

# Fear Not:

## Apocalypse Now Means Something Very Different

*By Doug Morgan and Bonnie Dwyer*

The prophecy charts are gone. Beasts are no longer the main point. There is no discussion about when certain events will take place. The emphasis in Adventist interpretation of the Apocalypse has shifted from the future to the present, from prediction to poetry, from fear to joy. This shift has been building for years and was conspicuous at meetings of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies in November 1999, as scholars from Adventist colleges and universities gathered in Boston to discuss the Apocalypse.

With each presentation, the significance of the meeting became more apparent. Sometimes *who* says something is as important as *what* they say. The presentations at this conference were made by mainstream Adventists who either relegated the historicist approach—with its emphasis on forecasting events—to a secondary level, or directly challenged its credibility. By the end, some in attendance said a landmark shift in Adventist interpretation of the Apocalypse had been voiced.

In his presidential address at the opening, Roy Adams, associate editor of the *Adventist Review*, turned not to Uriah Smith, Roy Allan Anderson, or even Ellen White in his statement on the contemporary significance of the Apocalypse. Instead, Adams looked to a commentary by South African minister and activist Allen Boesak, who, in the context of the struggle against apartheid, saw justice for the oppressed as the central theme of Revelation. Adams did not attack the historicist method, but his references to it were limiting, relativizing. Adams warned about relying “too heavily on the historicist method of interpretation” and of ignoring “the text’s original meaning.” He noted that, from John the Revelator’s perspective, history was fast catapulting to an end, “regardless of any historicist reading of the text today.”

Adams’s main point was to ask, “Why is Revelation significant today?” Not because its forecasts are being fulfilled, he inferred, but because it offers a message of “comfort and protest,” to borrow from the title of Boesak’s



commentary.

The next day, Jon Paulien, a Revelation scholar and professor of New Testament interpretation at Andrews University's Theological Seminary, gave a historical overview of Revelation's interpretation and traced back to the 1950s the fragmentation of the traditional Adventist consensus on the historicist reading. Paulien called for the formation of a new Adventist "center" for interpreting the book. "The traditional Adventist hermeneutic cannot do the job," he declared. According to Paulien, the "center" must be grounded in solid exegesis, which for him clearly means something other than the traditional approach. "The way I study Revelation is radically different from the methods of the previous generation, and from what the pioneers did," he affirmed.

Hans K. LaRondelle, retired professor at the Theological Seminary, also talked about the difference between biblical exegesis and historical applications of prophecy. Reflecting on his journey of discovery, he said, "There is a fundamental difference between biblical exegesis and our historical applications of prophecy, or those of the historicist school." Concerning the two-witnesses theology of Revelation 11—which points to the Old Testament prophetic message and the New Testament apostolic witness—LaRondelle commented that "this all-permeating truth in Revelation . . . became obscured in Adventism when some began to bolster the authority of the Spirit of Prophecy in Ellen White by an innovative appeal to Revelation 12:17." This discovery has led LaRondelle to give up the view that White was an infallible interpreter of Scripture.

## Fear Not

In a vesper devotional, Donn Leathermann, professor of religion at Southern Adventist University, addressed the fear that most young Adventists have of the end of time, despite being convinced that they have a saving relationship with Christ. Citing surveys conducted by colleague Norman Gulley at SAU, Leathermann said that students do not want to go through the time of trouble, which they view as only the beginning of difficult times. Leathermann identified a persecuted-minority, fortress mentality at the root of this fear and challenged Adventists to insure that the message of Revelation is one of hope rather than fear. To Leathermann, the main point is that we are on the winning side when we align ourselves with Christ. "Fear not," he rhythmically repeated to a chorus of "Amen."

He, too, seemed to speak in a revisionist mode and spirit, though he did not address traditional Adventist interpretations of specific apocalyptic symbols.

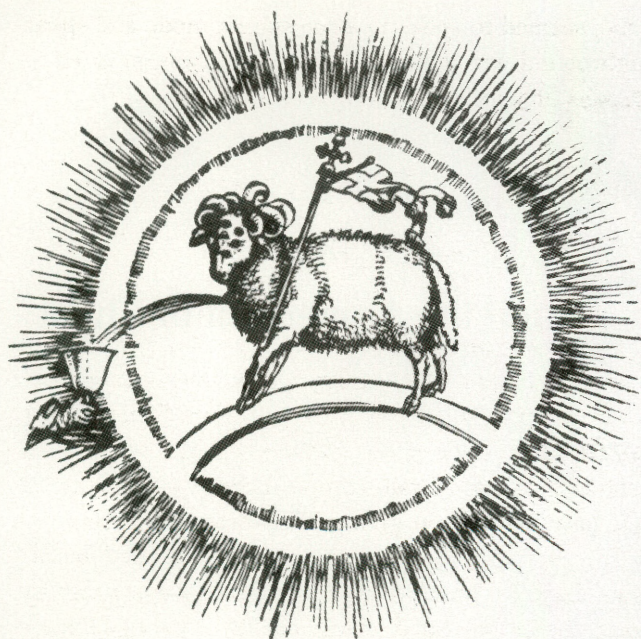
## Right or Left Brain Interpretations of Revelation

Fritz Guy, professor of theology at La Sierra University's School of Religion (and formerly associate dean of Andrews University's Theological Seminary), spoke about "increasing recognition that the book of Revelation is a right-brain composition to which many people have insisted on giving a left-brain interpretation. It is not a piece of encryption to be decoded, but a song of hope by which to be captivated, an epic poem by which to be inspired and energized." Such recognition, he said, means that "our hope can sit more lightly on interpretations and applications of specific periods of time, whether half an hour, or forty-two months, or a thousand years."

Whereas Guy saw John's book as poetry, others at the conference wanted that poetry put to song. Pointing to the freedom songs in Revelation chapters four to seven, Charles Scriven, president of Columbia Union College, said, "The heavenly worshipers sing the fundamental affirmation of the biblical community: that God is the beginning and the end of all things, the maker of heaven and earth. . . . Whereas both pagan myth and secular ideology conceive a universe that is essentially violent—an amalgam of chaos, fatality, and conflict brought about by violent gods or happenstance—the gospel conceives a good creation, a universe whose maker is worthy to be praised. If conflict has intruded, it is still an intrusion: it was not there to begin. Instead of assuming, then, that violence is inherent and inevitable, the gospel assumes the 'ontological priority of peace'; it envisions, in other words, an 'overall providential design' conducive to harmony and joy."

Others in attendance also talked about music that the Apocalypse inspired. The Artist (formerly known as Prince) and Bob Marley figured prominently in separate presentations. In another, Kendra Haloviak, assistant professor of religion at Columbia Union College, said, "By including hymns, the writer of Revelation creates a unique, unstable situation where different times and spaces are in dialogue with each other. The readers' real historical time-space is introduced into the apocalyptic narrative. The future-transcendent collides with the present-earthly."





## Summarizing the Shift

Guy seemed to sum up the shift in Adventist theology. According to him, "We are not, and cannot be, Adventist in exactly the same way as were our spiritual and theological great-great-grandparents a century and a half ago. That is, the Advent hope does not and cannot mean for us exactly what it meant for them. Our world is different—technologically, culturally, religiously, and so are its inhabitants—including us."

Guy imagined a conversation with Uriah Smith. "For our generation of Adventists, as for his," Guy would explain, "the Advent hope envisions an actual, objective coming of God again to our world. And then I would say further that as we enter the twenty-first century, our hope is historically realistic, scripturally responsible, spiritually positive, theologically modest, and existentially valuable. . . ."

"This then, is how we are Adventist as we enter the twenty-first century—not in exactly the same way that our Adventist foreparents were, but authentically, passionately, and (in our best moments) radiantly Adventist nevertheless—living in joy and not in fear, in love and not in competition, in generosity and not in acquisitiveness. Our Advent hope does not predict the future, but looks forward to it eagerly (which is spiritually much more important); for it knows that the future is, in the most profound sense, God's future, that what is coming is the activity and presence of God, and that in everything God will be working for good."

## Stories of Courage and Forgiveness

The conference ended with a Sabbath morning liturgical service that featured several stories of individuals who, through the strength of God, have triumphed over such current-day beasts as the U.S. tobacco industry, apartheid in South Africa, and drug cartels in South America. Sculptures that represented the seven churches of the Apocalypse set the stage at the front of the round chapel at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where the attendees gathered.

And there was singing.

"The experience of singing sparks our moral imaginations so that we leave this place enthusiastically considering ways the vision can be lived out in our particular churches and schools and neighborhoods," said Haloviak. "When we sing, we enter a great dialogue of words, stories, time-space locations. We join our voices in a most amazing conversation, which is also a song."

*After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count,  
From every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing  
Before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches  
In their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,  
Salvation belongs to our God  
Who is seated on the throne,  
And to the Lamb!  
And all the angels stood around the throne  
and around the elders  
And the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces  
before the throne and worshiped God, singing,  
Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom  
And thanksgiving and honor  
And power and might  
Be to our God forever and ever! Amen!*

(Rev. 7: 9-12)

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