

# The Adventist Problem with Revelation

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As the late blogger and *Spectrum* commentator *extraordinaire* [Aage Rendalen](#) once quipped: “There is simply no Adventist *sheol* left into whose darkness serious scholars can be thrown.”

This quarter’s Sabbath School lesson on the book of Revelation — and the controversy about the editors’ heavy-handed changes to the author’s manuscript — has revived the age-old debate about Adventism and the Book of Revelation, invariably pitting scholars against the establishment.

Faced with the zeal with which the General Conference tries to protect “landmark” biblical interpretations, few would disagree that the traditional Adventist interpretation of Revelation has become almost sacramental. Any deviation from “official” positions on the book is met with shouts of “*Unclean!*” and rending of robes.

But such dogmatism is not without its own existential conundrums. Below I list four issues facing Adventist interpreters of Revelation.

## 1. Overdependence on date-setting

Lying on my desk is a 3ft x 3ft prophetic chart I got at the Ellen White Estate in São Paulo, Brazil a few years ago containing myriad fine-print dates of fulfilments of prophecy.<sup>1</sup> I have often wondered, *what would Daniel and John think about this?*

Isn't it fascinating how we have given up setting dates for the end while confidently setting them for the past? And does it really make a difference?

This date-setting concern when interpreting Revelation misses the point for a couple of reasons.

First, defining the "official" version of Adventist historicism depends on whom we're talking to. There's the South American preacher warning against Pope Francis as the real "seventh king" of Revelation 17 (after the two failed predictions), the South African preacher peddling eschatological conspiracy theories, the American independent ministries condemning drums as part of the three unclean spirits of Revelation, women's ordination as part of the remnant's eschatological trial of the remnant and teaching unsuspecting young Adventists that sinless perfection is a *sine qua non* condition before Jesus can return.

You get the idea.

In essence, a method of interpretation based on dates and historical figures lacks sufficient controls; it can easily be hijacked by irresponsible interpreters in possession of "better" dates and fulfilments.

Secondly, neatly placing historicist assumptions as a security blanket on top of the entire book of Revelation neuters its literary nuances.

Years ago when I was considering the topic of my doctoral dissertation I asked myself: What theological topic is the most challenging and about which I feel I know the least? Revelation kept coming back. And here I am nearly a decade and a 450-page dissertation later and I feel I've barely scratched the surface.

Revelation is a complex book; it demands a more comprehensive approach than simply plugging in dates, events, and actors pulled out of a hat and placed willy-nilly where they fit "best" according to the interpreter's own external assumptions.

Ironically, however, one of the most overlooked aspects of Revelation is that John seems much more interested in the *past* than in the *future*. The book is inseparable from the Old Testament and the "Christ event."

As a case study, consider the three-and-a-half-year formula — also as 1,260 days/time, times and half-time/42 months — found in Revelation 11–13. This time period appears in Revelation in contexts of oppression and persecution. Following a numerological-allegorical approach called “year-day principle,” Adventists convert this period into 1,260 literal years. After this curious conversion, they then plug the 1,260-year period somewhere in the Dark Ages, from 538–1798 CE.

However, it appears John’s use of this expression points to something different. The allusions are based on the following OT passages and Jewish tradition:

1. Israel’s 42 encampments (years?) of the desert wandering (cf. Numbers 33:5–49)
2. The three-and-a-half-year drought during Elijah’s ministry (1 Kings 17–18)
3. The three-and-a-half-year oppression of Israel and desecration of the Jewish sanctuary from 164–167 BCE by the Greeks in Daniel (cf. Daniel 7:25; 8:13–14; 9:27; 12:7; cf. Josephus’s *Wars* 1.19; 5.394)<sup>2</sup>
4. A Jewish tradition around John’s time that the three-and-a-half years typified the Babylonian captivity (*b. Sanhedrin* 97b–98a) and a period of trouble before Israel’s final redemption (*Midrash Psalm* 10:1).

Since John gives no indication that he uses this three-and-a-half-year literally — and because of other symbolic imagery present in its immediate context — this symbolic period should not be interpreted as pointing to any literal time span in Revelation. As such, this three-and-a-half-year functions as a type of the time during which the new Israel, the church, was going to be “measured” (Revelation 11:1), persecuted by the “dragon” for 1,260 days (Revelation 12) and oppressed by the “beasts” for three-and-a-half years (Revelation 13), but ultimately saved. The formula is symbolic without sufficient information to match an identifiable time period.

This is one example of a far more measured explanation for this Old Testament allusion than the quantum leap of date-setting. There’s really no logical reason to pick 538–1798 as the beginning and end of 1,260 “years” other than the fact that these dates “fit” within a pre-conceived historicist schematics pointing to 1844. This interpretation not only fails to take into consideration the Old Testament background for the three-and-a-half-year formula and its clear symbolic use in Revelation, but the proposed end of these literal 1,260 years in 1798 falls far short of the end of the “tribulation” period for the church before its eschatological deliverance. We’ve now overshot its “end” by 220 years and counting!

In other words, keeping the interpretation of these passages grounded in the Old Testament safeguards their theological meaning without truncating it with questionable dates.

## **2. Making it all about Adventism**

I recently got blank stares when I said during a presentation on Revelation that the book was simply *not written with us in mind*. To clarify, I asked the audience in what language the book was originally written. Right, ancient Greek.

Millerites and Adventist pioneers took date-setting to its natural conclusions: Revelation's prophecies culminated in their own experiences.<sup>3</sup>

Thus the rise of the Advent movement in the 19th century was prophesied in the message to Laodicea (1844–?); the fairly recent *terramoto* of Lisbon (1755) fulfilled that of Revelation 6, thus framing their movement in eschatological import; the bitter taste of the “little book” (Revelation 10) was fulfilled in the great disappointment of 1844; Ellen White's visions were the culmination of the “spirit of prophecy” (Revelation 10) and the church's emphasis on “the law” was the mirror image of the commandment-keeping remnant (Revelation 12).<sup>4</sup> The Advent movement was the embodiment of the three angels messages (Revelation 14). Logically, then, the United States was one of the beasts of Revelation 13 which, along with the other beast — the papacy — was speaking like a dragon by enacting Sunday laws. And the list goes on.

Again, *what would John think of all this?*

The fact is that the Book of Revelation rises out of a certain historical, sociological, and religious context in the first century, although we can't pinpoint exactly when it was written (dates range from before ca. 68–95 CE) or by whom — either John the Apostle or someone else. Regardless, there's very little probability that the author, most likely a Jewish-Christian prophet slowly composing his book in the solitary Patmos — mixing his visions with extensive, assiduous reflection on the Old Testament — and having his flock in Asia Minor and their pressing needs in mind would be concerned with foretelling the goings-on of antebellum American revivalism.

The target audience was the seven churches and their realities continue to reverberate in our time. Their hope is our hope, their faith can be ours, we can share in their reward. We're just the tail end of a “great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1).

### **3. Ignoring Revelation's literary genre**

John's Apocalypse is the younger, nobler relative of a large family of apocalyptic writings circulating in Palestine around the turn of the first century CE, which included the canonical books of Daniel, Isaiah, and Ezekiel but also non-canonical books such as *The Book of Enoch*, *The Shepherd of Hermas* (considered inspired until at least the 4th century), *The Animal Apocalypse*, *The Apocalypse of Weeks*, *The Apocalypse of Abraham*, *The Apocalypse of Adam*, *The Apocalypse of Peter*, *The Apocalypse of Paul* to name a few.<sup>5</sup>

Apocalyptic literature is a complex mix of religious piety, sociological critique and eschatological admonition packaged in dramatic, symbolic visionary language mixed with real people and events. As part of this genre, Revelation portrays both earthly and

transcendent realities through symbols and enigmas.<sup>6</sup>

For example, the seven churches in Revelation 2–3 are clearly literal congregations who saw John as their “brother and companion” exiled in the real island of Patmos (1:9). In turn, the 24 elders are not real “elders” existing in heaven. In context, this imagery is built on at least three Old Testament backgrounds: 1) the 24 orders of priests of the sanctuary (1 Chronicles 24:3–19); 2) the 24 Levitical gatekeepers (1 Chronicles 26:17–19); 3) the 24 orders of Levites charged with offering music and worship in the sanctuary (1 Chronicles 25:6–31).<sup>7</sup> The same with seven trumpets, the seven seals and seven bowls, all are symbolic representations of “transcendent reality.” From Revelation 4:1–22:5, the book speaks in symbols and only returns to literal language in Revelation 22:6.

In other words, most of Revelation needs to be read *symbolically* rather than *literally*.

#### **4. Failure to “apocalypse” Jesus**

The word “*apokalypsis*” in John 1:1 means “revealing, opening” and its subject is Jesus Christ. Jesus suffuses every chapter of Revelation. Pick any messianic image from the Old Testament and you’ll find it enhanced and expanded in Revelation.

Revelation is like an autostereogram whose hidden image requires patience and a certain perspective to be seen right. All of a sudden, “*Voilà!*,” a 3D picture pops up out of nowhere. Its enigmatic imagery is meant to show one thing: Jesus Christ.

Take for example, the book’s foundational *Leitmotif*: Jesus Christ’s sacrificial death and his exaltation as heavenly high priest. This forms one of the most important presuppositional lenses through which Revelation could be read:

1. Jesus is introduced in Revelation 1 as the exalted heavenly high priest (cf. Hebrews 6, 9), officiating inside the heavenly sanctuary, wearing his Day-of-Atonement white linen robes (Revelation 1:13).
2. In Revelation 4–5, he is the slaughtered Lamb — a composite of all sanctuary sacrifices — whose blood is offered inside the heavenly Most Holy Place, indicating again John’s dependence on the Day of Atonement and sanctuary themes.
3. In Revelation 7 and 14, the saints come into focus wearing priestly robes as they worship before his throne, indicating purification by the lamb’s Day-of-Atonement blood.
4. Day-of-Atonement intercession at the altar of incense (Revelation 8–9) protects the followers of the Lamb from the judgment to be unleashed on unrepentant humanity (Revelation 6, 15 and 16).
5. Jesus is the rider of the white horse in Revelation 19, whose white linen high-priestly robe is sprinkled with his own Day-of-Atonement sacrificial blood (cf. Hebrews 10:19).

6. Jesus' Day-of-Atonement sacrifice and heavenly ministry — begun at the cross and ascension — precede the judgment of Satan and his minions (Revelation 17–20) based on the judgment on Azazel at the end of the age (Leviticus 16; cf. *1 Enoch* 10, 54).

7. The new Jerusalem — square as the Most Holy Place — is where priestly saints who “washed their robes” (Revelation 21; 22:14) live, worship and reign with Jesus, the heavenly high priest, “for ever and ever.”

God wins through the death of Christ. Those who follow him win, too.

How does date-setting — past or future — help advance or detract from this Christ-centered message?

## Conclusion

Adventist interpretations of Daniel and Revelation have been characterized by interpretative exuberance. We have been desensitized to the rigors of the exegetical task and fall prey to facile assertiveness about what Revelation means. And unfortunately, this quarter's lesson will not change the *status quo*.

Perhaps Revelation's fluid relationship with time and history can be compared to an ancient, unfinished fresco. The work of art tells the family's stories through familiar images mixed here and there with enigmatic, unrefined strokes representing what lies ahead for the clan (think of Jacob's deathbed predictions for his sons). Future generations hear and easily understand the shared lore while their own stories are somewhat blurred, waiting to be fully formed. The artist gives them just enough information to nurture bright hopes about the future without turning their story into self-fulfilling prophecies.

When it comes to Revelation, then, a sanctified sense of wonder and anticipation are more important than historical accuracy. This seemed to be Ellen White's view when she wrote:

“My brethren, read the book of Revelation from beginning to end, and ask yourselves whether you might not better spend less time in strife and contention, and begin to think of how fast we are approaching the last great crisis” (*Review & Herald*, August 20, 1903).

A more sensible approach to this fascinating book could look like this:

1. Read it *symbolically* rather than literally.
2. Allow it to *speak to its original readers primarily* and only *secondarily* to us.
3. Focus on *revealing* Jesus instead of predicting the future.
4. Seek to understand how the book portrays the overarching dynamics of God's kingdom *throughout salvation history*, rather than focusing on unsubstantiated fulfillments.

5. Keep the book's intended meaning *open* to updated readings rather than closed up by past fulfillments.

I invite you continue grappling with the way Revelation challenges us to follow and worship Jesus Christ above everything else. Be part of this new vision. A more sensible approach won't become reality until we forgo institutional dogmatism in favor of exalting Jesus alone — and replace interpretative exuberance with the hermeneutic of humility.

## Notes & References:

1. The chart is put out by the independent ministry Everlasting Gospel Publishing Association out of Seoul, South Korea.
2. This analysis is partly based on Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 565 ff.
3. Others before them had done the same with apocalyptic prophecy: the Essenes (at Qumran ca. 2nd century BCE) and the Montanists (1000 CE) are examples.
4. See Robert Surridge, "Seventh-day Adventism: Self-Appointed Laodicea," in *Studies in the Book of Revelation*, ed. Steve Moyise (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 21–42.
5. A more complete list includes: **Old Testament:** *Jubilees, Testament of Levi, Apocalypse of Zephaniah, Greek Apocalypse of Baruch, Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch, Greek Apocalypse of Daniel, Apocalypse of Elijah, Greek Apocalypse of Ezra, Gabriel's Revelation, Apocalypse of Lamech, Apocalypse of Moses, Apocalypse of Sedrach, Apocalypse of Zerubbabel, Aramaic Apocalypse. **New Testament:** *First Apocalypse of James, Second Apocalypse of James, Apocalypse of Golias, Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius, Apocalypse of Paul, Coptic Apocalypse of Paul, Apocalypse of Peter, Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter, Apocalypse of Samuel of Kalamoun, Apocalypse of Stephen, Apocalypse of Thomas, Apocalypse of the Seven Heavens.**
6. The standard definition of an "apocalypse" was crafted by scholars in the late 1970s: "'Apocalypse' is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world." (John J. Collins, "The Morphology of a Genre: Introduction," *Semeia* 14 (1979): 1–19).
7. See Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 323.

*André Reis, Ph.D., a frequent contributor to Spectrum, is the author of the upcoming book The Day of Atonement in the Book of Revelation.*

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