The Historicist Method in Adventist Interpretation*

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Abstract

Considering the various conflicting applications of the historicist method in the past, the need for an adequate definition rises. The source of a proper use of this method of prophetic interpretation should be seen in Jesus’ and Paul’s applications of apocalyptic perspectives in the book of Daniel. The essence of apocalyptic interpretation maintains the covenant history that centres in the God-sent Messiah and His people. This christocentric structure defines the hermeneutical principle and test of an authentic historicism. Furthermore, the discovery of a coherent literary structure in Daniel and Revelation, one of a chiastic nature, should be recognized to maintain the indivisible unity of prophetic visions. This may function as a corrective to the application of dissected parts of Scripture to historical events.

In his monumental collection The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers, LeRoy E. Froom states: “possibly more than with any other religious body, Bible prophecy may be said to be the foundational platform of the Seventh-day Adventist faith (1954, 165).” Indeed, the Seventh-day Adventist movement came into existence by reinterpreting the end-time prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, after the course of history proved in the autumn of 1844 that certain interpretations of William Miller were in error. A small group of sabbatarian Adventists remained motivated, however, to understand the prophetic word more accurately than the Millerite Movement had. Their persistence to search the Scriptures for a correction of their errors has kept this Advent movement alive until today (see Mansell 1999).

The concentration on the Most Holy Place in the sanctuary of God opened up a new interest in the commandments of God, because John saw within God’s heavenly temple “the ark of his covenant” (Rev. 11:19). Joseph Bates began to stress that God wanted a group of believers to unite on obedience to “God’s commandments and the faith of Jesus,” as was predicted in the prophecy of Revelation 14:12. As George R. Knight sums it up: “As Adventism’s first theologian he [Bates] set forth a system of concepts that united the doctrines of the Second Coming, the Sabbath, and the sanctuary within a great struggle between good and evil as portrayed in Revelation 11:19–14:20” (Knight, 2000, 71). This self-

* This essay offers my tribute to a distinguished Bible scholar and preacher, a man of God who has been a rich blessing to so many. Ad multos annos!
understanding of being a people of prophecy gave the sabbatarian Adventists their identity. Nevertheless, the new emphasis on the distinctive Adventist truths in great measure lost sight of the central truth of the atoning grace of Christ, so that “the trend was to legalism” (Spalding 1962, 286). This historical development in Adventism points up the need for an abiding vigilance to guard the priority and centrality of the “everlasting gospel” in the framework of the apocalyptic visions.*

1. Past Adventist Apocalyptic Interpretation

Traditionally, Adventists have assumed the role of “prophets” themselves when they predicted political events regarding the so-called “Eastern Question.” Unfortunately, many failed to examine whether their predictions were in harmony with the biblical perspective of salvation history and were based on sound principles of exegesis. Albert V. Olson, speaking at the denomination’s 1952 Bible Conference in Takoma Park on the topic “The Place of Prophecy in Our Preaching,” warned “against the danger of yielding to the temptation of indulging in fanciful, private interpretations or personal predictions. Consciously or unconsciously many of us may have erred on this point” (Our Firm Foundation 1953, vol. 2, 547). Olson offers this example:

Years ago I overheard one of our ministers, who had frequently written articles for the newspapers of his city on the Turkish question, say to a group of work- ers, “I will never write another article on this subject for the public press, be- cause every time I tell what the Turk is going to do he makes a fool of me by doing something entirely different.” [Olson then added:] By his erroneous inter- pretations and his unwarranted predictions, this good brother had created embarrassment both for himself and for the church ... Since the outbreak of the last World War I have heard a number of sermons on “Russia in Prophecy.” All of them have been disappointing (ibid.).

This long-standing habit of Seventh-day Adventist interpretations of Bible prophecies illustrates a major reason why they lost their image of true gospel witnesses of God and indicates a fundamental problem of traditional Adventist exegesis of the Scriptures. Today most informed Adventists are convinced that we need a more Christ-centred perspective in our understanding of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. Time took care of some errors, but the question needs to be faced: What was the reason of our failure? Why have we misinterpreted proph-

* The first denominational revival of the apostolic gospel during the General Conference sessions in 1888 in Minneapolis marked a turning point in refocusing the Adventist message on the gospel truth. Righteousness by faith in Christ became the central issue and was gradually recognized as the full faith of Jesus, the “third angel’s message in verity.” Froom even declared: “Its proclamation is the purpose of our existence as a people and as a Movement” (1971, 668).
ecy? George Santayana may remind us: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (Mansell 1999, 141). It is important for the church to periodically take time to stand back, evaluate, and refocus on its essential calling, to proclaim the “eternal gospel” of salvation and to be Bible based, Christ-centred, and Spirit-filled witnesses of God to the world.

2. Challenges to the Traditional Historicist Method

In 1980 the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists requested that its Biblical Research Institute establish an ad hoc committee, called the Daniel and Revelation Committee, to provide some answers to the growing doubts and urgent questions about traditional denominational interpretations of Bible prophecies, raised primarily by Desmond Ford in his book Daniel 8:14: The Day of Atonement and the Investigative Judgment (1980). As a result, the Daniel and Revelation Committee published between 1982 and 1992 seven scholarly volumes on Daniel and Revelation. But burning questions keep rising about denominational prophetic interpretation, such as the question about the validity and the limitations of the Adventist historicist method.

A completely new challenge presents itself in the Literary Analysis method that has been introduced persuasively into Adventism by some leading apocalyptic scholars like Kenneth A. Strand, William H. Shea, Jacques B. Doukhan, Jon Paulien, and others. These Bible scholars have presented their insights in the literary structures of Daniel and Revelation, but their benefits are still largely unknown to many Adventist pastors, teachers, and lay-members. Most of them know only the essence of the four traditional approaches to Daniel and Revelation, such as the historicist, the preterist, the futurist, and the idealist (or spiritual) methods of interpretation. Recently, these four major approaches of interpreting Revelation have been conveniently collected in four parallel columns by Steve Gregg (1997). His sections on the “History of Interpretation” (Gregg 1997, 28–34), and the “Analysis of the Four Approaches” (Gregg 1997, 34–49) are instructive. Gregg briefly sums up the essence of each approach as follows:


The historicist approach is still recognized as a method to be reckoned with, even though it is severely criticized. Its weakness is seen in “the inability of its advocates to agree upon the specific fulfilsments of the prophecies” (Gregg 1997, 36). Another criticism is that “[i]t is concerned mainly with the period of the Middle Ages and the Reformation and has relatively little to say of developments after A.D. 1500” (Tenney 1976, 96). J. Barton Payne, on the other hand, complained
that the historicists “seem always to discover the climax of prophecy in their own
day” (1973, 593). Eugene Boring asserts that “into the twentieth century, no criti-
cal New Testament scholar today advocates this [historicist] view” (Gregg 1997,
33). Some Seventh-day Adventist scholars, like Kai Arasola in his The End of
Historicism (1990), and also Desmond Ford (1980), assert that the date-fixing of
1844 by the Millerite Movement has discredited the Historical School of pro-
phetic interpretation beyond recovery, and that the “year-day principle” has
proven to be highly questionable.

Gregg reports, however: “Modern Seventh-day Adventists, also, with their widely
promoted ‘Revelation Seminars,’ present their own version of this approach, con-
necting at many points with the views of the historic Protestant commentators”
(Gregg 1997, 34). And he adds that “a small movement of Evangelicals are trying
to revive respect for this view as the true understanding of the Book of Revela-
tion” (ibid.).

A reply to these radical critiques of Historicism must respond that most of them
are seriously overstated because historicist interpreters have generally agreed on
some major fulfilments of prophecy, such as the antichrist identity during the
Middle Ages, the year-day conversion of the 1260-day prophecy, and the future
of the Millennium of Revelation 20, to be introduced by the Second Advent and
the literal resurrection of the dead (Froom 1950, 739, 750; 1954, 205–206).

Froom himself frankly admits:

True, the Protestant Historicists differed considerably as to when to begin and
when to end the 1260-day period of Antichrist, but they were all united in the
conviction that a period of 1260 years had been allotted to him, and that it was
drawing toward its close. The precise location of the period could scarcely be
determined with accuracy until the closing event took place. This is one of the
clear characteristics of prophecy – that history is the true and final interpreter
of prophecy (Froom 1948, 794–795).

History also shows, however, that many historicist expositors have proposed dif-
ferent date-settings for the Second Coming or the Millennium. For instance, the
respected Professor Joseph Mede (1586–1638) at Cambridge University in Eng-
land, calculated the beginning of the Millennium as the year 1736, based on the
idea that it would happen 1260 years after the end of the Roman Empire in 476, a
view that became standard in seventeenth-century England. In Germany, the in-
fluential Professor Johann A. Bengel (1687–1752) predicted that the year 1836
would be the beginning of the Millennium, a date accepted also by John Wesley
(Froom 1948, 710–711). The incessant failures of date-settings for the future
made by these and numerous other interpreters indicate a definite shortcoming in
the historicist school (Baumgartner 2001). Boring clearly overstated his criticism
that historicists have limited themselves to the Middle Ages, because many ar-
duced that the papacy’s domination would end about A.D. 1800, and expected the
fulfilment of the 2300-day prophecy of Daniel 8 around A.D. 1844, although they
differed as to just what would then take place. A number of historicists also ar-
gued for the prophetic significance of the French Revolution (Froom 1954). Froom convincingly demonstrates that “the dawn of the nineteenth century marked the beginning of the third distinctive epoch of prophetic interpretation in the Christian era” (Froom 1954, 382, 388–410). Its major attention was focused on Daniel 8 and on the flying angels of Revelation 14, “with the renewed proclamation of the everlasting gospel and the heralding of the judgment hour” (Froom 1954, 390). Such are some of the overlooked facts of the historicist school.

3. The Need of Defining the Historicist Method

It seems mandatory to establish a definition of the historicist method of prophetic interpretation and what its purpose and focus are. Historicism is defined by LeRoy Edwin Froom as: “the progressive and continuous fulfilment of prophecy, in unbroken sequence, from Daniel’s day and the time of John, on down to the second advent and the end of the age” (1946, 22–23). Seen in this light, prophecy serves as the “rainbow of promise, painted by the finger of God” (Froom 1954, 1173).

The question must be raised, however, whether Froom did not press his definition of the fulfilsments in an “unbroken” sequence beyond what divine revelation allows. The definition of Bryan W. Ball seems more adequate: “Historicism is the approach that sets Daniel and the Revelation within the context of history, and sees the progressive fulfilment of prophecy against that background and in relationship to the onward course of world history” (1981, 204).

Froom defines the benefit of understanding prophecy in that it “shows where mankind has come from, just where he is in the inexorable stream of time, and where under God he is going” (Froom 1954, 1171). Again his definition seems to overstate the benefit of knowing “just where he is in the stream of history.” Such precise beliefs were the convictions of almost every generation in Church history. One researcher calls it “a timeless obsession” and concludes: “Since the first century, each generation has claimed that they were the last generation; the generation that would see the glorious appearing of their God and saviour Jesus Christ” (Abanes 1998, 155).

Froom states that the recognition of an actual fulfilment of prophecy has unfolded only “in proportion as history has fulfilled each succeeding epoch or major event of prophecy” (Froom 1956, 1172). In other words, it can be said that “prophecy has been understood just as fast as history has fulfilled it, step by step, down through the passing centuries” (Froom 1946, 15). Rightly understood, prophecy “results in an ever-radiant optimism” and “assures mankind that the Paradise of Eden is soon to be restored” (ibid., 1173).

Froom’s ideal picture of historicism is frequently tarnished, however, by the fact that many interpreters assumed the role of prophets for themselves, asserting overconfidently certain future fulfilments of prophecy. Sir Isaac Newton, a life-
long student of the Book of Daniel, wisely cautioned to focus strictly on the divine purpose of Bible prophecies:

The folly of Interpreters has been to foretell times and things by this Prophecy, as if God designed to make them Prophets. By this rashness they have not only exposed themselves, but brought the Prophecy also into contempt. The design of God was much otherwise. He gave this [the Book of Daniel] and the Prophecies of the Old Testament, not to gratify men’s curiosities by enabling them to foreknow things, but that after they were fulfilled they might be interpreted by the event, and his own Providence, not the Interpreters, be then manifested thereby to the world (1733, 251).

Prophecy was not given to enable us to become prophets ourselves, but to point to God’s providential rule when prophecy is actually fulfilled in salvation history. This view appears to be in harmony with Jesus’ statement in John 13:19, “I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am He.” Here Jesus mentions the aspect of personal faith that needs to be recognized. A genuine fulfilment of prophecy, such as the first advent of the promised Messiah, was not self-evident to all. Even the cross of Christ was not self-explanatory. It requires faith in the Word of God to understand a fulfilment of prophecy. The Jews believed that the Messiah would come, but when he came they did not recognize him and “his own did not receive him” (Jn. 1:11). John the Baptist in his prison cell needed special direction from Jesus to let him “see” the fulfilment of the messianic prophecies (Mt. 11:2–6). Similarly, we need not be surprised that many Christians did not see a fulfilment of the biblical antichrist in the Middle Ages. It takes a thorough appreciation of the gospel truth before one can detect and evaluate the historic usurpation of Christ’s unique work and prerogatives within Christendom. Luther discovered Christ and his saving gospel before he identified the biblical antichrist. This order suggests that we need to focus our attention first on Christ and His saving work before we are able to discern the end-time significance of the antichrist predictions in Daniel and Revelation. It requires the illuminating and convincing work of the Holy Spirit on the heart of the searcher after truth, before the redemptive light of Scripture is recognized. Pascal already discerned that saving knowledge “is a science not of the intellect, but of the heart” (Pensées, 2, 17, 106).

4. The Validity of the Historicist Approach

Different approaches harbour different hermeneutical principles. More is involved in the four schools of interpreting Daniel and Revelation than their focus on different parts or aspects of salvation history. The origin of the various methods indicates that also different interpretative principles are involved. This implies the need for a proper evaluation of hermeneutical presuppositions before starting to
interpret Bible prophecy and criticizing the interpretations of others. The method of interpreting the prophecies of Daniel used by Jesus and Paul was that of a continuous-historical approach. They applied Daniel’s portrayal of the fourth beast (chapter 7) to the Roman Empire and to its persecution of the people of God and his Messiah (see Mt. 24:15–29; Lk. 21:20–24; and 2 Th. 2:3–8).

The early church fathers like Irenaeus and Tertullian, also adopted this continuous-historical approach to Daniel and Revelation, when they expected the rise of the predicted antichrist after the breakup of the Roman Empire (Froom 1946, 252, 257–258). This historicist method was revived by the Protestant Reformers of the 16th century, who applied the biblical antichrist to papal Rome, its claims of true worship, and its cruel inquisitions of the Middle-Ages. In other words, the antichrist was declared to be an ecclesiastical system, not an individual. This historical identification of the prophesied antichrist became the standard Protestant interpretation of Daniel and Revelation for more than three hundred years (Froom 1946, 789–796).

In the third century a different hermeneutic was proposed by Origen, the leading theologian in Alexandria, Egypt: the allegorizing method of interpreting Scripture. He spiritualized the symbolic language of Scripture by following the allegorical methods of Plato and of the Jewish Platonist Philo. As a result of his spiritualizing interpretation he diminished the historical sense of Scripture, and swept away the biblical doctrines of the early church: the literal resurrection of the dead, the millennium, the destruction of the antichrist, and the establishment of the kingdom of God. Origen’s structure of the allegorical interpretation “turned the church away from her historic positions on prophecy” (Froom 1946, 315). This allegorizing method prevailed in the medieval church until the Reformers restored the historicist approach again.

In reaction to the Protestant applications of prophecy to the papal antichrist, two Jesuit scholars arose in Spain, “determined to lift the stigma from the papacy by locating antichrist at some point where he could not be applied to the Roman church” (Froom 1946, 485). In this crisis of major proportions, the Counter Reformation attacked the prophetic positions on which all Protestants were agreed by two counter interpretations, both of which applied the method of a literal interpretation of all the prophetic symbols. Froom rightly comments, “But prophecy that is written in symbolic language must be symbolically explained” (Froom 1946, 794). Nevertheless, the Spanish Jesuit Alcasar introduced in 1614 the preterist method of interpretation, to prove that the prophecies of antichrist were fulfilled in certain Roman emperors, long before the popes ever ruled in Rome, and thus could not apply to the papacy.

On the other hand, the Spanish Jesuit Ribera created in 1580 the idea that the prophecies referred only to the antichrist as a future supernatural individual who would rule for three and a half years from a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem (Froom 1946, 486). Ribera is therefore widely regarded as the founder of the futurist system that was later adopted and enlarged with the rapture theory by many fundamentalist evangelicals. The essence of both preterism and futurism is the use of
literalism as the principle of prophetic interpretation, revealing its fundamental inadequacy in that both systems contradict and annul each other (Armogathe 1999, ch. 6).

The method of a literal application of the apocalyptic symbols is a rationalistic philosophy imposed on the symbolic portrayals. The intentional meaning of Holy Scripture is a theological meaning because prophecy centres in the work of the covenant God and of his divine Messiah. The method of literalism is missing the theological dimension and denies the “great controversy” theme of the symbolic portrayals. Literalism in prophetic interpretation is therefore the archenemy of the “God-and-Christ-centred” principle of interpreting Bible prophecy. As long as the historicist approach adheres to the covenant history that is centred in the messianic people of God, its progressive applications to church history will retain their Christ-centred nature and theological validity.

5. New Discovery of the Artistic Composition of Daniel and Revelation

During the last decennia various Bible scholars began to appreciate the internal artistry of John’s Apocalypse and concentrated on the literary composition of the book and on its structural unity. The new conviction grew that “the key to understanding a work is its literary form” (Collins 1983). Also C. Mervyn Maxwell discovered that the symmetrical pattern of John’s Apocalypse, with its structure of an inverse parallelism, provides “one of the most helpful possible keys for unlocking the book’s meaning” (1985b, 54). Among Seventh-day Adventists, Kenneth A. Strand and William H. Shea have been the leading Bible scholars in the literary structure of the prophetic books (see their contributions to Holbrook 1992). One major benefit of the literary analysis of the book of Revelation, namely the discovery of its chiastic structure, was accepted by the Daniel and Revelation Committee of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists as a valid key for a better understanding of the book of Revelation:

The literary structure divides the book of Revelation into two major sections: (1) a historical section (Rev 1–14) that emphasizes the experience of the church and related events during the Christian Era, and (2) an eschatological (end-time) section (Rev 15–22) that focuses particularly on end-time events and the end of the world (Holbrook 1992b, 177).

As a result of this new appreciation of the literary structure, an interpretation of Daniel and Revelation can no longer detach a text or chapter from the total composition and try to fit the dissected part with some event of world history. The literary approach provides a new standard for evaluating the exegesis of Daniel and the Revelation by previous historicists. Revelation is ingeniously structured as an inverse parallelism, in which a promise in the first half of the book consistently matches its counterpart fulfilment in the second half (Badenas 1992, 265). Revelation is now widely recognized as an in-
 divisible Scriptural unit, with “an overall chiastic pattern in which prologue and epilogue are counterparts and in which the intervening major prophetic sequences or visions are also paired in a chiastic or inverse order (Strand, 1992).” A look at the menorah-like composition of Revelation, with its seven-armed chiastic structure, reveals not only the compositional unity of the book but also the main emphasis of its end-time message in chapters 10–14 (LaRondelle 2000, 54). This new insight teaches the unbreakable unity of John’s Apocalypse, so that the seven letters of Christ in chapters 1–3 can no longer be dissected from the rest of the book (chapters 4–22) which Dispensationalism then applies to a strictly Jewish audience “after the Church Age ends” (Scofield 1967, 1351). However, a similar challenge comes also to those historicists who dissect passages of Scripture from their context and apply them exclusively to secular, political events in world history (for instance, Revelation 11:3–13; Daniel 11:36–39, and 40–45; Rev. 16:12–21, and others passages). Evidently, prophetic interpretations are substantially influenced by hermeneutical presuppositions and by the insight, or lack thereof, in the artistry of the apocalyptic writers. Interpreters may even defend an unbiblical understanding when they are unaware of the hermeneutical principles inherent in the inspired writings. Consistency requires that interpreters do not mix irreconcilable principles of interpretation, but persistently follow the inspired principles that are revealed in the New Testament gospel.

Adventism is not immune to misinterpreting Bible prophecy, especially when its interpreter is not educated in a thorough exegesis of Scripture, governed by a Christocentric hermeneutic. Ellen White sadly warned: “Many will stand in our pulpits with the torch of false prophecy in their hands, kindled from the hellish torch of Satan” (1962, 409–410). Adventist Bible scholars are becoming increasingly convinced that the traditional historicist applications of God’s Word need to be re-examined and to be more critically evaluated by a contextual exegesis, guided by Christocentric hermeneutics.

Reference List


Résumé
Quand on considère les différentes interprétations contradictoires de la méthode historiciste dans le passé, le besoin d’une définition adéquate s’impose. La norme d’un emploi correct de cette méthode d’interprétation prophétique se trouve dans les applications des perspectives apocalyptiques contenues dans le livre de Daniel faites par Jésus et par Paul. L’histoire de l’alliance, centrée autour du Messie envoyé par Dieu et de son peuple, est le cœur de l’interprétation apocalyptique. Cette structure christocentrique définit le système herméneutique; elle sert de test confirmant la validité de l’historicisme. De plus, la mise en évidence d’une structure littéraire chiastique cohérente dans le livre de Daniel et dans l’Apocalypse devrait être reconnue pour asseoir l’unité indivisible des visions prophétiques. Cela peut fonctionner comme un correctif, qui permet d’éviter l’application de sections isolées des Ecritures à des événements historiques.

Zusammenfassung

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