

Apocalypse When? Seventh-day Adventist Eschatological Pessimism in the Wake of World War I

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I. Introduction

Five years ago, Philip Jenkins released his book, *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade*. The book challenges long-held assumptions on the causes that led to the outbreak of the war, contending that, “The War to End All Wars” was Christendom’s first full scale religious civil war. For Jenkins, Christianity not only contributed to the war, but also prolonged it for many years, and consequently shaped the world we know today. “Contrary to secular legend,” Jenkins argues, “religious and supernatural themes pervaded the rhetoric surrounding the war—on all sides—and these clearly had a popular appeal far beyond the statements of official church leaders.”¹

With the hyper-religious consciousness of the era, eschatological perspectives were numerous. Like others who have studied the period of the First World War, Philip Jenkins describes these years as “apocalyptic” to denote the cataclysmic nature of the early twentieth century. Jenkins uses apocalypse to describe a period of “increasing chaos, marked by war, plague, famine, and disaster, culminating in a divine act of judgment that ends the existing world order and begins a wholly new creation.”² There is a reason why the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* featured so prominently in popular culture during the First World War. Tens of millions of people died as casualties of war, famine, disasters, and plague. The “end of the world” was part of society’s collective consciousness, especially in Europe and America.

In reading *The Great and Holy War*, I sought to examine SDA perspectives on socio-political events in the months preceding the end of the war. In particular, I sought to explore the church’s official statements regarding the eschatological nature of world events, reading these statements within the framework of the religious milieu of America at the close of the war in 1918. From my review of extant SDA periodicals of the period, several observations are

¹ Philip Jenkins, *Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade*, (Harper One: New York, 2014): 4.

² Ibid.

possible, but for the sake of time, I am only able to explore one of the most significant findings, namely the pessimistic nature of SDA eschatology that differed from prevalent eschatologies of the era.

With the risk of oversimplification, I posit two primary forms of eschatology that emerged in the wake of the First World War — optimistic eschatologies and pessimistic eschatologies. These two eschatological approaches took the form of postmillennialism or premillennialism, respectively. I contend that SDA eschatology holds elements of these two eschatological perspectives in tension, being both optimistic and pessimistic. We especially see these tensions among SDA leader's thinking in the wake of the First World War. How are these two eschatological tensions reconciled? And how may this inform our perspectives on current socio-political events, especially during times of trouble? First, some background is warranted in seeking to answer these questions.

II. Optimistic/Pessimistic Eschatological Debates and World War 1

A paper recently appeared in *The Journal of Church and State* titled “‘The Premillennial Menace’: Shailer Mathews’ Theological-Political Battle Against Premillennialism During the First World War.” The paper details the battle between modernists and fundamentalists over the direction of America. At the time, Shailer Mathews, dean of the University of Chicago Divinity School, led the charge against the premillennialists. The progressive Mathews believed “premillennialists’ erroneous and antiquated interpretation of Scripture had led them to misunderstand the purpose of the church and advocate a false and pessimistic eschatology.”³ As such, Mathews claimed the premillennialists were doing damage to Christianity and in turn, the American war effort. He argued this was mainly due to the premillennialist’s pessimistic view that the world would descend into chaos before the return of Christ. Mathews, to the contrary, believed the war against Germany would lead to lasting peace through American leadership by spreading democracy around the world, ultimately leading to a more just society. The progressives believed that together with big business and other powerful institutions, the

³ Adam Petersen, “‘The Premillennial Menace’: Shailer Mathews’ Theological-Political Battle Against Premillennialism During the First World War”, *Journal of Church and State*, 60, no. 2 (August 2, 2017): 271.

realization of God's Kingdom would happen in their lifetimes. Their influence went as high as the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, who's speeches in defense of the war were permeated with religious language.⁴

By the 1910s, the majority of premillennialists in America were dispensationalists. While the timing of last day events differed among various premillennialist groups, such as SDAs, most believed the world would increasingly descend into darkness and chaos before the second coming of Christ. The church's role, therefore, was to warn of impending judgment and lead as many people as possible to follow Christ before the end. For Mathews and other progressives, this view was not only contrary to Scripture, but it was also dangerous. By 1917, Mathews launched an aggressive campaign to convince America of his views. One of his most well-known attacks came in the form of a pamphlet titled, *Will Christ, Come Again?* Where he goes so far as to suggest premillennialists were unpatriotic. Again, to cite the Mathews paper, "With this little pamphlet, Mathews cast down the gauntlet and accused the premillennialists of distorting the Scriptures and rejecting the church's true calling to redeem society. Based on Mathews' beliefs about the war, accusations of treason were not far away."⁵

With battle lines drawn, the premillennialists did not sit back quietly. One of the most vocal defenders of premillennialism was R.A. Torrey, at the time president of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (B.I.O.L.A.). Torrey argued that Mathews' and other progressive's accusations were unfair and misrepresented premillennialist positions. Many premillennialists took social reform seriously, Torrey contended, a particular example being their support of prohibition. Still, there were extreme pessimistic views among premillennialists such as I.M. Haldeman, pastor of the First Baptist Church in New York City, a contributor to *The Fundamentals*, who claimed prohibition was a scheme of Satan as the only purpose of a world crisis is a revival. Haldeman once wrote, "The Devil would be glad to see prohibition successful. Nothing would please him more than to be able to shut up every saloon and every house of shame."⁶

Subsequently, in 1918, as America was in the height of the war and experiencing

⁴ Ibid. 271-272.

⁵ Ibid., 282.

⁶ Ibid., 292.

devastating casualties, Shirley Jackson Case, editor of the progressive *American Journal of Theology*, managed to publish an article in Mathews's journal *The Biblical World*, whereby he claimed premillennialist were guilty of treason. He argued that their eschatology was hurting the American war effort, in turn doing significant damage to Christianity and the realization of God's Kingdom on earth. To quote Case, "The premillennialist might well want Germany to win. A Teutonic victory ought to bring us nearer the end of the present world."⁷

While George Marsden considers the Case incident "bizarre," progressives like Mathews also made similar accusations against premillennialists. In the same edition of *The Biblical World*, he wrote that premillennialists were hurting the church and the country, and they must be exposed. For Mathews, exposure meant reporting all suspicious activity to government authorities according to the Espionage and Sedition Acts, even conscientious objectors. Of course, premillennialists like Torrey and others did not take these accusations lightly, claiming their judgments were unfair and resembled "the Salem witch trials."⁸ The Mathews paper concludes with the following assessment:

Ironically, while Case mocked the premillennialists' pessimistic interpretation of the war in Europe as a sign of the impending apocalypse, liberals' grand expectations that the war would usher in a new era of peace proved equally naive. In this way, both groups misread the signs of the times.⁹

III. Seventh-day Adventist Eschatological Pessimism

In light of the historical background above, we now turn our attention to an examination of SDA postwar responses to the First World War, first noting that Michael

⁷ Ibid., 294.

⁸ Ibid., 296.

⁹ Ibid., 298. In the spring of 2014, Friedensau Adventist University hosted an international symposium to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of the First World War. The symposium was aptly titled "The Impact of World War I on Seventh-day Adventists." Participants focused on three themes: Seventh-day Adventist's (SDA) role in times of war, the subsequent development of the SDA Reform church, and SDA interpretations of biblical prophecy. The discussion concerning biblical prophecy focused on the implications of misinterpreting current sociopolitical events. During the First World War, Adventists were caught up with the Ottoman Empire's role in the biblical battle of Armageddon, the Eastern Question. When Turkey failed to occupy Jerusalem during the war according to readings of Daniel and other biblical passages, many in the church were forced to reassess their methods of interpretation. However, these kinds of sensational views of world events in light of biblical prophecy are not unique to SDAs, which is particularly the case during the First World War. For a full report of the symposium see Jeff Boyd, "Adventists and World War I," <https://www.thh-friedensau.de/content/uploads/Adventists-and-World-War-I-AT-total.pdf> (May 12, 2014).

Campbell has substantially documented how the Fundamentalist movement influenced many SDA leaders during the war years. In his recent book on the 1919 Bible Conference, Campbell contends that SDA leaders at the time were captivated by the *Prophetic Conference Movement*, which contributed to the rise of premillennialism in America.¹⁰ For example, the June 19, 1919, edition of *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, leads with an editorial by F.M. Wilcox titled, “*The World Conference on Christian Fundamentals*,” which shares a report on his recent attendance at the event in Philadelphia earlier in the year. The report begins with the conference’s objectives. In part, it reads, “The supreme objective of this conference is to unite all such in a world-wide fellowship, to the end that we may all speak with one voice of unhesitating affirmation of the things which are verily believed.”¹¹ For Wilcox, this was the imminent return Christ, of which Campbell notes the irony of the conservative Adventist’s ecumenical openness. The report goes on to list premillennialists in attendance such as the aforementioned R. A. Torrey, dean of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles and I. M. Haldeman, pastor of the First Baptist Church, New York City, the latter of who espoused the radical views on social reform we observed previously.¹²

A survey of SDA periodicals during these years reveals that it was common practice to draw on the socio-political as well as religious viewpoints of those outside the denomination, even at times quoting at length or republishing entire articles by leaders in the fundamentalist movement such as R.A. Torrey.¹³ Although, while Adventist leaders felt they shared common core beliefs with these fellow premillennialists, SDA eschatological pessimism differed. Wilcox’s editorial above acknowledged that some views shared at the *The World Conference on Christian Fundamentals* did not comport with SDAs, particularly in regards to interpreting biblical prophecy. Wilcox affirmed the traditional Adventist position, writing, “We believe in the

¹⁰ Michael W. Campbell, *1919: The Untold Story of Adventism's Struggle with Fundamentalism*, (Pacific Press: Nampa, Idaho, 2019), Digital.

¹¹ F.M. Wilcox, “A Conference on Christian Fundamentals,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 96, no. 25 (June 19, 1919):2-5.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ For an example of this practice see R.A. Torrey, “The Place of Prayer in Evangelism,” *Signs of the Times*, 20, no. 2 (February, 1917): 34.

premillennial reign of Christ, but not in the same sense as was taught there [i.e., *The Word Conference of Fundamentals*].¹⁴

However, SDA eschatological pessimism differed more than in the timing of the millennium. It was also common practice during these years for Adventist leaders to report on the latest socio-political events of the time followed by commentary from the perspective of SDA eschatology. In the first edition of *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* for 1919, we find a lead article by A.G. Daniels, then president of the General Conference of SDAs, titled “The Present World Situation and Its Call to the Church of Christ.”¹⁵ The lengthy article begins by acknowledging the “momentous events” taking place in the world, while “startling” and “ominous,” even “dangerous,” they are also “full of promise and hope for all mankind.”¹⁶ Daniels praises progress, writing, “Leaders of labor federations, Socialists, suffragettes, and prohibitionists all believe that this reconstruction period is their hour of opportunity to build into the new world situation the great principles which they represent.”¹⁷ Daniels goes on to write about the millions of people being “delivered from the oppression of heavy-handed, despotic governments under which they have lived and groaned through decades and centuries.” He believes, “with this new freedom in civil or political affairs will come a larger measure of religious liberty.” The article continues at length to reflect on the socio-political situation around the world, quoting the optimistic statements of American leaders such as the U.S. Secretary of War, Newton Baker. We then discover the source of Daniels’ optimism, new opportunities for mission, writing, “Never in its long, eventful history has the church of God stood face to face with a more definite and divinely appointed mission than it does today ... Surely this hour calls for a great awakening on the part of Seventh-day Adventists.”¹⁸

The next week’s edition of *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* continues Daniels’ enthusiasm, going so far as to publish a photo of President Woodrow Wilson, followed later by

¹⁴ Wilcox, 5.

¹⁵ A.G. Daniels, “The Present World Situation and Its Call to the Church of Christ,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 96, no. 1 (January 1, 1919): 1-4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

photos of influential American politicians chosen as delegates to the Treaty of Versailles. The photos are accompanied by another lengthy article by the editor, F.M. Wilcox, titled “The World Outlook,” where he reflects on the devastation the war brought to the world the past four years.¹⁹ Wilcox, rhetorically asks, “And what has been accomplished?” His answer is filled with optimism. Wilcox writes,

In the political world stable governments have been swept aside. The iron rule of autocratic empires has been broken. Kings and emperors have been driven from their thrones. It is hoped that from these revolutionary changes greater liberties will accrue to the nations of men. If this shall result,— if all mankind, including hereditary rulers, shall learn that kings do not rule , by the authority of divine right ; that might does not make right ; that it will be wiser and better in the future to settle international differences by arbitration rather than by the sword; if the way shall be opened for the gospel message to go more freely to earth's remotest bounds, and men and women of every nation shall be accorded the free choice of religious expression,— if this shall result, then indeed the world will not have passed through its baptism of blood wholly in vain.²⁰

A.G. Daniels’ and F.M. Wilcox’s articles are representative of similar statements from Adventist leaders during this time. Their interpretations of socio-political events in light of SDA eschatology are both optimistic and pessimistic. For example, F.M. Wilcox’s optimistic view of the world situation soon turns pessimistic, writing, “Disorderly elements which have been held in check during the last few years through patriotic ardor or appeal, now that the war is over, will assert themselves in new force,” going on to predict, “Trade competition will increase. The poor will continue to be obliged to fight for existence. The rich will continue to hoard their accumulated store. And these conditions, instead of growing better, will continually grow worse.”²¹ Wilcox then offers this warning, writing, “The student of prophecy must recognize that we are living among the perils of the last days.” He then describes the world events to come, “Stable governments in every land will be seriously threatened. The evil philosophy of Bolshevism, so-called, will become a menace to every civilized state. The integrity of the church will be threatened by the subtle philosophies of infidelity and atheism. Society will be

¹⁹ F.M. Wilcox, “The World Outlook,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 96, no. 2 (January 9, 1919): 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*

honeycombed by the evil principles of excess and license."²² And what is to be the church's response? Wilcox's article concludes with a call to service. He challenges his readers, writing,

The future will prove occasion for supreme heroism on the part of every man who loves the right. The child of God, as he witnesses evil men and seducers waxing worse and worse, must take on new purpose to stand in the strength of truth and in the righteousness of Christ Jesus against the evils now threatening the world, the church, and society. He must stand to the extent of his influence a representative of heaven, a sentinel giving the warning against the approach of evil. He cannot ally himself organically or sympathetically with any disorganizing, disintegrating element. In these days of excess he must stand for conservatism in government, in Christian faith and of the church to withdraw the hand of fellowship morals, in social ethics ... Every believer should consider himself a watchman, standing ready to herald the message of his Lord. In this will be our safety as the perils of the last days thicken around us."²³

With these articles by Daniels and Wilcox, we make our first observation regarding the pessimistic nature of SDA eschatology in the wake of the First World War. While there are clearly elements of premillennial pessimism, there are also elements of postmillennialism's optimism. There is a pessimistic/optimistic dialectic. We see this in the conclusion of Daniels' article and his hope-filled clarion call to the church,

The call of the present world situation to the church of Christ is for reality in religion — a " living, glowing reality," that the organizations and agencies of the church for the mental and moral reconstruction of mankind may be vitalized with a power that will make them effective. Then truly the miracles of Christ " will multiply in the whole of human life," and there will be wrought out for this sorrowing, suffering, troubled world what it most needs. Who, then, can withhold himself from whatever personal self-surrender, consecration, and earnest endeavor may be required to secure the deep, true reality in religion that will contribute to the salvation of his fellow men?²⁴

There is still another aspect of SDA eschatological pessimism that sets it apart from other eschatologies during this era. In the first edition of *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* from 1919 mentioned above, we find an article by C.S. Longacre, then-Secretary of the General Conference Religious Liberty Department, titled, "Eternal Vigilance the Price of

²² Ibid., 5.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Daniels, 4.

Liberty.”²⁵ While Longacre praises American democracy, in particular, the Declaration of Independence, describing it as one of the “most precious gems on earth,” he also warns, “There are forces in operation in America which are seeking to establish religious dogmas by civil law, and compel all citizens to observe certain religious obligations under the threat of fines and imprisonment.”²⁶ Longacre’s concern for religious freedom is one of the most significant features of SDA’s pessimistic eschatology, the deep distrust of power, especially in regards to church and state. On the one hand, SDA leaders recognize that good may come from something as tragic as war, or even earthly governments may be a force for religious freedom; on the other hand, these ways and means cannot be trusted. Longacre’s article is representative of other similar pieces by Adventist leaders in this era, many of whom are optimistic about peace, but at the same time pessimistic about the possibility of peace until the Prince of Peace returns.

I offer one further observation which I believe is an essential aspect of SDA eschatology in the era. The first edition of the *Signs of the Times* for 1919, featured an article by a Baxter T. Howe, titled, “Some Principles with Their Warnings.”²⁷ Howe argues that a simple principle governs the universe, he writes, “His principle of government is stated in just eighteen words: ‘Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them... All that God has ever said by law and by prophets is summed up in these eighteen words. We all recognize their truth, and call it ‘the Golden Rule.’”²⁸ Howe then presents a lengthy treatise on the Cosmic Conflict between the Christ and Satan, warning of the dangers of political alliances between church and state, and how they inevitably seek to do away with freedom of conscience. He ends his treaty, with a challenge to the church,

... leave every man free to worship God any day, every day, or no day, as he may choose. This is the doctrine of Christ. "If any man hear My words, and believe not, I judge him not." Let us never put ourselves in a place where we shall be compelled to stand by the fiery furnace or the lions' den and confess our folly. "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye

²⁵ C.S. Longacre, "Eternal Vigilance the Price of Liberty," *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 96, no. 1 (January 1, 1919): 19-20.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Baxter T. Howe, "Some Principles with Their Warnings," *Signs of the Times*, 46, no. 1 (January 7, 1919): 5-6,12.

²⁸ Ibid.

even so to them."²⁹

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, I have presented three aspects of SDA eschatological pessimism during the First World War, where Adventists differed to varying degrees from other premillennialists of the era. Seventh-day Adventist eschatology is dialectical, being both pessimistic and optimistic. In this dialectical framework for viewing the world, Adventists are a people who seek peace, yet also are aware there will be no real peace until the return of Jesus Christ when his Kingdom will be established, and the earth will be renewed. Seventh-day Adventists are a community that seeks the good of all, even when they know the world will not get better. My conclusion is drawn from reading extant SDA periodicals and the perspectives of Adventist leaders at the end of the war. With more time, we would likely be able to identify more similarities and differences.

Despite the growing popularity of premillennialism in the war years and the influence of fundamentalism on many Adventist leaders, Adventist eschatology is infused with an optimism that has continued to guide SDAs in relating to world events. SDA eschatology is an eschatology of hope while remaining pessimistic about the present age. This may be one reason why Adventists have continued to build hospitals and universities for the good of the world, to advocate for religious freedom, and to work toward the good of society, all the while realizing their work will not usher in the Kingdom of God, but only serves in the here and now to join God in his work of overcoming evil with good.

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²⁹ Ibid., 12.