

Among Seventh-day Adventists, probably no discussion has produced more heat and less light than the various interpretations of the prophetic battle of Armageddon and the apocalyptic “king of the north” usually associated with it.¹ Yet most Adventists would agree that, unlike the doctrine of the second coming of Christ, these are not vital teachings of our church. Then why has the matter been so controversial and why discuss it now? The reasons are simple: As a people, we are committed to the Bible and deeply interested in its prophecies; however, our history can provide lessons to help us avoid getting entangled in needless controversies or sidetracked in futile speculations.

Millerite Background

To understand Adventist prophetic teachings, we must begin with our Millerite roots. When William Miller, an early 19th century Baptist preacher, focused on prophecies, he followed for the most part the then-prevailing Protestant interpretation, seeing in current events the fulfillment of Bible prophecy. Miller agreed with the Protestant view on the seven vials of Revelation 16: that five of these were in the past, the sixth was in the process of fulfillment, and only the seventh was in the future. The Euphrates represented the Turkish Empire, or Islam. However, Miller differed from his Protestant contemporaries in regard to other symbols of Revelation 16:12-16.

Accordingly, “the kings of the east” were, in his interpretation, the nations of Europe; the “three unclean spirits” were three wicked political powers: “the dragon” represented the kings of the earth, “the beast” the church of Rome, and “the false prophet” Islam.

Miller taught that these three entities would rally all nations to Armageddon, a battle that would involve religious as well as political strife. He believed that the battle would be fought mainly in the United States. At the climax of this struggle Christ would come, vanquish His enemies, and separate the wicked from the just. As for the last power of Daniel 11, Miller believed it represented Napoleon Bonaparte.²

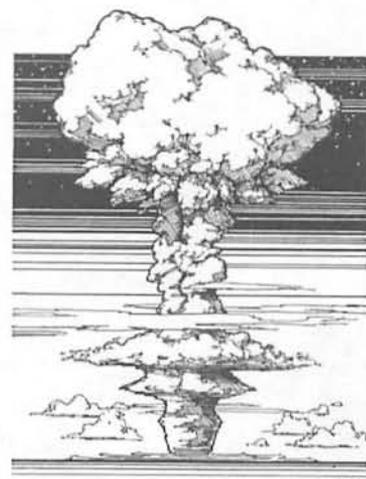
Not all the Millerites agreed with Miller’s interpretation. Josiah Litch, one of Miller’s chief lieutenants, was one of

those. Litch believed that at the Second Coming the righteous would be taken to the sea of glass (not heaven). There Christ would organize His kingdom. After the Second Coming the plagues would fall on the wicked.

Under the sixth plague, Litch said, the Euphrates would literally dry up to prepare the way for “the kings of the east.” Following this, the three “unclean spirits” (Islam the dragon, papacy the beast, and infidelity the false prophet) would gather the literal kings of the earth in Palestine to fight Christ in the battle of Armageddon. The battle would be fought under the seventh vial and would result in the wicked being driven out of Jerusalem by Christ and His saints. As for “the king of the north” of Daniel 11, Litch agreed with Miller that he was Napoleon Bonaparte.

Early Adventist Views

When the Seventh-day Adventist Church emerged out of the Millerite disappointment of 1844, Adventists did



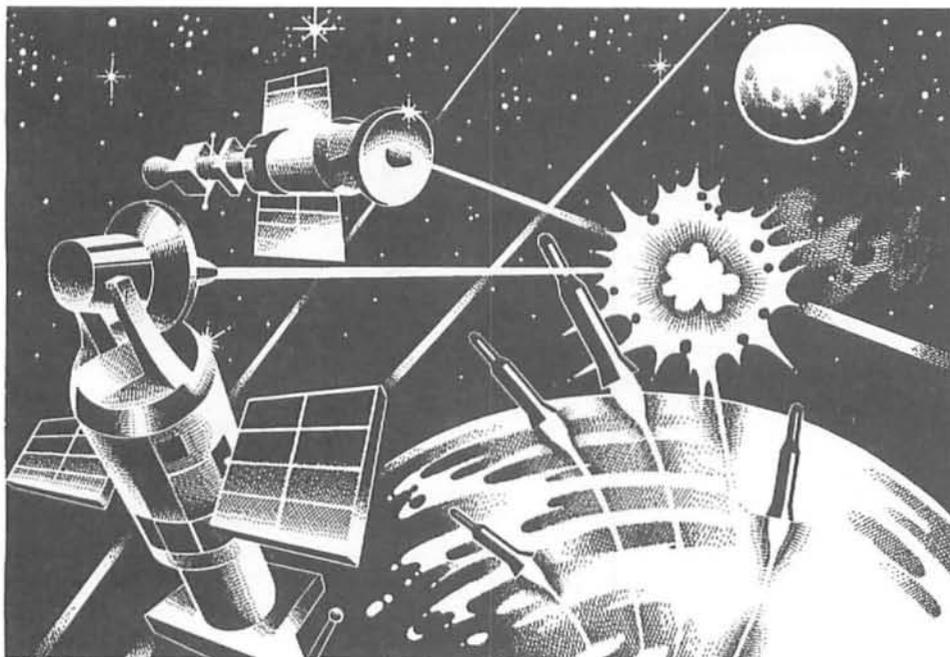
Armageddon:

Changing Views on the Final Battle

by
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not consider Armageddon and the king of the north as vital issues. However, the time for the plagues was the subject of earnest study and discussion. Thus, early in 1846, probably because of the visions of Ellen Harmon (later White), Adventists considered the plagues as future but pre-Advent events. This interpretation, different from that of both Miller and Litch, has remained standard with Seventh-day Adventists ever since.

But on Armageddon different views prevailed. As early as 1847, Joseph Bates taught that the future “mighty struggle [was] about restoring and keeping the seventh day Sabbath.”³ In 1848 the rise of Spiritualism impacted



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Adventist interpretations. A year later Ellen White was shown in vision that Spiritualism was of satanic origin. In 1852, George W. Holt identified Spiritualism as the force that would gather the kings of the earth to the battle of the great day of God Almighty.⁴

But the question arose: If the spirits of devils are now fulfilling the events of the sixth plague, how can the plagues be future? Uriah Smith answered that the present work of Spiritualism was preparatory. Before the spirits could have such absolute control over the wicked as to induce them to fight against God, they must first win their way among the nations, and this they were presently doing.⁵

In 1853 Otis Nichol, one of the early pioneers, identified the papacy as the power of Daniel 11:45.⁶ This continued to be the Adventist interpretation for almost two decades.

Virtually all our pioneers held that Armageddon was the culminating clash between the forces of good and evil over the Sabbath question. At the climax of the battle, Christ would intervene and rescue His beleaguered people.

This view, however, underwent a gradual shift in 1857, with Uriah Smith interpreting the Euphrates to be the country through which that river flows; that is, the Turkish Empire. Smith did admit that this view "will not help" many.⁷ This interpretation laid the groundwork for believing that under the sixth plague the nations would assemble for the final battle in Palestine.

In 1862 Smith was teaching a Sabbath school class in the Battle Creek church. James White was a member of this class. The lessons studied were from the book of Revelation. White, editor of the *Review* at the time, reported on the

class discussions in his magazine, saying that "all . . . [came] to almost the same conclusion on almost every point."⁸ Soon after this, White wrote in the *Review* a series of verse-by-verse comments on Revelation. As time went on, the comments became sketchy due to White's heavy responsibilities and health problems. In October 1862, he turned over the series to Smith.

The New View of the King of the North

Smith completed the series in 1865, and two years later published them as a book, *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Revelation*. So popular was the book that he took up similar work on Daniel. He completed the Daniel series in the *Review* by mid-1871, and later published them as a book.

Until November 1867 Smith held the generally accepted Adventist interpretation that papacy was the king of the north.⁹

But in an editorial published that month, he began to waver and stated that the king of the north could be either the papacy or Turkey. This ambivalence manifested itself again in March 1871 in his commentary on Daniel 11:40-45. However, a few weeks later, commenting on Daniel 12:1, he concluded that Turkey was the king of the north.

By 1873 Smith held that the papacy would never again play a significant role in earthly affairs.¹⁰ The absorption of the Vatican state into Italy and the "moribund" condition of Turkey led him to this decision. From then on, he began to "look for significant events" in the Middle East as fulfillment of Daniel 11. Before long he began to predict that Turkey's end was imminent; and with Turkey's demise would come the "standing up" of Michael (Daniel 12:1). That would mean the close of probation, to be followed by the second coming of Christ.¹¹

Smith's views and predictions concerning Turkey distressed James White. Having gone through the disappointment of 1844, he was cautious about making detailed forecasts based on unfulfilled prophecies. Repeatedly he cautioned Adventists to be careful.¹² In 1877 Russia declared war on Turkey, that was considered the "sick man of the east." In June 1878 Smith wrote that "we have reached the preliminary movements

of the great battle of Armageddon."¹³ This was too much for White. The clash between the two occurred during the camp meeting preceding the 1878 General Conference session.

Smith told the camp meeting audience that the Russian-Turkish war then in progress would develop into the long-expected Armageddon. When Smith finished his discourse, James White spoke for 70 minutes rebutting Smith's view. White argued that if Daniel 2, 7, and 8 are parallel prophecies, ending in the destruction of pagan-papal Rome, and the first part of Daniel 11 recapitulates chapters 2, 7, and 8, then the last power of Daniel 11 must also be pagan-papal Rome, not Turkey.

White published his rebuttal in the *Review*, October 3, 1878, under the title "Where Are We?" It was to have been "continued," but it was not. William C. White related later that a day or two after his father's rebuttal was published, his mother was shown in vision that her husband had erred in disagreeing publicly with Smith. She counseled her husband on the matter. James accepted her rebuke as from God and discontinued his articles.¹⁴ This did not mean, however, that Ellen White approved Smith's position, but only she disapproved the public disagreement on this issue expressed by James White.

Smith's Views Become Ascendant

James White died in 1881. The same year Smith's books *Daniel and the Revelation* were published as one volume. Smith's view of Armageddon and the king of the north, with certain modifications, became the denomination's accepted teaching until 1952.

Smith died in 1903. A little later George I. Butler, a former General Conference president, advanced the idea that Armageddon would be a battle of the east against the west. His reason? Japan's victory in the Russian-Japanese War of 1904-1905. This view, however, was not very popular until the 1920s.

View from World War I to 1923

During World War I and for several years after, the spiritual nature of Armageddon was almost completely eclipsed by an emphasis on a military

engagement in Palestine. Many statesmen and political analysts referred to the war as Armageddon. At first Adventists rejected such identification for the simple reason that the plagues had not begun to fall and this could not happen until Turkey came to its end.

However, when it appeared late in 1914 that Turkey's entrance into the war was imminent, and British Prime Minister Lord Asquith declared that Turkey had rung her own death knell, some Adventists began to preach that the war would develop into Armageddon. Arthur G. Daniels, then president of the General Conference, went so far as to predict that the end of the war would see the demise of Turkey.¹⁵

Events of the latter half of 1917 made it seem that these predictions would come to pass very soon. The war was going badly for the Turks and a battle was shaping up around Jerusalem. There were rumors that the Turks planned to move their capital from Constantinople to Jerusalem. The intense expectancy of some Adventists that the Lord's coming was just around the corner was evident in our publications of the time.¹⁶

But on December 9, 1917, the British forces took Jerusalem without a shot, and it became apparent that the Turk was not going to set up the "tabernacles of his palace between the seas in the glorious holy mountain."

The 1919 Bible Conference

In 1918 the war came to an end. But hostilities soon broke out between Turkey, Greece, and some of the Allies. It appeared that the "sick man of the east" was in his death throes, but Turkey fought on. In the shadow of these events, the General Conference convened the 1919 Bible Conference in Takoma Park, Maryland. Although other important matters were discussed, the so-called Eastern Question was the overriding issue. As one participant, H. Camden Lacey, a Bible teacher at Columbia Union College, put it: "[The interpretation of] Daniel 11 is the biggest thing among us at the present time." Most of those who spoke at the conference

favored the view that the papacy was "the king of the north." The General Conference president, however, was convinced that Greeks would still defeat Turkey, and was able to persuade those present to maintain the current view. The church held that view for many years.

Interpretations in Disarray

In October 1922 the Ottoman Empire collapsed, and out of its ashes arose a vigorous and defiant Turkish Republic, which fought on to victory and in 1923 dictated the terms of the Treaty of Lausanne to the humiliated allies. Adventists were chagrined. But worse was to come. In March 1924 Turkey abolished the caliphate. Henceforth she no longer claimed to be the spiritual leader of Islam. In spite of this, most Adventists continued to cling to the view that Turkey was to play a role in the prophetic fulfillment of Revelation 16:12. After all, she still controlled the headwaters of the Euphrates!

These disconcerting reversals led some Adventists to question the church's traditional interpretation of Armageddon and the king of the north. As they studied the writings of Ellen White, they came to the conclusion that Armageddon is a battle between Christ and Satan and their followers over spiritual issues, and that this battle was closely related to Christ's second coming. Most Adventists, however, continued to hold the military view, but now, due to tensions brought on by the rise of Japan as a naval power and the spread of Russian Communism there was a turning to Butler's East-versus-West interpretation.¹⁷

Moreover, World War II defined the lines of cleavage between world powers as not East versus West, but Axis versus Allies. This had its effect on prophetic interpretation, as Adventists began to see Armageddon as a conflict not between world powers, but between Christ and Satan. Eventually some excluded a military conflagration and stressed a spiritual struggle between Christ and Satan and their followers. Although tensions marked the debate between

those who held these opposing views, gradually the "spiritual," or "new view" gained ascendancy, with some modifications, as was evident at the 1952 Bible Conference.¹⁸ The modification stressed that while the battle was between Christ and Satan, Armageddon included physical aspects as well.

While the 1919 Bible conference articulated one view, the 1952 conference focused on the other. These conferences were significant landmarks in defining the Adventist position. For the next 25 years most Adventists looked at Armageddon as the final battle between Christ and Satan, some stressing the physical, others the spiritual dimensions of the conflict. Those who stressed the physical aspect of Armageddon usually saw a global military struggle in Palestine prior to or at the Second Coming, with Christ intervening to bring about a victory for the forces of righteousness. Those who stressed the spiritual dimension saw the ultimate vindication of Christ over the wicked ones.

The Present View

Since about 1975 fewer and fewer Adventists have emphasized the military interpretation, and more and more have stressed the view that the conflict is over the final resolution of the Sabbath-Sunday question—a matter of human allegiance to God or to the Enemy.¹⁹ We have come full circle. But there are exceptions. Because of current tensions in the Middle East some have recently reverted to making predictions that

Armageddon will involve a colossal military conflict in that region of the world.

We as students of prophecy have done well whenever we have been careful exegetes of Bible prophecy and followed the counsels of Ellen White. But we have done less admirably when we have ventured into becoming prophets.

If we can learn from our history, we can continue to proclaim with confidence the imminence and literalness of our Lord's return, while avoiding our past interpretative mistakes on secondary issues. Jesus Himself said that one of the main purposes of prophecy was confirmatory—assuring His followers that human history was steadily moving toward its culmination (see John 14:28, 29). James White's caution, uttered over a century ago, is still relevant: "We should tread lightly, and take positions carefully," when it comes to unfulfilled prophecy.²⁰ □

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