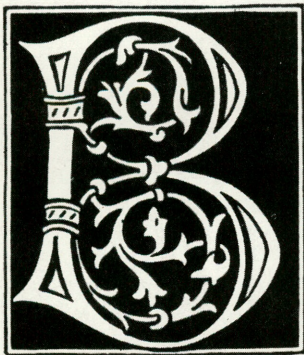


# Stars, Texts and Emerging Shapes of Biblical Renewal

By Glen Greenwalt



iblical scholars now know more about the Bible than at any other point in time. Yet fewer people are reading the Bible and having their lives shaped by its message. Something is obviously wrong, and I think that the move to a critical study of the text has something to do with it. To support this claim, I follow a tale of stars, texts, and emerging shapes of biblical renewal.

## And the Stars Sang and Danced

*The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun, which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race.*

—Psalm 19:1-5, KJV

In ages when people still looked at the night sky, before smog or bright lights—that is, throughout all centuries before our own—the starry heavens possessed a value that far transcended the petty things of earth.<sup>1</sup> To the ancients, the stars were not balls of ice, or fire or spent gas hurtling through a void of empty space, but living beings whose voices declared the judgments and praises of gods.

For Israel and most of her neighbors, life came from breath. God breathed and things became alive. In-spiration followed ex-spiration. God breathed out. Life breathed in. Life breathed out. God breathed in. All nature breathed and sighed together. This was also a time when thoughts about God were shared primarily by oral words.

Words have the power of life and death over us, so we sometimes forget how fragile the life of a word itself is. Words have no material existence of their own. They are the most ephemeral of things—thoughts, memories, air sound, silence, the undulation of breath escaping our lips.<sup>2</sup> Oral words, in particular, are dependent upon friends to get passed along. If a story is not remembered it is forever lost. There are no records, no recordings, to bring the story back to life. “In effect, if the story is not heard; the story is not told.”<sup>3</sup>

Such is the nature of oral stories that they require relationships to get passed along. It should not surprise us, then, that the logic of stories is not that of the syllogism. Those who live in a world without texts do not think like we who do. Hammers, boards, saws and nails may not belong together in a set of

logic on an IQ test, but they do belong together for someone who works from dawn to dusk building houses. In a society without texts, or books, there are no dictionaries to define the meanings of words, no catechisms to pass on beliefs, no how-to manual to explain how to do things, no protracted arguments to prove things. Meanings arise rather in the interplay between things. In an oral society there is no study. One learns, as the Greek roots behind the

plumb line is "true," or the strings of a lute are "true." The storyteller takes in a breath, and the breath sets the body to swaying and pacing to the plot of the story. Stories cannot be told without movement. In part this has to do with memory. Rhythm and motion reinforce memory. In oral societies, the insignificant, the accidental and the cluttered pass almost immediately into the forgotten and therefore into the unknown. Only events

STORIES ARE ALWAYS JOURNEYS. THEY FOLLOW PATHS... THEY SET SAIL...

words *text* and *rhapsody* suggest, by becoming "woven" and "stitched" into the fabric of things. In an oral society, people learn by the habits of their lives. Moral systems are tested by experience. "Every story is an experiment in living," as John Gardner suggested in his book *The Art of Moral Fiction*, where he proposed that we test moral systems by trying out their claims in the writing of fiction to observe what happens in the lives of the characters.

The logic of a story is different, then, than that of a text. The logic of a story is found in its movement, rather than its deductive powers. Throughout the pre-Socratic philosophers of Greece we find examples that reveal the original oral context of meanings. Nowhere is this clearer than in the baffling oddity of Zeno's riddles. Throughout these riddles we are confronted with the strange logic that something becomes larger by a "head" which is something small, so that one becomes larger by what is small; or one becomes heavier by a pair of sandals that are light. What we see in these riddles is evidence of a time when the "to be" form of the verb still designated only states of beings and not characteristics of things. It took the Greek philosophers some time to recognize that truth statements only apply to sentences and not to objects in the world. A red house is never true or false, but a sentence about a red house may be true or false. Thus, truth without texts is not a proposition, but a state of being.

Truth in an oral society, on the other hand, means living in relationships that are true to some measure, or resident to some harmony, even as a

that fit into and are reinforced by the picturesque, the paradigmatic and the peripatetic endure and are passed on.

But even more importantly stories are always journeys. They follow paths . . . They set sail . . . They get on board . . . And along the way they pick up things, not many things, mind you—



otherwise they get bogged down. But stories, like travelers' satchels do thicken through time. They echo other stories. They repeat themselves. They follow diversions, from which only a master storyteller can extract them. At times they even contradict themselves and throw barriers in our way. What they seldom do is ask us to say "yes" or "no" to things. And what they never do is ask us to "Sign on the dotted line." Oral stories in particular never

retrace the same way twice.

THEY GET ON BOARD.

What oral stories do is ask us to stand by our word and give up our lives for certain

things. The way of stories is just the opposite of the way of indoctrination. We discover the truth of a story by vicariously entering into the struggles, disappointments, dead ends, and victories of the protagonists in the story. Stories never dictate conclusions. Stories call us into themselves to share their journeys. The test of the story is the outcome of the life.

I sometimes wonder, as I drive by the Alkali Flats Café in the early morning and see all the pickups parked outside, or when I drive by the jammed parking lots of Popular Street theater on Saturday night, or at those times when I go out with my wife or a colleague to eat at a local deli, and listen in on the stories of the adjoining table, whether the world really needs another commentary or thesis on inspiration. Perhaps what the world needs is a story of the God who still breathes. Perhaps, just perhaps, in stories God is yet breathing the world alive.

There are, of course, difficulties as well as pluses to the oral culture that underlie most of Scripture. Not all stories are good just because they endure. Facts, are facts, no matter how we story them. And some things are just more complicated than can be remembered in story or dance. But most troubling of all, oral societies (in that they are dependent on living memory) possess few resources for change.

## And the Stars Became Numbers and Then Objects

*The Pythagoreans, as they are called, devoted themselves to mathematics; . . . they supposed the elements of numbers to be the elements of all things, and the whole heaven to be a musical scale and a number.*

—Aristotle, *Metaphysics*

In time, the stars became silent. In their place, rocks and stones became fixed in the heavens. But this silencing did not happen overnight. Nor did it happen as the result of the triumph of science over religion, as is often suggested. As late as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Newton still wrote about the music of the celestial spheres. The silencing of the heavens followed rather the gradual evolution of ever more precise ways of inscribing language. As Walter Ong has powerfully argued, the fragmentation of the modern world traces the history of the gradual enclosure of language first into writing, then print, and finally specialized notation. Inevitably our tools for thinking affect what we think. As believers we need to remember this.

The earliest writing was all pictographic. Certain stylized images stood as mental reminders of the everyday world. As a consequence, pictographs cannot be translated without knowledge of the oral world they depict. Even the first alphabetic writing, invented by Semitic peoples, cannot be read or spoken unless one is first acquainted with the spoken language, since it contains no true vowels. It was not until the Greeks invented an alphabet with vowels that for the first time in human history meanings could be conveyed, theoretically at least, without contact with another human being other than the person who first taught one to read.

Yet even with the rise of the alphabet and the possibility of constructing formal arguments, that are dependent upon writing for structure and conveyance, the philosophical tradition long retained a preference for oral disputation. Pythagoras, who is credited with having provided the mathematical foundation of science, left us no writings, and the teachings that come down to us through his disciples are in the form of cryptic aphorisms and riddles. Plato, whose writings remain to this day the benchmark of philosophy, was leery of writing, and so wrote in dialogues in order to retain something

of the give-and-take of everyday conversation in his writings. Even Aristotle, whose temperament and authorship most approximates that of our technological societies, was known as a 'Peripatetic,' by way of his habit of strolling up and down in the covered walkway (the Peripatos) of the Lyceum where he taught. In fact, the oral form of education conducted by Socrates and continued by Plato and Aristotle continued clear through medieval times. In fact, in the Latin there is no word for examina-

councils. If later, the Enlightenment thinkers turned to Newton as their hero, rather than Luther or Calvin, it was not because Newton had turned his back on religion, but because Newton had brought an order to the heavens that the Protestant Reformation had failed to bring to the earth. This point needs emphasis. Newton was not doing a different kind of thing in his approach to the heavens than the Reformers were doing in their approach to the text. Both sought to provide a more

## BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP MUST ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY, IN PART AT LEAST, FOR THE FISSURES THAT

tion as practiced in education today. Learning was not a matter of studying and memorizing texts, but of defending one's argument in oral debate.

The great gap that exists today between the knower and the everyday world of families, labor, government and nature did not become pronounced, until Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in 1450. Handwritten manuscripts moved language from the world of speaking and listening to one of space and texts, but much of the oral quality of language remained. Sentences in manuscripts break off and start over again. Conversations that take place in the margins get passed along with the text. Sometimes even the disposition of the author gets transcribed in the penmanship. But print changes all of this. Print locks words on to the surface of the page with a precision and finality that is never found in writing (and certainly not orally). It aligns words into straight rows and ruled margins. It impresses us with its infinite repeatability. Typographical errors jump out at us. Print provides, that is to say, precisely the world in which not only science and technology arise, but the world in which dictionaries, commentaries, catechisms, creeds, and bureaucratic institutions arise as well.

Seen in this light, the *via modern*, with its suspicions of metaphysics and its turn toward texts gave rise to Protestantism and created a world where science could flourish. But a high price was paid on earth and in the heavens. One might argue that print first created a science of texts before it created a science of the heavens. The Protestant Reformers, who were almost to a person educated in the *via moderna*, employed the textual skills they learned from the Renaissance Humanists to combat the vacillating dictates of popes, lords and church

precise understanding of the phenomena at hand. Protestants moved from allegorical and spiritual readings of the Bible to historical and grammatical readings. Newton discovered differential calculus that allowed him to plot and map the heavens with precision that was unimagined before. In both cases, the aim grew out of deep religious motivations. Unfortunately, in both cases, God became distanced from the earth and heavens.

The sad fact is that the entire history of Protestantism can be written as the story of a conflict of interpretations. From the very beginning Luther and Zwingli could not agree on the meaning of the Eucharist, and things have not gotten much better since then. The record of Protestantism is that of one division after another. To overcome this divide, liberal scholars have proposed one new method of reading the text after another—to no avail. In reality, the growing sophistication in historical and grammatical understandings of the text serves most often to distance the living voice of God from the text, until in the end biblical scholarship seems incapable of extricating itself from the text. It is of no small importance, that it was heterodox Lutheran scholar, Matthias Flacius Illyricus, who was the first author of a treatise on biblical hermeneutics. Nor is it of minor significance that in his treatise, *Clavis Scripturae sacrae* (1567), Matthias argues that the Hebrew vowel points and indeed all of Scripture is divinely dictated. Unfortunately, however, even an absolute text does not end controversy. Inevitably the text requires a divine commentary, and the divine commentary requires a divine teaching office, which itself falls into controversy and requires a single seat of authority. History recapitulates itself. Conservative scholars, on the other hand loudly

proclaim the perspicuity or clarity of the text, but inevitably turn to powerbrokers outside of the text to reinforce their beliefs when challenged.

Is it any surprise, then, that the Bible has so little power in the life either of the church or the world? Biblical scholarship must assume responsibility, in part at least, for the fissures that are growing in the church and society. It was after all, our dependence upon texts that contributed to the replacement of shared-collaborative ways of

#### ARE GROWING IN THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY.

knowing with impersonal, objective, bureaucratic structures of knowing and regulation. The recent work of Alden Thompson and Samuel Koranteng-Pipim illustrate the problem posed by a linear, text-bound epistemology. Despite major differences in their theology, both follow a very similar form of argumentation that spends little or no time talking about the living God who breathes the text, focusing rather on methodological issues that are perhaps important, but certainly not of primary

interest to a community of faith. In the end, neither is able to resolve the conflict of interpretations that threatens the church. Neither Thompson nor Pipim explain how their methodology resolves outstanding differences of interpretation between themselves and fellow adherents of their respective methods, let alone between themselves.

## Perhaps Stars and Texts Can Sing and Dance Again

*... the space telescope showed that galaxies—the 50 billion collections of stars, gas and dust that speckle the universe like beacons in a dark sea—are not the isolated, static structures they were once thought to be. Instead, they collide and merge, cannibalize each other, fade. Flare and change shape like flubber. “This is a huge revolution in thought,” says Astro-physicist Alan Dressler of the Carnegie Observatories in Pasadena, California.*

*Newsweek, November 3, 1997*

Today, stars are no longer viewed as static structures fixed in the heavens but as stages in a cosmic saga that ultimately involves you and me. We are bits and pieces of stardust that stare back at the heavens with wonder. And, as we might expect, this revolutionary way of seeing the stars was anticipated by a new technology of communication—in this case, the computer.

In 1982 when Walter Ong wrote his classic study of orality and literacy, he dismissed computers as simply further intensifying the “sequential processing and spatializing of the word. . .”<sup>4</sup> Little did Ong know that a revolution was taking place just outside of the public view that radically changed the way we see the world. The revolution was in non-linear ways of knowing. What people like Michael Feigenbaum, Edward Lorenz, Benoit Mandelbrot and others were discovering was that by a few simple algorithmic rules, they could approximate complex patterns and shapes in the natural world. In less than two decades, computers have been transformed from machines to crunch numbers and write documents into 3-D windows on the world—as anyone with an eleven-year-old boy knows. Suddenly knowing has shifted from linear, deductive knowing to *interactive processes*, where learners participate in creative and active ways with what they observe and know. In the new knowledge



what matters most is not the capacity to draw fine lines of distinction, but of being able to recognize, organize, and interrelate apparent chaos into patterns, shapes, coherent wholes. We are returning, that is to say, to the world Gerard Manley Hopkins described in his poem "Pied Beauty":

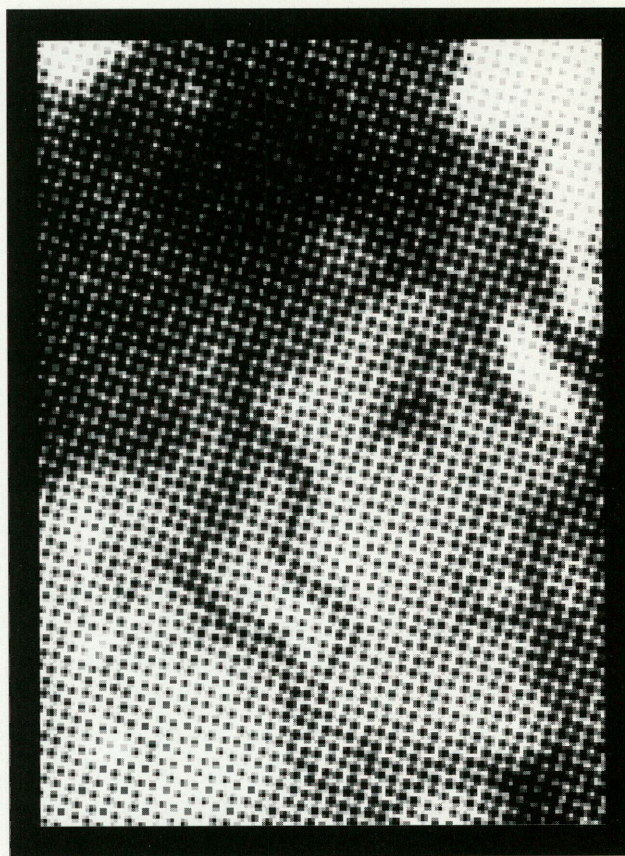
*"all things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)"*<sup>5</sup>

While this new technology of knowing is still emerging, I am attracted to it for the promise it holds of returning knowing more directly to the everyday world of belief and action.

## The Big Picture Is Truth

Truth, according to the emerging logic, is located in the Big Picture. Individual points of data have significance only when graphed and plotted on a larger grid. The tracking of the weather phenomenon of El Nino is a great example. In the winter of 1982-1983, when El Nino struck the California coast, the force of the storm came as a surprise to most professional weather watchers. That year, because of the immense data that had been gathered, the overall pattern of the storm was apparent even to the most illiterate weather watcher. Furthermore, because of the big picture, a relationship was established between such diverse phenomena as fishermen catching marlin off the coast of the State of Washington, forest fires in Indonesia, a hurricane in Mexico and the promise of great ski vacations at Aspen.

What might this say to biblical scholars? At the very least, it suggests that we are remiss as scholars if we can trace the textual history of the Pentateuch, outline the structure of Matthew, or decipher the theology of Paul in Romans, but fail to relate our study to the everyday lives of our students as they seek life partners, choose careers, or struggle to make sense of emerging cosmologies. Malcolm Maxwell used to talk in classes about "The Truth About God." We may have smiled at his audacity, but we never left class not knowing what mattered. The letter kills. The Spirit makes alive. I fear that biblical theology, with its focus on texts, has forgotten this fundamental truth. The rules of analysis and criticism—whether practiced by liberals or conservatives—divide and take apart. Perhaps the new epistemology can lead us to find



ways of uniting and drawing together again around what really matters in life—which I suspect has little to do with either historical or grammatical ways of knowing, and much to do with our hopes, dreams, fears, and aspirations as human beings on a very small and frail planet.

## The Big Picture Is Made of Many Parts

When the new epistemology locates truth in the big picture, it emphasizes at the same time that the big picture is made of many parts. Anyone who has scanned a picture into a computer, or has been scanned by MRI technology, knows that the image that emerges on the screen is comprised of millions of points of data. In a word, knowledge is holographic. Every point of individual data is necessary to see the whole—as is made clear by the image of Marilyn Monroe that emerges on the (October, 1996) cover of *Life* magazine out of a computer-generated arrangement of past covers.<sup>6</sup> This suggests that in reading the Bible we must allow the many pictures of the Bible to come together into a central image. Rather than viewing the Bible as an encyclopedia or a history of determinative faiths,

the new epistemology suggests that the truth of the Bible is found when the many pictures within Scripture—whether they arise in poetry, saga, proverb, chronicle, law, or aphorism—are brought together to create an overarching image. On this view the Bible might be visualized as a place of council (in contrast to counsel) where the entire church—past and present, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, male and female—gather together to hear God's will for us today. In this council, the voices of Scripture are privileged over all other voices because they speak from a time closer to the founding moments of faith, and because their voices have proved trustworthy to the Christian community thus far. On this view, then, the unity of the Bible is more an action than a set of propositions. The validity of Christian claims is demonstrated when the Bible creates one people out of us who were previously separated by whatever walls that divide us.

## Truth is Recognized in the Clarity of the Image

If there is a fundamental assumption of the emerging epistemology, it is the ecological notion that all things are constantly changing; yet all things are fundamentally one. A paragraph from a recent *National Geographic* magazine captures the essence of this idea. Jim Brandenburg created a photographic journal of the North Woods of Minnesota by taking a single photograph each day for 90 days. Of this experience Brandenburg writes, "All around me I witnessed cycles of life and death—with deer becoming wolves, bones becoming soil, lichens eating rocks, herons stalking fish.irate wolves chased ravens, which in turn teased indifferent eagles, while I wandered in the knowledge that my every sense would lead me to them so that I might paint them on film."<sup>7</sup> This poses a problem. If things are constantly changing, how can any distinctions be made? Is there no difference between one thing and another, or one belief and another? The solution to this problem, according to the new epistemology is located in the notion of emergence. The idea is that even within chaotic structures, certain relatively stable patterns emerge out of the blooming, buzzing background from which they stand out—as evidenced in a recent set of photographs in which an image of Bill Clinton is

transformed into an image of Jimmy Carter. Although images can be morphed into one image after another, the distinctive pictures of Carter and Clinton are clear in comparison.

To apply this insight to the interpretation of the Bible suggests that the faith of the Bible not be determined by any single feature, or even group of features, but by an emerging image that gathers through time. In the Christian faith, the image of Jesus is without doubt the paradigm image of faith, but this image is not a singular sort of thing, but an image that emerges out of many pictures of Scripture—those of Moses, Joshua, Emmanuel, suffering servants, the son of David, nursing mothers, the Messiah, the Son of Man, the lion of Judah, a lamb, a hen gathering her chicks, priests, tabernacles, etc. Now on the surface, at least, many of these images seem to fall into conflict. It is only by setting these pictures against pictures of a serpent, the tower of Babel, pharaoh, Baal, tyrants, Babylon, antichrists, beasts, dragons, false prophets, a pit of nether gloom, etc. that the interconnection of the pictures that comprise the image of Jesus Christ becomes clear. On this sort of reading, what matters most is whether we are becoming formed in the image of Christ, or that of the serpent and other beasts. Such skills are perhaps caught rather than taught. Still, a study of art interpretation may help. Here the paintings of Picasso's study of the masters is instructive. At first glance Picasso's paintings appear to bear no likeness to classical art. However, when compared with the originals he is interpreting, one sees that Picasso has not abandoned the tradition that went before him, but offered his own interpretation of that tradition. The question naturally arises within a conservative Christian tradition as to how far interpretation of a tradition can go before the truth of the tradition is itself obscured if not lost. Could a student working before the truth of the tradition ever reproduce the image of the earlier masters from what she saw in Picasso's painting alone? Perhaps not, if the student is ignorant of the classical work. But this is not to necessarily indict Picasso. It is only to point to the fact that any interpretation must be set in a history of interpretations. Admittedly, at some point of change, the incongruity may become so great that an interpretation represents not simply a difference of style, but a new school or tradition of paintings. One has to live with art closely to make such distinctions.

To apply this insight to a tradition such as Adventism is to suggest that Adventism is not determined by any single feature, or even a collection of things, but by an emergent image that is ordered and shaped out of many features. Viewed from particular perspectives, Adventism may be closer to other faith types such as Catholicism, Methodism, Anabaptism, or even Mormonism. Adventism's identity, and therefore its uniqueness, is located not in the fact that it shares no features with other faiths, but that its particular unity of features is different from any other community in the world. Likewise, as Adventism itself changes over time, identity is not preserved by not changing (which indeed threatens the essence of Adventism if its spirit is the continuation of reformation), but that the distinctive elements of Adventism continue to shine through. This is why I am opposed to identifying Adventism with either a generic statement like "they keep the commandments and have the faith of Jesus," or a creedal statement limited to a set of propositions. Neither captures the essence of how images emerge and are retained through time.

## Ultimately Images Must Come to Life to Be Real

It is at this point that we see the radical difference that exists between an interactive, image-generating rationality and the rationality based on print. Textual reality is based upon skills of dissection and analysis. In contrast, in the new way of knowing, reality comes into view, as an emergent image comprised out of many points of view. Reality is not an abstraction, but what is really real. In this regard, an image itself is never the real thing. The image of Aunt Lulu, whether a picture, an anecdote, or genetic scan is not Aunt Lulu. Only Aunt Lulu is Aunt Lulu.

This suggests that our teaching of the Bible is never real, unless the reality of the biblical world somehow comes to life. The Word of Christian faith is not a text, however important, but the living Word who still comes "to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!'"<sup>8</sup>

Truth from a Christian standpoint is not a proposition but a way of life. The test of Scripture is never a creed nor a methodological program, but a demand to recognize that Christ is present wherever two or three are gathered together in His name. This suggests that we must move our teaching beyond the analysis, criticism, and syntheses of ideas, into the realms where we walk, talk, and breathe. This is the world in which the stories of the Bible were first told and heard. And it is the world we as scholars must reconceive. How we will do this is open to a great number of strategies. That we must do this is without question, if the Gospel is to be heard by this generation.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes and References

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3. *Ibid.* 10.
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6. The One of the new epistemology is less the One of Plotinus and more the One of Hegel's Trinitarian love or Troelsch's understanding of Spirit as a kind of *gestalt*.
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8. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. by W. Montgomery (London: A&C Black, 1910, reissued with new introduction by James M. Robinson, 1968), 403.
9. I am interested that two new youth magazines of the Adventist church express by their titles and style the kind of visual, interactive logic of which I speak: namely, *Scanner*—produced by the Glendale Adventist church and *Adventist View*—produced by the Youth Department of the General Conference.

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