Is the Adventist Hermeneutical Approach to Daniel and Revelation Changing?¹

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Abstract

This article investigates whether, within Seventh-day Adventism, the hermeneutical approach is changing, in particular with regard to the prophetic portions of Daniel and Revelation: Is the traditional historicist position still dominant or are other approaches also making inroads? A number of official and semi-official sources are surveyed, as well as publications from scholars and popular authors. The article zooms in on the treatment of four issues in the interpretation of apocalyptic prophecy: (1) the year-day principle, (2) the identity of the little horn (Dan. 7) and the sea-beast (Rev. 13), (3) the seal of God and the mark of the beast, and (4) the number 666. It appears that the historicist approach continues to receive support, most strongly in official and semi-official publications, but less so in books by scholars and popular authors. Authors in the two latter categories are also inclined to attribute value to other approaches besides historicism. Quite generally, there is a tendency to be less specific, when compared to the past, in making specific historical applications to particular symbols.

It could be the dream of any Adventist author or Adventist publisher to hear the president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church during a world congress give an unequivocal endorsement of a book that has just been written or published. That was what Pastor Ted N.C. Wilson did when, after having emphasized the importance of approaching the Bible in as literal a way as possible,
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he encouraged the church members to use a recent book, prepared by the Biblical Research Institute, as their hermeneutical guide. He said: “Utilize wonderful resources such as the Biblical Research Institute’s new book on hermeneutics that helps us know the correct way to interpret the Scriptures.” In giving this ringing endorsement he spoke in clear support of the traditional Adventist approach to the study of the Bible, including the use of the historicist option in dealing with the apocalyptic prophecies of Daniel and Revelation.

In this article I want to address this element of traditional Adventist hermeneutics by surveying the way in which recent publications have approached this matter, and to investigate whether any clear hermeneutical shift is discernible. If so, this may inspire further studies with regard to implications for Adventist theology and evangelistic practice.

I will single out a few particular issues in Daniel and Revelation, to illustrate how a particular approach works out in the exegesis of the actual Bible text. I have selected about twenty books which have been published since 2000. A few of these have an official or semi-official status. These include the Seventh-day Adventist Handbook of Theology (Dederen 2000), two publications of the BRI (Reid 2006; Pfandl 2010), and the Andrews Study Bible (Dybdahl 2010). In addition, I have chosen a few publications that have been written by prominent Adventist theology professors: Jacques Doukhan (2000a; 2000b); Ekkehardt Mueller (2015), Jon Paulien (2004; 2007; 2008; 2009), Ranko Stefanović (2002), Zdravko Stefanović (2007) and Sigve K. Tonstad (2019). And, finally, I have taken a good look at a few books that are of a more popular nature, such as The Remnant Study Bible (2009) and books by Marvin Moore (2001; 2007; 2008), Mike Tucker (2007), Francis Njau (2010), Reimar Vetne (2016), and the book that was co-authored by Steve Case and Daniel Wysong


3 Tonstad’s book is published by a non-Adventist publisher and is intended for a wider public, which is clearly reflected in its approach and avoidance of Adventist jargon.

4 This categorization does not imply any judgment on the scholarly capacities of any of these authors, but only underlines that they intentionally write in a more popular way for a broader (mostly Adventist) public.

5 For an extensive review and a comparison of the Andrews Study Bible and the Remnant Study Bible, see Bruinsma 2011, 52–58.
I have not included in this study any of the publications and other media products about apocalyptic themes that constantly flow from a wide range of independent ministries, which operate mostly on the conservative fringe of the Adventist Church.

1. Our Historicist Heritage

Historicism has ancient credentials. Most Adventist authors on Daniel and Revelation do not fail to mention this fact and regard it as a key argument for choosing the historicist option. Historicism may indeed have a long track record, but we must recognize that over time the general picture within the Christian world has changed, and the preterist, futurist and idealist approaches have won many adherents, while dispensationalists have applied the historicist approach in ways that Adventists strongly reject. Norman Gulley, an Adventist systematic theologian, possibly overstates his case when he claims that Adventists stand virtually alone, when defending historicism, but his point is well taken (Gulley 1998, 66).

In a book in which the various hermeneutical approaches to biblical apocalyptic prophecy are compared, some rather striking statements by proponents of the various options may be found. The person writing in defense of preterism concluded:

**Preterism seems to me to provide the most coherent, relevant, and exegetically sound approach to the most difficult book of the Bible. The preterist principle can be abused, of course – some liberals adopt it, devoid of its supernaturalism, of course. But so can the futurist principle…. The same can be said about the idealist and the progressivist principles. The task of the serious Christian is to carefully weigh the issues in the balance of the whole of Scripture.** (Gentry 1998, 92)

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6 Most Adventist publications on eschatology are of American vintage and are written by professors in the American SDA colleges and universities. Many Adventist publications on eschatology in other languages are, in fact, translations from American originals.

7 Some of the best known are the 3ABN ministries, Doug Batchelor’s *Amazing Facts*, Walter Veith’s *Amazing Discoveries*, David Gates’ *International Gospel Ministries*, and Stephen Bohr’s *Secrets Unsealed*.


9 There are a few organizations that stridently promote historicism, such as the Historicism Research Foundation, with the Australian professor Francis Nigel Lee (a Presbyterian) as the key person (see www.historicism.net).
The representative of the *idealist* approach does not agree, but claims that his approach is superior: “I am convinced for several reasons, that the idealist approach stands on a stronger hermeneutical foundation than the other approaches ...” (Hamstra 1998, 128). Dispensationalist Robert L. Thomas is, however, convinced that his approach is best: “A *dispensational* view of Revelation strives for objectivity by putting aside all preunderstanding and bias, so that the text of the book may speak for itself” (Thomas 1998, 227).

Adventist theologian Jon K. Paulien, who defends historicism, is just as adamant as the three authors just mentioned: “The *historicist* view remains the best approach to apocalyptic prophecy” (Paulien 2006, 268). Elsewhere he states: “It [historicism] takes all the evidence of the Bible seriously” (Paulien 2009, 17).

Paulien echoes a long-established Adventist position: The historicist approach unlocks the meaning of Daniel and Revelation. Adventists inherited the historicist approach from their Millerite forebears (Davidson 2000, 96). However, Kai Arasola, the Finnish scholar who investigated the methodology of William Miller, concluded that many of Miller’s conclusions did not pass into Adventist thinking, and that the 1844 debacle which confronted the Millerites contributed to “the end of historicism.” Yet, Arasola admitted that historicism did not die with Miller. It still lives in a modified and partly renewed¹⁰ form within the groups that have some roots in Millerism.... On the one hand, he [Miller] contributed to the end of a dominant system of exegesis, on the other hand, he is regarded as a spiritual father by millions of Christians who have taken some parts of the Millerite exegesis as their raison d’être. (Arasola 1990, 171‒172)

2. **Qualified Support for Historicism**

Today, the historicist approach to apocalyptic prophecy represents a minority position. Academic interpretations tend to favor preterism, “while the popular market has embraced futurism” (Tonstad 2019, 27). The official teaching of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, however, remains firmly rooted in historicism. This was recently underlined in the *Consensus Statement* voted by the approximately four hundred participants in a conference on eschatology, held

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¹⁰ See Hans K. LaRondelle 2005 for some remarks as to how Adventists renewed the Millerite historicist approach.
in Rome (Italy) from June 11 to June 21, 2018. It was one of the regularly scheduled Bible conferences that are organized by the BRI, intended for Adventist theology teachers, pastors and church leaders. The statement that was voted included this paragraph: “We affirm that the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation are foundational for the understanding of biblical eschatology and that the historicist method is the proper approach to interpreting them.”

Yet, when looking at Adventist authors who have written about apocalyptic prophecy in the last two decades, we find that in many cases their support for historicism is qualified in different ways. In the chapter “Biblical Apocalyptic” in the Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology, William H. Johnsson argues for a historicist emphasis but does not push it too strongly. Daniel and Revelation manifest “a cosmic range of apocalyptic prophecy,” that covers history from the days of the prophets to the end of time (Johnsson 2000, 795). He adds that preterist and futurist interpretations, or such interpretations that make the prophetic message “no more than the eternal confrontation between the forces of good and evil,” are inadequate (Johnsson 2000, 796‒797). In contrast, he concludes, “historicism, though sometimes marred by diverse, sensational, speculative and contradictory approaches, appears as the most valid hermeneutical approach in the biblical apocalypses” (Johnsson 2000, 797).

The Andrews Study Bible, though avoiding Adventist jargon in its notes and comments on the apocalyptic sections of the Bible, makes it clear that it operates on the basis of the historicist principle: “The historicist position takes the full evidence of these portion of Scripture most seriously” (Dybdahl 2010, 1659). But, while the over-all method is considered as sound, exact applications, the Andrews Study Bible suggests, are often uncertain. Moreover, each of the other approaches (preterism, futurism and idealism), “have a point, as long as that point is not taken to an extreme.” The idealist perspective is “certainly helpful, provided it does not lead us to ignore the global, historical, and political implications of the book [of Revelation]” (Dybdahl 2010, 1659).

In one of his books Professor Jon Paulien, a specialist in the Book of Revelation, makes the same point. He suggests that historicism has its problems. If we limit ourselves to a historicist reading of apocalyptic prophecy, “then much of it doesn’t apply directly to the point of time in which we now live….

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[It] is often very dry and leaves people wonder about the spiritual meaning.” All approaches (historicist, but also preterist, futurist and idealist) “have a certain degree of validity” (Paulien 2004, 29–30).

In the commentaries of Doukhan on Daniel and on Revelation, historicism is assumed rather than explicitly defended. Although one might argue that Doukhan’s books also betray traces of idealism, the author maintains that a historicist approach is dictated by the context and stresses that there is much more beyond the spiritual dimension of these books:

In Hebrew thinking, though, truth is not a spiritual or philosophical message designed only to nurture our soul and our minds. Instead, biblical truth is essentially historical. God speaks in history. And whatever explanation or whatever emphasis we want to give to the date fulfilling the prophecy, we should not be surprised that biblical prophecy takes the risk of entering the flesh of history, even our modern history. (Doukhan 2000, 152)

In his recent commentary Zdravko Stefanović, a theology professor at AdventHealth University (Orlando, Florida, USA), does not deny the important historical applications of Daniel. But he is also keen to pay attention to the meaning for the original readers and to contemporary applications (Stefanović 2007, 9). Daniel’s purpose is not to provide objective history, but to point at the truths that lay behind the historical facts. His brother Ranko Stefanović, who teaches theology at Andrews University (Berrien Springs, Michigan, USA), expresses himself in rather similar ways with regard to the book of Revelation. He finds the historicist approach “sometimes problematic,” because of the difficulty of fitting every detail of the text into a historical fulfilment. On the other hand, he says, the alternative approaches can only have some validity, “if the prophetic elements are taken into consideration and applied to the time that extends beyond John’s days” (Stefanović 2002, 11). This position appears to have some resemblance to that of Desmond Ford (Ford 1978, 65–72), whose “apotelesmatic” principle – which stressed the positive elements in preterism, futurism, and idealism – caused major theological uproar in the Adventist Church in 1980s and beyond (Ouro 1888, 326–342). Ranko Stefanović calls for making case-by-case judgments:

The exposition of the text must be controlled by the intent of its author, who should tell us what we are supposed to find in it. If the message of the studied text was primarily for John’s days, then it calls for the
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preterist or idealist approach. On the other hand, if it discusses the very end of times, then its interpretation calls for a futurist approach. If the studied text presents the events occurring throughout the course of history, however, a sound interpretation calls for a historicist interpretation of the text. Strong evidence must demonstrate that the scenes and symbols in the text point to events throughout all of history, rather than those primarily in John’s times or the time of the end. (Stefanović 2002, 12)

In the second edition of his commentary, Ranko Stefanović somewhat modifies his views regarding this matter without, however, retracting them (Reynolds 2010, 27–28).

Sigve Tonstad emphasizes that any interpretation of the Revelation must be adequate and relevant (Tonstad 2019, 28). He opines that the major “schools” of interpretation are all found wanting in these respects. Repeatedly he points to the inadequacies of the preterist view. “Revelation trains its sight on values more than events, and is God-centered more than time-centered” (Tonstad 2019, 29). The central theme is the cosmic conflict between good and evil (Tonstad 2019, 20).

The more popular authors whom I have included in this review do not spend much energy on defending the historicist approach to apocalyptic prophecy. Marvin Moore, a prolific author and editor at the Pacific Press Publishing Association, and the African author Francis Njau simply assume the validity of the historicist option. The same applies to the Remnant Study Bible. No attempt is made to explain why the historicist approach is the best option, but the principle is simply applied (1575–1582). Mike Tucker’s book is primarily pastoral in intent, and looks particularly for contemporary spiritual lessons. But underneath one can detect the tacit assumption that historicism is a valid principle. Yet, it could be argued that Tucker’s book in some places clearly shows idealist tendencies.

In their book about the Revelation, which places Jesus at the center of everything that is said in this Bible book, the authors – Steve Case and Daniel Wysong – briefly discuss the various approaches to apocalyptic prophecy. They conclude that “each of the four schools [of interpretation] has merit, and yet each gets stuck by insisting that it is the only possible interpretation.” (Case and Wysong 2014, 4) Readers of the Revelation, they say, must let the text speak for itself and then determine which sections focus mainly on the
first century, which have particular meaning for the end-time, and which relate to events in past history. And “we certainly can find passages with powerful spiritual application for any believer who listens” (Case and Wysong 2014, 4).

Gerhard Pfandl and Ekkehardt Mueller, both prominent staff members of the Biblical Research Institute during the period under review, do not agree. They see a major difficulty in this eclectic approach, since it leaves the exegete with the problem of how to determine what method is appropriate (Pfandl and Mueller 2010, 81).

The somewhat different levels of qualified support of historicism may be partly due to different definitions. Reimar Vetne has pointed out that many Bible exegetes operate with a particular understanding of preterism and of the other non-historicist approaches, which may not always be totally accurate, and therefore tend to define historicism in an all-or-nothing way.12 Vetne suggests that a definition of historicism must allow for enough room for applying certain passages specifically to the authors’ days, and some specifically to the final days which are yet future (Vetne 2003, 7).

3. Historicism at Work
It seems fair to conclude that in recent Adventist publications historicism is still used as the main hermeneutical principle in interpreting apocalyptic prophecy, even though there is often not the across-the-board unqualified stamp of approval historicism once received. We will find confirmation of this when we look at a few topics that have consistently played an important role in the Adventist understanding of Daniel and Revelation. We will look briefly at the way our various recent authors have dealt with these particular facets. I have chosen (1) the year-day principle, (2) the identity of the little horn of Daniel 7, the sea beast of Revelation 12 and the land beast in Revelation 13, (3) the meaning of the seal of God and the mark of the beast, and (4) the meaning of the number 666.

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12 As we find, for instance, in: Shea 2003, 22.
3.1 Year-Day-Principle

It is rather surprising to discover that, generally speaking, very little effort is made to provide a solid basis for the validity of the so-called year-day principle, which stipulates that in apocalyptic time prophecies one day symbolizes one literal year, one month stands for 30 years, and one year for 360 years. Several authors refer to the extensive study by William H. Shea (Shea 1982, 67‒110), which is probably the most thorough treatment given to the topic by any Seventh-day Adventist scholar. Marvin Moore also provides detailed information about the historical antecedents of the year-day principle (Moore 2008, 116‒124). Usually, if any justification for the application of this principle is given at all, reference is simply made to Numbers 14:34 and Ezekiel 4:4‒8 as proof texts. In these two passages, days are used as a symbol to represent years. Although these passages are situated in a prophetic context, they are not, however, connected to any long-term prophetic time periods.

The year-day principle, which is closely linked to the historicist approach to apocalyptic prophecy, has a venerable tradition, and was an important aspect of the Millerite heritage. The application of the principle to the 70-week prophecy of Daniel 9:25 was “the ultimate proof of its suitability…. Like earlier historicists, he [Miller] believed that a 490-year period leading up to the time of Christ was an unarguable conclusion for any discussion on the year for a day theory” (Arasola 1990, 87). Gerhard Pfandl and Ekkehardt Mueller call the year-day principle the “backbone of historicism” (2010, 81‒83).

Johnsson argues that the statements of time periods in Daniel and Revelation are found in a symbolic context. Hermeneutical consistency, therefore, would require that these time periods, which are described as days, months, or times, are treated as symbolic (Johnsson 2000, 797). Paulien also stresses that there is a strong exegetical basis for interpreting the time prophecies as symbolic (Paulien 2010, 210.257.268). For Doukhan it is clear that the year-day principle is dictated by the context in which the time prophecies occur (Doukhan 2000, 108), but he hardly discusses the matter any further. In his commentary on Revelation, one short footnote refers the reader to a few remarks in his previous book on Daniel (Doukhan 2002, 97). Zdravko Stefanović accepts the year-day principle, but limits his justification to a reference to Shea and Doukhan (Stefanović 2007, 282). Ranko Stefanović, when discussing the

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13 See for instance Remnant Study Bible, 158; Andrews Study Bible, 1673.
1260 day period, is a little less explicit and suggests that “these time designations have more qualitative than quantitative significance” (Stefanović 2002, 379). But it is clear that he applies the year-day principle (albeit perhaps more loosely) when he refers to this 1260 day time period as a period “of approximately 1200 years,” during which God’s people were under attack (Stefanović 2002, 384). Tonstad concludes that the prophetic time periods, such as the 1260 days, cannot refer to literal days, but seem to denote “a considerable time period” (Tonstad 2019, 163.185).

Mike Tucker assumes the validity of the year-day principle, when he mentions a twelve-hundred year period of persecution during the Dark Ages (Tucker 2007, 97). Reimar Vetne, likewise, emphasizes that “days” in apocalyptic portions of the Bible must be symbolic, and refer to years, if they are to make sense (Vetne 2016, 62–64). Case and Wysong mention the year-day-principle only in passing. Those who take “days” as symbolic, “follow a concept of each day of prophetic time meaning a year of literal time” (Case and Wysong 2014, 88). Francis Njau thinks that it is not a question whether the year-day principle is legitimate, but when it should be used (Njau 2010, 252). Some passages, such as Daniel 8:14, make sense only when interpreted symbolically (Njau 2010, 238).

3.2 The Identity of Daniel’s Little Horn and of the Sea-Beast and the Land-Beast in Revelation 13

The identity of the little horn in Daniel 7 was from the very start of the Adventist movement seen as one of the capstones for the apocalyptic framework. There was no doubt in the mind of the Adventist pioneers, and of most Adventist thought leaders since then, that this symbol represents the institutional Roman Catholic Church, since they believed the description of this horn clearly matches the characteristics of this religious and political power. Although the books under review in this article by-and-large support this thesis, there are considerable differences in the way in which this conviction is expressed, as a few examples will demonstrate.

Frank B. Holbrook in his chapter on the “Great Controversy” theme in the Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology (Holbrook 2000, 969–1009), remains quite vague regarding the identity of the persecuting power that wages an unremitting war against the saints, and the “beasts of Revelation” are not specifically identified (Holbrook 2000, 990–991). Only in the final section of his
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chapter the Roman Catholic Church is briefly referred to by name: “As Protestants, employing historicist principles of prophetic interpretation, the pioneers of the [Adventist] movement were familiar with the identification of the little horn (Dan. 7:8,21,25), and the seven-headed leopardlike beast (Rev. 13:1–10) with the Roman Papacy” (Holbrook 2000, 1002).

For Marvin Moore, the evil role of the Catholic Church in the course of history and in the end-time scenario is crystal clear. From their study of Daniel and Revelation, Adventists know, he argues, that the apostate forces of the future will be under the leadership of Rome (Moore 2001, 17). He states: “I agree with the traditional Adventist view that the first beast of Revelation 13 is the papacy. I agree that at the very least the papacy was the antichrist during the Middle Ages and will be an important antichrist during the final conflict” (Moore 2010, 99). In his book Challenges to the Remnant, in particular, Moore minces no words in his discussion of the historic, present and future role of Catholicism. His use of language is a reminder of what used to be the common Adventist manner of speaking about Roman Catholicism (Moore 2010, passim). This is also true of the treatment given to the Daniel 7 prophecy by Francis Njau (Njau 2010, 186–193).

The users of the Remnant Study Bible will note that the Ellen G. White quotations clearly identify the little horn and the sea-beast as Roman Catholicism, and the land-beast as the United States of America (2009, 1528–1534; Bruinsma 2011, 35–42). In the notes of the Andrews Study Bible, the little horn and the sea-beast of Rev. 13 are said to be powers with a religious agenda, but no specific mention is made of the papacy. Somewhat surprisingly therefore, in the note for Rev. 13:11 the land-beast of Rev. 13 is more clearly named: “According to many interpreters, it is a symbol for the United States of America” (Dybdahl 2010, 1676).

In his 2007 book with daily devotional readings, Jon Paulien does not to intend to engage in “dissecting beasts in detail as representatives of sweeping events in history” (Paulien 2007, 8). He contents himself with referring to the “beast” of Revelation 13 as a counterfeit for the Son of God, the second entity of the pseudo-trinity of dragon, sea-beast and land-beast (Paulien 2007, 232). He reiterates this concept of a pseudo-trinity repeatedly in several other of his writings (Paulien 2008, 64ff.).

Ekkehardt Mueller, an associate director of the Biblical Research Institute of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, clearly identifies the little horn as the...
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Roman Catholic Church (Mueller 2015, 166). He argues that the little horn of Daniel 7 and the beast from the sea in Revelation 13 are symbols for the same power, namely ecclesiastical Rome. But this, he hastens to add, does not mean a depreciation of Catholic Christians. “The redemption of people is God’s concern. We, therefore, do not equate membership in a church with salvation or condemn people based on their religious affiliation” (Mueller 2015, 169).

Doukhan follows the Adventist tradition: The little horn and the sea-beast are symbols for the institutional Roman Catholic Church, but his language is rather mild. “We should not rush into the extreme of seeing features of the little horn in every aspect of Catholic Christianity.” And the symbol of the little horn extends beyond Catholicism: “The evil represented by the little horn appears in any religious community that allows intolerance, anti-Semitism, and human tradition to prevail over love, respect, and faithfulness to divine revelation” (Doukhan 2000, 110). Moreover, recognition of the faults in Catholicism should not lead us to an attitude of anti-Catholicism (Doukhan 2000, 111). The prophecy [of the sea-beast] “does not necessarily accuse the Catholic Church as such. The prophetic intention seeks less to condemn than to elucidate the meanders of history” (Doukhan 2002, 116). Doukhan identifies the land-beast, in line with Adventist tradition, as the United States of America (Doukhan 2002, 119–120).

Zdravko Stefanović lists eight characteristics of Daniel 7’s little horn and concludes that “only one entity really fits all these eight identifying marks,” namely “the religio-political power that gained prominence after the decline of the Roman empire,” i.e. the Roman papacy. But he does not dwell at any length on this and hastens to add that the world was also greatly blessed in many ways by the church of Western Europe (Stefanović 2007, 281). Ranko Stefanović is even more circumspect than his brother in linking prophecy with Roman Catholicism. “The sea beast represents all oppressive world powers, civil and religious, that oppressed God’s people from the establishment of the church at the Exodus down to the Second Coming” (Stefanović 2002, 411). Certainly, there is a match between aspects of the sea-beast and “medieval and post-medieval ecclesiastical rule,” but we must acknowledge, that applying the seventh head of the sea-beast to the medieval ecclesiastical power alone is inadequate. History equally depicts the same behavior of religious-political oppression and intolerance in the newly established Protestant orthodoxy in the
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Western world during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
(Stefanović 2002, 412)

The land-beast is more directly identified, namely as a symbol for the United States of America.

Mike Tucker follows much the same line as the Stefanović brethren. The sea-beast equals the little horn, and the symbolic language of the prophetic passages to describe these entities points to “a religio-political power that played a role in persecuting God’s people” for about twelve hundred years. Luther, he says, identified this power as the papacy. However, Tucker then refers to William G. Johnsson (without providing a reference), who “like others” see the “beast-power” as pointing to “any power that coerces matters of faith” (Tucker 2007, 97).

Tonstad does not identify the two beasts of Revelation 13 with any specific political or religious entities. He sees them as the “two witnesses” who represent Satan’s mission, in contrast to the “two witnesses” of Revelation 11 who are on God’s side (Tonstad 2019, 187–194).

3.3 The Seal of God and the Mark of the Beast

A somewhat similar picture emerges when we look at the “seal” given to the end time people of God and the “mark of the beast” that will be stamped on God’s end time enemies: In general, the Adventist tradition is adhered to, but the degree in which a clear identification is made (with Sabbath and Sunday respectively) varies significantly.

Hans K. LaRondelle, in his contribution to the Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology, states that “the end time seal of God represents the divine recognition of the obedience of faith to God’s commandments,” while “the mark of the beast represents a cultic sign of disobedience to one or more of God’s commandments” (LaRondelle 2000, 879). To the Adventist reader it is clear what is meant, but for the general reader this remains rather vague.

The Andrews Study Bible comments in a short note that “the seal of the living God” in Rev. 7:2 is “possibly a reference to the Sabbath” (Dybdahl 2010, 1669. 1677). The notes in this Study Bible connect the “mark of the beast” with a “counterfeit Sabbath” (Dybdahl 2000, 1676). Again, as may be expected, the Remnant Study Bible is far more explicit and extensive in its comments, which are accompanied by a selection of E.G. White quotations. It directly links
God’s seal with the Sabbath and the “mark of the beast” with Sunday-keeping.

Paulien maintains that the “mark of the beast” is not just about the end of time, but is a more general symbol for “divided loyalties” (Paulien 2007, 245; Paulien 2008, 172 ff.). Tonstad agrees and indicates that God’s seal cannot just refer to a particular point in time. Believers must be “sealed” by God, i.e. they need divine protection, at all times (Tonstad 2019, 132).

Reimar Vetne connects God’s seal with his gift of the Holy Spirit (Vetne 2016, 50). Jacques Doukhan expresses himself in similar ways: The seal and the mark are “outward signs of inner allegiance” (Doukhan 2002, 128). For Tucker these symbols stand for a “sign of ownership” (Tucker 2007, 108). Likewise, for Ranko Stefanović both the seal and the mark are a “sign of loyalty.” He does not highlight the role of the observance of Sabbath or Sunday to any extent and believes that the seal/mark application should not be limited to the day of worship, even though the observance of either day may at some point in time become a litmus test (Stefanović 2002, 371, 415, 416). Marvin Moore knows no such reticence. The mark of the beast is “observance of the Sunday when enforced by law” (Moore 2001, 203).

3.4 The Number 666

Finally, a few words about the “number of the beast,” the mysterious number six hundred and sixty-six. The “discovery” that the papal title Vicarius Filii Dei was the key to the solution of this mystery used to be a favorite argument for Adventist evangelists. The claim continues to be used in popular evangelism and in some publications, mainly at the fringe of the church, but by-and-large it is recognized that this interpretation is methodologically faulty and historically questionable, at the very least.¹⁴

The fact that Ellen G. White never connected 666 with the papacy explains the total silence on this point in the Remnant Study Bible. The Andrews Study Bible notices that 666 is a multiple of the number six and “may represent and emphasize counterfeit and falling short” (Dybdahl 2010, 1676). Tonstad points to the symbolic meaning of the number 7, which stands for completion

¹⁴ For an extensive discussion about this, see Valentine 1992, 273–275; and Bruinsma 1994, 143–147. Samuel Bacchiocchi, in his later years, turned against the traditional Adventist interpretation of 666; see: http://www.biblicalperspectives.com/endtimeissues/et_145.htm.
and perfection. The triple-6 “signifies an imitation that is a stunning imperfection” (Tonstad 2019, 198). Paulien remarks that lots of suggestions have been made to find the name that was somehow hidden in the alleged numerical value of 666. He mentions several examples, without making reference to any pope (Paulien 2007, 247). For Jacques Doukhan, 666 is “a symbol of God’s absence” (2002, 121). Case and Wysong warn against any attempt to identify 666 with any person or institution. It is “a symbol for humans disregarding God” (Case and Wyson, 2014, 102). Ranko Stefanović also warns against any play with numbers, as John has nowhere used gematria as a means of identification. It is significant that ancient Babylon employed the sexigesimal system (Stefanović 2002, 417). Mike Tucker also believes that the number is spiritual rather than literal (Stefanović 2007, 99).

4. Some Tentative Conclusions

Our investigation has shown that there is a definite tendency on the part of Adventist interpreters to remain loyal to basic framework Adventist interpretations, but many are increasingly reticent in making specific applications, and the language used is generally much less aggressive than was often the case in the past.

The number of Adventist publications, both scholarly and popular, on apocalyptic topics is extensive, and this brief study does not do justice to the entire range of opinion that these publications (also in non-print media) present. Yet our present study, though limited in scope (both with regard to the number of authors surveyed and the range of publications that were investigated), may lead to two significant, albeit tentative, conclusions.

(1) The historicist principle continues to be dominant among the hermeneutical approaches to apocalyptic prophecy by recent Adventist authors. The adherence to this principle tends to be most strongly expressed in those sources that may be considered as more or less authoritative in the Adventist denomination. The choice of the historicist option is more qualified among recognized scholars who are active in the field of apocalypticism, while there is a divergence of opinion among the more popular authors. The idealist approach may well be gaining some ground in Adventist apocalyptic thinking. Further research would be needed to substantiate this and it would, in particular, be interesting to know whether this idealist approach also gains in importance among the rank-and-file of church membership.
(2) When looking at a few selected topics, which are important in the Adventist eschatological tradition, to see how the historicist principle is applied, we find that there definitely is a significant tendency with several of the authors to be less explicit about the specific historicist application of certain symbols. In some cases an idealist interpretation is offered in addition to, or in the place of, a purely historicist application.

Further research could provide more evidence to either confirm or disconfirm these tentative conclusions. Opinions may differ as to whether these trends (if they can be further substantiated) are desirable or deplorable, but regardless of one’s convictions on that issue, I believe clarifying possible trends will be useful in any further discussion.
Reference List


Adventist Hermeneutical Approach to Daniel and Revelation


Zusammenfassung


Résumé

Cet article examine si, au sein de l’adventisme du septième jour, l’approche herméneutique est en train de changer, en particulier en ce qui concerne les parties prophétiques de Daniel et de l’Apocalypse: la position historiciste traditionnelle est-elle toujours dominante ou est-ce que d’autres approches émergent-elles également ? Un certain nombre de sources officielles et semi-officielles sont examinées, ainsi que des publications de spécialistes et d’auteurs. L’article se concentre sur le traitement de quatre questions dans l’interprétation de la prophétie apocalyptique: (1) le principe de l’année-jour, (2) l’identité de la petite corne (Dan. 7) et de la bête de mer (Ap. 13), (3) le sceau de Dieu et la marque de la bête, et (4) le nombre 666. Il en ressort que l’approche historiciste continue d’être avancée, surtout dans les publications officielles et semi-officielles, mais moins dans les livres d’érudits et d’autres auteurs. Les auteurs des deux dernières catégories sont également enclins à valoriser d’autres approches en plus de l’historicisme. En général, il y a une tendance à être moins spécifique, comparé au passé, en faisant des applications historiques spécifiques à certains symboles apocalyptiques.

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