

The Elusive Advent

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TWO adult courses, published in the "Adult Student" during the past calendar year, have elicited more correspondence from the field than anything that has appeared in Methodist adult church school periodicals in the last dozen years. One dealt with "Great Protestant Leaders." The reaction which came back to the editorial desk clearly indicates that Protestants are increasingly concerned to know more clearly and definitely than they have in the past, just how their version of the Christian faith differs from that of Roman Catholics. They appear to be facing up with a new seriousness of purpose to the problem of just what it is that they do believe about those questions that matter most.

The other course dealt with the books of Daniel and the Revelation. This is one of the sharply controversial areas in Biblical interpretation and theological statement. The editors had anticipated that the material presented would precipitate a considerable amount of vigorous argument, since the author of the course, Dr. Martin Rist, Professor of New Testament in The Iliff School of Theology, challenged directly and without apology or equivocation the whole structure of interpretation of these books that is widely current today. It was a matter of genuine surprise and no little satisfaction to the editors when by far the major portion of the correspondence in reaction to this course proved to be thoroughly appreciative in character. It seems clear that there are very considerable numbers of thoughtful and earnest laymen for whom the method of using the Bible as means of forecasting in detail events in

a far distant future, has lost its appeal. This, again, seems to lend additional support to the conviction that increasing numbers of laymen, today, are looking for help in clarifying their understanding of the major propositions of our Christian faith. Certainly there is no point at which we are in greater need of that clarification than in reference to what we believe about the nature and essential content of biblical prophecy. For this question the books of Daniel and the Revelation are pivotal. The manner in which we deal with them will largely determine our attitude toward the Bible as a whole, and our whole conception of the Christian faith.

There came to my desk, some few months ago, a volume written by Le Roy Edwin Froom, and published by The Review and Herald Publishing Association in Washington, D. C. It constitutes Volume III in a projected four volume survey of "The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers." While the manuscript for the first two volumes has been completed, we are told, only the third volume has yet been put on the press. The final volume remains still in process of preparation. Evidently the work aims at a scholarly historical survey of the interpretation of prophecy that has been current in the Christian community, with particular emphasis upon the discovery, throughout the scriptures, of prophetic evidence to substantiate the general theory of an anticipated second coming of Jesus, to be succeeded by a millennial reign of the glorified Christ, enthroned in an earthly capital, followed by the final judgment and the grand consummation of the triumph of God over Satan.

It is not difficult to understand how it has come about that precedence in publication was given to Volume Three. This volume deals with "Colonial and Early National American Exposition," and with "Old World Nineteenth Century Advent Awakening." That is to say, the volume recently published deals with those years in which the modern Adventist movement was developing. It would, therefore, naturally command the greatest interest among the group for whom the book was primarily written. The work is a serious undertaking that has been carried through with commendable thoroughness and with a quality of scholarship that commands every respect. Inevitably, therefore, it reveals some aspects of this so-called "prophetic" movement that are of immense significance, when we come to evaluate the method of using the Scripture upon which the whole structure of belief in an imminent bodily return of Jesus to inaugurate a millennial reign upon the earth is grounded.

That this method of using the scripture that involves genuine risk, many of those who employ it are frank to admit. Whenever anyone sets forth to find in the scripture a dependable forecast for future history, his work must, inevitably, stand or fall in the light of the development of events, as the years roll on. It is thoroughly understandable that, in the employment of this approach to the Bible, interest should focus upon the date at which we may expect our Lord to make his appearance. To begin with there is general agreement that the authors of both Daniel and the Revelation meant to offer an interpretation of the meaning of certain particular historical events. They dealt with specific historical situations in which the saints of God were living under highly unsatisfactory circumstances. In the face of grievous persecutions, and the temptation to give

up all faith in the ultimate salvation of God, they sought to reassure their readers with an affirmation of their confidence in the final triumph of the faithful and the complete vindication of their faith.

When it came to the matter of marking down a date when this triumph would be evident the authors of these books have resort to cryptic symbols and to statements of time that are usually taken to conceal, rather than reveal their real intention. There are three such time statements to which it is of interest to call attention, as we hurriedly survey the manner in which those students of the scripture, whose work is reviewed in the volume written by Mr. Froom, have made use of them in attempting to identify the precise moment in history to which they have concluded the prophetic writer must have looked forward.

The first is found in Daniel 8:13, 14, which reads (A.R.V.): "Then I heard a holy one speaking; and another holy one said unto that certain one who spake, How long shall be the vision concerning the continual burnt offering, and the transgression that maketh desolate, to give both the sanctuary and the host to be trodden under foot? And he said unto me, Unto two thousand and three hundred evenings and mornings: then shall the sanctuary be cleansed."

The second is found in Daniel 12:5-13 (A.R.V.): "Then I, Daniel, looked, and behold, there stood other two, the one on the brink of the river on this side, and the other on the brink of the river on that side. And one said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, How long shall it be to the end of these wonders? And I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, when he held up his right hand and his left hand unto heaven, and swore by him that liveth for ever that it shall be for

a time, times, and a half; and when they made an end of breaking in pieces the power of the holy people, all these things shall be finished. And I heard, but I understood not: then said I, O my Lord, what shall be the issue of these things? And he said, Go thy way, Daniel; for the words are shut up and sealed till the time of the end. Many shall purify themselves and make themselves white, and be refined; but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand; but they that are wise shall understand. And from the time that the continual burnt-offering shall be taken away, and the abomination that maketh desolate set up, there shall be a thousand two hundred and ninety days. Blessed is he that waiteth, and cometh to the thousand three hundred and five and thirty days. But go thou thy way till the end be; for thou shalt rest, and shalt stand in thy lot, at the end of the days."

Here are three different cryptic numbers upon which "prophetic" interpreters have fastened as clues to the unravelling of the riddle of the future, "time, times and a half," which probably means literally, three and one half; "one thousand two hundred and ninety days;" and a "thousand three hundred and five and thirty days." We shall confine our observations to the manner in which the students of the scriptures, that follow the pattern we have under consideration, make use of the latter two of these numbers.

The third statement is found in the Revelation, 11:1-3 (R.S.V.): "Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told: 'Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample over the holy city for forty-two months. And I will grant my two witnesses power to

prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sack-cloth."

All three of these passages were written centuries before any of these relatively recent "prophetic" interpreters undertook to decipher their meaning. It was obvious, therefore, that, if they were to discover any significance in them in the way of a forecast of events that were still in the future, they could not accept the literal sense. "Days" could not mean just days. It became, consequently, a generally accepted principle of interpretation that "days" meant really "years." And, when the scripture read "months," then, first of all, these "months" must be reduced to "days" and then the "days" understood as meaning "years." Then the real message of the prophet would stand revealed.

There remained still another problem. That was the determination of the base line for reckoning. The passages in the Book of Daniel appeared to be based upon references to the period of the exile in Babylon. The "prophetic" interpreter must, therefore, hit upon some date that might be considered significant, located near the end of the Exile, and use it as the point from which he began his calculations. There was, further, the question whether these various time periods were to be considered as synchronous or successive. When we come to examine the conclusions of the interpreters we find the widest variances of opinion. For some, the periods are telescoped so that the longest, the twenty-three hundred years, includes all the others. For some the four time periods we have singled out must be reckoned from the same initial base line; for some they are considered as pointing to the same conclusion, and consequently must be reckoned as beginning at variant points of departure. Taking the whole list of "prophetic" interpreters whose work is

quoted by Froom, each of these time periods is reckoned by one or more as pointing up to the date for the expected second advent of Christ and the beginning of the Millennium. That fact is all that need to concern us here. The following tabulation of dates will be sufficient to indicate the variety and hopeless confusion into which we find ourselves led whenever we embark upon the venture of interpreting the scripture in this fashion.

I have listed here the dates that have been selected by one or more of the students of "prophecy" whose work is quoted in Froom's survey as indicating the time at which the scripture has revealed we might expect either (a) the second coming of Christ and the beginning of his millennial reign on earth, (b) the end of the twelve hundred sixty year period, (c) the end of the twelve hundred ninety year period, (d) the end of the thirteen hundred thirty-five year period, or (e) the end of the twenty-three hundred year period. The dates listed here do not represent by any means all of the dates that have been selected, at some time or other, in the long span of Christian speculation. There was, for example, speculation about the possible end of the world around the year 1,000 A.D., to which Froom makes no reference in this volume at all. He has confined his attention to speculation within the last three hundred years, although a few of the dates he lists lie in an earlier period. All of the dates that appear in the following table are taken from Froom with the exception of the year 1914. This became the primary focus for the forecasts of Charles Taze Russel, the founder of the movement now known as "Jehovah's Witnesses." I have included this one date taken from outside of Froom's survey, for reasons that will appear as we proceed.

**Dates that Have Been Selected as
Marking a Premillennial
Consummation
(All dates below are A.D.)**

General Forecast	End of 1260 Years	End of 1290 Years	End of 1335 Years	End of 2300 Years
1260		870		
		1360		
			1405	
				1517
	1519			
	1625			
	1638			
	1639			
	1649	1649		
1650		1650		
	1652			
1655	1655			
	1670			
1673				
1695			1695	
	1700			
	1710			
	1715			
	1716			1716
		1730		
	1736			
		1740		
		1745		1745
	1758			
	1759			
	1760			
				1762
			1763	
			1765	
			1775	1775
				1785
	1789			
			1790	
	1791			1791
	1792			1792
	1793			
1794				
1796				
	1797			
	1798			

General Forecast	End of 1260 Years	End of 1290 Years	End of 1335 Years	End of 2300 Years
1811	1800			1800
1812				
	1813			
	1814			
		1819		1819
				1820
		1821		
		1822		
		1823		
		1827		
1836				
	1842			
1843	1843	1843		1843
	1844	1844		1844
1847				1847
1848	1848			
1849				
1859	1859	1859		
1860	1860			
	1866			1866
1867	1867		1867	
1868			1868	
			1872	
1873		1873		
		1874		
	1880			1880
				1885
	1890			
		1896		
				1909
1914				1910
1917			1917	
		1920		
1941				1941
			1965	1965
				1966
				1970
2000	2000			2000

Here are eighty-one different dates that have been fixed by the infallible word of scripture as marking the second advent of Christ and ushering in

the millennial reign of Christ upon the earth. They cover a span of nearly twelve hundred years. Would it not seem, if the method of interpreting the scripture that has produced this strange array of results is valid and dependable, we should have had something much nearer a unanimity of conclusion? If it were a matter of a relatively small number of variations, or if the range of these variations covered a relatively brief span of years, we might conclude that there were errors in the calculations of one or another of the interpreters. Indeed, this appears to have been the conclusion to which the appearance of such variations in results drove a good many of those who have undertaken to apply this method for the analysis of the scripture. As you read through the literature of this movement you come upon frantic and feverish calculations, and tentative selections of now this base line for beginning and now that, all in the interest of working out to something much more closely approximating an agreement concerning conclusions. The exhibit which we have offered above is sufficient evidence of the futility of these efforts.

When we set about appraising this method of "handling the word of truth" there are some things that we need to keep in mind. We need to remember that it is predicated upon the primary assumption that the Bible contains and intends to reveal, to those who will yield themselves to the disciplines of a spirit-led scholarship, an absolutely accurate forecast of history that is yet to unfold. It assumes, further, that it is important that the faithful should be able to read and interpret aright this revelation. And yet, when we compare the life-work of hundreds of honest, earnest and devoted students of the prophetic writings the results are not anything approaching a general agreement, but rather a bewildering array

of completely unreconcilable confusion. It is obvious that the prophecies were not fulfilled in the manner in which these "prophetic" interpreters confidently affirmed that they would be, upon the dates which they elicited from their analysis of the scripture, following the clue to its interpretation upon which they depended. In fact, all but the last four of the dates included in this tabulation already lie behind us. In all of the seventy-odd instances that precede the date of this writing, the method which we are urged must be followed in order to understand the revelation of God has, upon the basis of the incontrovertible evidence of the event, led us astray. The source of this difficulty must lie, not in relatively slight errors in calculation, but rather in the method itself. We have been making demands upon the Bible that it was never designed to meet. We have been seeking information that it does not contain, nor intend to reveal. We have misconceived the whole nature and function of the scriptures.

The only alternative to this conclusion is to do as the representatives of "Jehovah's Witnesses" do today. Charles Taze Russell, who inaugurated this movement, fixed upon the year 1914 as the pivotal year of history. It was upon this date that the end of the age would come, the Lord would return, and set up his millennial reign upon the earth. Now the year 1914 having come and gone the followers of "Pastor" Russell resolutely affirm that the prophecy of their leader and founder was fulfilled. The world DID come to an end in the month of October, 1914, just as the scripture had been interpreted to have foretold. Just to rehearse this line of argument is its sufficient refutation. It represents, no matter how absurd it may sound when it is put bluntly and baldly, no more severe a coercion of fact to conform to a theory than is the violence that is repeatedly done to the record of long past events in the determined ef-

fort to constrain history into obedience to the "prophetic" demand.

There is still another aspect of this "prophetic" movement that it should be illuminating to consider. We have referred to the wide disparity in the conclusions to which these students of the prophecies have come in their effort to fit the patterns of prophecy as they understand them to the record of actual events. There appears to be a degree of unanimity of opinion upon certain points, however, that would seem to be significant. It has become very much the accepted rule to recognize in the image that was made of gold, of silver, of brass, of iron and of iron mixed with clay, in the second chapter of Daniel, and in the vision of the four beasts in the seventh chapter, a reference to a succession of world empires. The Assyrian, the Babylonian, the Medo-Persian and the Macedonian empires are fairly readily identifiable. This is easy to understand. There does not seem to be much question that the author of the Book of Daniel was using these symbols as media for a hurried survey of world history leading up to the attempt of Antiochus Epiphanes to Hellenize the Jews. It is when these modern interpreters of prophecy get beyond the second century and attempt to fit the prophecies to the actual history of the Roman Empire, and, later still, the Roman Catholic Church, that they fall into confusion.

In somewhat similar fashion it has become a fairly standardized practice to see in the seven trumpets, in Revelations eight; nine and eleven, references to the Barbarian and Saracen invasions which ultimately destroyed the Roman Empire and stripped the Roman Catholic Church of a major portion of the countries over which it formerly exercised control. The first six trumpets stand out fairly clearly:

First Trumpet—Alaric and the Goths.

Second Trumpet—Genseric and the Vandals.

Third Trumpet—Attila and the Huns.

Fourth Trumpet—The Ostrogoths and the formal end of the western Roman Empire.

Fifth Trumpet — The Mohammedan conquests.

Sixth Trumpet—The Ottoman Turks. And, again, as it was in the attempt to read in the symbols of Daniel a complete forecast of all future history, the final stages prove disconcerting because stubborn history refuses to introduce the finale.

Our only interest in this reference is to observe that all of these attempts to read the riddle of the future are associated with world-shaking political upheavals. It is both interesting and illuminating to compare the following table of historic events with the previous tabulation of "prophetic" dates.

1260—Kublai Khan became Great Kahn.

1360—End of the Mongol empire.

1405—Death of Tamerlane.

1517—Beginning of the Lutheran revolt from Rome.

1625-1660—Wars of religion in Europe and Civil war in Britain.

1700-1763—Anglo-French struggle for colonial empire.

1775-1815—The French and American revolutions.

1830-1848—Period of revolutionary unrest in Europe climaxing in the rise of Napoleon III.

1850-1880—The American Civil War and reconstruction.

1914—Outbreak of the World War.

It is clearly not an accident that we find those who emphasize the apocalyptic element in the scriptures focussing their expectations on some kind of cosmic catastrophe and denouement in the periods that are marked by revolutionary political movements.

There seems to be but one conclusion to which this hurried survey of the outcome of the attempt to read in the Bible a calendar of future events must lead us. We are certain to be led astray

by such an approach to the scriptures. It is really amazing with what tenacity so many still cling to a method of interpreting the scripture that, in every instance, without a single exception, has been proven in error by the event. It is only as we read such books as Daniel and the Revelation in the light of the historic situation in which they were produced that they begin to make sense. Reading Daniel as a vigorous "tract for the times" designed to stiffen the resistance of the Jewish community in opposition to the program of forced Hellenization of Antiochus, it becomes a thrilling document. Setting the Revelation over against the fury of the Domitian persecution it stands revealed as one of the landmarks in the long struggle for religious liberty.

There is one further brief observation with which I should like to bring this article to a close. The persistence of the apocalyptic motif, not only in the literature of the Bible, but in post-apostolic Christian thinking, would seem to indicate that there is a genuine kernel of truth wrapped up in the husk of its sometimes weird and always cryptic symbolism. In an article published some years ago in "Religion in Life" under the title, "The Significance of the 'Kingdom of God' for Current Christianity" I called attention to "the role of crisis in the kingdom process." In this article I developed the thesis "that history develops through recurrent crises and discloses its most significant meanings in catastrophic patterns." This idea of a catastrophic or cataclysmic pattern of historical development finds imposing documentation in Arnold Toynbee's "Study of History." The following paragraph taken from my earlier article in "Religion in Life" may very well serve to bring this discussion to a close:

"One point seems to be sufficiently clear. That is that back of all this attempt to interpret the cosmic significance of current events, which runs as

one of the major motifs through the prophetic writings, lies a conviction concerning the ineradicably catastrophic character of the developing drama of history. The notion of a developing process, moving with the untroubled peacefulness of a quietly flowing stream toward an inevitable goal of progress, which characterized so largely the outlook of the nineteenth century,

now stands exposed as a bit of hopelessly romantic sentimentalism. That is not the manner in which history discloses the relationship of events. There is an element of crisis that appears to be structural to the essential processes of reality, which finds expression in the apocalyptic pattern in which most of the Hebrew Prophets, and Jesus as well, conceived their philosophy of history."