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Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

A Brief History of SDA Interpretation
On The Battle of Armageddon

A Report
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SDA History

by

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Many false forecasts have been occasioned by the Eastern Question, and many loyal Seventh-day Adventists have made false forecast, due to their belief in the Eastern Question. The only purpose in referring to this fact is to point out the cause, in order that we may profit today by the mistakes of yesterday. It would be difficult to learn of a prophetic interpretation more discredited by the unfolding of events than those which lead to the battle of Armageddon and the Eastern Question. For three-quarters of a century, since it was introduced into the Advent Movement, it has been prolific as a producer of false prophecies, and even today the mistakes of yesterday are still coming out in some of our publications.

In this brief history, it is my intent to show that we as a church, even though we wandered from our basic firm foundation, regarding Armageddon, are now returning from the wilderness, back onto the path into the Kingdom.

Pre-SDA History:

William Miller taught that the sixth plague was a diminishing or taking away of "the Turkish power" then (1836) in the process of fulfillment, "so that the way

now appears to be prepared for the kings to come up to the battle of the great day"¹ Josiah Litch, who placed the the plagues "in the future, and after the second advent" stated,

"the great river Euphrates" will be as literally dried up to make way for kings of the eastern world to come up to Jerusalem and Palestine to that battle, as the same river was dried up before Cyrus, when he entered and took the city Babylon;"².

SDA publications contain little on the subject of Armageddon until the 1850's. G. W. Holt contended in an article in the Review and Heralded (1852) that the plagues were as real and literal as the plagues of Egypt. And after quoting Rev. 16:12 he declared, "This doubtless will be literal, and better understood about the time of its fulfillment!" It is not clear whether he ment that just the s/xth plague would be literal or whether he ment the prophetic symbols would be literal.³

It was not until some unresponsible leaders started declaring that the Civil War was the beginning of the

¹Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia, Commentary Reference Series Vol. 10, Review and Hearld Publishing Association 1966. p. 61.

²Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia, p. 61,62.

³Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia, p. 62.

battle of the great day of God, that formal exegesis of Rev. 16:12 appeared in our SDA literature.

SDA Beliefs:

In the Jan. 21, 1862 issue of the Review and Herald James White wrote an article intitled "Thoughts On The Great Battle."

"In view of the civil war of the States, and the war like attitude of other nations, the question is sometimes asked. 'Is not the battle of that great day of God Almighty commencing?' We wish to offer a few thoughts upon the battle of that great day, which may lead to a more thorough investigation, and a better understanding of this subject.

We have probably entered but the threshold of our own national difficulties. American soil may yet be drenched with human blood. Evil may go forth from nation to nation, and a great whirlwind be raised up from the coasts of the earth, till all nations become imbrued in the horrors of war, yet in all this we do not see the battle of that great day of God Almighty.

The special preparations for that battle do not commence until the time of the pouring out of the sixth vial..."

James White states further in his article, "These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them; for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings; and they that are with him are called, and chosen and faithful."

Here, then, the great battle is fought, and there is no proof that a gun is to be fired." He also states after quoting Rev. 16: 19-21, "Here it is seen that the great battle is not between nation and nation; but between earth and heaven. Satan wishes to make another attack on

Jesus Christ. He musters the fallen spirits of his command, and they go forth to the kings of the earth, and the whole world, to gather them to battle. The King of kings overcomes, and destroys all his enemies."

Whites interpretation that the great battle was not between nation and nation, but between earth and heaven, showed how God had lead His faithful servents into truth, away from the errors of their times. Whites interpretation was a Christ centered interpetation, which had Christ fighting for his people throughout all ages in the spiritual battle of the Conflict of the Ages, or the Great Controversy between Christ and Satan.

A short time later a more formal exegesis of Rev. 16:12-16 came forth in a series of articles entitled "Thoughts on the Revelation" by Uriah Smith. These articles came out in the Review intermittently from June 3, 1862, to Feb. 3, 1863. Smith identified "the symbolic drying up of the river Euphrates as "the consumption of the Turkish empire," which power, he said, would cease to exist altogether under the sixth plague." This interpretation tends to take Christ out of the center of Smith's prophetic interpretation, as can be seen in this statement. "He considered the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire a

necessary prelude to the battle of Armageddon, inasmuch as that battle, he said, would be fought at Jerusalem, and Jerusalem was then in the hands of the Turks. The dissolution of the Turkish Empire, he said, would prepare the way for "the kings of the East," by which he understood nations to the east of Palestine, to fight in the battle at Jerusalem."¹

When Smith made the following statement:

"All eyes are now turned with interest toward Turkey; and the unanimous opinion of statesmen is, that the Turk is destined soon to be driven from Europe. . . Time will soon determine this matter; and it may be but a few months."²

James White could never be reconciled to this view. He quoted in another Review and Herald article some six years later, "what will be the result of this positiveness in unfulfilled prophecies should things not come out as very confidently expected, is an anxious question"³

One of the main reasons that **Elder** White could not be reconciled to the same views of Elder Smith, is that

¹Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia, p. 62

²Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia, p. 63

³Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia, p. 63

Smith's prophetic interpretation is not Christ centered, but geographically centered. Without a Christ centered interpretation, one can not obtain an entirely different religious experience, that comes from the correct study of the books Daniel and Revelation.

"When we as a people understand what this book (Revelation) means to us, there will be seen among us a great revival. We do not understand fully the lessons that it teaches notwithstanding the injunction given us to search and study it. . . . When the books of Daniel and Revelation are better understood, believers will have an entirely different religious experience."¹

This important and thrilling knowledge for God's people to experience from the better understanding of the books of Daniel and Revelation comes when one understands the truth on such subjects as the king of the north, and Armageddon the battle in which God intervenes to save His people from destruction at the hands of their enemies. It is this knowledge that reveals the closeness of God's presence to save His people, and this comforting truth is discerned when one turns from Uriah Smith's teaching that Turkey is the king of the north. With out sound Biblical hermeneutical principles for scriptural interpretation one is not able to rightly divide the Word of God.

¹White, Ellen G. Testimonies To Ministers And Gospel Workers, Pacific Press, 1923, 1944, 1962, pp. 113, 114.

Thus they will fail to understand the one thing that should come from the study of Revelation, "that the connection between God and His people is close and decided."¹

The moral purpose of prophecies is not to be seen as merely milestones which are to be counted as road markers on the highway to heaven, which show us just where we are and how far we have to go. Prophecies moral purpose is to teach us salvation. Through true interpretations prophecy illustrates how salvation is accomplished, and also strengthens the soul to resist sin. The Word of God is the seed which, through the operation of the Holy Spirit, generates the new life. That life is revived and strengthened as often as the Word of God is read and received into the soul. The new man lives and grows by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God, and in purifying the life, and building up the soul, the Saviour emphasises the necessity of heeding every word of the Holy Scriptures.

Man's indefatigable enemy seeks to render ineffective to students of the Bible the life-giving energy contained in certain important prophecies of Holy Writ. He does this by means of erroneous interpretations. The Saviour not only said "Search the Scriptures" but He also said; "How readest thou?" By erroneous interpretations it is possible to

¹White, Testimonies To Ministers And Gospel Workers
p. 114.

add unto or take away from the Word of God, against which we are explicitly warned. (Rev. 22:18,19.)

A true understanding of Bible prophecies reveals the gospel teaching that the abiding Presence of the Saviour affords protection and deliverance from hostile foes and that victory is assured through the indwelling Spirit of God. The moral purpose of prophecy gives us the realization that Christ the King of glory reigns, not only as the King of the Universe, but also in the trusting heart, where victory over sin is won or lost. Thus, we can say "We are more than conquerors through Him that loved us," (Rom. 8:37)¹ only when we keep Christ first and foremost in the center of our lives and interpretations of prophecy.

It is this writer's opinion that the church began to wander into the wilderness, with the beginning of Uriah Smith's prophetic interpretations. When our evangelist and preachers began to preach a geographical centered prophecy, errors and lack of unity crept into our prophetic interpretations, and as Elder White was afraid of, when they were proven to be incorrect the Gospel was set back instead of beaming forth with the last day message God has given our church.

¹Were, Louis F. The Moral Purpose of Prophecy, Melbourn, Victoria, Australia. 1972.

Some Of The Views Through The Ages:

1880-1900

George Teasdale states in a Signs Publication, "In other words, Turkey shall remove her Capital from Constantinople to Jersusalem, which is situated on Mt Zion, between the Dead Sea and Mediterraneam."¹ Just before the turn of the century we can see how Uriah Smith's interpretation began to be adopted and preached all over the world.

1896

Alonzo T. Jones stated in Oakland California,

"We see that the sure Word of God announces that the ending of the Ottomon Empire is followed by a time of universal war, wo, and trouble, such as never was before since there was a nation. . ."

"There is yet one other element to be noticed in this connection. It is that the Turks themselves look for this very thing. They expect to be driven out from Constantinople, and² that their seat of power will then be Jerusalem."

The armament race that led to World War I revived interest in Armageddon. And W. A. Spicer wrote this in an Review and Herald article entitled "The Gathering for Armageddon,"

"Men who know the pulse of international affairs see just before us a worl-conflict, which they describe as the Armageddon of the nations. . ."

¹Teasdale, George, Armageddon, Signs Publishing Company Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. Around 1880-1900.

²Jones, Alonzo T. "The Eastern Question" Bible Students Libery, Published Quarterly, for the International Tract Society, by Pacific Press Publishing, #144 Extra 1896, p. 14.

The sure word of prophecy says that it is the gathering to the battle of the last great day. . . . With express speed the world is rushing on to the great Armageddon Before our very eyes the prophecy is fulfilling. Men of the world bear witness to it. The rest will surely come, and the time is near at hand"¹

1913

W. H. Branson commented:

"It is astonishing to note how the idea of Armageddon is taking hold of thinking people of every country, and how the world is awaiting with fear and trembling the great crisis that Armageddon stands for, and that is so sure and so soon to come."²

Six years before the outbreak of World War I, S. N.

Haskell wrote:

"Even the Turks themselves are looking forward to the time when they will have to remove their capital from Constantinople to Jerusalem. . . . All know that when the Turk steps out of Constantinople, there will be a general breaking up of Europe. They may not name the impending conflict the battle of Armageddon, but God has so named it."³

C. M. Snow suggested that if Turkey should enter World War I:

"then this (World War I) is the first stage of Armageddon battle. But that is yet to be determined. The outcome of this war we cannot forecast. Its relation to Armageddon depends

¹Spicer, W. A. Review and Herald, Oct. 22, 1903.

²Branson, W. H. Review and Herald, Feb. 6, 1913.

³Haskell, S.N., The Story of Daniel the Prophet, SDA Bible Commentary, p. 63.

upon the aligning and shifting of the nations themselves. Will those shiftings and alignments so dry up that power designated as the Euphrates that the way will be prepared for the forces of heathenism and Mohammedanism to come up to the common battle ground of the world? Time will tell. But if this war does not do it, another must follow soon that will."¹

F. M. Wilcox a few weeks after the beginning of the war, follow right along with Snow, by saying:

"The Scriptures indicate that eventually the site of government will be removed to the glorious holy mountain between the seas, referring evidently to Jerusalem. . . . The river Euphrates, representing the Ottoman government, is rapidly being dried up that the way of the kings of the East may be prepared to take part in the great battle of Armageddon"²

When Turkey did declare war, six weeks later, G. B. Starr wrote:

"The Ottoman Empire in Europe will soon be merely a memory." . . . For nearly forty years the writer has watched with deepest interest the movements in the Near East with reference to the fulfilment of the predictions relating to the Eastern Question, and rejoices in the clear evidences that the last step, the last act of the drama, is at hand"³

Dispite the trends of most interpretations to one of geographical literalism, during the turn of the century, and especially just before and during World War I

¹ Snow, C. M. Review and Herald, Sept. 17, 1914, SDA Bible Commentary, page 63.

² Wilcox, F. M., Review and Herald, Oct. 15, 1914, SDA Bible Commentary, p. 63

³ Starr, G. B., Review and Herald, Nov. 26, 1914, SDA Bible Commentary, p. 63

there were those who cautioned the brethren not to consider the war as the Biblical Armageddon. One of these men was A. O. Tait. He stated:

The furious way in which this European war has broken out, and the rapidity with which it is spreading from one nation to another, is causing many people to ask the question, "Is this the beginning of Armageddon?" To this question we can clearly say, No, the war of Armageddon has not commenced; for it will be observed, in the prophecy already quoted, that that war of Armageddon takes place under the pouring out of the sixth of the seven last plagues, and these plagues have not begun to fall, as every one knows."¹

Eventhough there were men like Tait, the majority of interpretations still held to a geographical literal interpretation. In 1924 Carlyle B. Haynes wrote a small book intitlled "On the Eve of Armageddon" and once again the center of his interpretation centered around Turkey. "When the Euphrates is dried up. or dropping the figure, when Turkey is destroyed, there will be a scramble for his territory, resulting in general war. This will be the certain result, both in the opinion of world statesmen, and also in the teaching of the Bible.

As a result of the downfall of Turkey, "the kings of the earth, and of the whole world," will be gathered to Armageddon."²

¹Tait, A. O., Signs of the Times, Aug. 18, 1914, SDA Bible Commentary. p. 64.

²Haynes, Carlyle B. On the Eve of Armageddon, Review and Herald Publishing Association, Takoma Park, WASH. D.C. 1924. p.53.

Haynes further states; "Who are these kings from the rising sun, the "kings of the east?" They are the nations lying east of Palestine, the heathen nations, the colored races, the uncivilized, the barbarous nations of the world, constituting more than half the population of the earth."¹

Eventhough Haynes has "the contest between nations" interrupted by the personal, visible return of Jesus Christ, the moral purpose and content of this prophecy is lost, without Christ in the center of the whole prophecy.

In 1925 Robert Bruce Thurber wrote a book intitlled "When East Meets West" and once again we see a man who allows Scripture to interpret Scripture, and not current events or popular trends.

"With such a terrific clash impending, immediately there springs to every mind the question, "What will be the result?" It would appear like the proverbial irresistible force striking an immovable body. But East and West both will be bitterly disappointed. Foolish is man that he should think to settle the great controversy of the world with material weapons and physical strength.

Every forecast of the divine prophecies concerning the outcome of Armageddon indicates that the actual conflict in that last great battle will not be between East and West, nor between man and man, but between man and God."²

¹Haynes, Carlyle B. p. 54.

²Thurber, Robert Bruce, When East Meets West, Southern Publishing Association, Nashville, Tennessee, 1925, p. 28.

Just before World War II broke out, once again, the same cry that was heard just before World War I was seen in our interpretations of Rev. 16: 12-16. In a book intitled "Prepare War" Louis S. Bauman wrote: "Armageddon, we conceive to be, not a single battle, but a war, the War of Armageddon. . . . This war will begin in Egypt. It will end outside the walls of Jerusalem. What is commonly called "the battle of Armageddon" more specifically refers to the final battle of the War of Armageddon. This last battle will not be a battle between Gentiles. It will be Gentiles against Jews!"¹

And yet in the same year W. L. Sims stated that we needed a return back to the belief of James White regarding Armageddon, and in his book "Battle of Armageddon" he says, "It is not the outcome of an organized military fight in the little valley of megiddo, . . ."²

There are many more men that can be quoted, such as Raymond F. Cottrell, who does not see Armageddon as a military battle.³

¹Bauman, Louis S. Prepare War, Long Beach California, 1937. p. 59.

²Sims, W. L., Battle of Armageddon, page 3.

³Cottrell, Raymond F. Armageddon, a paper presented to the Bible Research Fellowship Angwin California. 1945, and 1947.

In 1951, George Vandeman wrote in a pamphlet intitlled "All Eyes East", "While the Battle of Armageddon is raging when every nation under heaven is locked in a death struggle, God says, "It is done."¹

In 1959 in the Beverly Hills SDA Church, a series of lectures were given on Armageddon, ". . . and Armageddon will be a real literal war and battle of the nations." "The King of the North at the present time is the Nation of Turkey, because Turkey has for many years ruled over the land of the North."²

Even our own Bible Commentary, does not take a clear cut stand on the issue of a Spiritual or literal Battle of Armageddon.³

The point in bringing all these different views or interpretations to the for front, is to show the great need for a sound Biblical Hermeneutic. As was mentioned earlier I feel the church has moved out of its wondering in the wilderness, regarding its view on Armageddon, and not only Armageddon, but in all prophecy, because of its sound Biblical Hermeneutics that have come to light.

¹Vandeman, George E., All Eyes East, Talk given at Sligo Auditorium, Takoma Park Maryland, Jan. 28, 1951

²Series of Lectures given in the Beverly Hills SDA Church, on Armageddon. Could not read Pastors name. 1959

³SDA Bible Commentary, Vol 7, p. 843 1957.

One of the Pioneers in establishing a sound Biblical Hermeneutic was Louis R. Were. Eventhough his views on Biblical interpretation were not accepted by the Brethern in the Australasian Division he wrote many small books on last day prophecy. One of his finest books is called "The Certainty of the Third Angel's Message" and in this book he proves the certainty of this message, by using sound Biblical principles for prophetic interpretation. Quoting from the foreword in his book:

"Through a study of the Scriptures and the Spirit of Prohpecy, the writer, having in a measure sensed the greatness of the struggle which lies before the people of God, desires to strengthen the foundations of the faith of God's people. My efforts have been to point out by Biblical laws of interpretation why the message of God which has been entrusted to our car is truly established upon the Word of God. Many of God's people do not know how wonderfully strong are the walls of Zion, nor how impervious to the assaults of the enemy are the deep, broad, and irrefragible foundations of "the faith of Jesus." The writer is burdened with a desire that all of the members of spiritual Israel know for themselves the laws governing the interpretation of Scripture so that their faith will not depend upon another's word, but upon their own intelligent understanding of the Word of God"¹

Were used his principles of interpretation in understanding Armageddon and in his books you will see him returning you back to the early Pioneers, "No Eastern Question, no military

¹Were, Louis F., The Certainty of the Third Angel's Message, reprinted in 1975, Victoria, Australia. p. 2 Of Forward.

Armageddon emerged from these earnest and long seasons of Bible Study and of pleading for the light of Heaven. To the contrary, Armageddon was seen to be "not between nation and nation; but between earth and heaven". Thus the light of truth came as the Lord led the Pioneers to compare Scripture with Scripture, making the Bible its own expositor."¹

It is this return to our Pioneer beliefs, and the fuller understanding of the meaning that the Bible is its own expositor, that has lead men like Dr. Hans LaRondelle to compile five important hermeneutical principles for Scripture interpretation:

I. The Bible, as an organic whole in Christ Jesus, it its own interpreter.

Jn 5:39; Heb. 1:1-2; 1 Pet 1:10; 2 Pet 1:19-21;
2 Tim 3:15-16; 2 Cor 1:20; 3:14-16.
CT 462; ED 190; Col 127-128. See L. Froom,
Mov. of Destiny, Ch. V.

II. The New Testament teaches the Christological-ecclesiological fulfillment of the Old Testament kingdom prophecies in two phases, centered in the two advents of Christ.

Mat 12:6,28,32; 13:37-43; 28:20; Heb 1:2; 9:26-28;
Acts 2:16-17,33; 3:21; 1 Cor 10:1-11; 15:50;
1 Pet 1:20; 2 Pet 3:13.
DA 234; QD 215.

III. The many covenant promises to the house of Israel and the house of Judah in the Old Testament have found an initial fulfillment after the Assyrian-Babylonian exile, are finding a present fulfillment in the gathering of believing Jews and Gentiles into the church of Christ, and will find their future fulfillment in the universal gathering of all believing Jews and Gentiles from all ends of the earth to the visible returning Christ from heaven and to the Kingdom of glory.

Deut 30:1-10; Is 11:11-16; 43:5-7; 49:10-13; Ez 36:24;
37:21-24; 34:11-23; Hos 1:10-11; 1:12; Am 9:11-12
(A). Ezra 1 and 7. PK 703-704.

¹Were, Louis F. The Kings that come from the Sunrising
Reprinted 1975 page 9

(B). Mat 12:30; 18:20; 23:37; Jn 10:11,14-16;
12:49-52; 12:32; Acts 15:13-21.
PK 374-375; EW 74-76; PK 714-715.

(C). Mat 24:30-31; 25:31-33; I Thes 4:16--17;
2 Thes 2:1; Mat 8:11-12; Rev 7:16-17;
PK 720; Col 179

IV. In applying the Old Testament gathering promises to the Christian dispensation and the future age, the New Testament removes all ethnic and geographic limitations even when the Old Testament terminology and imagery are retained.

Ex 19:4-6 in 1 Pet 2:9 and Rev 5:10; Jer 31:31-34
in Heb 8:8-12 and Rev 21:3-4; 22:3-4.
Mat 5:5,14; Jn 4:21-23; Rom 4:13; Heb 12:22-24;
Rev 14:1; 2 Pet 3:13; Heb 11:9-10,13-16.

V. In applying the Old Testament gathering prophecies to the post-millennial age, the Revelation of John (chapter 20-22) relates them no longer to the Old Jerusalem, but to the New Jerusalem, the bride of the lamb, which will descend from God out of heaven on earth at the end of the millennium. This is the final consummation of all apocalyptic prophecies, centered in Christ and His holy city, the capital of the new earth.

When these Biblical principals of interpretation are use to understand prophecy, then the moral purpose of prophecy will shine forth, and Christ will ring through our interpretations. Then the soul will find strength in the building up of our faith, as we see how Christ our King of Kings who has already defeated the devil, will again defeat the enemies of our souls, as the climax of the Great Controversy between Christ and Satan comes to a partial end at Christ second Advent.

It has not been the intent of this writer to belittle or pass judgment on any of our church leaders of the past or present. Mrs. White makes a very serious statement found in our Bible Commentary (7 BC 983) "The present is a solemn, fearful time for the church. The angels are already girded, awaiting the mandate of God to pour their vials of wrath upon the world. Destroying angels are taking up the work of vengeance; for the Spirit of God is gradually withdrawing from the world. Satan is also mustering his forces of evil, going forth 'unto the kings of the earth and of the whole world,' to gather them under his banner, to be trained for 'the battle of that great day of God Almighty.' Satan is to make most powerful efforts for the mastery in the last great conflict. Fundamental principles will be brought out, and decisions made in regard to them. Skepticism is prevailing everywhere. Ungodliness abounds. The faith of individual members of the church will be tested as though there were not another person in the world?

With the way that Dispensationalism, and the Hal Lindsey's (Late Great Planet Earth) have begun to take hold of Christianity today, with their literal, geographical interpretation for Armageddon, Mrs. Whites statement has great meaning to me. This is why I praise God that He has lead us as a Church out of the relm of speculation, in regards to prophecy, and has shown us the Biblical principals for correct interpretation

so that each individual member in the family of God, may know the truth, of these great prophecies, and thus the moral purpose of God giving us these prophecies will shine forth, and we will know that our salvation is sure.

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