

Historical Note: This was the keynote address for a conference on the book of Revelation. I had just completed ten years with the “Reading the Apocalypse Seminar” of the Society of Biblical Literature (the major academic society for all scholars of the Bible across North America). This was a summary report of the developments I traced there with some reflections on the state of Revelation scholarship in the SDA Church as well. The head of the Seminar, David Barr, was so interested in the topic, that he attended the Adventist meeting where I delivered this paper.

Jon Paulien

“The Book of Revelation at the Crossroads: Where We’ve Been and Where We’re Going”

Jon Paulien

Adventist Society for Religious Study

Annual Meeting

1999

The Distant Past

The Book of Revelation began its existence as a public text. According to Rev 1:3 a blessing was pronounced on “the one who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy.” This implies the intention that the book be read to the churches in a public setting and find its place in the lives of believers as a corporate document. So Revelation began not only as a public text, but as a popular text, to be heard, savored and interpreted by the “common people” in public interaction with one another. The role of “scholars” in the interpretation of the book was left undefined.

In the Middle Ages the popular interest in the Book of Revelation continued. New evidence suggests that popular excitement in relation to the year 1000 was greater than the previous generation of historians had thought.¹ Richard Landes, a major figure in the recent year 1000 debate, goes so far as to suggest that the established church went out of its way suppress even the memory of year 1000 excitement in Western Europe.² Popular interest in the Book of Revelation seems to have peaked with the work of Joachim of Flores in the twelfth

¹See Jon Paulien, “The Millennium is Here Again: Is It Panic Time?”, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* (2, 1999), pp. 167-178.

²Richard Allen Landes, *Relics, Apocalypse, and the Deceits of History: Ademar of Chabannes, 989-1034* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); idem, “Lest the Millennium Be Fulfilled: Apocalyptic Expectations and the Pattern of Western Chronography 100-800 CE,” in *The Use and Abuse of Eschatology in the Middle Ages*, edited by Werner Verbeke, Daniel Verhelst and Andries Welkenhuysen (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1988), pp. 137-211. See Hillel Schwartz (*Century’s End: A Cultural History of the Fin de Siècle from the 990s through the 1990s* [New York: Doubleday, 1990]) and Henri Focillon (*The Year 1000*, translated by Fred D. Wieck [New York: F. Ungar Publishing Co., 1969]), for a more moderate view of the evidence and the possible conclusions the evidence might lead to.

and thirteenth centuries.³ Scholars, on the other hand, generally neglected the book during this period.

Little changed at the time of the Reformation. Revelation was treated with some disrespect by Luther and was the only Bible book on which Calvin did not write a commentary.⁴ On the other hand, the book was loved by the peasants⁵ and became a major focus in the Peasants Revolt and the uprising at Münster.⁶ The disparity of interest in the book between scholars and laity continued into the 18th and 19th Centuries. During those centuries there was little scholarly interest in the book outside of the influential works by Newton and Bengel.⁷ At the popular level, however, interest surged as the result of the efforts by interpreters such as William Miller and John Nelson Darby.⁸ As the world approached the end of the 19th century, therefore, a clear pattern had been established. The Book of Revelation was received with enthusiasm by humble believers, but was not the object of major academic attention.

By that time, however, another major pattern had been established. The attention lavished on Revelation by the “common people” had proven to be a mixed blessing. Popular interpreters read the book as a direct witness to their own time and place. The literary and historical contexts of the book’s author were largely ignored. Instead of public reading and interpretation producing a unity of acceptance in the believing community, the reading of the book became increasingly a matter of private interpretation. Revelation became the source of inspiration for hotheads and nut cases. Private reading produced a chaos of interpretation.

³LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation*, 4 vols. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1950), vol. 1:683-742. See Richard Kyle (*The Last Days are Here Again: A History of the End Times* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998], pp. 47-49) for a shorter summary of Joachim’s career and influence.

⁴Jean Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, 45 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1947-1950). Froom believed that while Luther had serious doubts about the value and authenticity of Revelation at first, his attitude had become more positive by 1545. See Froom, *Prophetic Faith*, vol. 2, p. 273. See first intro to Revelation in *Schriften* for the negative view.

⁵I can’t resist paraphrasing an interchange between Luther and one of his colleagues at the time of the Peasants Revolt:
Colleague (agitated): Herr Luther, the peasants are revolting!
Luther: So what! I’ve known that for years.

⁶For a summary of radical, popular developments at the time of the Reformation see Kyle, pp. 58-60.

⁷Johann Albrecht Bengel, *Bengelius’s Introduction to His Exposition of the Apocalypse: With His Preface to that Work and the Greatest Part of the Conclusion of it, and also His Marginal Notes on the Text, Which Are a Summary of the Whole Exposition*, translated by John Robertson (London: J. Ryall and R. Withy, 1757); see also idem, *Bengel’s New Testament Commentary*, translated by Charlton T. Lewis and Marvin R. Vincent (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1981); Sir Isaac Newton, *Observations on the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse of St. John*, edited by S. J. Barnett, with preface and notes by Mary E. Mills (Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1999).

⁸For an extensive scholarly comparison of the competing systems of Miller and Darby, and their popular impact on the United States, see Stephen O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1994).

The “failure” of Miller’s prophetic scheme in particular led to considerable disillusionment with regard to interpretation of prophecy in general and historicist interpretation of Daniel and Revelation in particular.⁹

Two Waves of Scholarly Interest

Beginning around 1890 and continuing into the early 30s of this century, there was a major wave of scholarly interest in the Book of Revelation. Scholars sought to correct irresponsible misinterpretation by refocusing attention on the original literary and historical context of the author’s time and place. Ramsey went to Asia Minor to see what could be learned about the seven churches on the very ground where they had existed.¹⁰ R. H. Charles,¹¹ Henry B. Swete,¹² William Milligan,¹³ E. -B. Allo,¹⁴ Ernst Lohmeyer¹⁵ and J. A. Seiss¹⁶ sought to respect the author’s intention for his work by giving careful attention to the ancient Greek. In reaction to popular attempts to understand what the text means, there was a rigorous focus and what the text meant. Historical-critical presuppositions led to a treatment that was largely preterist, in other words, interested in the impact of the book on its original audience alone. There was little attempt to apply the book’s message to the interpreter’s time and place. The concept of predictive prophecy was rejected.

More recently, in the 70s and 80s of this century, a second wave of scholarly interest developed. Like the first wave, it was largely limited to historical-critical interpretation from a preterist approach. The main area of focus was the genre of Revelation. From the Early

⁹Paul S. Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992); Kyle, pp. 90-91; O’Leary, p. 132.

¹⁰William M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia and Their Place in the Plan of the Apocalypse* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904), reprinted by Baker Books (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1979). See the recent re-evaluation of Ramsay’s work by Steve Freisen, “Revelation and Realia Revisited: Archaeology and the Apocalypse,” a paper presented to the Reading the Apocalypse Seminar of the Society of Biblical Literature, national meeting, Chicago, IL, November 20, 1994. Freisen seems to have become the leading figure in the intersection between the archaeology of Western Turkey and scholarship on the Book of Revelation. Steven J. Freisen, *Twice Neokoros: Ephesus, Asia, and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993).

¹¹*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, 2 vols, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1920).

¹²*The Apocalypse of St. John* (London: MacMillan & Company, 1906).

¹³*The Book of Revelation*, The Expositor's Bible (Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham, [1889]).

¹⁴Saint Jean. *L'Apocalypse* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1933).

¹⁵*Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, Handbuch zum NT, vol. 16 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1926).

¹⁶Seiss, J. A. *The Apocalypse*, 3 vols., 7th edition (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1900).

Christian Apocalypticism Seminar (Society of Biblical Literature) through the Uppsala Conference scholars wrestled with the issue of whether Revelation was to be understood as prophetic, apocalyptic or epistolary in nature.¹⁷ The early critical consensus, expressed in the work of John J. Collins, was that Revelation was to be understood primarily as an apocalyptic work.¹⁸ Other names associated with this debate were David E. Aune,¹⁹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza,²⁰ Adela Yarbro Collins,²¹ Leonard Thompson,²² David Hellholm.²³ Currently, in part due to the radical critiques by Mazzaferri and Müller, there is the general sense that some blend of the three generic types is required by the evidence.²⁴ In addition to the general interest in genre, significant commentaries appeared during these two decades; the

¹⁷See David Hellholm, editor, *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism, Uppsala, August 12-17, 1979 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1983). See also volumes 14 and 36 of the journal *Semeia*.

¹⁸John J. Collins, "The Genre Apocalypse in Hellenistic Judaism," in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, edited by David Hellholm (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1983), pp. 531-548; idem, "Introduction: Toward the Morphology of a Genre," *Semeia* 14 (1979):1-20.

¹⁹"The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre," *Semeia* 36 (1986):65-96; idem, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983).

²⁰"Apokalypsis and Propheteia. The Book of Revelation in the Context of Early Christian Prophecy," in *L'Apocalypse johannique et l'Apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament*, edited by J. Lambrecht, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologaricum Lovaniensium, vol. 53 (Gembloux: Leuven University Press, 1980), pp. 105-128; idem, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

²¹*Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984); idem, "The Early Christian Apocalypses," *Semeia* 14 (1979), pp. 61-121.

²²*The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); idem, "The Mythic Unity of the Apocalypse," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1985 Seminar Papers*, edited by Kent Harold Richards (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 13-28; idem, "A Sociological Analysis of Tribulation in the Apocalypse of John," *Semeia* 36 (1986), pp. 147-174.

²³"Introduction," in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, edited by David Hellholm (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1983), pp. 1-6; idem, "The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre and the Apocalypse of John," *Semeia* 36 (1986):13-64.

²⁴Müller, Ulrich B. "Literarische und formgeschichtliche Bestimmung der Apokalypse des Johannes als einem Zeugnis frühchristlicher Apokalypstik," in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, edited by David Hellholm (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1983), pp. 599-619; Frederick David Mazzaferri, *The Genre of the Book of Revelation from a Source-Critical Perspective* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989). Beale reflects the more eclectic approach in *Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998).

voluminous and controversial work by J. Massyngberde Ford,²⁵ and those by Robert Mounce,²⁶ Pierre Prigent,²⁷ and Heinrich Kraft.²⁸

These last hundred years have not been the friendliest time for SDA scholars in Revelation. Historical-critical presuppositions tended to rule out a faith approach to the book or an appreciation of its predictive elements. The historicist approach to the book has been laughed off by the academy. Our tendency toward a more popular style of reading the Apocalypse was usually considered irrelevant to serious study. The fields of exegesis and biblical theology in general were largely closed to work from an SDA perspective.²⁹ So SDA scholars who succeeded in making their scholarly mark in biblical studies did so in the fields of archaeology,³⁰ text criticism,³¹ and linguistics.³²

A change in the above atmosphere was signaled for me by the work of Edgar McKnight.

²⁵ *Revelation*, Anchor Bible, vol. 38 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1975).

²⁶ *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the NT, vol. 17 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977).

²⁷ *L'Apocalypse de Saint Jean*, Commentaire du Nouveau Testament, Second Series, vol. 14 (Lausanne: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1981).

²⁸ *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, Handbuch zum Neuen Testament, vol. 16a (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1974).

²⁹ Although note should be taken of the influential surveys of biblical theology published by Gerhard Hasel: *New Testament Theology : Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), and *Old Testament Theology : Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975).

³⁰ The work of Horn and Geraty particularly comes to mind, more recently that of Sten LaBianca and Randy Younker. This voluminous tradition (too voluminous to offer a selected listing here) is amply witnessed to in the pages of *Andrews University Seminary Studies* and the many publications of the Archaeological Institute at Andrews University.

³¹ See Sakae Kubo and Walter Specht, *So Many Versions? Twentieth Century English Versions of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975); Sakae Kubo, *p72 and the Codex Vaticanus* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1965); W. Larry Richards, *The Classification of the Greek Manuscripts of the Johannine Epistles*, (Missoula MT: Scholars Press, 1977); idem, "Profiles or Text Passages: A Comparison of Two Text-Critical Methods," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115 (1996), pp. 253-271; idem, "An Analysis of Aland's *Teststellen* in 1 John," *New Testament Studies* 44 (1998), pp. 26-44; Bernard A. Taylor, *The Lucianic Manuscripts of 1 Reigns*, 2 vols. (Scholars Press, 1992, 1993).

³² Sakae Kubo, *A Reader's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: And a Beginner's Guide for the Translation of New Testament Greek* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975); Steven Thompson, *The Apocalypse and Semitic Syntax* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Warren C. Trenchard, *The Student's Complete Vocabulary Guide to the Greek New Testament : Complete Frequency Lists, Cognate Groupings and Principal Parts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992, revised 1998); Bernard A. Taylor, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Septuagint: A Complete Parsing Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994).

In his book *Postmodern Use of the Bible*,³³ McKnight provokes in readers a whole new way of thinking about the past, present, and future of biblical interpretation. McKnight decries the way a critical approach to the text creates distance between the text and modern readers. He argues for the right of each reader to make sense of the text for himself or herself while remaining in dialogue with critical assumptions and approaches. The hermeneutical circle should expand from original intent to the literary relationship of the parts to the whole of the text, to its progressive contexts in the consciousness of individual readers and in communities of readers over the centuries.

McKnight outlines with striking clarity that both the popular and scholarly approaches to the text were satisfying in their time because they offered interpretations that were consistent with the prevailing world-views that brought them into existence to begin with. Just as allegorical interpretation fit comfortably in a platonic world, so critical interpretation fit comfortably into a world that limited truth to sense experience, thus defining God out of existence. Neither view of the world was objective, both were comfortable and popular assumptions. McKnight suggests that we have now moved into a "post-modern age" in which language is capable again of conceptualizing God but in a sense different than in the dogmatic age. McKnight hopes that in this age biblical texts can be read without a detour through any philosophical system.

McKnight builds on the above to argue that meaning is dynamic. Individuals and groups make sense of their world by means of a particular view of the universe. But since none are in direct touch with ultimate reality a plurality of meanings and world views inevitably results. Such pluralism may be a "nightmare" to many, but McKnight sees it as the key to the future of biblical interpretation. Instead of combining into exclusive groups struggling to define the correct approach to the biblical text, scholars of the Bible can gain from the richness of diversity. By sharing a variety of readings, each scholar's own reading is enriched.

Because of work such as McKnight's, I have seen a major change in attitude over the last fifteen years of attendance at the Society of Biblical Literature. Scholars are much more willing to express faith, and there seems to be a much greater readiness to admit mistakes and/or ignorance. Faith-based approaches to the text are increasingly seen as a contribution to knowledge, provided they are serious attempts at dealing with the evidence.³⁴ Today the world of biblical scholarship is open to the exegetical and theological work of Seventh-day Adventist. Today graduates of Andrews University's Ph.D. program are treated with respect,

³³Edgar V. McKnight, *Post-Modern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988.

³⁴I recall with some amusement the comment of an "old guard" scholar ten years ago that the exegetical work of believers such as Richard Hays and Tom Wright was "neo-fundamentalist crap!" No one dares level such charges at first-rate scholars like Hays and Wright today.

not just among evangelicals, but among critical scholars as well.³⁵ This has brought about what I call the third wave of scholarly interest in Revelation.

The Third Wave of Scholarly Interest

I see the third wave of scholarly interest in Revelation signaled by the emergence of David Barr as a major force in the current debate over the book. Barr began publishing on the Book of Revelation in the mid-80s. He argued for a more oral and narrative approach to the book in contrast to its critical analysis as a historical document.³⁶ In doing so he helped open the field to literary and social approaches to the book.³⁷ In 1990 he guided the establishment of the "Literary Criticism and the Apocalypse Consultation," which was replaced after two years by the "Reading the Apocalypse Seminar." The two groups were largely made up of younger scholars eager to move the debate forward.

The purpose of the seminar was to explore the "intersection between literary and social readings of the Apocalypse." I sense that Barr was hoping to avoid the quagmires of both pre-critical and critical readings of the Apocalypse and develop some consensus among those advocating more contemporary approaches to the book. As the years went by, however, I sensed his increasing frustration as the fifteen to twenty members of the group seemed to fragment in a variety of directions; literary, structuralist, feminist, rhetorical, theological, liturgical, and so on. In the end the group decided to publish a couple of books that would highlight a variety of reader responses rather than a consensus approach. What I have personally appreciated about Barr is his willingness to allow those he disagreed with generous

³⁵See the extensive discussions of Ranko Stefanovic's published dissertation (*The Background and Meaning of the Sealed Book of Rev 5* [Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1995]) in David E. Aune, *Revelation*, 3 vols., Word Biblical Commentary, edited by David A. Barker and Glenn W. Hubbard (Waco, TX: Word Publishers, 1997), vol. 1, pp. 320, 339-340, 346, 355, and elsewhere (in a private letter to me Aune notes his awareness of Stefanovic's Adventism, but lauds the thoroughness of his work and the quality of his argumentation); the published exegetical dissertation of Robert Badenas (*Christ the End of the Law: Romans 10.4 in Pauline Perspective* [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985]) has been widely cited by Paul scholars (see James D. G. Dunn, *Romans*, 2 vols., Word Biblical Commentary, edited by David A. Barker and Glenn W. Hubbard [Waco, TX: Word Publishers, 1988], vol. 2, pp. 578, 581-582, 585, 589-591, 598-603, and Wilhelm C. Linss, "Exegesis of *telos* in Romans 10:4," *Biblical Research* 33 (1988), p. 10, as examples); Jon Paulien, "The Book of Revelation and the Old Testament: Thoughts on David Aune's Approach," *Biblical Research* 43 (1998), pp. 61-69; see also, for example, multiple citations of my work in G. K. Beale, *Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), pp. 64, 76-78, 85, 468-488, and Robert A. Briggs, *Jewish Temple Imagery in the Book of Revelation*, Studies in Biblical Literature, vol. 10, general editor Hemchand Gossai (NY: Peter Lang, 1999), pp. 3, 40-41, 54, 106, 247 and elsewhere.

³⁶David L. Barr, "The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis," *Interpretation* 38 (1, 1984), pp. 39-50; "The Apocalypse of John as Oral Enactment," *Interpretation* 40 (1986), pp. 243-256; *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1998).

³⁷The social approach had already made headway in the work of Adela Yarbro Collins (*Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984]) and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (*The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985]).

access to the group's deliberations over the years, in spite of the fragmented conclusions that resulted.

While the Reading the Apocalypse Seminar seemed a gathering of rugged individualists, I detected a number of areas in which the group seemed to divide almost 50/50. And depending on the issue, the group would divide differently. About half the individuals in the group preferred to retain an interest in the original author's intention ("it's not a legitimate reading to interpret the seven seals as aquatic animals"),³⁸ the other half was primarily interested in how contemporary readers respond to the book.³⁹ Similarly, about half the scholars seemed to prefer what McKnight would call a "modern" reading of Revelation, the other half preferred "post-modern" reading. About half the group seemed to appreciate Revelation from more of a faith-based, evangelical background,⁴⁰ the other half seemed to have a more secular and critical interest in the outworking of the subject.⁴¹ I personally felt that the interaction of these "opposites" was an extremely fruitful exercise.

In the course of the Seminar's development some interesting synergisms did develop. Josephine Ford presented readings of the Apocalypse from the perspective of contemporary artists. Barr's work sought to unite literary, oral, social and structural approaches to the book. Fiorenza produced a commentary which includes a historical critical analysis, followed by a contemporary, feminist analysis of Revelation.⁴² Tina Pippin challenged the limits of propriety in her analysis of the author's presumed sexual fantasies.⁴³ Even I found a place in the discussion by examining how Revelation has affected popular culture and how an awareness of popular culture affects the reading of Revelation.⁴⁴

In this type of open-ended approach to the Bible, believing scholars have found a new place in the academy of biblical scholars. Although David Aune believes that Ranko Stefanovic

³⁸Among these I would include Aune, Adela Collins, Leonard Thompson, Fiorenza, Ford, and myself.

³⁹Among these I would include Tina Pippin, Barr, Jean-Pierre Ruiz, Ron Farmer, and Edith Humphreys.

⁴⁰Among these I would include Humphreys, Ramsey Michaels, John Stanley, and myself.

⁴¹Among these I would include Barr, Fiorenza, Collins, and Pippin.

⁴²Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, Proclamation Commentaries, edited by Gerhard Krodel (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

⁴³See her book, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), but prepare yourself for some shock value. Pippin continues to press the edges in a new book, *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Images* (NY: Routledge Press, 1999).

⁴⁴I shared the above assessment of the seminar and its context with David Barr himself. Expressing a humble concern that I had overstated his role in the "third wave," he otherwise concurred with my analysis of developments. Email from David Barr on November 3, 1999.

reveals too much of his Adventism in his book on the sealed scroll of Revelation 5,⁴⁵ he nevertheless cites him at great length in his monumental commentary.⁴⁶ Barr intends to use my paper on popular culture as the lead article in a textbook for college university students interested in studying Revelation, to be published by Scholars Press. This new level of openness to faith is an exciting development, and I challenge all of you to pick an area of the academy, listen for a while, get to know the key players, and then make a contribution of your own. The table has been set for you already.

With the closing meeting of the Seminar in 1997, attention in the world of Revelation scholarship moved to the publication of two monumental commentaries, that of David Aune in the Word Biblical Commentary series,⁴⁷ and that of Gregory Beale in New International Greek Testament Commentary.⁴⁸ Averaging more than 1500 pages, they represent a compendium of more than a hundred years of scholarship. Aune himself has joked that he wrote the last nineteenth-century commentary. His is a monument of historical-critical attention to the author's intention, and to a rigorous analysis of every detail of the text from a disinterested, scholarly perspective. Beale, on the other hand, is unabashed in his believing, theological approach to the book. What has surprised me is that my students at the Seminary generally prefer Aune to Beale because his descriptive approach seems to have made him more honest with the text. Beale's belief system clearly affects his reading and to that extent distracts that reader away from what may be a more natural reading of the text. While Aune offers little synthesis, his detailed analyses guide the reader into the text and its environment with as little prejudice as possible. Together, they provide an incomparable resource to students of Revelation.

The capstone of this third wave of interest in Revelation may have come at last year's SBL meeting in Orlando. A sizable crowd witnessed a full-length dramatization of the entire book by David Rhoads, followed by a panel discussion and reactions from the audience. It was as if we had come full circle from Rev 1:3. Once again the Book of Revelation became an oral text, a public text. For most of the audience, including the panelists, it was the first time that the original intention of the author was fully experienced, and in the contemporary setting of Disney World no less! In a real sense author's intention and reader's response became one.

⁴⁵I have unfortunately lost track of a letter from Aune in which he made the observations on which the above assessment is based. The same has been confirmed in private conversations with him. Stefanovic's dissertation was published as *The Background and Meaning of the Sealed Book of Rev 5* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1995).

⁴⁶David E. Aune, *Revelation*, 3 vols., Word Biblical Commentary, edited by David A. Barker and Glenn W. Hubbard (Waco, TX: Word Publishers, 1997), vol. 1, pp. 320, 339-340, 346, 355, and elsewhere. He also lists the work of another member of this society, R. Dean Davis (*The Heavenly Court Judgment of Revelation 4-5* [Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992]), in a bibliography on page 319.

⁴⁷*Revelation*, 3 vols., Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Publishers, 1997).

⁴⁸*Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998).

Continuance of the Third Wave

This weekend, two follow-up efforts seek to extend the third wave of scholarly interest in the Book of Revelation. As a follow-up to last year's dramatization of Revelation, the Frontiers of Biblical Scholarship program will present a panel of distinguished scholars discussing how archaeology and critical scholarship have helped us better understand the original context in which Revelation was written.⁴⁹ This is the second in a three-year series that will result in a video aimed at providing scholarly insights into Revelation in a format accessible to non-professionals.

A second session, the new "Apocalypse in Context, both Ancient and Modern Consultation" will explore the possibility of continuing the work of the seminar group within the larger context of the Society of Biblical Literature.⁵⁰ The level of interest in the consultation this year and next will probably determine whether the "third wave" of scholarly interest has any steam left in it.

Adventist Study of Revelation Then

The subject of Adventist study of Revelation deserves a paper in its own right, but I would like to offer a few general, intuitive comments about the 150 or so years of SDA study of Revelation.⁵¹ SDA studies of the book generally followed the methods of William Miller from the time of the Great Disappointment until a hundred or so years later. A systematic and often allegorical approach combined with a historicist heritage to govern SDA interpretation. The theological fragmentation that one would expect from a lack of attention to exegesis, however, did not occur.⁵² There seem to be two reasons for this. First, respect for the prophetic contributions of Ellen White limited discussion in many passages of the book. She provided a divine safeguard against erroneous conclusions, even though the methods of Bible study were less than rigorous in their exegesis.⁵³ Second, the wide acceptance of Uriah Smith's interpretations on Revelation in areas not addressed by Ellen White provided a general framework in which Adventist thought and evangelism developed its basic unity of understanding.

⁴⁹AAR/SBL 1999 Annual Meeting Program Book (Boston, MA, November 20-23, 1999), Session S119, "What John Saw: Visualizing Life in the Cities of the Apocalypse" (Sunday, November 21, 3:45 PM-6:15 PM), pp. 19 and 121.

⁵⁰AAR/SBL 1999 Annual Meeting Program Book (Boston, MA, November 20-23, 1999), Session S26, "John's Apocalypse and Cultural Contexts Ancient and Modern Consultation" (Saturday, November 20, 1:00 PM-3:30 PM), p. 69.

⁵¹This subject is worthy of a major study, but I can only be suggestive here from my own experience in the process. The footnotes are incomplete and the whole thesis is likely to be flawed.

⁵²The book by Gerard Damsteegt (*Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977]) highlights the potential for fragmentation in the earliest period.

⁵³See the interesting discussion of this process in Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Years (1827-1862)* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1985), pp. 140-150.

The lack of exegetical rigor among the pioneers can be illustrated by Uriah Smith's work on the trumpets.⁵⁴ In the course of 42 pages of interpretation there is but one single exegetical statement. Verses are printed according to the King James Version followed by pages of historical detail without a single reference back to the text or its background in the OT. 62% of the text is in quotation marks, being culled from earlier historicist writers. This leads to the suspicion the Brother Smith himself never did any serious work in the text. Even more interesting, the entire piece, quotations and all was taken from an anonymous pamphlet published in 1859, probably from the pen of James White.⁵⁵ The one exception to the general lack of exegetical rigor among the pioneers was the work of J. N. Andrews, who understood the original languages and proved fairly insightful with regard to exegesis.⁵⁶ This may have been a reason that Ellen White called him, "The ablest man in all our ranks."⁵⁷

The Hermeneutical Crisis Since 1915

In spite of the lack of exegetical rigor, unity of understanding was largely maintained as long as Ellen White was alive.⁵⁸ By the time of the 1919 Bible Conference, however, concerns were being expressed as to how the Bible should be handled in the absence of a living prophet.⁵⁹ The problem with a dead prophet is that the prophet's work becomes subject to interpretation just as much as the biblical materials do. At the 1919 Bible Conference there was an awareness of this problem, but that awareness does not seem to have filtered down into general church practice.

The material in the *Our Firm Foundation* volumes (1953) indicates that the Adventist Church arrived at this half of the century with essentially the same approach to Revelation as

⁵⁴Uriah Smith, *The Prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1944), pp. 475-517.

⁵⁵*The Sounding of the Seven Trumpets of Revelation VIII and IX* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press of the Review and Herald Office, 1859).

⁵⁶John Nevins Andrews, *The Three Messages of Revelation XIV, 6-12, Particularly the Third Angel's Message, and Two-horned Beast*, reprint (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1970). Compare Andrews' textual work with the exposition of the trumpets in the previous note.

⁵⁷From a personal letter by Ellen G. White, August 28, 1878. Quoted in C. Mervyn Maxwell, *Moving Out*, Unit IV of a four-part course entitled Breakthrough with God's Church (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1973), pp. 132, 136.

⁵⁸The decisive role of Ellen White in Adventist theological unity is acknowledged by W. H. Branson ("Objectives of the Bible Conference," in *Our Firm Foundation*, 2 vols. [Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1953], vol. 1, pp. 46-47) along with a renewed call for unity back in the 50s.

⁵⁹See the transcripts published in *Spectrum*, vol. 10, number 1, May, 1979, pp. 27-57.

the 19th century pioneers.⁶⁰ The assumption was made (but never argued) that the seven-fold sequences of the churches, seals, and trumpets represented stages of history from NT times to the second coming.⁶¹ The method of study was systematic and text-selective rather than exegetical. The goal seemed to be conclusions compatible with the church's traditional positions rather than fidelity to the text of Revelation itself.

As the 1950s wore on, however, at least two major strands within Adventism had become visible, one represented by the work *Questions on Doctrine*,⁶² the other by its vigorous opponents.⁶³ The traditional Adventist consensus for Revelation was also beginning to break down. There remained a consensus regarding the historicist approach to interpretation, but various individuals were becoming more and more creative in their use of Bible and Ellen White to offer interpretations that differed with those of Uriah Smith.⁶⁴

Meanwhile more and more individuals seeking academic degrees were seeing value in subjecting Adventist evangelistic and theological use of the Bible to the standards of exegetical procedures. The approaches to Revelation taught and utilized in societies like SBL and SNTS were greeted with various levels of interest.

The fragmentation that was feared in 1919 and began to be discernable in the 1950s has reached full-blown maturity as we approach the new millennium. Today, there are perhaps a dozen or more different versions of Adventism.⁶⁵ It is now clear to most Adventist scholars, at least, that in the absence of a living prophet, the traditional Adventist hermeneutic cannot do the job.⁶⁶

⁶⁰[no author] *Our Firm Foundation: A Report of the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Conference Held September 1-13, 1952, in the Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church, Takoma Park, Maryland*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1953).

⁶¹Along the lines of the historical sequences in Dan 2 and 7.

⁶²[group authorship], *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine: An Explanation of Certain Major Aspects of Seventh-day Adventist Belief* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1957).

⁶³M. L. Andreasen, *Letters to the Churches: Series A* (Baker, OR: Hudson Printing Co., [1959?]).

⁶⁴See as examples the work of Louis F. Were (*The Woman and the Beast in the Book of Revelation* [Melbourne: 1952, reprinted by Sarasota, FL: First Impressions, 1993]; *The Moral Purpose of Prophecy: The Harmony Between Christian Experience and Prophetic Interpretation* [Melbourne: 1949, reprinted 1974]; *The Certainty of the Third Angel's Message* [Melbourne: 1945, reprinted by Sarasota, FL: First Impressions, 1979]) and Robert D. Brinsmead (*Crisis and Victory in Revelation 13 and 14* [Springfield, MO: Ministry of Healing Health Centers, 196?]; *God's Eternal Purpose* [Springfield, MO: Ministry of Healing Health Centers, 1959]; *Revelation* [Bryn Mawr, CA: Prophetic Research International, 1963]).

⁶⁵Note, for example, Martin Weber, *Who's Got the Truth: Making Sense out of Five Different Adventist Gospels* (Silver Spring, MD: Home Study International Press, 1994); and William G. Johnsson, *The Fragmenting of Adventism: Ten Issues Threatening the Church Today: Why the Next Five Years are Crucial* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1995).

⁶⁶By traditional Adventist hermeneutic, I mean the systematic, allegorical approach to the Bible still exhibited by the more egregious proof-text type Bible studies and in many evangelistic approaches to the Bible.

The church seems to have taken two approaches over the last half-century to healing the rift in Adventist hermeneutics. One approach is to call conferences in which Bible scholars, pastors and administrators are brought together to develop a more careful approach to the Bible and Adventist doctrine. The first such conference in 1952 resulted in the two volumes entitled *Our Firm Foundation*.⁶⁷ The second, more scholarly conference, was the committee on Daniel that met back in the early 60s, but failed to publish its results. The third, more general, conference, was the Bible Conference held at Andrews University in 1974.⁶⁸

The most significant of these conferences, the fourth, was the Daniel and Revelation Committee which brought top scholars from around the world together for eleven years (1981-1992) in an attempt to iron out some of the most intractable problems of Adventist interpretation. The first five volumes (based on the committee's work from 1981-1985) were largely a reaction to the work of Desmond Ford presented at Glacier View in 1980.⁶⁹ But in 1986 a shift in the committee's perspective could be detected.⁷⁰ The committee turned away from a reactive approach to a more exegetical, forward-looking approach to the Bible. The last two volumes in the series (on Revelation) are more reflective of the latter approach.⁷¹ Thanks in part to the work of this committee, scholarly exegesis of the Bible in general, and Revelation in particular is more widely accepted among Adventists than ever before.

The other approach taken by the church to heal the rifts resulting from fragmented interpretation is to give more attention to hermeneutics and exegesis in the training of its ministers and scholars. The development of a Ph.D. program in Religion at Andrews University and the general encouragement for religion faculty to gain advanced degrees signaled church

⁶⁷[no author] *Our Firm Foundation: A Report of the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Conference Held September 1-13, 1952, in the Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church, Takoma Park, Maryland*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1953).

⁶⁸Gordon M. Hyde, editor, *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*, prepared by the Biblical Research Committee of the General Conference of SDAs (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1974); idem, companion notebook to the Bible Conference.

⁶⁹William H. Shea, *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1982); Frank Holbrook, editor, *Symposium on Daniel: Introductory and Exegetical Studies*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of SDAs, 1986); idem, *70 Weeks, Leviticus and the Nature of Prophecy*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 3 (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of SDAs, 1986); idem, *Issues in the Book of Hebrews*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 4 (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of SDAs, 1989); idem, *Doctrine of the Sanctuary: A Historical Survey (1845-1863)*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 5 (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of SDAs, 1989).

⁷⁰The shift was signaled for me by an unopposed speech of William Johnsson.

⁷¹Frank Holbrook, editor, *Symposium on Revelation-- Book I: Introductory and Exegetical Studies*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 6 (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of SDAs, 1992); idem, *Symposium on Revelation-- Book II: Exegetical and General Studies*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 7 (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of SDAs, 1992).

leadership's concern with the allegorical approach.⁷² As examination of the Bible becomes more grounded in solid exegesis, there is some hope that unity in the essential core of Biblical teaching can be achieved, resulting in an Adventist center. The current rift between the two scholarly societies among us indicates that achieving an exegetical-based Adventist center will not be easy, but without such a center, there is reason to question whether Adventist unity will survive into the next generation.⁷³ While not coming together as a result of administrative action, both scholarly societies can play a role in the process of a more responsible approach to the Book of Revelation, hopefully one day we will even listen to each other.

Adventist Apocalypse Now

Where is Adventist interpretation of Revelation going? I'd like to offer a brief perspective from my own experience. In my view the decisive shift in Adventist understanding of Revelation was precipitated by Desmond Ford's Glacier View document, although it devoted relatively little attention to the Book of Revelation. Following up on hints toward a future interpretation first published in his Daniel commentary,⁷⁴ the Glacier View document's advocacy of the apotelesmatic principle opened the way to a futurist interpretation of texts that Adventists had traditionally placed in the Middle Ages or at some other point in the history of the Christian era.⁷⁵ The implications of Ford's suggestions, however, were largely lost

⁷²I must confess a certain ambivalence in church leadership's behavior here. While the committee to Ph.D. work at Andrews and elsewhere suggests a strong commitment to solid biblical hermeneutics, the strong endorsement for more allegorical methods as commonly exhibited in televised evangelistic series seems to be working at cross-purposes. The methods used by the evangelists to straighten people out are being used by lay people to promote disturbing new theological trends.

⁷³My remarks here should not be interpreted as a slap against systematic theology or theologians. It is simply an appeal for us all to be reading the same texts when we interpret the Bible. Unless we give careful attention to the text's original context, it is all too easy for the interpreter to make the Bible say whatever one wants. Unless one gives careful attention to what the text meant, even conservative biblical interpretation easily loses track of the biblical message in the service of political agendas.

Will exegesis ever bring us into agreement on all issues? Of course not. There are many grammatical and syntactical ambiguities in Scripture that will vex exegetes until our Lord comes. But the goal of exegesis is to help us see where the Bible is clear and where it is not. The emerging Adventist center will avoid establishing doctrine on the basis of unclear biblical texts, but will instead ground our understanding in that which is reasonably clear in the Bible. Such a focus on the clear texts will isolate those who make a living on the unclear texts (like the seals, the trumpets, and Dan 11) by using them to undermine the clear teachings of Scripture.

⁷⁴Desmond Ford, *Daniel*, foreword by F. F. Bruce (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1978), pp. 283, 305-309.

⁷⁵The interpretation of Revelation is actually rarely addressed in the Glacier View manuscript: Desmond Ford, *Daniel 8:14, the Day of Atonement, and the Investigative Judgment* (1980), published by Euangelion Press, PO Box 1264, Casselberry, FL. Concerns about traditional interpretation of the trumpets are aired on pages 211-215. Pages 282-284 suggest a Day of Atonement context for Rev 8:2-6, a major cornerstone of SDA futurist interpretation. Page 363 states that an historicist interpretation of Rev 11:1-13, such as espoused in *The Great Controversy* is exegetically unsustainable, but fortunately, E. G. White also applies the passage to its true place in the very last days (which opens the way to a literal-day understanding of the 1260 days). Ford's Glacier View hints

sight of by church leadership in its settled focus on issues related to Dan 8, Leviticus, and Hebrews.

Where the futurist suggestions of Ford made their impact, surprisingly, was in the context of the conservative Adventist “right.” The mainstream Adventist Church essentially accepted Ford’s soteriology, but rejected his eschatology.⁷⁶ The radical right, on the other hand, seems to have rejected his soteriology while opening itself up to the futuristic aspects of Ford’s eschatology.⁷⁷ Whereas conservative elements of the church tended to be very defensive of church authority and administration before Glacier View, we have now entered an era in which many of the most conservative elements of the church are in a hostile relationship with the mainstream church. Significant elements of this conservative wing have applied traditional systematic and allegorical approaches to Revelation with a resulting conviction that most of the book, including the seals, the trumpets, and Rev 13, actually apply to our present and future rather than the broad sweep of Christian history. An allegorical approach to the relationship between Ellen White and Revelation is a major component of this development.

In 1986, the Daniel and Revelation committee turned its attention to the book of Revelation. As the committee became more and more aware of “end-time” applications of Revelation, it became less and less focused on Des Ford and more and more focused on the book itself. Since allegory cannot be countered by allegory, the committee became more and more open to serious, scientific exegesis as the best way to demonstrate the weaknesses of upcoming alternatives to SDA thought. This also made the committee more open to creative approaches to traditional Adventist thinking than it might otherwise have been.

In 1989, Bill Shea and I were invited to a gathering known as the “End-Time Committee” near Nashville, Tennessee. Attending were some 40-50 students of Daniel and Revelation, mostly lay people, but including some pastors. These were in agreement that the interaction between Ellen White and Revelation, combined with attention to contemporary world events,

were fleshed out a couple of years later in *Crisis: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, vol. 2 (Newcastle, CA: Desmond Ford Publications, 1982). On pages 415-417 and 458 Ford expresses the belief that Rev 9 is about the last crisis of earth’s history, not Islamic attacks throughout the Christian era. On pages 430-432 he fleshes out the Day of Atonement context that he sees in Rev 8:2-6. On page 490 he indicates that the 1260 days of Rev 11:3 are future and literal.

⁷⁶I remember Dr. Gerhard Hasel addressing this issue with students and faculty after Glacier View. He commented (more or less) that we were in essential agreement with Ford’s soteriology, but that the issue between Ford and church leadership was focused in the area of eschatology.

⁷⁷The widespread use of the terminology “New Theology” in the Adventist right, is directed as much at elements of Ford’s soteriology as it is at deviations in the areas of sanctuary, christology, and worship style. In fairness, the elements of the Adventist right represented by the journal *Our Firm Foundation* and the 1888 Study Committee are strongly supportive of traditional historicist interpretation of Revelation, the groups I am referring to from here on in the paper lie outside of those two groups.

compelled them to a futurist application of Revelation as being the only truly “adventist” one.⁷⁸ It seemed that no matter what text we were looking at we saw something completely different in it. No matter what approach I took to explain, there was no meeting of the minds.

A devotional by one of the members helped me to understand what was going on.⁷⁹ She showed a series of slides in which she had set up Barbie dolls in such a way as to illustrate various themes in the Song of Solomon. The devotional expressed her conviction that the Song of Solomon was not a celebration of human sexuality, or even an allegory of the Messiah, but rather a prophecy of Christian history from the cross to the second coming.

I confronted her later that evening and indicated that what she had done fit into the category of allegory, along the lines of Origen and Philo. Her presentation really had nothing to do with the intention of Solomon’s Song and everything to do with her own needs and imagination. She argued in return that she had not read Christian history into the Song, but that the history had emerged naturally from the text. I argued back that she had simply read her understanding of Christian history into the text. I asserted that if we took an English teacher from each of our colleges and showed them the presentation they would unitedly agree that her use of the Bible was allegory in the classical sense, not an attempt to understand the biblical text itself.

She was not ready to give in. She brought out her clinching argument. “When I first got this out of Song of Solomon,” she said, “I was only 19 years old. I didn’t know any Christian history. How could a 19-year-old girl come up with all of this?”

I asked, “Had you read Great Controversy by then?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“Had you read Froom’s *Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* by then?”

“Yes,” she admitted.

“Case closed,” I said, “You may not have known secular historians, but your presentation makes it clear to me that you read Great Controversy and Froom’s *Prophetic Faith* back into Song of Solomon. What you are doing is a classic case of allegorical imagination.”

She thought for a moment and then moved in for the kill. She said, “I interpreted the Bible that way, because that is how I was taught, in our Adventist schools. I read the Bible the way Adventists always have. You Ph.D.s are the ones who are changing things. It is this

⁷⁸Major examples of this perspective are Larry Wilson, *Warning! Revelation is About to be Fulfilled* (Brushton, NY: Teach Services, 1992); Robert W. Hauser, *Give Glory to Him: The Sanctuary in the Book of Revelation* (Angwin, CA: by the author, 1983); idem, *Daniel, Revelation and the Final Generation* (Angwin, CA: Morningstar Publications, 1987); and Harry Robinson, “The Seven End-Time Trumpets of Revelation,” (manuscript presented to the End-Time Committee, Nashville, TN, 1989). Among the mainstream proponents of all or part of the futurist perspective are Marvin Moore (*The Seven Trumpets of Revelation: A Crisis About to Happen?* [unpublished paper, mid-1990s]) and Erwin Gane (*Heaven’s Open Door: The Seven Seals of Revelation and Christ Our Heavenly High Priest* [Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1989]). To be fair, Gane asserts the historicist view of Rev 5 and 6, for example, but then suggests a “double fulfillment” of the same material in the future. Rather than a futurist, he might prefer to be categorized as a proponent of dual fulfillment of prophecy (a more moderate version of Ford’s apotelesmatic principle).

⁷⁹She was a pastor’s wife named Marian Berry.

exegesis business that is the new thing, I'm studying the real Adventist way."⁸⁰

This was one of those enchanted moments when everything becomes clear. I suddenly realized that she was right, that the way I study Revelation is radically different than the previous generation, radically different than what the pioneers did. This insight led me to the brief outline of history I shared above.

Is the change of scholarship for the better? I believe it is. The trouble with allegorical methodology is that the results depend on the interpreter much more than the text. As long as the interpreter is reasonably reliable, the results will not be damaging. But in modeling an allegorical method, pastors and evangelists train people in a method which, in the hands of unstable people, can produce wild-eyed speculations and even life-threatening obsessions, such as those of 16th-century Münster.

In the absence of a living prophet, allegorical method leads to fragmentation. Each interpreter reads into the text according to his or her needs and expectations. For years administrators in the church have tolerated eisegetical abuse in evangelists and pastors because there was general agreement on the main points. But the days of Adventist unity are now in the past. Evangelists are increasingly diverging from the approaches of the past without the safeguard of a clear understanding of Scripture. Lay people of a variety of educational backgrounds are asserting their right to interpret the Bible in general and the Book of Revelation in particular in the way they see fit.

I predict the church will soon discover that there are only two remedies for interpretational chaos. One of them is the voice of a living prophet. Lacking such a voice we are left with the second remedy, a sober and rigorous attention to original meaning of the text. It is only when we are all looking at the same text that there is any hope for unity of understanding in our study of Revelation.

In the time of interpretational trouble that lies ahead the church will need its biblical scholars more than ever before. Sometimes tolerated, often ignored, Adventist biblical scholars can provide the means to counter the cacophony of voices the church faces in interpretation today. As far as the scholarly study of Revelation goes within the Adventist Church, it is my conviction that the best days are just ahead.

⁸⁰In a dialogue by mail with Harry Robinson, another follower of this end-time interpretation of the seals and the trumpets of Revelation, I came to the conclusion that he interpreted the Book of Revelation as if it were written in 1990 and I interpreted it as if it were written in 95 AD. I expected that this insight would bring him to his senses. Instead he responded that I was right in my analysis. He did interpret Revelation as if it were a contemporary book, and furthermore, he believed that that was the correct way for Adventists to approach the book of Revelation! At this point I could see that there would never be a meeting of the minds between these two divergent methods.