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Ekkehardt Mueller



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Interpreting The Best of Revelation 17: A Suggestion

The number 666 found in Rev 13:18 has always intrigued people. For a number of years now, a new suggestion has been circulating which was treated by some as “new light” and seemed to be attractive to a number of church members. It was proposed that the number 666 has to do with papal names. The sea beast of Rev 13 and the beast of Rev 17 were taken more or less as the same power. Both were understood to represent the papacy.

The seven heads of the beast of Rev 17 are described in a more detailed manner than the seven heads of the sea beast. Therefore, the number 666 and the seven heads, as found in Rev 17, were combined in order to come up with a new interpretation of this cryptic number. The seven heads are portrayed in Rev 17:10-11: “And they are seven kings; five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain a little while. The beast which was and is not, is himself also an eighth and is of the seven, and he goes to destruction.” Apparently, since 1798 only seven papal names have been used, namely Pius (12 times), Leo (13 times), Gregory (16 times), Benedict (14 times), John (supposedly 21 times), Paul (6 times), and John Paul (2 times). By adding $1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8+9+10+11+12$ for the twelve times that the papal name “Pius” has been used throughout church history one comes up with the number 78 for the name “Pius.” For “Leo” one has to add $1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8+9+10+11+12+13$ which makes 91, because the papal name Leo has been used thirteen times. Doing the same with all seven papal names and adding the figures together gives the number 665. Consequently, John Paul II was considered to be the seventh head having received a deadly wound (the attempt to assassinate John Paul II) from which he recovered. It was claimed that one pope would still be missing. When he would come, he would use a name not employed by any pope before him and would be the antichrist and the eighth head. Therefore, his name would be counted as a “one” only. This would

complete the number 666. If the new pope, however, would take a name used previously, as Benedict XVI has done, he would be an “antipope” who would be deposed and would be followed by the real antichrist. Needless to say that such a scenario is based on speculation and reminds one of soft time setting.

Other proposals on Rev 17 abound. One suggests to understand the sixth head/king as John Paul II. Another derives from the name of Benedict XVI the number 616 which is a variant reading of 666. However, many expositors—especially Adventists—point out that the heads/kings/mountains represent kingdoms and not individual kings. “The four beasts of Dan. 7 were said to represent four kings (Dan. 7:17) when, more precisely, Daniel means the kingdoms over which they rule.”¹

I. The Issues

Before studying Rev 17 in more detail, some basic questions must be answered: (1) Is the sea beast of Rev 13 identical with the beast of Rev 17 or does the beast of Rev 17 represent a different power? (2) What is the time frame of the vision? Does John describe events from a first century A.D. perspective, or is the point of reference to be found later and John is placed there in the spirit? (3) Is the description of the beast in Rev 17:8 “it was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and goes to destruction”—parallel to the description of the horns in verse 10 which says “five are fallen, one is, the other has not yet come,” or do these different stages of the beast not directly coincide with the subdivision of the heads?² (4) How should the heads be interpreted? We will briefly turn to these questions and propose some answers.

The beast of Rev 17 as well as the heads have been understood differently by biblical scholars within the Adventist Church. The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* lists several views but

¹ George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 227-228.

² The “was” phase of the beast would be parallel to “five are fallen;” the “is not” phase of the beast would parallel “one is” of the heads; and the “will come” phase of the beast would match “the other one has not yet come.”

is not dogmatic about any of them: (1) Some Adventists hold that the “was” phase of the beast represents pagan Rome, the “is not” phase the interim between pagan and papal Rome, and the “will come” phase papal Rome.³ (2) “Others equate the ‘was’ period with that represented by the beast and its seven heads, the ‘is not’ period with the interval between the wounding of the seventh head and the revival of the beast as ‘the eighth’, and the ‘yet is’ period with the revival of the beast when it becomes ‘the eighth.’”⁴ In this case the “was” period would probably stand for papal Rome and the “will come” phase for its revival after the healing of the deadly wound.

The heads are understood by some as “all political opposition to the people and cause of God.”⁵ Another suggestion is to interpret the five heads as the beasts of Dan 7 plus the little horn, that is, the empires from Babylon to the papacy, the sixth head as the beast out of the abyss (Rev 11), that is, the French Revolution, and the seventh head as the beast out of the earth (Rev 13) namely the United States of America. Still another proposal considers the five heads as the empires Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece, the sixth head as pagan Rome, and the seventh as papal Rome.⁶ The difference between the second and third view on the heads is that with the second view the sixth head is placed in the year 1798 A.D., whereas in the third view the sixth beast represents the time in which John lived, namely the first century. We will have to address this issue later. The following interpretation should be regarded as a good possibility, but not as the final word on one of the most difficult passages of Scripture.

Although the sea beast of Rev 13 and the beast of Rev 17 have some common elements, there are also important differences. Common elements are: Both have seven heads and ten horns (13:1; 17:7). The sea beast has a “mouth speaking . . . blasphemies” (Rev 13:5), whereas the other beast is “full of blasphemous names” (Rev

³ See Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1957), 7:853.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7:854.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7:854-856.

17:3). Both are powers opposed to God, Jesus, and the saints (Rev 13:6-8; 17:14). The differences are also remarkable: The sea beast has crowns on its horns (Rev 13:1), the beast of Rev 17 does not have any crowns. The color of the sea beast is not mentioned, but the other beast's color is scarlet (Rev 17:3). The sea beast comes out of the sea (Rev 13:1), but the beast on which Babylon rides comes out of the abyss (Rev 17:8). This suggests that these beasts symbolize different entities, although they share some characteristics and pursue similar goals.

II. The Abyss

In Revelation the abyss out of which the beast comes is mentioned seven times: (1) In Rev 9:1 the star fallen from heaven has the key to the abyss. (2) In Rev 9:2 this star opened the pit of the abyss. (3) In Rev 9:11 the king of the locusts is the angel of the abyss called Apollyon. (4) In Rev 11:7 the beast which comes out of the abyss kills the two witnesses. (5) According to Rev 17:8 the beast on which the great prostitute sits "was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and goes to destruction." (6) In Rev 20:1 an angel comes from heaven with the key to the abyss. (7) Finally, in Rev 20:3 this angel binds Satan for one thousand years in the abyss. After this period, Satan will be released. Four of these references belong to the historical part of Revelation,⁷ and all are found in the trumpet vision (Rev 8:2-11:18).

The fallen star mentioned in Rev 9:1-2, that is able to open the pit of the abyss and bring about disaster, suffering, and torture, should be identified as Satan. In Job 38:7 the sons of God, heavenly beings, are called morning stars. A fallen morning star occurs in Isa 14:12. Behind the Babylonian king someone far superior to him is addressed—Satan the real fallen morning star. According to Luke 10:18 Jesus saw Satan falling from heaven. In Revelation, stars, when used symbolically, refer to (1) the angels of the seven churches, probably religious leaders and teachers (Rev 1:20), and (2) heavenly beings, such as Jesus, the bright morning star (Rev 22:16), or the fallen angels (12:4, 9). In Rev 9:1 we hear about one

⁷ The historical part of Revelation ends with chapter 14.

fallen star only which according to Rev 8:10 is a great star whose actions bring about negative effects. It seems best to understand this star as Satan who according to Rev 12:7-9 was cast out of heaven.

Obviously the king of the locusts and angel of the abyss of Rev 9:11, also called Abaddon/Apollyon or destroyer, is the fallen star--Satan. His demonic army attacks humanity.

In Rev 11:7 the beast which comes out of the abyss and temporarily kills God's two witnesses (the fate of the OT and NT during the French Revolution) is Satan again.⁸ There is no reason to link the abyss of Rev 11, part of the same trumpet vision, to another person.

However, with Rev 20:1-3 the great reversal takes place. Satan's power to open the abyss is taken from him. This power was given to him by God (Rev 9:1) who is always in control. Now Satan himself is bound by an angel and confined to the abyss for one thousand years. It seems that Rev 17:8 points to this very situation. The beast which "was, and is not, and will come out of the abyss and goes to destruction" is Satan, who was presented as the great red dragon in Rev 12.

Apparently, all references to the abyss in Revelation have to do with Satan. The term is found in two other places in the NT. In Rom 10:7 the abyss may be the realm of the dead. But in Luke 8:31 demons ask Jesus not to be sent to the abyss. Again it is linked to satanic agencies. Therefore, we suggest to understand the beast on which Babylon sits as Satan who works through political powers.

III. Context and Time Frame of Revelation 17

The book of Revelation comes in two major parts. The first part (Rev 1-14) consists of several historical series of events reaching from the time of John to the final consummation. The second part (Rev 15-22) deals with end time events only and has been called the eschatological part. Whereas the dragon and the sea beast are found in the historical section of Revelation, the beast of Rev 17 belongs to the end time section. Therefore, differences between these beasts have to be expected.

⁸ Cf., Ekkehardt Mueller, "The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 13/2 (2002): 30-45.

Rev 15 and 16 contain the seven last plagues. The sixth plague describes the drying up of the Euphrates river, the river of Babylon, the coming of the kings from the east, namely Jesus and his heavenly host, and Armageddon. The seventh plague describes the judgment on Babylon and the time when it is being split apart into three parts. From Rev 17 onward this judgment is described in more details. The connection of the plagues with the subsequent chapters is evident. In Rev 17:1 one of the bowl angels introduces John to the judgment of the harlot Babylon which is described in chapters 17-19, whereas the judgment on the beast from the abyss which carries the harlot follows in Rev 20. Another bowl angel then introduces to John the bride of the lamb, the New Jerusalem in a more detailed manner--Rev 21:9-22:6. Rev 17:8-12 should be interpreted in this context.

Outline of Rev 17

1. Narrative: John is approached by one of the bowl angels (1a)
 - Speech* of the angel:
 - Speech 1* (1b-2): Judgment on the harlot.
2. Narrative: John is taken into the desert (3a)
 - Visions*:
 - Vision 1* (3b-5): The harlot on the beast with seven heads and ten horns as the mother of harlots, Babylon the Great.
 - Vision 2* (6a): The harlot and the saints.
3. Narrative: John wonders (6b)
 - Speeches* of the angel:
 - Speech 2* (7-14): The beast, the heads, the horns and their future battle against the lamb, the faithful ones.
 - Speech 3* (15-18): The waters, the horns' and the beast's battle against the harlot, the harlot as the great city.

In apocalyptic literature such as Daniel a vision is often followed by an explanation (cf. Dan 7:1-15 and 7:16-28 or Rev 1:16 and 1:20). After an initial angelic speech at the beginning of Rev 17 we find two short visions followed by two longer speeches. In

his initial speech the angel promises John that the judgment on the harlot will be revealed to him. However, the next two short visions (Rev 17:3b-5 and Rev 17:6a) do not focus on the judgment but introduce the beast with seven heads and ten horns. Yet the following two angelic speeches do not only explain the powers mentioned before, but also elaborate on the judgment mentioned in the first angelic speech. They provide additional information not contained in any of the two visions. Therefore, these angelic speeches are not just an explanation of the visions but furnish new insights.

The two visions of Rev 17:3b-6a depict the woman/harlot and her activities in historical time (cf. 17:4 and 14:8). On the other hand, the speeches identify the different powers introduced at the beginning of chapter 17 (with the exception of the beast) and portray the beast and the horns in their final battle against the lamb, and in their battle against the harlot, which is her judgment. The allies of the harlot will turn against her and destroy her. The beast will also be destroyed. All three speeches deal with judgment.

With regard to end time activities there is a stronger emphasis on the horns and the beast than on the heads. The heads are not directly mentioned as being involved in the final battle. This may indicate that the heads are more related to the flow of history and maybe to the harlot herself, whereas the horns in conjunction with the beast play an important role in the final battle against Jesus and in the battle against the harlot. These horns will come to power in the future and collaborate with the beast “for one hour.”

Two further observations are in order. Yet before turning to them the following outline is presented which focuses on speeches 2 and 3 in a more detailed way.

The Second and the Third Angelic Speeches

Second Speech of the Angel (7-14):

Introduction (7)

a. The beast (8-9a)

Which you have seen

b. The heads (9b-11)

The heads **are** seven mountains and seven kings.

c. The horns (12-14)

Which you have seen

The horns **are** ten kings.

Third Speech of the Angel (15-18):

- a. The waters (15)
Which you have seen
The waters **are** peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues.
- b. The ten horns and the beast (16-17)
Which you have seen
- c. The harlot (18)
Which you have seen
The harlot **is** the great city.

The harlot, the waters, the heads, and the horns are identified. In each case the phrase is used “the . . . are/is . . .” The only entity which is not directly identified is the beast (Rev 17:8-9a). There is another section in the third angelic speech dealing with the beast and the horns, in which an identification is missing (Rev 17:16-17). But the horns were already explained previously. Therefore, it is again the beast which is not explained, although we hear about its activities.

While the beast is singled out as the symbol which is not explained, the heads are singled out in another way. The second speech deals with the beast, the heads, and the horns; the third with the waters, the horns and the beast, and the harlot/woman. In these six sections five times the phrase “which you have seen” is applied. It is found with all entities except the heads. This may, or may not, be a coincidence. In any case, when we attempt to identify the powers of Rev 17 in specific terms, it is the heads which form the starting point. Five of the heads are fallen, one is. The phrase “one is” must in some way or another relate to John. There is a specific time in which John is found and in which one of the seven heads also “is.” The question then is whether this time is the first century A.D. when John lived or whether it refers to the time of the events shown to him in the vision.

As we find the phrase “one is” with the heads, so we find the expression “is not” with the beast. The beast was, is not, will come out of the abyss and goes to destruction. The beast is described similarly three times in Rev 17:8 and 11:

- (1) It was AND IS NOT *and is about to come up
out of the abyss* AND GOES TO DESTRUCTION.
- (2) It was AND IS NOT *and will come.*
- (3) It was AND IS NOT, *and is an eighth
and is of the seven,* AND GOES TO DESTRUCTION.

As “one is” (head) relates to John’s time either in the first century or at a later time in vision, the phrase “is not” (beast) could also relate to John and therefore to history. Is such a conclusion warranted? We do not think so. (1) Although both phrases use the present tense, it is hardly conceivable that at the same time the beast “is not” and one of its heads “is.” (2) The beast is not identified. Statements related to the beast portray it from an end time perspective and point to its future judgment. Therefore, the phrase “is not” does not necessarily connect this period to John’s time. (3) The “is not” phase can be understood as a future development, because the present tense oftentimes stands for the future (see e.g., Rev 17:11-13; 16:15). Furthermore, the phrase “it goes to destruction” in the same sentence is also used in the present tense, although it will be the end of the beast. That the beast is not identified and that the heads are singled out may point to the fact that the beast should be understood mainly from a future perspective, whereas the heads contain the clue to unlock the understanding of Rev 17. (4) The second part of Rev 17:8 seems to connect the “is not/will be” phases of the beast to the earth dwellers. However, this is a future development only, most probably related to the very last hours of this world.⁹ (5) How does the Book of Revelation interpret the beast’s future coming up out of the abyss? Answer: It describes it in Rev 20 as Satan’s release from the abyss prison. In other words the phase dealing with the beast coming up out of the abyss and its subsequent destruction depicts events that follow the millennium. Then the phrase “is not” should be understood as the time during the millennium. The first phase, describing the beast as “it was” refers to historical time and ends with the beginning of the millennium. It is the time which points to Satan’s activity during human

⁹ They will be astonished–future tense (Rev 17:8).

history until Christ's Second Coming. The heads would basically fall into this time, whereas the horns seem to come on the scene at the very end of time only. However, John's special focus is on the judgment and thus on events taking place in conjunction with and after Christ's Second Coming.

The seven heads are divided into three segments with an eighth head being added: (a) Five are fallen, (b) one is, (c) one has not come yet, and (d) the eighth is the beast. Although it is tempting to associate the phases of the beast with the division of the heads, the text does not demand such a procedure. If the phases of the beast and the subdivision of the seven heads are understood to be parallel, then the "is not" phase of the beast would correspond with the "one is" period of the heads. If we follow the above suggestion concerning the beast from the abyss, such an approach would be impossible, because if parallelism is required one king/kingdom would need to survive during the millennium, the phase during which the beast "is not." But this is excluded by Rev 19 and 20. Furthermore as indicated above, how can the beast be in the state "is not," while one of his heads exists—"one is"? This is not only awkward but also requires fancy interpretations. Therefore, it seems best not to take the phases of the beast and the segments of the heads as parallel accounts.

A natural understanding of Rev 17:10, "and they are seven kings; five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain a little while" seems to imply that at the time John wrote the Book of Revelation five kingdoms had fallen and the sixth was ruling. We are not told that John was transported into another time. Obviously, John lived during the period of the sixth head. In addition, the Book of Revelation was primarily addressed to Christians living in the first century. Probably they would have understood verse 10 in such a way that the sixth head referred to the time they were living in. If we assume that the sixth head was not ruling when Revelation was penned and John had been taken to another time, then we are not able to come up with any definite interpretation of Rev 17, because there is no way to determine in which time John was transported, whether he was in the first centuries A.D., the medieval ages, directly after 1798, or at an even later time. But then such a prophecy containing chronological statements would be meaningless. Jon Paulien has stated:

In a vision, the prophet can travel from earth to heaven and range back and forth from time past to the end of time. The vision is not necessarily located in the prophet's time and place. But when the vision is explained to the prophet afterward, the explanation always comes in the time, place, and circumstances of the visionary.¹⁰

According to this principle the explanation of the heads is crucial. It locates the sixth head in the first century A.D. Kenneth A. Strand writes about the beast and the heads:

To seek a fulfillment in history, for example, for the 'is not' phase of the beast of chapter 17, when that phase is obviously a view of judgment, is illogical. Or to treat the whole chapter 17 as having historical, rather than eschatological fulfillment is to miss the very point of the chapter and of the whole second part of the book of Revelation in which it occurs.

This is not to say, however, that there are absolutely no historical reflections in chapter 17. The explanation of the seven heads and ten horns, for example, must be from the viewpoint of John at the time of his writing. After all how else can an *explanation* be given than in terms of what exists, even though the vision itself is from the perspective of eschatological judgment when the beast 'is not'? In other words, though John sees the vision from the 'is not' phase (judgment), the heads and horns are historical entities belonging to the 'was' phase.¹¹

IV. Suggested Interpretation

The Beast. We have already suggested that the "was" phase of the beast refers to historical time. During that time Satan was and is active through different agencies. The time ends with the Second

¹⁰ Jon Paulien, "The Hermeneutics of Biblical Apocalyptic," unpublished paper, 2004, 25.

¹¹ Kenneth A. Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation: Hermeneutical Guidelines, with Brief Introduction to Literary Analysis* (Worthington, OH: Ann Arbor Publishers, 1979), 54-55.

Coming of Jesus Christ. In connection with Christ's Second Advent Satan is bound and confined to the abyss. He enters the phase "is not." After the millennium Satan is released from the abyss. He is active as described in Rev 20. As such he is the eighth and out of the seven. But he will be judged and destroyed by God.

The Heads. At the time of John, five heads—world empires—were fallen and one existed. The existing one was the Roman Empire. The five preceding kingdoms start with Egypt and continue with Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece. Although this can be deduced logically once the kingdom existing at John's time is identified, there is additional information found in Revelation which points to Egypt as the first empire. Egypt is mentioned by name in Rev 11:8. Although this Egypt is a symbolical Egypt, because it is said that the Lord was crucified there, it still reminds us of the ancient empire of the Pharaohs. It is the earliest empire mentioned in Revelation. Furthermore, Strand has shown that the first five trumpets and the first five plagues are modeled after the Egyptian plagues. Therefore, he talks about the "Exodus from Egypt Motif" in Revelation.¹² Egypt as a world empire was followed by the Assyrians. After them the kingdoms known from Dan 2, 7, and 8 follow. The sixth head would be the Roman Empire and the seventh the papacy.

The Sixth Head and the Shortness of Time. The seventh head is said to remain for "a little [while]." Some have suggested that this cannot be applied to the papacy, because the papacy has already exists longer than several of the other kingdoms combined. The word *oligos*, "little," "small," "few," "short," is found four times in Revelation. In the messages to the seven churches it describes the quantity of things (Rev 2:14) and persons (Rev 3:4), whereas in Rev 12:12 and 17:10 it refers to time. Rev 12:12 is interesting because the text states that after Satan's battle with Michael and his defeat, "the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, knowing that he has a short time." This "short time" started with

¹² Cf., K. A. Strand, "'Victorius-Introduction' Scenes" in *Symposium on Revelation: Introductory and Exegetical Studies, Book 1*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, edited by F. B. Holbrook (Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 67.

Christ's cross and still continues, consisting in the meantime of about two millennia.

The length of time expressed by *oligos* is dependent upon that with which it is compared. In Rev. 12:12 *oligos* defines the period of time from the casting out of Satan at the time of the crucifixion of Christ to the end of Satan's tyranny over the inhabitants of earth. This period of times is described as *oligos* in comparison with the more than 4,000 years preceding the crucifixion.¹³

Therefore, the "little [time]" of the seventh head does not exclude the papacy as the fulfillment of the seventh head.

The Ten Horns. The ten horns are political powers during the time of the seventh head which will support the beast (Rev 17:13). "The nations of the earth, represented by the ten horns, here purpose to unite with the 'beast' . . . in forcing the inhabitants of the earth to drink the 'wine' of Babylon . . . , that is, to unite the world under her control and to obliterate all who refuse to cooperate . . ." ¹⁴

A Diagram. The diagram found at the end of this article; is adapted from K. Strand.¹⁵ It summarizes our discussion and helps us see the relationships between the different phases and entities of the vision.

Summary

We suggest that: (1) The seven heads of the beast seem to represent kingdoms rather than individual kings. These kingdoms are Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome, and the papacy. (2) The beasts in Rev 12, 13, and 17 do not exactly represent the same power. The beast of Rev 17 is Satan working through political powers. He is active throughout human history. (3) The phases of the beast and the subdivision of the heads are not directly parallel. Whereas the phases of the beast represent historical time, the time during the millennium, and the time after the millennium,

¹³ Nichol, 7:811.

¹⁴ Ibid., 7:857.

¹⁵ Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, 56.

the heads must all be placed in historical time. The sixth head seems already to refer to John’s time, that is, the first century A.D.¹⁶

As mentioned before, the interpretation presented here is a viable option and follows the principles of interpretation found in Scripture itself. There are other possibilities dealing with this difficult passage which may have some merit. However, the fanciful interpretation in the introduction to this article as well as similar ones must be rejected. They are absolutely arbitrary and completely subjective. They superimpose ideas on the biblical text which are not found in Scripture.

Although Rev 17 depicts evil powers which are quite active, God is still in control. He brings judgment on the enemies of his people and delivers his saints from all perplexities and persecutions. “These will wage war against the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, because He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those who are with Him are the called and chosen and faithful” (Rev 17:14).

THE BEAST OF REV 17

Historical Era		
“WAS”	}	1 st Head
		2 nd Head
		3 rd Head
		4 th Head
		5 th Head
“Five are fallen”		
“One Is”	}	6 th Head John’s Time
“One Is Not Yet Come”	}	7 th Head 10 Horns Concurrent
Eschatological Era		
“IS NOT”		“Bottomless Pit” (Millennium)
“YET IS”		8 th Head
“Goes to Destruction”		“Perdition”

¹⁶ According to Rev 17:16 the beast and the horns will turn against the harlot and will attack and destroy her. In this context the heads are not mentioned, only the beast and the horns are. If the heads are mostly past entities—as suggested above—this makes perfect sense.



Biblical Research Institute
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

12501 Old Columbia Pike
Silver Spring, MD 20904-6600

Website: adventistbiblicalresearch.org
E-mail: biblicalresearch@gc.adventist.org
Phone: 301-680-6790
Fax: 301-680-6788