



# New Testament Studies Face 2000

Adventist New Testament scholars shape—and are shaped by—the church. It's time to share that experience with academia.

by Ernest J. Bursey

Religious communities contribute to biblical studies to the degree that they allow us to re-enter and re-experience the world of the past. While the methodologies and critical approaches employed in biblical studies have traditionally drawn on disciplines taught in the universities, it is the gift of religious communities to allow the texts to be seen in particular ways. Perhaps more now than in previous eras, particular perspectives of faith communities are acknowledged and even welcomed.<sup>1</sup>

Some New Testament scholars steeped in the perspective of their particular faith have had measurable impact on the study of the New Testament outside of their own denomination. To simply drop names, consider John Howard Yoder and William Swartley among Mennonites, Gordon Fee, a charismatic, and Raymond Brown, a Roman Catholic.

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With what perspectives can Seventh-day Adventists enrich New Testament scholarship? The obvious choices of Sabbath, law, and Eschaton might well be augmented by attention to the prophetic. The books of Matthew, James, and Revelation seem natural areas for Adventist contributions to New Testament scholarship. Robert Johnston, chair of the New Testament department of the SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University, observes that the Adventist denomination itself might serve as a model for students of the early church: the expansion to a worldwide movement, a growing disparity in numbers between the mother North American church and the burgeoning membership in the Southern Hemisphere, and the onset of what looks like the early Catholicism of the post-apostolic church.<sup>2</sup>

Conversely, the interests of the academy effect the way Adventist New Testament scholars relate to their faith. A senior level Adventist scholar notes that

the apocalyptic in early Christianity will remain a focus of research even if the questions are phrased

differently [than the Jesus Seminar]. Given this, Adventism will continue to face the challenge of this research and will have to confront its own apocalyptic traditions with new insights. The Revelation Seminars so popular in some quarters are a source of embarrassment in others already. The apocalyptic sectarianism that characterizes Third World Adventism is becoming more and more problematic for those who do New Testament studies. How the fraternity of Adventist New Testament scholars reacts to the coming impasse will prove decisive for the future of the church in the long run.<sup>4</sup>

The largest group among Adventists with Ph.D. degrees in religious studies earned them in New Testament studies. To what extent have their contributions been fueled by our perspective as Adventists? What have my Adventist colleagues contributed to the larger field of New Testament scholarship, especially in the more promising areas? What sort of a profile do we as a group cast within the academy? Correspondingly, how have we fared in shaping the understanding of the church?

I offer my own incomplete listing of research and writing as a simple gesture toward a badly needed bibliographic effort on someone's part. In the meantime, please accept them as illustrative: the publication of Philo texts in the Loeb Classical Library series by Abraham Terrian; Larry Richards' earlier work on textual criticism, recently revived; Harold Weiss' ongoing study of the Sabbath in New Testament texts and communities; Bruce Johanson's continued work on text-linguistics and rhetoric, starting with 1 Thessalonians; B. Brinsmead's published dissertation on the Galatian opponents; Ron Jolliffe's work on Q, which continues to this very day; and the several New Testament contributors to the dissertation series published by Andrews University.

Several have parlayed their scholarly pursuits into popular books: Pedrito Maynard-Reid's work on poverty and wealth in James, published by Orbis; William Johnsson's work

on pilgrimage and purity in Hebrews and his popular introductions to Matthew and Hebrews; and William Richardson on the charismatic phenomena in Corinthians.

Among the formally trained New Testament teachers, perhaps the most prolific has been John Brunt. He has produced a series of highly accessible works on a wide range of topics, including hermeneutics, the Sabbath, eschatology, New Testament ethics, the role of women in the New Testament, divorce, as well as popular commentaries on Romans and Philippians. Virtually all were produced while carrying full-time teaching and/or administrative responsibilities on an undergraduate campus without the benefit of a sabbatical for nearly two decades. All this has left the rest of us humbled and mystified. He has ranged from a challenging dissertation on clean and unclean foods, which has never been published, to the assuring *Good News for Troubled Times*, the church's missionary book of the year in 1993.

A number have contributed significantly in both directions: Sakae Kubo's work on textual criticism, Greek language tools, and Pauline studies balanced by widely accessible books on ethics, Sabbath, and the Second Coming; Robert Johnston's form-critical work comparing the rabbinic parables with the parables of Jesus, as well as his recent commentaries on the Epistles of Peter and Jude; Robert Badena's published dissertation on Romans 10:4 in the Society of Biblical Literature series and his recent work on the Book of Revelation; Robert MacIvor and Norman Young's writings on parables; and Warren Trenchard's published dissertation on the depiction of women in the intertestamental literature and his recent publications of Greek language tools. Among the most prolific is Jon Paulien, with strong interests in the Johannine corpus. His two-octave span reaches from active membership in the Society of Biblical Literature Seminar ("Reading the Apocalypse: The Intersection of Liter-

ary and Social Methods Seminar") to being a major contributor to the volumes on Revelation produced by the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference. Like Brunt, he has written on more general topics.

An example of a person trained in New Testament studies who has contributed to his church in unexpected ways is Fred Veltman. Veltman's understanding of redactional methodology in the study of the Gospels stood us all in good stead when searching for someone to guide the church through the difficult rapids of the research on Ellen White's use of sources.<sup>4</sup>

There is an immense reservoir of talent and training among us. We have been given the best educational opportunities available at outstanding institutions. While still graduate students, many of us are warmly encouraged by our professors. Yet, when all the names and contributions were added up, it appears to me that Adventist New Testament scholarship has been and continues to be under-represented in the academy. What are the publications we have written that are routinely placed on the reading lists of graduate students? How many of us have contributed to major commentary series? When the academy wanted to understand the apocalyptic exegesis of David Koresh, did they turn to us? How many chairs or even tenured positions do Adventist New Testament scholars hold in non-Adventist universities or colleges? How often are we honored by our professional colleagues by serving as the chair of section meetings? Why have so many with such obvious gifts and promise not continued to be productive to the level of our graduate school counterparts?

These are not words of despair. I, for one, am honored to be a teacher. Every day I make use of the education I received at Yale for the benefit of my students. Others here can make a similar speech. We have committed ourselves to the service of the church. But, ironically, the impact of Adventist New Testament scholars on the church can be construed

as marginal, too. Note that I say marginal, but not irrelevant. For several years, our church has been focused on the study of particular books of the Bible. How many of us have been asked by our church to produce a series of lessons? Perhaps I have overstated and underestimated. I am open to your persuading me to see the matter differently.

I am not intending in the slightest degree to suggest that somehow we have failed to work hard or that, somehow, we are at fault. I am suggesting that we ought to articulate the factors that have led us to the place where we are if we are to talk responsibly about Adventist New Testament scholarship in the 21st century. To what extent have the conditions of our employment been a factor in inhibiting scholarship? What has blunted or stalled our contributions to the field of New Testament scholarship? Are these factors going to continue with the next generation of Adventist New Testament scholars? What needs to change for them to be able to make a more obvious impact in the intellectual academy, especially in this time of openness to the contributions of scholars nurtured in particular faith communities? These questions deserve our sustained attention.

Adapted from "The New Jerusalem," from the series "The Apocalypse."





I conclude with a final provocation and a final suggestion. Let me be provocative first: Can a mature Adventist scholar write a first-rate commentary on the Book of Revelation as a recognized gift to the academic community that has enriched us? Could a mature Adventist scholar in an Adventist institution write a first-rate commentary on the Book of Revelation? I

hope the answer to both of those questions is Yes. If not now, then a few years hence.

Finally, I suggest that the Adventist Society for Religious Studies plan a seminar on biblical apocalyptic, with participants drawn from scholars inside and outside the Adventist community. The papers and discussion should be published in time for the year 2000.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. A. Malherbe noted that up to the 20th century, the field of classical studies determined the methodologies subsequently employed in biblical studies. That is no longer the case. The plethora of approaches come from a number of universes, especially the social sciences. For instance, the interdisciplinary work of John Dominic Crossan draws on "studies in cultural and social anthropology, medical anthropology, the sociology of colonial protest movements, the dynamics and structure of pre-industrial peasant societies, honor-shame societies, patron-client societies . . ." (Marcus Borg, "Recent Developments in North American Jesus Scholarship," *Qumran Chronicle* 5.1 [July 1995], pp. 67, 68). In more recent times, the readings of the academy have been broadened by the inclusion of non-white, non-male, non-Christian practitioners: i.e., the burgeoning number of Jewish New Testament scholars like Geza Vermes, Amy-Jill Levine, and others have allowed us to see Jesus and Paul as Jews. The work of the feminist New Testament scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has widely popularized Jesus as the leader of an egalitarian and non-patriarchal movement.

2. While I was engaged in New Testament studies at Yale, our family attended the Humphrey Street SDA church within easy walking distance of the campus. The

church members' keen expectations of the soon coming of Jesus was light years away from the perspective of my academic colleagues engaged in the study of the Thessalonian correspondence while lacking empathy for an apocalyptic Paul. The connections were much easier for me, coming as I did from a community that fully expected the Parousia. Perhaps with adequate sociological and anthropological skill and some courage, I could have contributed to my fellow students' grasp of Paul by offering them the experience of contact with the Adventist folk at Humphrey Street. These thoughts did not occur to me at the time.

3. In preparation for the annual meeting of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies, a number of Adventist New Testament scholars in the United States and Australia were invited to comment on the intersection of New Testament studies and Adventist faith. Their contributions to the development of this paper are considerable, though I am responsible for its particular shape and focus.

4. The knowledge among church leaders of Ellen White's use of sources made my participation in the critical study of the Gospels much less risky than for Adventists contemplating denominational employment even 10 years before.