

Chapter 1

The Adventist Prophetic Scenario

Frederick Wheeler, a Methodist Episcopal minister, was conducting a Communion service in a small church in Washington, New Hampshire, on a Sunday morning back in early 1844. Before serving the emblems, he told the congregation that “all who confess communion with Christ in such a service as this should be ready to obey God and keep His commandments in all things.”

Rachel Oakes Preston, a Seventh Day Baptist, was sitting in the congregation that day. Later, when Wheeler visited her in her home, she challenged him. “You remember, Elder Wheeler, that you said everyone who confesses Christ should obey all the commandments of God?”

“Yes.”

“I came near getting up in the meeting right then and saying something.”

“I thought so,” Wheeler replied. “What did you have in mind to say?”

“I wanted to tell you that you had better set that Communion table back and put the cloth over it until you begin to keep the commandments of God.”

Wheeler was taken aback. What, he asked, did she mean? Mrs. Preston said she had in mind the fourth commandment, which she said Wheeler was violating by not observing the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week. Wheeler accepted the challenge and went home to study what the Bible said about the Sabbath. A few weeks later he kept his first Saturday Sabbath, and in March 1844, he preached his first sermon about the Sabbath.

That is how Rachel Oakes Preston introduced the seventh-day Sabbath to Adventists,* and it’s how Frederick Wheeler became the first Seventh-day Adventist minister. At the time, neither Mrs. Preston nor Pastor Wheeler knew the global impact their simple exchange that Sunday morning in Washington, New Hampshire, would have.¹

COULD IT REALLY HAPPEN?

*It would be another seventeen years before Sabbath-keeping Adventists adopted the name Seventh-day Adventist, and nineteen years before they organized as a denomination.

There's a bit of uncertainty about exactly what happened next. However, we do know that T. M. Preble, another preacher who lived in or near Washington, New Hampshire, became convinced of the seventh-day Sabbath, and in the summer of 1844, he began to keep it. It's most likely that he learned about the Sabbath from Frederick Wheeler or one of Wheeler's members.

William Miller was at the height of his preaching career at the time, and in February of the next year, Preble published an article on the Sabbath in *The Hope of Israel*, a Millerite publication. Joseph Bates read Preble's article and within a few days made up his mind to keep the Sabbath. From that point on, he was an indefatigable promoter of the Sabbath. In early 1846, he discussed the Sabbath with James White and Ellen Harmon, but at the time they didn't think it was important. In August 1846, Bates published a forty-eight-page tract titled *The Seventh-day Sabbath a Perpetual Sign*. James and Ellen White, who were married that same month, studied Bates's tract, became convinced that it was the truth, and began keeping the day. Thus began the long history of the Adventist observance of the Sabbath on Saturday, the seventh day of the week.

Now consider this: Over the past 150 years, the global membership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has grown from about three thousand in 1863 to some fifteen million around the world today (2007). On the other hand, Seventh Day Baptists, who outnumbered the Adventists several to one back in the mid-1800s, have a global membership today of about fifty thousand. That's a tiny fraction of one percent of today's Adventist membership. What made the difference? Why did Seventh-day Adventists grow so dramatically during the past 150 years while the Seventh Day Baptist membership has remained more or less static? I propose that one of the primary reasons is that from the very beginning of our history, we placed the Sabbath in an eschatological setting, while for the Seventh Day Baptists, the Sabbath is simply the right day to keep.

The Sabbath and eschatology

Eschatology is the study of the final events of this world's history up to and including the second coming of Jesus. Eschatological themes are found throughout the Bible, but especially in the major and minor

COULD IT REALLY HAPPEN?

prophets of the Old Testament and in Revelation in the New Testament. Additionally, the Gospels and Epistles reveal that Jesus and the apostles were keenly aware of eschatology. The apostles all believed that the second coming of Jesus would occur within their lifetime or shortly thereafter*

*See for example Romans 13:11, 12; James 5:8, 9; 1 Peter 4:7; 1 John 2:18; Revelation 22:7, 12, 20.

Daniel and Revelation have particularly fascinated students of prophecy for hundreds of years, and Adventists are no exception. However, our understanding of these prophecies differs significantly from that of nearly all other Catholic and Protestant interpreters, and the Sabbath is a key aspect of our unique perspective. As we understand it, the mark of the beast in Revelation 13:16, 17 is a symbol pointing to a law requiring the observance of Sunday, which will be enforced first in the United States and eventually all over the world just before the second coming of Jesus. We believe that an important issue in the world's final conflict will be whether God's people should observe the Sabbath on Saturday, the seventh day of the week, or on Sunday, the first day.

This view goes back to the very beginning of our movement, some fourteen or fifteen years before we organized as a church. Joseph Bates was the first to connect Revelation's "mark of the beast" with the observance of Sunday. In a tract he published in January 1847, he wrote, "There are tens of thousands that are looking fore [sic] Jesus, that don't believe the above doctrines, what will become of them? Consult John, he knows better than we do; he has only described two companies. See xiv 9-11,12. One is keeping the commandments and faith of Jesus. The other has the mark of the beast.... Is it not clear that the first day of the week for the Sabbath or holy day, is the mark of the beast?"*

A few years later Ellen White, a cofounder of the Adventist Church in the mid-1800s, expressed the same primitive understanding of the mark of the beast. In her book *Early Writings*, she said, "Then I realized, as never before, the importance of searching the Word of God carefully, to know how to escape the plagues which that Word declares shall come on all the ungodly who shall worship the beast and his image and receive his mark on their foreheads or in their hands. It was a great wonder for me that any could transgress the law of God and tread down His holy Sabbath, when such awful threatenings and denunciations were against them."³

COULD IT REALLY HAPPEN?

While Ellen White did not specifically state the relationship between the mark of the beast and the observance of Sunday, she clearly had that thought in mind, for she contrasted the mark of the beast with the observance of the Sabbath. And she maintained this understanding throughout her seventy years of ministry. For example, in 1899, she wrote, “When the decree shall go forth enforcing the counterfeit sabbath, and the loud cry of the third angel shall warn men against the worship of the beast and his image, the line will be clearly drawn between the false and the true. Then those who still continue in transgression will receive the mark of the beast.”⁴

As this statement suggests, Adventists believe that just before Christ’s second coming, the world will be divided into just two camps: Those who keep the Sabbath will receive the seal of God, while those who honor Sunday will receive the mark of the beast. Ellen White wrote,

The Lord has shown me clearly that the image of the beast will be formed before probation closes; for it is to be the great test for the people of God, by which their eternal destiny will be decided....

...All who prove their loyalty to God by observing His law, and refusing to accept a spurious sabbath, will rank under the banner of the Lord God Jehovah, and will receive the seal of the living God. Those who yield the truth of heavenly origin and accept the Sunday sabbath, will receive the mark of the beast.⁵

This is the eschatological context in which Seventh-day Adventists have placed the Sabbath. We believe God has called us not only to proclaim what the Bible says about the Sabbath but also to warn the world of the final conflict, which will revolve around the commandments of God, particularly the fourth one. As we understand it, the dividing line in the end time between those who serve God and those who do not will involve this Sabbath-Sunday controversy. At that time, Sabbath keepers will be persecuted and even martyred for their loyalty to God in observing the Sabbath on Saturday. We feel compelled to warn the world regarding what most people aren’t even faintly aware of and many find unbelievable, yet which we are certain lies just ahead. This is one of the major factors that has made our proclamation of the Sabbath so much more successful than that of the Seventh Day Baptists. This is one of the primary reasons why we today have fifteen million adherents to the Seventh Day Baptists’ fifty thousand.

COULD IT REALLY HAPPEN?

But could it really happen?

This eschatological interpretation of the Sabbath comprises a stupendous claim, to say the least! Audacious is not too strong a word. Even a casual look at American political history makes it difficult to believe that the United States would ever enforce a national Sunday law, for throughout our history, we've kept church and state separate.

Back in 1970, when I was the pastor of a small Adventist church in the west Texas town of Uvalde, I made friends with a local Baptist businessman. We were chatting in his office one day about religion and prophecy, and I asked him if he would be interested in knowing what Adventists believe about the end time. He said Yes, so I shared with him what you've read in this chapter. When I was through, I asked him what he thought. He smiled and said, "I think it's stupid."

He isn't the only one to think so, nor is he the first one. Back in the early 1900s, one critic called our view that the mark of the beast will be the enforced observance of Sunday "absurd." He said that the rejection by the United States of its historic support of religious freedom would require "a greater miracle than for God to grow a giant oak in an instant."⁶

Another early critic of the Adventist prophetic scenario was D. M. Canright. A popular Adventist evangelist and leader during the early years of our movement, he severed his connection with us in 1887 and joined a Baptist congregation in Otsego, New York. In his book *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced*, Canright wrote,

Seventh-day Adventists lay great stress upon their interpretation of this symbol [the lamblike beast of] Revelation 13:11-18. Their theory of the mark of the beast, his image, the seal of God, the Third Angel's message, and all their special work about the Sabbath is built upon their assumption concerning that beast. If they are mistaken here, their whole system collapses. They claim that this beast is the United States, and that soon we shall have here a church and state united, the image of the beast, the papacy. The mark of the beast is Sunday-keeping. A law will enforce this upon Seventh-day Adventists. They won't obey. Then they will be outlawed, persecuted, and condemned to death! Of all the wild Advent speculations in the prophecies, this deserves to stand among the wildest.⁷

That's strong language! And while I wouldn't go so far as to say that if we are wrong in our prophetic interpretation of Revelation 13, our whole system collapses, it is true that much of what we view as our mission to the world is based on our understanding of that chapter.

COULD IT REALLY HAPPEN?

The critical question, then, is this: Could it really happen? Is it reasonable to suppose that the United States will ever legislate Sunday as a day of rest? Is it anything more than fantasy to suppose that at some point in the fairly near future, a global edict will require that people everywhere observe Sunday as the Sabbath and that violators will be threatened with death and perhaps even executed? Is this what the mark of the beast is all about?

My purpose in writing this book is not to prove to you that the answer to these questions is “Yes.” It’s more to present the evidence as I and many other Adventists see it and then let you decide for yourself. That’s why I’ve titled this book *Could It Really Happen?* not *Will It Really Happen?*

Prophecy and current events

I like to compare the interpretation of prophecy to a pair of sunglasses. If you put on a pair with blue lenses, the world will look blue. A pair with amber lenses will cause the world to look amber. Green lenses will give the world a green tint. In the same way, any person’s interpretation of Bible prophecy will affect the way he or she views what’s happening in the world today and, what’s likely to happen in the future. Dispensationalists, for example, have a particular understanding of prophecy, and they interpret world events in light of that understanding. They focus their attention on the Middle East, especially Israel. They interpret events such as 9/11, the conflict in Iraq, and the clash between Israel and the Palestinians in light of their dispensationalist understanding of prophecy.

Their dispensationalist prophetic lenses also lead them to make certain predictions about the future.

The Adventist prophetic understanding differs greatly. It’s like putting on a pair of sunglasses with lenses of a much different color from those that Dispensationalists wear. The world looks different through our lenses, which leads us to a much different explanation of what’s happening now and what to expect in the future. While we need to be cautious about reading a prophetic implication into every news event that appears in the daily paper or on TV, trends over a period of time can give us an indication of where the world is headed. And our understanding of Bible prophecy influences our interpretation of those trends.

In this book you will read a detailed explanation of the Adventist understanding of Revelation 13 and how it affects our interpretation of

COULD IT REALLY HAPPEN?

trends in today's world. This first chapter is a brief introduction. The rest of the book examines the details. Two key questions will dominate my discussion throughout the book:

- Is the Adventist interpretation of Revelation 13 reasonable-is it based on what the Bible actually says, or is it mere speculation? To answer this question, we will examine Revelation 13, as well as a few other Bible prophecies.
- Do history and current events indicate that the Adventist scenario is realistic? To answer this question, we will review the history of Catholicism, the history of both Protestants and Catholics in America, and what both are doing in America today.

Introduction to the book

A few comments follow that should make it easier for you to understand this book. First, a word about what you can expect to find. As I suggested a moment ago, this book is largely an interpretation of Revelation 13 in the light of history and current events. I've divided it into three sections, each of which deals with a different aspect of Revelation 13:

- The first section deals with a terrible beast that arises from the sea.
- The second section deals with a beast that arises from the land.
- The third section deals with the mark of the beast.

The first two sections each begin with a chapter explaining the biblical basis for the Adventist understanding of that part of Revelation 13. The section on the mark of the beast begins with two chapters on the biblical basis for that interpretation of the prophecy. The chapters that follow each of these introductory chapters provide historical evidence-some ancient, some very modern-to show that the Adventist interpretation also has a solid basis in world events that have happened or that are happening.

Second, I'm a lifelong Seventh-day Adventist, so, obviously, I've written this book from an Adventist perspective. However, I've also written it in such a way that it should make sense to those who are not of our faith and thus not familiar with our beliefs. In fact, you will no doubt notice that the tone of the book addresses non-Adventists as much as it does Adventists. Because of this, I've explained the biblical basis for our interpretation of Revelation 13 in greater detail than many Adventists will need.

COULD IT REALLY HAPPEN?

And finally, Ellen G. White is without a doubt the most influential Adventist author. She lived for eighty-eight years, from 1827 to 1915. In December 1844, when she was just seventeen years old, she received the first of some two thousand visions that she claimed God gave her throughout her lifetime. She was the most prolific female author of the nineteenth century, and perhaps of all time. During her seventy-plus years of ministry, she wrote more than a hundred thousand pages, all by hand, including more than two dozen books. And since her death, excerpts from her letters and diaries and other writings have been collected and published as books, as well.

Adventists accept Ellen White as a genuine prophet, though she preferred to be known as a “messenger of the Lord.” She had a great deal to say about the end time. I shared several of her statements with you earlier in this chapter, and I will quote her occasionally in future chapters. Adventist readers will no doubt accept these citations as the word of the Lord. Non-Adventists reading this book can think of these quotations as simply representative of what Adventists believe. Most Adventists will probably agree with the majority of what I say in this book. I invite non-Adventist readers to accept what I say as well, if it makes sense. In any case, I hope that reading this book will help both Adventists and those who are not of our faith to understand our prophetic interpretation better.

1. My two sources for this story are the Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1966), 1019, 1020; and Arthur W. Spaulding, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1961), 117-119.

2. Joseph Bates, *The Seventh-day Sabbath a Perpetual Sign From the Beginning to the Entering Into the Gates of the Holy City According to the Commandment*, 1847 edition, 59, italics added; cited in *Development of Seventh-day Adventist Theology Source Book: Maxwell Source Collection*, a private manuscript prepared by Mervyn Maxwell for students in his class on the history of Adventist theology, 271.

3. Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1882), 65.

4. Manuscript 51, 1899; cited in Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1946), 234, 235.

5. *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1957), 7:976.

COULD IT REALLY HAPPEN?

6. Theodore Nelson, in the introduction to Dudley M. Canright's book, *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1914), 23.

7. Canright, *ibid.*, 89.