

# The Pre-Advent Judgment – Fact or Fiction

Part I

Gerhard Pfandl

Biblical Research Institute

Of all the doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist Church the doctrine of the pre-Advent judgment in heaven beginning in 1844 has been questioned more than any other. This questioning has come from scholars and others both outside and inside the church.

From outside the church, Walter R. Martin in his book *The Kingdom of the Cults* has written, “Adventists in the opinion of conservative Biblical scholars, not to mention the liberal wing of Protestantism, are only speculating with their sanctuary and investigative judgment theories. Actually most agree that they have created doctrines to compensate for errors in prophetic interpretation.”<sup>1</sup>

Within the church, the most thorough negative inquiry was initiated in recent times by my former mentor Dr. Desmond Ford. In 1980 he presented a 991 page document to more than 100 church leaders and theologians gathered at Glacier View. In his study he contended that the judgment in Daniel 7 is not a pre-Advent judgment, that apocalyptic prophecy is also conditional, that according to the apotelesmatic principle a prophecy can have multiple fulfillments, and that the antitypical Day of Atonement began in A.D. 31 rather than in 1844.<sup>2</sup>

At Glacier View, Ford's views were rejected. However, the questions he raised were deemed sufficiently important to merit a 1981 action by the Executive Committee of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which asked that the Biblical Research Institute form a special committee to restudy the books Daniel and Revelation.

During the eleven years of its existence, the Daniel and Revelation Committee produced seven volumes<sup>3</sup> that address many of the issues raised during the Glacier View meetings. In its final report the committee stated that “far from being a museum piece of pioneer theology, the biblical teaching of the pre-advent, investigative phase of the final judgment is of vital importance to Christians today. It is a concluding portion of the overall salvation process and an integral component of the three angel's messages.”<sup>4</sup>

## Apocalyptic Prophecy and Historicism

It is generally agreed that there is a difference between classical prophecy, in which the prophet was God's spokesperson to his people in Old and New Testament times, and apocalyptic prophecy with its focus on the end of the world and the coming of the kingdom of God.

The fulfillment of the promises in classical prophecy was dependent on the response of the people (Jer 18:7-10). “Classical prophets tied God's activities to events in human history.”<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, apocalyptic prophecy presents God's cosmic timetable for the

final supernatural appearance of the kingdom of God. Hence it is not conditional. In other words, it is not dependent on the human response, e.g., Christ's first coming was not dependent on Israel's or Judah's obedience. He came, "when the fullness of time [outlined in Daniel 9:24-27] had come" (Gal 4:4 NKJV), even though the Jews were not ready to receive him.

Similarly, the time prophecies in Daniel and Revelation which point towards the time of the end and the Second Coming are independent of any human response. In apocalyptic prophecy we become "spectators to events on a world stage; we are seeing the divine foreknowledge unfold the course of the future."<sup>6</sup>

Apocalyptic prophecies explain what God has foreseen and what he has determined should happen. The 2,300 "evenings and mornings" and the "three and a half times" in Daniel 7 and 8, therefore, are not conditional. They cannot be repeatedly applied to different ages as the interpreter sees fit. In the sweep of history they can only have one fulfillment, just as the 70-week prophecy in Daniel 9 only had one fulfillment.

Throughout most of church history these apocalyptic time prophecies were interpreted according to the historicist method of interpretation. Only in the last two hundred years have other systems, such as preterism and futurism, replaced historicism. And, as all students of prophecy know, the backbone of historicism is the year-day principle.

### **The Year-day Principle**

It is ironic that one of the best summaries of the year-day principle, based on the works of T. R. Birks<sup>7</sup> and H. G. Guinness,<sup>8</sup> is found in D. Ford's first commentary on Daniel.<sup>9</sup> In his second Daniel commentary, eighteen years later, he rejected it on the basis that it cannot be biblically justified.<sup>10</sup>

Contrary to this position, Seventh-day Adventists believe that the year-day principle is a Bible based principle. The main points in support of it can be summarized as follows:<sup>11</sup>

1) Since the visions in Daniel 7 and 8 are largely symbolic, with a number of different beasts representing important historical empires (7:3-7; 8:3-5, 20-21), the time periods (7:25; 8:14) should also be seen as symbolic.

2) The fact that the visions deal with the rise and fall of known empires in history which existed for hundreds of years indicates that the prophetic time periods must also cover long time periods.

3) The peculiar, distinctive way in which the time periods are expressed indicates that they should not be taken literally. If the "time, times, and half a time" in Daniel 7:25 stands for three and a half literal years, why didn't God say "three years and six months?" In Luke 4:25 and James 5:17 where three and a half literal years are referred to, each time the phrase is "three years and six months" Similarly, Paul remained in Corinth "a year and six months; (Acts 18:11), and David reigned in Hebron "seven years and six months" (2 Sam 2:11).

4) In Daniel 7 the four beasts which together account for a reign of at least one thousand years are followed by the little horn power. It is the focus of the vision since it is most directly in opposition to God. Three and a half literal years for the struggle between the little horn and the Most High are out of proportion to the comprehensive scope of salvation history portrayed in this vision. The same applies to Revelation 12:6 and 14 where the one thousand and two hundred and sixty days or three and a half times cover most of the history between the First and Second Advents.

5) According to the context, the expressions "time, times, and half a time" (Dan 7:25; 12:7; Rev 12:14), "forty-two months" (Rev 11:2; 13:5), and "one thousand two hundred and sixty days" (Rev 11:3; 12:6) all apply to the same time period, but the natural expression "three years and six months" is not used once.

"The Holy Spirit seems, in a manner, to exhaust all the phrases by which the interval could be expressed, excluding always that one form which would be used of course in ordinary writing, and is used invariably in Scripture on other occasions, to denote the literal period. This variation is most significant if we accept the year-day system, but quite inexplicable on the other view"<sup>12</sup>

6) The prophecies in Daniel 7-8, and 10-12 lead up to the "time of the end" (8:17; 11:35, 40; 12:4, 9 ) which is followed by the resurrection (12:2) and the setting up of God's everlasting kingdom (7:27). "In the sweep of history described in these prophecies that extends from the prophet in the sixth century B.C. to our time and beyond, literal time periods of only 3 ½ to 6 ½ years are not capable of reaching anywhere near this final end time. Therefore, these prophetic time periods should be seen as symbolic and standing for considerable longer periods of actual time extending to the end of time."<sup>13</sup>

7) The only commonly used measure of time not used in the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation is the year. Days, weeks, and months, are referred to, but not the time unit "year." The most obvious explanation is that the "year" is the unit symbolized throughout these prophecies.

8) There are a number of texts in the historical narratives of the OT in which "days" stands for "years" ( Ex 13:10; 1 Sam 2:19; 20:6; Judges 11:40 etc.). Also in the poetic portions of the OT "days" at times stands in parallel to the word for "year" (Job 10:5; 32:7; 36:11; Ps 77:5; 90:9-10; etc.). "Both of these usages provide a ready background for the kind of thought that could be extended to the more specific quantitative application of this relationship in apocalyptic."<sup>14</sup>

9) In Numbers 14 and Ezekiel 4 God deliberately used the day for a year principle as a teaching device. "According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for each day you shall bear your guilt one year, namely forty years, and you shall know my rejection" (Numbers 14:34). And in an acted out parable the prophet Ezekiel was told to lie 390 days on his left side and 40 days on his right side, "I have laid on you a day for each year" (Ezekiel 4:6).

10) In Dan 9:24-27 the 70-week time prophecy met its fulfillment at the exact time, if we use the year-day principle to interpret it. Many interpreters, who in other apocalyptic texts do not use the year-day principle, recognize that the 70 weeks are in fact "weeks of years" reaching from the Persian period to the time of Christ. Thus the pragmatic test in Daniel 9 confirms the validity of the year-day principle.

References to the year-day principle can be found in intertestamental times in Qumran as well as in other Jewish writings of that period.<sup>15</sup> Thus the historicist method of interpretation is not a Johnny-come-lately on the theological scene, rather it rests on a solid biblical and historical foundation. And in spite of what some may claim, it is not an outdated method belonging to the past but a valid principle of interpreting apocalyptic prophecies today.

When the year-day principle is applied to the time prophecies in Daniel 7 and 8, a pre-Advent judgment beginning in 1844 emerges from the text. In the concluding article we will specifically look at the judgment scene in Daniel 7.

## Endnotes:

- 
1. Walter R. Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965), 407.
  2. D. Ford subsequently published his Glacier View document as *Daniel 8:14 The Day of Atonement and the Investigative Judgment* (Casselberry, FL: Euangelion Press, 1980).
  3. The set of seven volumes is available from the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference as well as from any Adventist Book Center.
  4. W. R. Leshner and Frank B. Holbrook, "Daniel and Revelation Committee: Final Report" in *Symposium on Revelation – Book II*, DARCOM, edited by Frank B. Holbrook, 7 vols (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 7:455.
  5. Dewey M. Beegle, *Prophecy and Predictions* (Ann Arbor: Pryor Pettengill, 1978), 90
  6. William G. Johnsson, "Conditionality in Biblical Prophecy with Particular Reference to Apocalyptic" in *70 Weeks, Leviticus, Nature of Prophecy*, DARCOM, edited by Frank B. Holbrook, 7 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Research Institute, 1986), 3:278.
  7. Thomas R. Birks, *First Elements of Sacred Prophecy* (London: William E. Painter, 1843).
  8. H. G. Guinness, *The Approaching End of the Age, Viewed in the Light of History, Prophecy, and Science*. 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1882).
  9. Desmond Ford, *Daniel* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Assoc., 1978), 300-305.
  10. In his latest Daniel commentary he denies that the 70 weeks are cut off from the 2300 years of Daniel 8 and adds, "Neither do I consider that the year-day principle should be applied in the study of the prophecies of Daniel, though I recognize it as a providential aid over long centuries of Christ's delay." (D. Ford, *Daniel and the Coming King*, [Newcastle, CA: Desmond Ford Publications, 1996], 298).
  11. See Ford, *Daniel*, 300-305 and William H. Shea, *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation*, Revised edition, DARCOM, 7 vols. (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 1:67-104.
  12. Birks, 352.
  13. Shea, 73.
  14. Ibid. 103.
  15. See Shea, 106-110.