

## Questions about the Historicist Method of Interpretation

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I have spent several years closely studying the historical method of interpretation and its conclusions (historicism) as taught by the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) church. In my studies on this topic, I have found some good things and some bad things.

The good news is that the SDA church properly recognizes that certain portions of Daniel and Revelation have been fulfilled during the past 26 centuries. The bad news is many of the prophetic conclusions taught by Seventh-day Adventists are inadequate and historically nonexistent.

The biggest problem I have, however, with SDAs in terms of apocalyptic prophecy is that they ignore and/or distort certain specifications stated in Scripture to make their "historical interpretations" appear valid. Moreover, I find that the SDA church does not recognize or use a valid set of rules to interpret prophecy, and bad rules always produce bad results.

I believe the Bible reveals much more about end times than the SDA church has been willing to consider. For example, it insists the seven trumpets were fulfilled in the past, but cannot produce a widely accepted position on what the trumpets were and how they were fulfilled. It insists the 1,260 days of the Two Witnesses were fulfilled in the past, but the specifications for the Two Witnesses in Revelation 11 raise more questions than they answer. The SDA church believes the seven seals were fulfilled in the past, but when we consider the specifications for the seals in Revelation 6 there is a great gulf between its claims and the historical record.

### Reasons why the Adventist Church Defends Historicism

I think there are three reasons the SDA church insists on maintaining a historical approach to Bible prophecy (historicism). The first and primary reason is the writings of Ellen White (1827-1915). As an early follower of William Miller (1782-1849), she and many others in New England became convinced in the 1830's and 40's that Miller's explanation of the prophecies in Daniel and Revelation were valid. Miller, a Baptist minister, believed Jesus would return and the world would end in 1844 and his understanding drove his prophetic interpretation to the logical conclusion that everything in Daniel and Revelation (except the one thousand years in Revelation 20) had to occur *prior* to the Second Coming.

When 1844 came and went, the Millerite movement collapsed. Ellen White and a few contemporaries slightly modified Miller's views and eventually, in 1863, the SDA church was born. Today, the Adventist church teaches that Ellen White was a prophet and few within the church are willing to confront and question her "prophetic authority." As a prophet, the church is compelled to uphold her historical views because it cannot admit that her writings could be wrong in significant ways.

The SDA church has a second reason for defending historicism: it believes it is the "[remnant](#)

[church of Bible prophecy.](#)” The SDA church believes it uniquely fits the specifications given in Revelation 12:17, which it interprets as keeping the [ten] commandments and having writings of Ellen White which they believe, are the “Spirit of Prophecy.” This “self-appraisal” keeps the church in lock-step with the founding fathers (and mother) of the church, because if the church decided that the writings of Ellen White are in error, it would no longer be the remnant church of Bible prophecy.

Finally, the SDA church has a third reason for defending historicism. Adventists feel very strongly that their church was raised up to keep the Protestant Reformation alive. There were two causes for Protestantism separating from the Catholic church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The first was the obvious degeneracy of popes and priests. Martin Luther was deeply offended when the pope began selling indulgences, forgiveness of future sins, to raise money to build the Sistine Chapel. Second, as Bibles became available, Protestants were quick to discover the Roman Catholic Church in prophecy. They concluded the Church was “the great whore” in Revelation 17 and that the pope was Antichrist.

A few centuries later, when William Miller began his ministry in 1831, everyone in colonial America knew that Napoleon had captured Pope Pius VI in 1798 and taken him to France where he died the following year. Protestants in New England did not look favorably upon Catholics for a long time. When Adventists discovered the Catholic Church had changed the day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday, the SDA view of prophecy congealed around the earlier idea that the Roman Catholic Church was indeed the villain in Revelation. Therefore, any interpretation of prophecy that lessened the evilness of the Roman Catholic Church was evil in itself. From its inception, the SDA church has believed that the observance of Sunday as a holy day is the mark of the beast (the beast being the papacy).

## **The Adventist Church Rejects Futurism**

So, the SDA church is “dug in” when it comes to Bible prophecy. As I see it, Bible prophecy is a house of cards for the church. Tear down one of the three cards and the other two will fall. Therefore, any person who challenges its views is frowned upon and avoided; and to keep members from giving serious consideration to other views on prophecy, SDAs label those who would lessen the evilness of the Roman Catholic Church as “futurists.”

“Futurism” is label used by SDAs to describe the work of Jesuit scholar, Francisco Ribera. Ribera published a counter-reformation document in 1590 which exonerated the church and the pope from charges brought by Protestants. Using the books of Daniel and Revelation, Ribera explained how the Antichrist would appear sometime in “the future” and lead the world astray. Of course, 17<sup>th</sup> century Protestants were not impressed with Ribera’s work and his conclusions remained obscure until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After Miller’s epic failure, some Protestants began looking again at prophecy and Ribera’s ideas caught on. Cyrus Schofield (1843-1921) made many of Ribera’s ideas prominent when he published his reference edition of the Bible in 1900.

Even though millions of Christians embrace some of Ribera’s ideas today, his method of interpretation is no better (in my view) than the historical position advocated by SDAs. Both schools of thought are founded on inadequate principles of interpretation.

This short article is presented in hopes that it will stimulate you to start looking for some answers. I would like to present a few problems that I have with the historical method of interpretation and you can consider the merits of my discoveries for yourself:

## **The Timing in Revelation Does Not Support a Historical View**

SDAs believe the Second Coming will be marked by a series of physical signs such as flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a severe earthquake. Rightly so. The Bible says, **“Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake... Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found.”** (Revelation 16:18-20)

However, SDAs do a strange thing to make their historical model work. They teach the earthquake in Revelation 6:12 occurred in Lisbon, Portugal in 1755 to fit their perspective that the sixth seal was opened prior to 1844 (like William Miller). This earthquake is said to have killed about 60,000 people which is a small number when compared to deaths in more recent earthquakes that exceed 240,000 people. Notice the specification given in Scripture: **“I watched as He opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. . . The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.”** (Revelation 6:12,14)

To get around the fact that NOT “every mountain and island was removed from its place” during the Lisbon earthquake, Adventists have created a second earthquake in Revelation 6:14. This example show how a specification is ignored or dismissed by advocates of the historical method of interpretation.

Here is another example. SDAs believe the flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and the severe earthquake at the Second Coming are to be understood as literal signs, but when asked to demonstrate the fulfillment of these literal events in history past, they subvert the topic.

Notice the order of events:

**“And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets. . . Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake. Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them. The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up.”** (Revelation 8:2,5-7)

SDAs insist on putting verse 5 with the great earthquake in the future, because it does not fit their prophetic schematic. Then, they insist the immediately subsequent verses 6 and 7 belong 1,500 years earlier (about A.D. 500). The chronological flow of events described in Revelation 8:2-7 is ignored by the historical method because it can't fit the SDA paradigm.

Again, SDAs treat the seventh trumpet in Revelation 11:19 the same way:

**“The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever’. . . Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm.”** (Rev 11:15,19)

SDAs insist the seven trumpets in Revelation 8 are in the past, and the 7th trumpet sounded in 1844. Since there was no significant earthquake that year (or flashes of lightning, rumblings, or peals of thunder) and since the Ark of the Covenant has not yet been seen, their historical method of interpretation allows them to move chronological events around as needed to avoid the order of events given in Scripture. This practice is unacceptable. It won't work.

Finally, SDAs are silent on this one. Historically, they cannot produce a valid date for the earthquake described in Revelation 11:13. This would be impossible if there has been a historical fulfillment.

**“At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.”** (Revelation 11:13)

## **The Ten Toes in Daniel 2 are Future**

In the vision of the metal man, Dan 2:42 speaks of the [ten] toes as a “kingdom.” **“As the toes were partly iron and partly clay, so this kingdom will be partly strong and partly brittle.”** Moreover, the Bible indicates, **“In the time of those kings [the toes kingdom], the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed.”**

Many SDAs interpret the [ten] toes on the metal man to be in the past maintaining they represent the same entities as the ten horns in Daniel 7, but this is impossible. Here is why:

The little horn (the papacy) eliminated three of the ten horns on the fourth beast in Daniel 7 (the three tribal nations that overran the Roman empire) by A.D. 538. Simple math says 10 horns minus 3 horns equals 7 horns. Seven horns plus the little horn equals 8 horns after A.D. 538. Does the metal man still have 8 toes today or has he grown two more? I am asking this silly question for a reason.

Who are the TEN kings that make war against the Lamb when He appears in Revelation 17:12-14?

The Bible says: **“The ten horns you saw [on the composite beast] are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast. . . They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings.”**

Clearly, the ten kings in Revelation 17 align with the [ten] toes on the metal man who appear at the end of the age, when Jesus will set up His kingdom. SDAs cannot respond when asked who the ten kings are. How can there can be 8 toes in Daniel 2 and 10 horns in Revelation 17 at the Second Coming?

## **The Beast of Revelation 13 is Not the Papacy**

Contrary to what SDAs teach, the composite beast in Revelation 13:1 cannot be the papacy because just one of the seven heads on the beast represents the papacy. When the beast rises from the sea, it has seven heads:

The Bible declares, **“One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed the beast.”**

The Bible says that each head has a blasphemous name written on it. This specification (the blasphemous name) indicates the seven heads are insulting to God, they are religious in nature, whereas the ten horns (ten future kings) on the composite beast are the same 10 kings in Revelation 17 who will make war against the Lamb when He appears.

SDAs correctly teach the wounded head is the Roman Catholic Church and history confirms the Church received “a near fatal wound” in 1798 when the Pope Pius VI was arrested and exiled in France. For the past 219 years, the influence and power of the church has been healing, BUT no one can say that the deadly wound “had been healed” (past perfect tense) until the beast rises from the sea and the Church is strong enough to exercise its previous authority over nations.

Since one of the seven heads is a religious system (the Roman Catholic Church), I understand the other six heads represent represent the other six religious systems on Earth. The Bible declares there will be seven heads, seven of the same thing on the composite beast when it rises from the sea.

Here is a crucial question: If the Roman Catholic Church received a near fatal wound in 1798, then the phrase, “but the fatal wound HAD BEEN healed” indicates the rise of the composite beast has to occur AFTER 1798.

What entity appears on Earth after 1798 that includes the Roman Catholic Church and the other religions of the world which is represented by the composite beast? The Roman Catholic Church will be but ONE of seventeen elements. (10 horns + 7 heads = 17 elements) What will rise up and become so powerful that all seven-plus billion of us, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Atheists, Protestants, Catholics, and heathen will obey and worship it? (Revelation 13:8)

**“All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast--all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.”** (Revelation 13:8)

These few examples are presented in kindness, hoping to help those SDAs who are searching the prophecies. The SDA view on end time events is lacking in many ways. This is not an attack on SDAs. I respect the right of every church body to believe whatever it wishes to believe. I also believe the book of Daniel has been unsealed and the Bible reveals more about end times than most Christians will allow. I wrote an article a few years ago to help SDAs better understand some of the problems which the historical method imposes on Scripture. The linked article is titled, "[The National Sunday Law Revisited](#)" if you care to examine it.