially in order to save people who would not otherwise be saved.

GANE: APOCALYPSE NOW

These days many people are waiting for “the apocalypse,” some kind of cataclysmic event which will end the present age. But this is not the biblical meaning of the word “apocalypse.” This word comes from Greek *apokalupsis*, which in Revelation 1:1 is the “revelation” of Jesus Christ (from and about Jesus Christ), which is contained in the book written by John on Patmos. The book of Revelation reveals a sweep of human history which moves forward inexorably from John’s time to the *eschaton* like a giant conveyor belt.¹⁰ In this sense, we have been in apocalyptic time all along. While the culmination is not yet, we are living in the apocalypse now.

Notes

¹NRSV here and in subsequent quotations unless otherwise indicated.

²Stephen Skinner, *Millennium Prophecies* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1997), 15.

³I.e., two times.

⁴*Selected Messages* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald, 1958), 1:68.

⁵Dale Ratzlaff, *The Cultic Doctrine of Seventh-day Adventists* (Sedona, AZ: Life Assurance Ministries, 1996), 76.

⁶The next few pages are from my response to Ratzlaff’s book published as “Our Cherished Doctrine” in *Adventist Today*, 6.2 (1998): 8-10.

⁷See A. K. Grayson, *Babylonian Historical-Literary Texts* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1975), 24-37.

⁸L. F. Hartman and A. Di Lella, *The Book of Daniel*, Anchor Bible 23 (1978), 147.

⁹See note 5, above.

¹⁰On cosmic sweep as a feature of apocalyptic literature, see Kenneth Strand, “Foundational Principles of Interpretation,” *Symposium on Revelation—Book I, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series*, Frank Holbrook, ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 12-13.