

Discussed: maps, Hitler, the Internet, birth pangs, tsunamis, prophets, angels, doubts, seals, trumpets, bowls

# Of the Time that Is Not Yet

By Sigve Tonstad

## HOPE DEFERRED

Concern for the Christian hope does not veer far off the mark if it begins by considering Jesus' great exposition of the end time. This remarkable disclosure, unjustly thought beneath the dignity of Jesus by many theologians, begins with a question from the disciples.<sup>1</sup> "When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?'" (Mark 13:3-4).

In the course of the centuries since this exchange, many people have listened to Jesus' answer. His answer has been interpreted as something approaching a map of the future, and that map has been studied in minute detail. Again and again, by generation after generation, lines have been drawn from the map sketched on the Mount of Olives to specific historical events. Again and again, too, it has been

necessary to erase the lines, to replace them with new ones, and sometimes to repeat the exercise all over again.

The eschatological map has been near and dear to Seventh-day Adventists. Hearing Jesus' words that earthquakes will occur in many places (Mark 13:8), we have asked, as was done after the great Lisbon earthquake in 1755, Was this the earthquake of Jesus' prophecy? Noting

Jesus' warning of tribulations (Mark 13:19), we have asked, Is what we see happening now the last tribulation, or at least the warm-up to the last tribulation?

Assuming chronological precision in Jesus' teaching, we have seen that darkening of the sun and the moon will follow tribulation and have asked, Does this point to the Dark Day on May 19, 1780? As for the falling of the stars, we ask whether the meteoric showers seen in New England on November 13, 1833, answer the specification given on the Mount of Olives (Mark 13:24-25).

At least one thing is obvious as we look back on these texts and concrete fulfillments proposed through the centuries: Those who early on saw 1755, 1780, and 1833 as important fulfillments of Jesus' teaching did not imagine room for so much history between those events and the Second Coming.<sup>2</sup>

Expecting Jesus' coming imminent, they did not imagine that another century and a half would transpire or that the earth's population would increase from 500 million in 1850 to 6.1 billion in 2000. They did not foresee Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, the Holocaust, and the atom bomb. They did not imagine that people would set foot on the moon, or that an American vice president would invent the Internet.

Yet another thing is likely, if not quite so obvious: Those who initially heard Jesus' most comprehensive exposition of the believer's hope and those of us who study these words today have not paid equal attention to all of what Jesus said. We may have been more interested in mapping out the lines between predictions and fulfillment than of the caveat, the pointed reservation, that Jesus offered.

Note this, too, right here in Mark: "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come" (Mark 13:7). Perhaps the New King James Version reflects the Greek slightly better: "But the end is not yet."

Mark is not done. "For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs" (Mark 13:8).

We are no doubt ready to grant leeway to the original listeners. Of course they should have known better. Of course they should have grasped that the end is not yet, not in their time, not by any means, not at all.

The more difficult question is to assess how we should read these reservations in our time. To what extent must we, too, hear these words spoken to us as

we survey the tsunamis, the hurricanes, and the crumbling buildings of the world? To what degree are Jesus' words directed at us, as well?

If we, too, hear him say, "The end is not yet," to what extent do we put the heart of Adventism at risk? Will we then lose sense of the imminence of Jesus' return? Will we become prophets of an indefinite delay? How do we respond to a reality that in our eyes, too, has become a hope deferred?

## Hope Affirmed

Voices outside our own community have spotted a weakness in emphasis on the imminence of Jesus' coming, specifically emphasis that tinkers freely with links between prophecy and specific historical events. I take this to be Jürgen Moltmann's concern when he writes, "the experience of two thousand years of delayed parousia makes eschatology impossible today."<sup>3</sup>

C. Marvin Pate deals even less kindly with the historicist approach, the hallmark of the Adventist understanding of prophecy. According to him,

[W]hile the historicist approach once was widespread, today, for all practical purposes, it has passed from the scene. Its failed attempts to locate the fulfillment of Revelation in the course of the circumstances of history has doomed it to continual revision as time passed and, ultimately, to obscurity...<sup>4</sup>

Whether or not these criticisms are too broadly brushed, as I believe they are, they assume a credibility crisis for those who base Christian hope on a foundation of chronological progression. Yet Christian hope has not been dismissed. On the contrary, we have witnessed an upsurge of interest in the apocalyptic undercurrent of the New Testament, a reappraisal of the sources and a striking realignment that brings the point of gravity in contemporary theology closer to the traditional Seventh-day Adventist preoccupation.

"From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue," writes Moltmann, "Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the



present.”<sup>5</sup> Another statement by Moltmann’s compatriot, Ernst Käsemann, now a classic, is just as sweeping: “Apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology.”<sup>6</sup> As this reappraisal gained traction forty years ago, Klaus Koch joined in, asking “whether Christian theology can ever survive in any legitimate form without this [apocalyptic] theme.”<sup>7</sup>

The reappraisal also encompasses the apostle Paul, now seen as a thoroughly apocalyptic thinker. “Resurrection language is end-time language and unintelligible apart from the apocalyptic thought to which resurrection

the Lamb takes the sealed scroll and proceeds to break the seals, one after the other (Rev. 6:1–17). There is an intermission, or an intercalation between the sixth and the seventh seal, a moment of sustained suspense (Rev. 7:1–17). Then comes the climax as the narrator tells the dramatic story: “When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour” (Rev. 8:1).

The narrative has forward movement, from the white horse, to the red horse, to the black horse, to the emaciated ashen horse. The seventh seal is the last.

## If we, too, hear him say, “The End is not yet,” to what extent do we put the heart of Adventism at risk?

language belongs,” says J. Christiaan Beker. “Resurrection language properly belongs to the domain of the new age to come and is an inherent part of the transformation and the recreation of all reality in the apocalyptic age.”<sup>8</sup> It is all about apocalyptic here, and biblical apocalyptic is all about hope.

While we have been busy in our little corner, students of the Bible outside have wrought wonders with the book of Revelation, restoring a measure of prestige to this disparaged book. They have demonstrated its unity and sophisticated composition, drawing out theological themes that on some points may surpass Adventist efforts.

Richard J. Bauckham, a champion of the transformed outlook, describes Revelation as “a work of immense learning, astonishingly meticulous literary artistry, remarkable creative imagination, radical political critique, and profound theology.”<sup>9</sup>

Although hope has been deferred in unsettling ways because our timing was wrong, Christian hope is being affirmed down to the bedrock of the original sources. But what is the character of this hope if chronology is not at its center?

### Hope Reconstituted

Let us go back to the Bible to regain our bearings, this time to the book of Revelation. In this book, perhaps the most distinctive structural feature is recurring cycles of seven. These cycles of seals, trumpets, and bowls are especially intriguing in the present context.

In the charged atmosphere of the heavenly council,

I, the reader, cannot be faulted for thinking on the breaking of the seventh seal, It is over; this must be the end. But here, too, as in Mark, the end is not yet; the story continues.

The trumpet cycle begins (Rev. 8:2–9:21). Again, an intermission comes, this time between the sixth and seventh items in the sequence, another period of charged suspense (Rev. 10:1–11). During this intermission, a mighty angel proclaims to the awestruck John, “There will be no more delay, but in the days when the seventh angel is to blow his trumpet, the mystery of God will be fulfilled, as he announced to his servants the prophets” (Rev. 10:6–7).

We eagerly wait for this moment in the narrative, and it finally arrives. “Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever” (Rev. 11:15). Reading this, I cannot be faulted for thinking, Now this is it; this, at least, must be the end. But the story continues.

Yet another cycle begins, the bowl cycle, which heralds plagues billed as the seven last plagues (Rev. 15:1–16:21). One after another the angels come, pouring out their bowls. Finally comes the seventh bowl, of the seven plagues, “which are the last” (Rev 15:1). “The seventh angel poured his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, ‘It is done!’” (Rev 16:17).<sup>10</sup>

Now, I think, beyond the shadow of a doubt the end has come. And yes, indeed, this time the end comes, in a way, although the story continues with

such unexpected convolutions that R. H. Charles, probably the most learned expositor of Revelation of all time, became convinced that an unintelligent disciple of John had tampered with the text.<sup>11</sup>

The end is not yet in Mark. The end is not yet in the cosmic narrative of Revelation. The end is not yet for those of us waiting for the end, affirming it, and proclaiming it. The end is coming; it will come, but it is not yet.

There is an end, but not only an end to the Christian hope presented in this remarkable manner. There is an end, a purpose—a *telos*—to the hope that seems to us oddly and needlessly deferred. To restive and reviled believers, Second Peter explains that the apparent deferral has a redemptive purpose (3:9). But the purpose of the apparent delay is also revelatory. Indeed, this aspect is more strikingly projected on the apocalyptic canvas than anything else.

If the end is not yet, it follows that the interim—the time between—is not without a purpose. In the sweeping apocalyptic narrative beneath the entire New Testament, the implicit but underexposed premise is the story of the cosmic conflict. The one who took the lead in maligning God, accusing the Creator of being a capricious despot, finds his own scheme exposed for what it truly is. The qualities in God that this persona took the lead in denying become manifest, in what we might call the mother of all shock-and-awe experiences (Isa. 52:14, 15).

Notice, for instance, the hush that falls on the heavenly council when the Lamb appears in the middle, looking manhandled and violently abused (Rev. 5:6).<sup>12</sup> In this revelatory unfolding, we learn that God does not use force; God's rule is a rule of freedom. Indeed, the opponent in this great conflict falls by the logic of freedom, precisely the quality in God that he claimed was missing.<sup>13</sup>

The time between matters, too. For "this must take place" Jesus says of this time in Mark 3:7. Paul affirms the revelatory character of this time in his corrective to the Thessalonians (2 Thess. 2:1–12). We breathe a sigh of relief as Satan is seized and bound in Revelation (20:1–2), but what becomes of our relief when, at the end of the thousand years, we are told that Satan "must be let out for a little while?" (Rev. 20:3).

Hope is affirmed in these passages, but it is also reconstituted. Those who place their trust in the reconstituted hope should not be dismayed to discover that they find common ground with other voices in our time

that also affirm hope. Even if Moltmann goes too far in exchanging the imminence of the Christian hope for its immanence, he is on to something when he writes,

[T]hose who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present.<sup>14</sup>

Although this reconstituted hope is a scriptural construct, it does not lose its luster if it finds itself agreeing with Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Revelation is not comprehended completely in the beginning, but at the end of the revealing history."<sup>15</sup> This hope loses nothing if it affirms with Richard Bauckham that the eschatological hope has its foundation "in the belief in the Creator's faithfulness to his creation."<sup>16</sup>

Nor should we see ourselves upstaged if we find ourselves in agreement with Marilyn McCord Adams: "The goodness of creation will be secured when God has finished God's labors. My claim is that *so long as horrors and vulnerability to horrors persist, God's work is not yet done.*"<sup>17</sup>

If our reconstituted hope emphasizes chronology less than values, events less than the character of God, we may have done no more than reconstitute the Seventh-day Adventist version of the Christian hope according to raw material lying there all along, in the densely written scroll of prophecy waiting to be eaten (Rev. 10:9–11).

Hope deferred. Hope affirmed. Hope reconstituted. I submit that this hope is still more than ever the Blessed Hope (Titus 2:13). Those who hold this hope dear will no less than before affirm the words of Jesus, "Behold, I am coming soon" (Rev. 22:20).

## Notes and References

1. For a review of the scholarly debate, see G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days: The Interpretation of the Olivet Discourse* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993).

2. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press), 304–8.

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