

Cosmic Signs of the End As Landmarks for the Nearness of the Second Coming in Adventism

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Abstract: *Seventh-day Adventists have been believing that cosmic signs described under the sixth seal in the book of Revelation (6:12-13; cf. Matt 24:29) were fulfilled in the 18th/19th century and their fulfillment served as landmarks for the nearness of the second coming of Christ. But recently, that view has been challenged within the church, stating that these are signs at His coming itself (that is, they did not occur prior to the second coming; they accompany the actual coming of Jesus). Using the historicist approach for the interpretation of apocalyptic prophecies, this paper re-evaluates both the traditional and the challenging view from a biblical perspective and the spirit of prophecy.*

Introduction

In his description of the sixth seal, John writes: "I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind." (Rev 6:12-13, NIV). Adventists have believed that these cosmic signs were fulfilled in the 18th and 19th centuries. Additionally, they served as landmarks pointing to the nearness of the second coming. But recently, that has been challenged within the Adventist circle itself, at least, indirectly.

Historicist Interpretation of the Signs under the 6th Seal

Historicist Interpretation of Apocalyptic Prophecy

Reimar Vetne has aptly demonstrated that Jewish apocalyptic writings (200 BC – AD 100) interpreted the book of Daniel in a historicist fashion.¹ Jesus himself interpreted prophecy in Daniel as a future event (Matt 24:15). The tradition of using the principles of historicism in the interpretation of biblical apocalyptic prophecy can be traced back to the primitive church.² Its systematic form is said to have begun either with Joachim of Fiore (12th century), or Nicholas of Lyra (d. 1340).³ Well-known scholars of the pre-Reformation, Reformation, and post-Reformation periods, such as John Wicliffe, Martin Luther, Johann Bengel, Albert Barnes, and E. B. Elliott, had adopted the historicist interpretive approach of Revelation.⁴ But the method has experienced a decline and it is almost sidelined by most modern commentators. One of the main reasons that allegedly invalidated it is the variation (or diversity) in results by its proponents.⁵

Historicist interpretation of the prophecy does not set exegesis aside. That was the understanding and use in the Reformation and Post-Reformation hermeneutics when “Scriptures were allowed to interpret themselves through the historical-grammatical method; and their prophetic-apocalyptic elements began to explain the ongoing history of the Christian church

¹ Reimar Vetne, “A Definition and Short History of Historicism as a Method for Interpreting Daniel and Revelation,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 14/2 (2003): 9.

² P. Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1977), 294. Prominent early church interpreters of apocalyptic prophecy, such as the author of *Epistle of Barnabas*, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Eusebius, and Jerome, saw apocalyptic prophecies as reaching into the Roman era (Vetne, 11).

³ “Historicist Interpretation,” accessed 23 January 2018, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/revelation/introduction/historicist-interpretation.html>

⁴ John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 18.

⁵ E. W. Bullinger, *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1984).

using the historicist approach.”⁶ Mueller reminds us that “Adventists believe that the text of Revelation supports a historicist approach. They are convinced that the present generation lives already on the verge of Christ’s second coming, in the time of the sixth seal and the sixth trumpet.”⁷ One of its founders, Ellen White, adopted and consistently used the historicist approach. “There is not the slightest evidence that Ellen White intended for the church to follow any other method of interpreting the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation than the historicist method.”⁸ She affirms: “the book of Revelation opens to the world what has been, what is, and what is to come.”⁹ She further explains: “some of the scenes depicted in this prophecy [Revelation] are in the past, some are now taking place; some bring to view the close of the great conflict between the powers of darkness and the Prince of heaven, and some reveal the triumphs and joys of the redeemed in the earth made new.”¹⁰

The Adventist historicist approach has not remained unchallenged. A mixture of preterist, historicist, idealistic, and futuristic approaches is being proposed.¹¹

Historicist Interpretation of the Signs under the 6th Seal

The prophecy of the book of Revelation has caught the attention of Christian commentators since the early church. As for the sixth seal, Victorinus (d. 303) interpreted the earthquake as the

⁶ Alberto R. Timm, “Historical Background of Adventist Biblical Interpretation,” in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. George W. Reid (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2005), 4.

⁷ E. Mueller, “A New Trend in Adventist Eschatology: A Critical Analysis of a Recent Publication,” *Reflections* 44 (October 2013), 1. At the same time, Mueller remarks that Adventists “recognize that although Revelation discloses the last events, it does not provide details of some current religious and political affairs. In other words, Revelation contains broad lines but not every stroke of history.” (Ibid.).

⁸ “Ellen G. White and the Interpretation of Daniel and Revelation,” *BRI*, 1988.

⁹ E. G. White, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7:954.

¹⁰ E. G. White, *Acts of the Apostles* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1970), 584.

¹¹ Mueller, “New Trend,” 1.

very last persecution, darkening of the sun as beclouding of doctrine, and falling of the stars as typifying saints who were troubled because of their faith. For Le Roy E. Froom, such interpretation for the sixth seal's signs was "strange."¹²

Non-Adventist historicists believed that the end of the reign of Diocletian and his persecution against Christianity marked the start of the overthrowing of the pagan world.¹³ In other words, the earthquake of the sixth seal corresponds to the political upheaval and collapse of the Roman Empire brought about by the invasions of the barbarian tribes in the fourth and fifth centuries.¹⁴

Adventist historicists uphold that earthquake, sun, moon, stars in the sixth seal are literal.¹⁵

A question arises: Should these descriptions (found both in Jesus' portrayal of the end of the world and in the scene of the opening of the sixth seal) be understood literally or symbolically? Although the language of the opening of the sixth seal is drawn from the Old Testament, nothing in the text indicates these signs are intended to be symbolic. On the contrary, the repeated usage of the word 'as' or 'like'

¹² Le Roy E. Froom, *Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: the Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation*, vol. 1, *Early Church Exposition, Subsequent Deflections, and Medieval Revival* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1950), 340.

¹³ Frank D. Dowset, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ," accessed 22 January 2018, historicist.info/dous/rev5.htm

¹⁴ C. Marvin Page, *Reading Revelation: A Comparison of Four Interpretive Translations of the Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), 57.

¹⁵ It is important to note that theological interpretation of the sixth seal signs had proponents even within adventist historicists before 1844. For instance, J. Litch wrote in 1838 that the sixth seal opened about 1789 with the French Revolution, the "sun" represented the kings or chief rulers who fell during the Revolution, the "moon" was the queen or wife of the rulers, sharing the same fate of the husband, and the "stars" were inferior officers who were swept away by revolutionists (J. Litch, *The Probability of the Second Coming of Christ about AD 1843* [Boston: David H. Ela, 1838], 140 -141).

(Gr. *hōs*) in the text appears to be very significant. The sun becomes black *as* sackcloth, the moon *as* blood, the stars of the sky fall *as* do the figs of the fig tree, and heaven splits *as* the papyrus scroll. ... This suggests that these heavenly signs are intended to be taken literally.¹⁶

Ellen White warns against a spiritualized interpretation of the elements described in the cosmic signs: "I saw that when the Lord said 'heaven,' in giving the signs recorded by Matthew, Mark, and Luke, He meant heaven, and when He said 'earth' He meant earth. The powers of heaven are the sun, moon, and stars. They rule in the heavens."¹⁷

Additionally, Adventist historicists point out when and where these signs happened:

Seventh-day Adventists saw in the historic earth quake of Lisbon, Portugal, on November 1, 1755, a fulfillment of the sixth seal of Revelation 6:12-17. They further accepted the "inexplicable" darkening of the sunlight on May 19, 1780, for a few hours in some eastern states along the American seacoast as fulfilling the prediction: "The sun turned black" (Rev. 6:12). The meteor shower on the morning of November 13, 1833, seen across North America, was seen as a spectacular sign from heaven to warn humanity of the imminent coming of Christ. Ellen White considered this event the last of the cosmic signs predicted in Matthew 24 and Revelation 6, and the forerunner of the coming Judgment Day. She declared that all three upheavals in nature the Lisbon quake, the "dark day," and the meteor shower were fulfillments of Christ's predictions in Matthew

¹⁶ Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 251.

¹⁷ E. G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 2000), 41.

24:29 and Revelation 6:12,13. It seemed to her a "surety" that she was living in the last generation on earth.¹⁸

Challenge to the Adventist Historicist Interpretation of the Cosmic Signs

The view on the fulfillment of the cosmic signs in the 18th/19th century as pointing to the nearness of the Second Coming has been challenged, particularly in the eighties. R. Bruinsma admits that there is a quest for pluralism in the Adventist church. In one way or another, that quest affects the prophetic approach and its outcome. R. Bruinsma admits:

The rapidly growing church is still remarkably united, both organizationally and theologically, but it manifests an increasing pluralism. Unfortunately, this seems to lead to a significant degree of polarization. Where one current seeks to find ways of making Adventism more relevant to this generation, others insist that "the old landmark" of the Adventist faith must be zealously guarded and are unwilling to rethink or modify traditional views. These more conservative Adventists insist that Adventism must continue to subscribe to its traditional interpretations of prophecy, with the corresponding condemnation of Roman Catholicism and other Christian churches. The more "progressively" inclined are increasingly open to emphasizing the common bond with other Christians and tend to feel uncomfortable with traditional attitudes.¹⁹

In fact, the challenge to the approach is intended to have Adventists to not to have preconceived opinions about the the

¹⁸ Hans LaRondelle, "The Application of Cosmic Signs in the Adventist Tradition," *Ministry* (September 1998), 27 (emphasis his).

¹⁹ R. Bruinsma, *Seventh-day Adventist Attitudes Toward Roman Catholicism 1844-1965* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1994), 301.

Roman Catholic church.²⁰ In the same vein, Adventist church is called to re-evaluate its traditional views on the Roman Catholic church in the context of our time.²¹ Adventists should share the same views with other churches so that we can be accepted by them. As it has been said: “sometime soon the Church must decide unequivocally whether it is a Christian church - with its own unique witness - amidst other Christian churches, or whether it must stand alone over against all other Christian bodies.”²²

An article has been written that purports to “examine the basic approach of the early Adventist expositors, the limitations of their verse-by-verse commentaries of prophecy, and Mrs. White's adoption of their faulty conclusions.”²³ At the end of the 20th century, another Adventist scholar has also asked “in retrospect, can we, today (in some cases centuries after the events) maintain the same understanding of these phenomena . . . ?”²⁴ Books by contemporary Adventist scholars are said to “no longer articulate the traditional application of the cosmic signs.”²⁵

Forwarded arguments include that there were earthquakes of greater intensity and death before and after the Lisbon's earthquake, and meteors of greater intensity than that on 1833 (i.e. November 17, 1966). “In light of these facts, some conservative Adventist expositors are now convinced that the

²⁰ See R. Bruinsma, “Adventists and Catholics: Prophetic Preview or Prejudice?” *Spectrum* 27/3 (1999), 45-52.

²¹ Bruinsma, *Seventh-day Adventist Attitudes Toward Roman Catholicism*, 301.

²² Bruinsma, “Adventist and Catholics,” 52.

²³ Donald Casebolt, “Is Ellen White's Interpretation of Biblical Prophecy Final?” *Spectrum* 12/4 (1982), 2. The gist of the article was that these phenomena were caused not by supernatural but natural causes.

²⁴ LaRondelle, 27.

²⁵ LaRondelle, 27, cites Marvin Moore, *The Crisis of the End Time* and S. Bacchiocchi, *The Advent Hope for Human Hopelessness*. As a matter of fact, S. Bacchiocchi omits the traditional view about 1755, 1780, and 1833 phenomena.

traditional Adventist interpretation of these historical phenomena has lost its convincing power. . . . The unanimous voice of conviction in Adventism regarding the prophetic significance of these phenomena has disappeared.”²⁶ It is even alleged that “traditional applications of the prophetic ‘signs of the age’ are not part of any pillar or landmark of Seventh-day Adventism. Truth progresses; so should we.”²⁷ Therefore, our preaching of the second coming should no longer have anything to do with these signs:

Today you would be hard pressed to convince people that Jesus is coming soon on the basis of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, the 1790 dark day and the 1833 falling of the stars. To our pioneers it appeared these were the signs that Jesus had spoken to indicate His soon return. This had an effect upon them for good to build and nourish the Advent hope. And there is no doubt that Ellen White endorsed the traditional view of the early Adventists in her book *The Great Controversy* (see pp. 305-308, 334). Today, few, if any, Adventist scholars would support her on these points.²⁸

²⁶ LaRondelle, 26.

²⁷ LaRondelle, 27.

²⁸ Graeme Bradford, *More Than a Prophet: How We Lost and Found again the Real Ellen White* (Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 2006), 139. The Ellen G. White Estate had issued a notice of strong concerns about the book: “in actuality, while recognizing elements of the book on which we can agree, the White Estate staff has strong concerns regarding several of the viewpoints expressed in the book.” (“A Notice Regarding *More Than A Prophet*,” accessed 06 December 2017, <http://www.whiteestate.org/issues/more-prophet.asp>). Kevin Morgan, *White Lie Soap: For Removal of Lingering Stains on Ellen’s White Integrity as an Inspired Writer* (Millers Creek, NC: Honor Him Publishers, 2013), 152, is aware that Bradford referred to Donald Casebolt’s challenge to Ellen White’s interpretation of prophecy regarding these cosmic signs, the captivity of Pope Pius VI in 1798 and the Turkey’s fall in 1840. See Donald Casebolt, “Ellen White, the Waldenses, and Historical Interpretation,” *Spectrum* 11/3 (February 1981), 37-43. Morgan’s *White Lie Soap* is a response to Walter T. Rea, *The White Lie* (Turlock, CA: M & R Publications, 1982).

In other words, since Jesus did not come in 1844 as Adventist pioneers had hoped, and in any case, their interpretation of prophecy was faulty, the view on the fulfillment of the 18th/19th century cosmic signs for the end must be abandoned.

Dealing with the Challenges to Historicist Interpretation on the Cosmic Signs

Historicist Interpretation in the Structure of Revelation

John certifies that the book of Revelation contains “words of the prophecy.” (Rev 22:18). There is internal and structural evidences that support the historicist approach to apocalyptic prophecy. Christ’s letters to the seven churches contain elements that describe the first century situation of the church till the second coming. The seven seals vision is introduced with the vision of God’s throne and the enthronement of the Lamb, who in turn, breaks the seals. The breaking of the seventh seal ushers the second coming and brings to view the redeemed in heaven (Rev 8:1). Likewise, the seven trumpets have been unfolding through history, though there is a strong emphasis on the last events.²⁹

Different apocalyptic passages in Daniel and Revelation represent a “symbolic prophetic time-sequence parallelism, covering approximately the same period in history.”³⁰ Additionally, recapitulation characterizes the Revelation. As Mueller puts it:

The Book of Revelation resembles the Book of Daniel in using the principle of recapitulation or repetition. Daniel 2, 7, 8, 10-12 are clearly parallel, although not in every detail. But the chapters discuss world history from the time of the prophet to the end.

²⁹ Ekkehardt Mueller, “Challenges to the Adventist Interpretation of Apocalyptic Literature,” *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 13/1 (2010), 65.

³⁰ Damsteegt, *Foundations*, 21.

However, recapitulation is not a mere duplication, but each time the flow of history is repeated a different perspective, with additional details, is added.³¹

Signs of the Times in the SDA Apocalyptic Prophecy Interpretation

The cosmic signs and the second coming in the structure of Revelation 6:12-17. The unit passage of Revelation 6:12-17 describe two major events: (1) the events accompanying the opening of the sixth seal itself (6:12-13), and (2) events immediately preceding the second coming (6:14-15), which in fact, belong to the 7th seal.³² These can be summarized as follows:

Events at opening of the sixth seal:

The great earthquake (v. 12a)

Darkening of the sun and the moon (v. 12b)

Falling of the stars (v. 13)

Events of actual coming:

Vanishing of the sky (v. 14)

Kings of the earth hiding in the caves (vv. 15-16)

Day of the Lord (v. 17)

We have already mentioned that some commentators believe that the elements (earthquake, sun, moon, stars) described in the sixth seals are not literal, and they are signs associated with the eschatological day of the Lord:

Like the OT lawsuits against heathen nations, the cosmic disturbances described in the Gospels and the Revelation point to *theological* rather

³¹ Mueller, "Challenges," 64.

³² So C. Mervyn Maxwell, *God Cares: Vol 2, The Message of Revelation* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1985), 202.

than *geological* or *astronomical* realities: the eschatological day of the Lord represents the end of the natural securities attached to the cycle of day and night and the end of the present order, regardless of whether the sun or moon will still shine or remain in orbital relationship with the earth after the “day of the Lord.”³³

Throughout the Old Testament, literal cosmic signs appear before the coming of the Lord (day of the Lord).³⁴ These include earthquake (Ezek 38:19-20; Joel 2:10; Amos 8:8), darkening of the sun and moon (Joel 3:15; Isa 13:10, 13; 50:3), and falling of the stars (Isa 34:4). A great and unequalled earthquake accompanies the seventh last plague and the second coming (Rev 16:17-21). As John describes it, there is no doubt that earthquake, sun/moon, and stars in Revelation 6:12-13, are literal.

Multiple Fulfillment? Recently, some have been resorting to multiple fulfillment in the interpretation of the cosmic signs.³⁵ Proponents of multiple fulfillment claim that they have Ellen White’s endorsement of this method. The document, “Ellen G. White and the Interpretation of Daniel and Revelation,” presents several exhibits to deal with this issue, demonstrating that the multiple fulfillment for apocalyptic prophecy is not

³³ André Reis, “Shaking the Powers of Heaven: A Total Solar Eclipse and Adventist Eschatology,” *Spectrum* (18 August 2017), accessed 07 December 2017, <https://spectrummagazine.org/article/2017/08/18/shaking-powers-heaven-total-solar-eclipse-and-adventist-eschatology>

³⁴ See Stefanovic, 249-251.

³⁵ Maxwell, 214, states, “The possibility that another dark day, blood-red moon, and shooting-star shower will take place immediately prior to Christ’s actual return is not denied in the Bible. Jesus didn’t say how many times these events might occur, and neither did John, when presenting his similar list under the sixth seal. Since 1833 there already has been another notable star shower. Since 1755 there have been many serious earthquakes. There have been several other dark days.” Nevertheless, Maxwell has already previously stated “the series of signs that were to take place ‘immediately after the tribulation of those days’ has evidently been fulfilled.” (Maxwell, 202).

tenable.³⁶ Students of apocalyptic prophecy are reminded that “apocalyptic prophecy is not conditional prophecy and does not contain more than one fulfillment.”³⁷

If Ellen White were alive today, she would deplore the strained interpretations being urged upon the church as a result of employing the dual fulfillment concept. Furthermore, we may be sure she would request that her writings not be used to support such an error. And we may be sure that she would add: If you want to know what the Lord has revealed to me regarding Bible prophecy, don't try to deduct a hidden principle from a paragraph here and a line there. Rather, read my volume, *The Great Controversy*, where the major lines of Daniel and Revelation are treated. Here is the prophetic truth for our times.³⁸

³⁶ “Ellen G. White and the Interpretation of Daniel and Revelation,” accessed 06 December, 2017, <https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/prophecy/ellen-g-white-and-interpretation-daniel-and-revelation>.

³⁷ Mueller, “Challenges,” 67. Mueller rightly adds that “there may be an application in the sense that practical and personal lessons can be learned from a specific passage, but an application is not an interpretation. To interpret, for instance, Revelation both historically and, in a second step, futuristically does not do justice to the text.” (Ibid.)

³⁸ “Ellen G. White and the Interpretation of Daniel and Revelation.” Ellen White warns against “new light.” In 1896, she said:

those who are seeking to understand this message will not be led by the Lord to make an application of the Word that will undermine the foundation and remove the pillars of the faith that has made Seventh-day Adventists what they are today. The truths that have been unfolding in their order, as we have advanced along the line of prophecy revealed in the Word of God, are truth, sacred, eternal truth today. Those who passed over the ground step by step in the past history of our experience, seeing the chain of truth in the prophecies, were prepared to accept and obey every ray of light. They were praying, fasting, searching, digging for the truth as for hidden treasures, and the Holy Spirit, we know, was teaching and guiding us. Many theories were advanced, bearing a semblance of truth, but so mingled with misinterpreted and misapplied scriptures, that they led to dangerous errors. Very well do we know how every point of truth was established, and the seal set upon it

Ellen White warned against giving a dual fulfillment to an apocalyptic prophecy. In Manuscript 31, 1896, she wrote: “events in the train of prophecy that had their fulfillment away in the past are made future, and thus by these theories the faith of some is undermined.”³⁹

Ellen G. White’s post-1844 view. After 1844, has Ellen G. White changed her view about past fulfillment of cosmic signs? Evidences show that she has not.⁴⁰ About fourteen years after the disappointment of 1844, as she received the visions of *The Great Controversy*,⁴¹ Ellen White did not say that the Adventists were wrong in their interpretation of these cosmic signs. As a matter of fact, a cursory reading from the same book reveals that Ellen White admits when there was anything amiss. For instance, she pointed out the error on the Millerite interpretation of the sanctuary in Daniel 8:14 which results into the 1844 disappointment.⁴² But Ellen White did not alter the

by the Holy Spirit of God. And all the time voices were heard, “Here is the truth,” “I have the truth; follow me.” But the warnings came, “Go not ye after them. I have not sent them, but they ran.” (See Jeremiah 23:21.)” (*Selected Messages*, 2:103-104).

³⁹ *Selected Messages*, 2:102. She further continues, “The great waymarks of truth, showing us our bearings in prophetic history, are to be carefully guarded, lest they be torn down, and replaced with theories that would bring confusion rather than genuine light. . . .” (Ibid.)

⁴⁰ As Jonathan M. Butler, “Second Coming,” in *Ellen White: An American Prophet*, ed. Terrie Dopp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 185, says: “White stubbornly stuck to Miller’s historicist approach to the end-time prophecies as she emphatically abandoned his ill-conceived time setting [that is the second coming in 1844].”

⁴¹ Regarding the reason for writing *The Great Controversy*, Ellen White reports, “In this vision at Lovett’s Grove (in 1858), most of the matter of the Great Controversy which I had seen ten years before, was repeated, and I was shown that I must write it out.” (Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 2:265-272; see also James R. Nix, “Telling the Story,” *Adventist Review* [March 20, 2008]). A separate volume of *The Great Controversy*, was published in 1888, with its another edition in 1911.

⁴² Ellen G. White attests that Miller was wrong because he “adopted the generally received view that the earth is the sanctuary, and he believed that the cleansing of the sanctuary represented the purification of the earth by fire at the coming of the Lord. When, therefore, he found that the close of the 2300 days was definitely foretold, he concluded that this revealed the time of the second advent. His error resulted from accepting

view on the cosmic signs in the sixth seal by giving another fulfillment of it. On the contrary, Ellen White maintained that they were fulfilled in the 18th/19th century, and they remained historical pointers to the nearness of the coming of Jesus. Again, this is very clear in *The Great Controversy*.

The last question to be answered is: would Ellen White change her view on cosmic signs if she were still alive today? Her description of the cosmic signs within the framework of historicism in the book *The Great Controversy* has been discredited:

If we keep in mind the reason she wrote the book which was to win people to Christ using the prevailing ideas among Adventists of her era, we have no problem with this. The real problem emerges only if we try to use the book as a type of textbook to lock us into the interpretations she upholds. *The Great Controversy* was meant to be an evangelistic tool to win people to Christ and Adventism. And it uses the ideas in Adventism accepted at the time of its writing. As already noted, Ellen White borrows much of her prophetic material from Uriah Smith and J. N. Andrews.

Her borrowing was primarily in the areas of theology and prophecy. When she applies lessons spiritually she is basically working by herself. She takes prophecy and doctrine to apply them to the lives of the believer. This is the work of prophets as outlined in 1 Corinthians 14:3. In doing this she helps us to see the real purpose of prophecy. . . .⁴³

It has been alleged that Ellen White would change her view, should she re-write *The Great Controversy* today: “she

the popular view as to what constitutes the sanctuary.” (*Great Controversy*, 350).

⁴³ Bradford, 139-140.

revised *The Great Controversy* when she was given advice from scholars in 1911. If she were alive today there is every reason to suggest she would still be open to revise it again. She was ever open to receive more light, and encouraged more study on the books of Daniel and Revelation.”⁴⁴ But this allegation has not provided any instances to change. Additionally, Ellen White statement, “We, with all our religious advantages, ought to know far more today than we do know,”⁴⁵ referring to more study on the book of Daniel and Revelation, has been used as supporting and encouraging progressive or changing views.⁴⁶ But there is no hint from the statement that she encourages God’s people to discover more light that will change or contradict established views.⁴⁷ As for the so-called revision of *The Great Controversy* in 1911, firstly, any revision had received her approval. Second, the revision was more of technical than editorial nature.⁴⁸ Revision included Scripture references, references to historian quoted, verification of quotations, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, or wording.⁴⁹ Therefore, the revision which she had approved did not, in anyway, alter her views in the book.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers* (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 2010), 116.

⁴⁶ That is clearly the understanding of Bradford, 140, fn 258, where he quotes the above mentioned statement of Ellen G. White.

⁴⁷ For more details, see Morgan, 146-147. Gluder Quispe aptly affirms, “Adventists believe knowledge of truth is progressive, but they also believe that ‘new light’ builds on and complements old light, without contradicting its biblical foundations.” (Gluder Quispe, *The Apocalypse in Seventh-day Adventist Interpretation* [Lima, Perud: Peruvian Union University, 2013], 18).

⁴⁸ Electrotpe plates of the book were so worn that new plates needed to be made for its re-publication (“*The Great Controversy: A statement made by W. C. White before the General Conference Council, October 30, 1911*,” accessed 25 January 2018, <http://www.whiteestate.org/issues/GreatControversy1911.html>).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Signs of Nearness or Signs of Coming

(the Olivet Discourse and the Sixth Seal)

George Knight in his commentary on Matthew 24 says, “the pattern of Matthew 24 appears to be that the real signs are not signs of nearness but signs of coming.”⁵⁰ His view has met approval from some other Adventist scholars as the following shows:

Knight is correct in what he says, for anyone reading a modern translation will find the Greek text clearly translated in such a way as to forbid the interpretation that the cosmic events could be anything other than what occurs at the actual coming of Jesus. For example, after listing the sun being darkened and the falling of the stars, the NIV renders Matthew 24:30: "*At that time* the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky. . . ." (emphasis added).

It would appear from Matthew 24:30 that these cosmic signs accompany the personal, visible coming of Christ with His angels causing the nations on earth to mourn. In addition, a natural reading of Revelation 6:12-17 suggests that the cosmic signs accompany the coming of Christ. We appear to be forcing the issue to fit in a gap of hundreds of years between verses 13 and 14.⁵¹

A subsequent article appeared in 1998 which equally reaffirmed that view. It is claimed: “these cosmic events occur not prior to

⁵⁰ George R. Knight, *Matthew* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1994), 236, 237. “A cataclysm such as the Second Coming of Christ will be accompanied by a disruption of the natural order.” (André Deis, “Shaking the Power of Heaven.”).

⁵¹ Bradford, 138.

but at the actual coming of Jesus to this earth again.⁵² Traditional historicist Adventist interpreters of apocalyptic discourse/prophecy have reacted to the “signs of coming” view. C. Mervyn Maxwell states:

But in the course of the Olivet Discourse, Jesus also talked about the ‘great tribulation’ of the 1260 year-days and added that ‘*immediately after* the tribulation of those days’ and prior to His reappearance ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the star will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken [Matt 24:29].’⁵³

Their magnitude, their location where people were studying and pondering biblical prophecies, and their timing (after the tribulation of 1260 days) made these series of signs significant to “qualify [them] as the fulfillment of Christ’s prediction in the Olivet Discourse and John’s prediction made under the sixth seal.”⁵⁴

Since John was present when Jesus pronounced the Olivet discourse, it is no surprise that the framework of his understanding of future events goes back to Jesus Himself.⁵⁵ The following parallels can be established between the apocalyptic events in the Olivet discourse (Matt 24:21-31 and the seals (5th, 6th, and 7th) in Revelation (6:9-17):

⁵² Hans LaRondelle, “The Application of Cosmic Signs in the Adventist Tradition,” *Ministry* (September 1998), 27.

⁵³ Maxwell, 193.

⁵⁴ Maxwell, 201-202.

⁵⁵ Keith H. Essex, “The Rapture and the Book of Revelation,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 13/2 (2002), 217.

Matthew 24	Revelation 6:12-17	Events in the Prophetic fulfillment
Severe persecution of Christians cut short (24:21-22)	5 th seal: Souls under altar, asking when they would be vindicated, told to wait a little longer under persecution (6:9-11)	1260 years persecution (AD 538 – 1798)
Cosmic signs immediately after the persecution (24:29)	6 th seal: Cosmic signs (6:12-13)	Cosmic signs in the 18 th -19 th century
Sign of the Son of Man appearing Nations will mourn (24:30 -)	The second coming Kings and mighty mourn (6:14-17)	The second coming

Understanding the signs in the sixth seal as signs of coming calls for futurist interpretation of Revelation.⁵⁶ Then what about the previous five seals? Are the things they describe also happening immediately before the coming? What would we make of “they were given white robe; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed.” (6:11, NKJV). Whatever “a little while longer” means, it implies a significant length of time that is elapsing between the fifth seal and the second coming. The fifth seal’s events cannot accompany the actual coming.

⁵⁶ Non-Adventist futurist interpretation of the 7 seals understand them as judgments during the post-rapture seven year tribulation. “The sixth seal will be literal cosmic disturbances caused by nuclear war. The first nuclear explosion will trigger the worst earthquake ever. The smoke will darken the sun, make the moon appear red, and prompt massive meteor showers” (Pate, 50-57).

Cosmic Signs of the Times As Landmarks for the Nearness of the Second Coming in Adventism

We have seen that historical fulfillments of these phenomena have been dated by historicist scholars as follow: Lisbon earthquake in 1755, the darkening of the sun and moon on May 19, 1780, and the meteor shower on November 13, 1833.⁵⁷

Ellen White quotes Revelation 6:12, 13 in *The Great Controversy* (pp. 304, 333) and applies them to the signs that took place in 1755, 1780 and 1833:

Prophecy not only foretells the manner and object of Christ's coming, but presents tokens by which men are to know when it is near. Said Jesus: "There shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars." Luke 21:25. "The sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars of heaven shall fall, and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in the clouds with great power and glory." Mark 13:24-26. The revelator thus describes the first of the signs to precede the second advent: "There was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood." Revelation 6:12.

These signs were witnessed before the opening of the nineteenth century. In fulfillment of this prophecy there occurred, in the year 1755, the most terrible earthquake that has ever been recorded.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Stefanovic, 249.

⁵⁸ White, *Great Controversy*, 304. It is safe to say that Ellen G. White when writing that statement was aware of what historians call the deadliest earthquake in history, i.e. 23 January 1556 in Shaanxi, China. The earthquake, even though it was not the most powerful that have ever been recorded, killed more than 800,000 people, and was said to have been felt in more than 97 countries (Daryl Worthington, "Deadliest

Then Ellen G. White states that the events of 1780 and 1833 followed:

Thus was displayed the last of those signs of His coming, concerning which Jesus bade His disciples: "When ye shall see all these things, *know* that it is near, even at the doors." Matthew 24:33. After these signs, John beheld, as the great event next impending, the heavens departing as a scroll, while the earth quaked, mountains and islands removed out of their places, and the wicked in terror sought to flee from the presence of the Son of man. Revelation 6:12-17.⁵⁹

Fulfillment of the Cosmic Signs, the Nearness, and Actual Coming of Jesus

We have mentioned that the gap of hundreds of years between Revelation 13 and Revelation 14 has been questioned.⁶⁰ But gaps in time between the fulfillments of various parts of apocalyptic prophecies are common. For instance, the unit of Daniel 2:31-35 presents in one stroke, and just in five verses, the kingdoms which succeeded one after the other, from Babylon to the second coming. The same can be said for the Olivet discourse (Matt 24:15-24). As for the gaps between Revelation 6:13 and Revelation 6:14, Ellen G. White's description of the phenomena clarifies:

Interestingly, Mrs. White quotes Revelation 6:12, 13 in *The Great Controversy*, p. 304, 333 and applies them to the signs that took place in 1755, 1870 and 1833. She does not quote Revelation 6:14-17 until pages 641, 642: "*The heavens are rolled together as a scroll, the earth trembles before Him,*

Earthquake Hit China," accessed 29 January, 2018, <http://www.newhistorian.com/deadliest-earthquake-hits-china/2776/>).

⁵⁹ White, *Great Controversy*, 334.

⁶⁰ Bradford, 138.

and every mountain and island is moved out of its place.” (And then she quotes verses 15-17). Why does she separate verses 12, 13 from verses 14-17 by over three hundred pages? Simply because she knew there was a long parenthesis of time between the events that are depicted in these passages.⁶¹

Conclusion

There were phenomena which were part of the big picture as we wait for the second coming.⁶² But these did not qualify as historical landmarks for the second coming. The 18th/19th century cosmic signs remain the landmarks for the second coming. These were indicating the nearness of the advent, and they are not “signs *at his coming*.”⁶³ The “delay” of the *parousia* may be perceived, but we are definitely living between the sixth and the seventh seal. As Maxwell puts it, “we stand today between the star shower of Revelation 6:13 and the momentous time in verse 14 when the heavens will roll back like a scroll, the mountains and islands will move out of their places, and sinners will ask the rocks to hide from the Lamb.”⁶⁴ In Adventist theology, Jesus will come any time from the fulfillment of these cosmic signs. Anything different undermines the authority, truthfulness and trustworthiness of inspired writings. We cannot move away from the interpretation of the cosmic signs that Adventists embraced in the 19th century and have taught ever since.

⁶¹ “A response to attacks against the Signs of the End (1755, 1780, and 1833),” accessed 06 December, 2017, <http://everlasting-gospel.blogspot.co.ke/2012/08/signs-of-end-1755-1780-and-1833.html>

⁶² Most recently, for instance, the total solar eclipse in the United States and parts of Canada, and Mexico in partial darkness on 21 August 2017.

⁶³ That they are “signs *at his coming*” is the opinion of Morgan, 153.

⁶⁴ Maxwell, 202.