

# Disappointed by Scripture: October 22, 1844 and the Limits of Biblical Hermeneutics

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Every year on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, Adventists recall the events of 1844, the year when thousands of North American Millerites expected that the sanctuary of Daniel 8:14 pointed to the “cleansing” of earth by the return of Christ. I, too, have started my own tradition at this time of year, writing personal reflections about my church’s journey as it relates to 1844.

Millerites arrived at this date as the year of the Second Coming by applying an historicist-numerological interpretative method to the prophecies of Daniel, in particular to 8:14. Based on this numerological approach, Miller had no less than fifteen ways to calculate the coming of Christ for 1843.<sup>1</sup> Kai Arasola argues that while the other “proofs” helped determine the year of the Second Coming, Daniel 8:14 was attractive to Millerites because it could be used to determine precisely the date of the event.<sup>2</sup>

When Oct 23, 1844 dawned, the hope of Millerites to meet their Lord lay shattered on the frozen ground. The profound emotional impact of such harrowing experience was formative to proto-Adventists. Ellen White would often refer to those days with nostalgia, even calling 1844 “the happiest year of my life.”

The approach to Scripture that led post-Millerites to reinvent themselves after failure is fertile ground for students of the history of biblical interpretation, especially in regards to the power of personal spiritual experiences on one’s understanding of Scripture. In what Jonathan Butler describes as the “boundlessness” of antebellum America,<sup>3</sup> Millerites were not hesitant to push the limits of biblical interpretation in order to validate their bittersweet experience. They were convinced that the time prophecies of Daniel could not be wrong and set out to find out why they had been disappointed. When they revised just the event and not the date,

the image of an infallible God coalesced into the infallibility of prophetic timetables. Scripture had been finally vindicated. The 2300 evening-mornings had effectively become the key to unlocking the divine oracles.

But in their efforts to prove that time prophecy was infallible and could be understood absolutely, they were setting themselves up to be disappointed by the very Scriptures they meant to defend. Their disappointment happened not because the Bible was prone to some intrinsic inadequacy; the biblical text has stood the test of time and it is reliable. It happened because they pushed the limits of what the text could endure before protesting in waves of prophetic disconfirmation.

### **Tell it Like It Is**

Very early on, attentive Adventists started noticing that the limits of biblical hermeneutics were being tested by the movement. And with no other passage of Scripture were these boundaries challenged as in the book of Hebrews. Contrary to assertions that Jesus only entered into the holy of holies in 1844, A. F. Ballenger pointed out correctly that Hebrews 6:19-20 places Jesus “within the veil,” i.e., inside the holy of holies *at the time of his ascension*. He showed as early as 1905 that nowhere in Scripture does the expression “within the veil” refer to any place other than the Most Holy Place.

Ballenger wrote a detailed letter to Ellen White which she never answered directly to him but criticized to third parties.<sup>4</sup> Ballenger’s conclusions contradicted Ellen White’s use of the expression “within the veil” in the *Great Controversy*<sup>5</sup> as referring to the activities of the priests in the holy place of the tabernacle instead of the holy of holies.

In the early 2000s, an article in the DARCOM series defending White’s position was refuted by Roy Gane and Norman Young in a series of articles in the *Andrews University Seminary Studies*.<sup>6</sup> Both the Hebrew text and the Greek of the NT point undeniably that “within the veil” always refers to the Most Holy Place in the Bible. The author of Hebrews considers Jesus’ ministry inside the Most Holy Place immediately at his ascension as the Christian’s “anchor.”

### **The Importance of An Intertextual Method**

The limits of biblical hermeneutics were once again tested on the meaning of the 2300 evenings-mornings of Daniel 8:14. The easy answer is that v.14 simply answers the question of v. 13 of “how long” the daily sacrifices would be removed and the profanations on the sanctuary would last: 2300 evenings-mornings = days<sup>7</sup> (likely a rounded number) and then the sanctuary would be restored.

But by extricating Daniel 8:14 from its context, Millerite Adventists suggested rather an allusion to the Day of Atonement rituals described in Leviticus 16 which in turn would point to an eschatological Day of Atonement commencing on Oct 22, 1844, according to their calculations. This was a bold move, characteristic of self-made revolutionary exegetes.

The matter of whether these two texts are related at all can only be properly addressed by taking an intertextual approach. Such intertextual (or inner-biblical) method looks first at verbal parallels between two or more biblical passages in order to establish an *intentional* dependence of one author on another. This establishes thematic and allusive relationship between such passages. Jeffery Leonard has proposed a method to identify inner-biblical allusions<sup>8</sup> which I summarize here:

- (1) Shared language is the single most important factor in establishing a textual connection
- (2) Shared language is more important than non-shared language
- (3) Shared language that is rare or distinctive suggests a stronger connection than does language that is widely used
- (4) Shared phrases suggest a stronger connection than do individual shared terms
- (5) The accumulation of shared language suggests a stronger connection than does a single shared term or phrase
- (6) Shared language in similar contexts suggests a stronger connection than does shared language alone
- (7) Shared language need not be accompanied by shared ideology to establish a connection
- (8) Shared language need not be accompanied by shared form to establish a connection

In sum, inner biblical allusions need meaningful “shared language” in order to establish an allusive relationship. Based on the above method, we see that there is simply no relationship between Lev 16 and Daniel 8:14 because there is no “shared language” or meaningful contextual relationship. This impasse was insightfully articulated by Norman Young when responding to Richard Davidson:

*Davidson’s study leaves me with a query. How is he able to see the Day of Atonement in Dan 8:11-14 where there is no mention of a high priest, blood, calves and goats, entering, sin offering, cleanse, annual (to the contrary, Dan 8:11, 12, 13 refer to the “daily” service, tamid), inner veil, or the burning of carcasses outside the camp? Yet despite their **absence** in Daniel, he is able to find the Day of Atonement in 8:14. However, despite their **presence** in Hebrews, he is unable to see the Day of Atonement in 6:19-20 or 9:11-12.<sup>9</sup>*

Some have argued that because both the Day of Atonement and Daniel 8:14 deal with the cleansing/reestablishment of the sanctuary, they could be related. However, the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16 deals with the sins of Israel which have soiled the sanctuary and jeopardized the relationship with Yahweh while Daniel 8 describes the intrusive actions of the “little horn” which profanes the sanctuary for a period of time lasting 2300 evenings-mornings (2300 literal days) until the sanctuary is re-consecrated. Antiochus Epiphanes IV has been the prime suspect for most scholars, and, although a flawed one, his actions in removing the daily sacrifices and desecrating the temple in Jerusalem for a period lasting roughly 2300 days seem closer to Daniel’s intention than relocating the fulfilment of such profanations to 2300 years away from Daniel’s time.

Not surprisingly, the removal of Daniel 8:14 from its contextual moorings has led to a long string of assumptions that further complicate things, including these: a day for a year in biblical prophecy, the connection of the 490 years of Daniel 9 with the 2300 evenings-mornings of Daniel 8, the replacement of the decree of Cyrus for the reconstruction of Jerusalem predicted in Isaiah 45 for Artaxerxes' weaker decree to make dates "fit," and Jesus' impossible crucifixion in "the middle of the week" in 31 AD.

### **The Need for Timetables**

One of the most disturbing features of the interpretative method used by both Millerites and, subsequently, by Adventists to set precise dates for the mechanics of celestial events is the disregard for Jesus' warning recorded in Acts 1:7. When asked by his disciples for some hint of "when" the end would come, Jesus responded: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." It is for this reason that we do not find in Paul, Peter, or John or any other writings in the NT any effort to decipher prophetic periods from the Old Testament. Paul warned the Thessalonians not to believe in "prophecy, report, or letter" based on timelines (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2) while Peter completely removed the temporal moorings from prophecy when he stated that God is not bound to act according to our human understanding of time (2 Peter 3:8). This analysis makes all the more jarring the notion, embedded in the traditional Adventist interpretation of 1844, that the activities of Christ in heaven would be regulated by the Jewish Karaite calendar!

The principle of the timelessness of prophecy sets important limitations on setting timetables for divine action. Not only does this principle prohibit future date setting by the church but also annuls past "fulfillments" which contradict this notion.

Below I summarize two points which feed the need for prophetic timelines:

1. ***The false assumption that apocalyptic prophecy can/needs to be fully decoded:***

Current Adventist interpretations of apocalyptic prophecy implicitly assume that all biblical prophecy can be deciphered. The more one studies, the more one is close to finding the true meaning of a particular prophetic period.

But the failures of historicism have caused modern students of prophecy to propose a more moderate view of apocalyptic prophecy, one that does not see the decoding fulfillments as prophecy's primary goal. The reason is that the ambiguity of the language present in Daniel and Revelation does not allow for dogmatism in correlating prophecy with precise historical characters or dates. Doing so has brought much discredit to the Bible because it lowers it to the level of an Ouija board. It feeds shallow curiosity and sensationalism.

New readings of apocalyptic prophecy see the small, peripheral details in the text (such as numbers or time periods) as the individual color strokes of a painting which form a larger picture that needs to be looked at from a distance in order to be properly understood and appreciated. Looked from this perspective, one could posit that the one overarching *Leitmotif* of all apocalyptic prophecy is this: Evil wins for a time, and God wins at the end. Those who are on his side will win, too. Apocalyptic prophecy is like a complex puzzle missing half of its pieces; it gives you a general idea of what it will look like when it is done, but you are missing enough information to be absolutely certain.

2. ***The false assumption that God is obligated to confirm our prophetic***

***interpretations:*** As a corollary of the previous point, Adventists feel a sense of interpretative entitlement, for our position as the remnant people of prophecy is confirmed by the Bible which leads to a confirmation of all our other positions because, since we are the chosen people, God would not allow his remnant people to spouse incorrect prophetic interpretations. This circular reasoning was precisely the argument I heard from a pastor who, despite all the problems I pointed out in the traditional understanding, still was not convinced because he trusted God would ultimately vindicate our interpretations.

The pervasive notion that God has to miraculously rescue Adventism from erroneous interpretations was part of the post-1844 period. The pioneers believed that by earnest prayer and study they could unlock prophetic mysteries. Ellen White writes that the new understanding of 1844 as the year of Christ's entrance into the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary providentially "explained" to them the reason for the disappointment.<sup>10</sup>

But God is under no compulsion to supernaturally correct our exegetical shortcomings. All we have is the text of Scripture, and if the history of Christian theology is an indication, the text is all we have. The litmus test of the doctrine of 1844 is whether it can be established in a self-evident manner from Scripture.

## Revisiting Ellen White's Role

The problem for individual Adventists and the church at large is that challenging the traditional interpretation of 1844 casts a shadow on Ellen White's staunch defense of this doctrine. For most, her calling as a prophetess is indivisible from absolute infallibility in all matters. But it should be pointed out that White's visionary/revelatory confirmation of 1844 was rather ambiguous. The closest she came to a direct, divine revelation on this matter is found in *Early Writings* where she describes a scene in which both God and Jesus enter the Most Holy Place in chariots of fire.<sup>11</sup> The header of this section reads "The End of the 2300 Days."

But is it possible that this vision, if it meant to address 1844 at all, should be reinterpreted similarly to the vision of December 1844 that confirmed the shut-door doctrine only to be "reinterpreted" later.<sup>12</sup> Notably, the vision of "the end of the 2300 days" conflates elements from the ascension of Elijah in chariots of fire (cf. 2 Kings 2), the ascension of Jesus in a cloud surrounded by angels (cf. Acts 1:9-10), and the day of atonement ritual inside the holy of holies in relation to Christ's sacrificial death (cf. Heb 6:19-20). If this comparison holds, as the verbal parallels seem to show, then the vision is best interpreted as Jesus assuming his role as the heavenly high priest by going "within the veil" *at his ascension* as described in Hebrews 6 and 9 and not necessarily in 1844.

Further, Ellen White's comments supporting October 22, 1844 as the date of Jesus' passage into the heavenly Most Holy Place are meant to repeat and support the interpretations of Adventist authors of her day as she acknowledged in the introduction of the *Great Controversy*. Thus, at face value, the doctrine of 1844 could have been dropped as easily as Ellen White revised her understanding of the "shut-door doctrine" which she had understood as having been shown to her in vision.

More importantly, despite her continuous calls to maintain the "pillars" of the Adventist faith, including the doctrine of 1844, Ellen White also called for continued study, to the point that, if a doctrine was "shaky," we should not be afraid to let it fall. In the aftermath of the 1888 law-grace debacle, she would write: "If every idea we have entertained in doctrines is truth, will not the truth bear to be investigated? Will it totter and fall if criticized? If so, let it fall, the sooner the better."<sup>13</sup>

## The Neutering of Prophecy

In *The Neutering of Adventism*, maverick Adventist historian George Knight argues that Adventism must continue with the same apocalyptic emphasis lest it lose its relevance and unique contribution to Christianity. Although I agree with the overall premise of the work that an apocalyptic outlook has helped shape Adventism's mission, Knight has defended most of the traditional Adventist views, including 1844 and the Papacy as the beast, which not only are questionable from a biblical studies point of view but create the wrong "apocalypticism" in the church by stressing exclusivism, an "us-against-them" mentality and perfectionism.

And there is an even more serious danger in this dynamic, that of neutering prophecy itself. By promoting a purported final and unassailable interpretation of the apocalyptic prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, we are in essence castrating the text because it no longer speaks to new readers. That is an even worse outcome than the concern about neutering our church.

The warnings against adding or removing anything from the “word of this prophecy” (Revelation 22:18-19) ultimately have to do with impeding its understanding. Does imposing a single fulfilment on prophecy fall into the same condemnation?

## Conclusion

As part of the celebrations of the Great Disappointment this year, the Adventist Church has released *Tell the World*, a movie sponsored by the Adventist church in Australia which recounts the early Adventist experience.

I have enjoyed watching some of its leaked chapters on YouTube before its official release with my two young daughters. I took the opportunity to instill in them the sense that they are part of a long line of believers in Jesus’ Second Coming. We suffered with the pioneers as they waited and waited. We relived the struggles of Ellen White’s family as they were cast out of their congregation for their Millerite views and felt the sting of Joseph Bates’ financial struggles after having sold all he had to support the work. The movie is an emotional palette, depicting from the unbounded entrepreneurial spirit of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, to the romantic love of James and Ellen, the death of their first child, and the family quarrels of the Bates. I have come away from it with a conviction that, despite its shortcomings, God has a plan for the Adventist Church.

The only hope for Adventism is to keep the flame of the Second Coming alive. Our part as keepers of that flame is to make it relevant to 21<sup>st</sup>-century society without overstating our case.

## NOTES:

1. See Kai Arasola, *The End of Historicism* available [here](#).
2. See Arasola, p. 128.
3. Jonathan Buttler, “The Making of a New Order: Millerism and the Origins of Seventh-Day Adventism” in *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Ronald Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1993): 189-206.
4. See Gary Land, *Seeker of Light* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 200), 131-149.
5. Cf. *The Great Controversy*, 420: “The ministration of the priest throughout the year in the first apartment of the sanctuary, “within the veil” which formed the door and separated the holy place from the outer court, represents the work of ministration upon which Christ entered at His ascension.”

6. Cf. Roy Gane, "Reopening Katapetasma ("Veil") in Hebrews 6:19-20," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* Vol. 38, No.1 (Spring 2000): 5-8.
7. See Siegfried J. Schwantes, "Ereb Boqer of Daniel 8: 14 Re-Examined." *Andrews University Seminary Studies* (AUSS) 16.2 (1978) Available [here](#).
8. Jeffery M. Leonard, "Identifying Inner-Biblical Allusions: Psalm 78 as a Test Case *JBL* 127, no. 2 (2008): 241-265.
9. Norman Young, "The Day of Dedication or the Day of Atonement? Background to Hebrews 6:19-20 Revisited," *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Spring 2002): 66.
10. *Early Writings*, 236; *Evangelism*, 222.
11. *Early Writings*, 54-56.
12. See the helpful timeline of the "shut door doctrine" available [here](#).
13. Letter 7, 1888 – Written to William H. Healey, Dec 9, 1888.

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Image: Still from the film, "Tell The World."

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