

Stamped Interpretation

A Reply to Samuele Bacchiocchi, "Islam and the Papacy in Prophecy" (1)
Kevin D. Paulson ++ Published on GreatControversy.org ++ 2 August 2002

Yet another challenge is being posed to Adventist prophetic interpretation -- and from what many would consider an unlikely source.

Samuele Bacchiocchi, noted Adventist scholar and author of various books on current denominational issues, now claims he is convinced that the Antichrist of Bible prophecy includes Islam as well as the Roman papacy, and that -- in his view -- the stated characteristics of Daniel's little-horn power more accurately reflect Islam than the papacy, specifically with regard to the uprooting of the three horns (Dan. 7:8, 24) and the "time and times and the dividing of time" (Dan. 7:25) during which this power would rule (2).

While he insists that he still holds the papacy to comprise the prophesied Antichrist, at least in part, he raises serious doubts about the veracity of 538 as the starting point for the 1,260-day prophecy (3). He likewise claims that Adventism's historic view regarding the uprooting of the three horns in Daniel 7:8, 24 is historically inaccurate (4). And he now views the 1,260-day prophecy itself as an inexact illustrative device, calling to mind past periods of sacred history but not necessarily foretelling a future time of precisely-fulfilled dates (5).

Perhaps most seriously of all, when confronted by a respondent with Ellen White's clear endorsement of Adventism's historic dates for the 1,260-year prophecy (6), Bacchiocchi sought to weaken this fact by claiming Sister White was "committed to search for truth and recognized her limitations" (7).

Other than the 2,300-day prophecy of Daniel 8:14, no time prophecy is more crucial to the identity and purpose of the Seventh-day Adventist Church than the 1,260 years of papal supremacy (Dan. 7:25; 12:7; Rev. 11:2, 3; 12:6, 14; 13:5). Any disputing of the integrity of this prophecy is thus extremely serious for any Adventist to contemplate. For Bacchiocchi to compare Ellen White's alleged "limitations" in understanding this prophecy to peripheral changes in the 1911 Great Controversy or similar discrepancies between the four New Testament Gospels -- as he did in defending his views to one inquirer (8) -- is to grossly understate the Biblical significance and vital role of this prophecy.

Recent decades have witnessed a sharp increase in such challenges, and as the final events draw nearer we can be sure such challenges will increase even more. And if nothing else, they offer yet another opportunity to demonstrate the enduring soundness and surety of the prophetic faith we cherish.

It saddens me to trace these lines, because I count Sam Bacchiocchi as a friend and productive scholar in the church. But the evidence of Inspiration and history must be laid

out, carefully studied, and followed wherever it leads. Each of us must ever be willing to bring our ideas to the counsel of God for correction. It is my prayer that in the end, Brother Bacchiocchi will appreciate the candor and clarity of what follows.

Those who might wish further historical and contemporary evidence for the 1,260-year prophecy as historically believed by Adventists, may wish to consult another article by the present author, titled, "The Prophecy Standeth Sure," written to mark the 200th anniversary of the captivity of Pope Pius VI in 1798 (9).

Stamped by Events

Throughout the twentieth century, faithful Adventists steadfastly resisted the pressure of circumstances and events to alter our historic view of the Antichrist of Bible prophecy. Fascism, Communism, feminism, secular humanism -- these and other attractive targets have lured countless conservative Protestants away from the Reformers' identification of the papacy as the Biblical Antichrist.

For the most part, Seventh-day Adventists have kept clear of such diversions, recognizing that while numerous crises and difficulties may arise, they offer no ground to question the detailed forecast of end-time events provided by Scripture and the Spirit of Prophecy. At the bottom line, one might well ask why it is necessary to tamper with the prophecies in order to find compelling reasons for condemning such anti-Christian belief systems as Communism or humanism! Many challenges may indeed face Christians on the road to the final events, but the details God has provided regarding the key players in Earth's last drama need not be altered in order to face such challenges. Whatever we may meet along the way, we know through prophecy the forces we will meet at the end. God's servant has written, under divine inspiration, that the Christian "has a chart pointing out every waymark on the heavenward journey, and he ought not to guess at anything" (10).

Conditional prophecies do exist, but the Bible is clear that only spiritual change -- not a change of outward circumstances -- makes prophecy conditional. For example, Jonah's prophecy that Nineveh would be overthrown in forty days was not conditional on what seemed outwardly or circumstantially possible, only on the spiritual response of those to whom the message was delivered.

Sadly, Bacchiocchi's new understanding of the Antichrist prophecies seems less the product of careful Bible or historical study than an all-too-obvious reaction to the recent focus on Islamic terrorism in the wake of September 11. Bacchiocchi frankly admits this. In his newsletter he writes, "In good conscience I cannot ignore the Biblical implications of the current war on terrorism" (11). Regarding the Adventist pioneers and their understanding of the Antichrist prophecies, he claims:

"It is unfortunate that our Adventist pioneers did not consider the prophetic role of Islam, as the counterpart of the papal Antichrist. Let us not blame them for this shortsightedness. After all, they lived before

September 11 at a time when the Muslim power (Ottoman Empire) was declining" (12).

In short, Bacchiocchi's views represent a clear case of stamped prophetic interpretation. Various others, mostly on the fringes of modern Adventism, have likewise ventured to tamper with our historic prophetic understandings, often in reaction to world events they too thought significant. Few, however, have possessed the credibility or scholarly reputation of Samuele Bacchiocchi. To his credit, he describes his conclusions on this issue as "tentative" (13) and admits it would be "presumptuous to claim that this newsletter offers comprehensive answers" to the questions he raises (14). We can only pray that the weight of inspired and historical evidence will cause him to withdraw and disavow this case of misbegotten creativity.

The Uprooted Three Horns and 538

Bacchiocchi offers two reasons why he disputes our historic understanding of the 1,260-day prophecy:

"The first problem is the questionable significance of 538. We noted earlier that Justinian's triumph over the Ostrogoths in 538 was short-lived, because under their new leader, Totila, the Ostrogoths quickly captured most of their lost territories. In other words, this event did not significantly boost the power of the Papacy, which still faced constant harassment from various rulers for centuries to come.

"The second problem with the traditional interpretation is its failure to account for the basic meaning of this prophetic period, The persecution and protection of the church did not begin in 538, nor did it end in 1798. These are realities that have characterized the whole history of God's church throughout the centuries. Some of the most bloody persecutions by Roman emperors occurred during the first four centuries" (15).

Unfortunately for his case, Bacchiocchi offers no historical evidence for his claim that the Ostrogoths were not fully overcome by Justinian. By contrast, very strong evidence from recent historians upholds the historic Adventist belief that the Heruli, the Vandals, and the Ostrogoths were indeed the three tribes uprooted in order to smooth the way for the emergency of the medieval papacy.

Robert Browning, in his recent book Justinian and Theodora, describes in depth the overthrow of the Heruli with the conquest of Odoacer's kingdom in Italy in 479 A.D. (16). Browning then writes of what happened in 534, in the struggle between Justinian's general Belisarius and the Vandals:

"After a swift reconnaissance, Belisarius attacked the Vandal camp. Gelimer did not attempt to defend it, but fled westward into Numidia. The rest of his army followed their king's example, abandoning their families

and all their possessions. The Vandal force no longer existed. *Indeed, the Vandals as a people vanished from the face of the earth*" (17).

Browning later describes the re-taking of Rome from the Ostrogoths in the spring of 538 (18), and states that shortly thereafter, "*the Ostrogothic kingdom had ceased to exist*" (19).

Another historian describes the aftermath of this re-conquest, and its implications for both the papacy and the Ostrogoths:

"The Church, with the shadow of the ancient authority behind it, was the only symbol left of imperial Rome, and its bishop, the Pope, was the city's only recourse for leadership and protection. . . .

"The Roman Empire in Europe would be replaced by the spiritual empire, which came to be temporal as well, whose reigning seigneur was the bishop of Rome.

"As for the Ostrogoths, with the defeat and dethronement of their leader and the destruction of their army, they passed out of Italian history; *in fact, out of history altogether*" (20).

Bacchiocchi's claim that "none of these three Germanic tribes were ever really eradicated" (21), is therefore strikingly at odds with the above assertions from recent, well-publicized historians with no connection whatsoever to Adventism.

Bacchiocchi insists that Islam better fits the claim of having uprooted three kingdoms on its path to power, noting that Islam subdued Egypt, Syria, and Palestine in its rampage across the Middle East (22). But Bacchiocchi fails to consider that these three territories were not even among the ten horns described earlier by Daniel as emerging out of the disintegrating Roman Empire. Daniel is crystal clear that the three horns subdued by the little horn were among the original ten which emerged from the Roman Empire:

"There came up among them another little horn, before whom there were three of the first horns plucked up by the roots" (Dan. 7:8).

"By the roots" implies total destruction, which is exactly what the above historians say happened, particularly to the Vandals and the Ostrogoths. And the text is clear that these three were among the ten horns which emerged after Rome fell. How do Egypt, Syria, and Palestine fit in here? They were not among the powers that conquered imperial Rome. What is more, if these three former Roman provinces were the three horns uprooted by the little horn (which Bacchiocchi thinks is Islam), who were the other seven? Just how much of this prophecy is he wishing to reinterpret? He does not explain.

The authenticity of 1798 as the close of this prophetic period is likewise affirmed by secular history. In its article on Pope Pius VI, the latest edition of the Encyclopedia Americana writes:

"In 1798 the French occupied Rome and established a republic. The pope fled and, though extremely ill, was obliged to move to France. He died in Valence, France, on the night of August 28-29, 1799" (23).

Malachi Martin's book The Keys of This Blood describes one of the goals of the Papacy of Pope John Paul II:

"From the first moments of his pontificate, it was John Paul II's purpose to free the Papacy from the straitjacket of inactivity in world affairs imposed on it by the secular powers for 200 years" (24).

Martin is obviously tracing this 200-year period back to the approximate time of the Pope's captivity at Napoleon's hands in 1798.

Bacchiocchi is certainly correct when he speaks of how the long struggle for papal ascendancy was often thwarted and set back by competing rulers and states (25). This is precisely why prophecy describes this power as a *little* horn rather than a big one, at least at the time of its emergence. But this in no way obscures the fact that during the century preceding 538, the power of imperial Rome was gradually replaced by that of papal Rome, even though the process was arduous and took some centuries thereafter to complete. One of the historians cited above makes this point clearly:

"With the breakup of the Roman bureaucracy the structure of daily life was threatened with disintegration. The only trace left of the Roman organism was the Catholic Church, and the only men with administrative experience were the bishops" (26).

Historian Will Durant, in Caesar and Christ, makes a similar observation:

"When Christianity conquered Rome the ecclesiastical structure of the pagan church, the title and vestments of the *pontifex maximus*, the worship of the Great Mother and a multitude of comforting divinities, the sense of supersensible presences everywhere, the joy or solemnity of old festivals, and the pageantry of immemorial ceremony, passed like maternal blood into the new religion, and captive Rome captured her conqueror. The reins and skills of government were handed down by a dying empire to a virile papacy; the lost power of the broken sword was won by the magic of the consoling word; the armies of the state were replaced by the missionaries of the Church moving in all directions along the Roman roads; and the revolted provinces, accepting Christianity, again acknowledged the sovereignty of Rome" (27).

Likewise, the century preceding 1798 saw the gradual erosion of papal power in Europe through secularism and the Enlightenment, culminating in the French Revolution and the pope's exile at Napoleon's hands in 1798. In other words, the events preceding and surrounding 538 and 1798 are just as important as the specific events themselves. And no reputable historian can possibly deny the successive emergence and disintegration of papal power which took place at the start and conclusion of this time period.

We have seen Bacchiocchi's claim that the persecution of Christians by pagan Rome was a very bloody affair, implying that these acts were every bit as cruel as what the papacy later did. Will Durant offers a very different observation:

"Compared with the persecution of heresy in Europe from 1227 to 1492, the persecution of Christians by Romans in the first three centuries after Christ was a mild and humane procedure" (28).

Writing of the persecution of French Huguenots in 1685 under King Louis XIV, Durant makes a similar, equally amazing comparison:

"This holy terror of 1685 . . . was far worse than the Revolutionary terror of 1793" (29).

Thus we see again how historians with no connection to Adventism have clarified that what the papacy did during its years of supremacy was significantly worse than what other powers have done at different times.

Spiritualizing the Time

Bacchiocchi doesn't try to find a similar period of 1,260 days or years which he thinks fits Islam as well or better than the years given for papal supremacy. Instead, he tries to make the time period symbolic in a more obtuse, spiritualized manner. Comparing this time period to the three and a half years of famine during which Elijah was exiled from Israel, as well as the same period of time for Jesus' earthly ministry, Bacchiocchi writes:

"This was a period in which the Evil One tried to destroy Christ, but he did not succeed before God's protection was over Him. The attacks against Christ lasted only three and a half years. Why? Because half a week stands for incompleteness, limitation. The forces of evil were limited by God and could not accomplish the complete destruction of Christ and His work" (30).

This attempt to spiritualize the time prophecies of Scripture into inexact illustrative devices has been tried before. Robert Brinsmead, in his infamous Judged by the Gospel, uses this approach in seeking to discredit the precision with which Adventists have historically calculated the time prophecies.

"To try to read the mysterious apocalyptic numbers as if they were mathematical predictions to be fitted into an exact timetable is to miss the artistic spirit of the literature. It is as clumsy and unimaginative as a literal interpretation of a love poem. . . .

"By such ingenious imagery and apocalyptic manipulation of numbers (forty-two months, 1,260 days), John beautifully shows that the situation of the church is like that of both Israel and Elijah in the desert. Let sanctified imagination grasp these two analogies from the Old Testament,

and we will have a rich source of understanding on the present life of faith. Used in this way, apocalyptic does not tickle idle curiosity, but it builds character -- faith, hope, and patient endurance. Instead of using our calculators when we encounter these mysterious numbers, we should rather read our sacred history to determine which event the author is alluding to" (31).

The foolishness of this argument is obvious to anyone who closely examines it, especially when one notices how earlier Brinsmead tries to compare the "forty-two months" of Revelation to Israel's 40-year wilderness wandering (32). Not only does he not explain where he gets the extra two years, but he offers no explanations as to why 42 months have suddenly become a symbol for 40 years! How, in his reckoning, do months suddenly become symbols of years? Moreover, if the Bible didn't intend these periods to be understood with exactness, why are they stated so exactly in the passages where we find them? Not only is this true for the "thousand two hundred and threescore days" (Rev. 11:3; 12:6), but also for the "thousand two hundred and ninety days" (Dan. 12:11), and the "thousand three hundred and five and thirty days" (verse 12). If the Bible didn't mean for us to understand these numbers with precise accuracy, why are they stated so precisely?

Coming from Brinsmead, such an argument may not be surprising. But from Bacchiocchi it is most disheartening. Such an approach to the time prophecies of Scripture not only destroys faith in God's ability to predict the future with clarity; it places in doubt every other such prophecy, including the 2,300 days of Daniel 8:14. Bacchiocchi has started down a most dangerous road, one that others have ignominiously traveled before him.

Inspired Affirmation

The 1,260-year forecast of papal supremacy were not simply an interpretive invention of Uriah Smith or the other Adventist pioneers. It was endorsed by the one Adventist pioneer who was divinely inspired -- Ellen G. White. In her own words:

"In the sixth century the papacy had become firmly established. Its seat of power was fixed in the imperial city, and the bishop of Rome was declared to be the head over the entire church. Paganism had given place to the papacy. The dragon had given to the beast 'his power, and his seat, and great authority.' Revelation 13:2. And now began the 1260 years of papal oppression foretold in the prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation. Daniel 7:25; Revelation 13:5-7. . . . For hundreds of years the church of Christ found refuge in seclusion and obscurity. Thus says the prophet, 'The woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and three-score days.' Revelation 12:6" (33).

"The periods here mentioned -- 'forty and two months,' and a 'thousand two hundred and threescore days'-- are the same, alike representing the time in

which the church of Christ was to suffer oppression from Rome. The 1,260 years of papal supremacy began in A.D. 538, and would therefore terminate in 1798. At that time a French army entered Rome and made the pope a prisoner, and he died in exile. Though a new pope was soon afterward elected, the papal hierarchy has never since been able to wield the power which it before possessed" (34).

"In the Saviour's conversation with His disciples upon Olivet, after describing the long period of trial for the church -- the 1,260 years of papal persecution, concerning which He had promised that the tribulation should be shortened -- He thus mentioned certain events to precede His coming, and fixed the time when the first of these (signs) should be witnessed: 'In those days, after that tribulation, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light' Mark 13:24. The 1,260 days, or years, terminated in 1798. A quarter of a century earlier, persecution had almost wholly ceased" (35).

One is interested how she says, "*almost* wholly ceased." It wasn't until 1787 that the French king Louis XVI finally granted equal rights and toleration to the French Huguenots, after over a century of persecution (36). So while, as Ellen White says, persecution had *almost* wholly ceased in the years before 1798, a semblance of papal authority remained intact in some places, almost to the end of this prophetic period.

The above statements make it obvious that this time prophecy is central to the identity and place in history given to the Seventh-day Adventist Church by God Himself. It is therefore no small matter to call it into question. Ellen White's endorsement of this prophecy most assuredly cannot be placed in the same category as the various small discrepancies alluded to by Bacchiocchi in his letter to a recent respondent (37). Such issues as how many of Jacob's family came out of Egypt (Gen. 46:27; Acts 7:14), or such historical details as which bell tolled for the St. Bartholomew Massacre (38), cannot possibly compare to the authenticity of the 1,260-years of papal supremacy. It is this time prophecy, and the persecution of the saints which then took place, which in Daniel 7 precedes the investigative judgment beginning in 1844 (Dan. 7:8-14; 25-26). To tamper with one of these prophecies is to invariably tamper with the other. Not only the doctrinal authority of Ellen White, but of Adventism's entire prophetic structure, is at stake in this discussion.

Conclusion

Samuele Bacchiocchi has contributed many years of fine scholarship to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. His books defending the Sabbath, the non-immortality of the soul, and our historic positions on such issues as alcohol, adornment, and rock music, have been a great blessing to Adventists throughout the world. But by seeking to alter our historic stand regarding the Antichrist prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, he has stepped into theological quicksand. His position contradicts the clear statements of Inspiration, as well as the plainly-documented facts of history.

We cannot force the Bible, or the Spirit of Prophecy writings, to speak to issues which happen to be on our minds at a given moment. Various global events and personalities may seem overwhelming in their present significance, but God doesn't necessarily agree. In Scripture He warns us, "My thoughts are not your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8). In another criticism of Adventist prophetic interpretation, Brinsmead states:

"Thoughtful people of today listen to traditional Adventist expositions and wonder why Bible prophecy says so much about the French Revolution (Rev. 11) and so little about the great Communist Revolution of the twentieth century" (39).

But the events that matter to us may not be the ones that matter to God. Issues and ideologies may come and go, but God's words -- about the past as well as the future -- stay constant.

Bacchiocchi spends considerable time in his recent newsletter writing against the various teachings of Islam (40). Some of his claims may be more accurate than others -- the question, for example, of whether Allah is or is not the God of Scripture may be arguable by those with greater expertise than I in the study of Islamic teachings. But at the bottom line, the Antichrist prophecies of Scripture need not be reinterpreted in order to refute the errors of Islam, any more than such reinterpretation is necessary in order to refute Fascism, Communism, or secular humanism.

We cannot be sure what exact role will be played in the last days by the various non-Christian religions of the world, such as Islam. But we know that somehow their role will be subordinate to that of the prophetic threefold union: Catholicism, apostate Protestantism, and spiritualism (Rev. 16:14) (41). Many likewise wondered for decades what role Communism and the Soviet Union would play in the final events. Today the Berlin Wall is a million souvenirs, while the papacy continues to bestride the earth. One way or the other, the various religious and political powers of earth will come together. And thanks to inspired predictions, we know already who the key players will be.

Destructive belief systems and thought patterns will likely abound in our world till the end comes. All of these will have to be met and opposed on the basis of God's Word. But our prophetic scenario need not -- indeed, cannot -- be changed to accomplish this. Our study of prophecy cannot be stampeded by circumstances or events. Rather, the Bible's predictive segments must remain that "more sure word," to which we must ever "take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place" (II Peter 1:19).

We see further proof of the following inspired statements written so long ago:

"None but those who have fortified the mind with the truths of the Bible will stand through the last great conflict" (42).

"Men may get up scheme after scheme, and the enemy will seek to seduce souls from the truth, but all who believe that the Lord has spoken

through Sister White, and has given her a message, will be safe from the many delusions that will come in these last days" (43).

ENDNOTES

1. Samuele Bacchiocchi, "Islam and the Papacy in Prophecy," *Endtime Issues No. 86*, July 6, 2002.
2. *Ibid*, pp. 22-23; 25-27.
3. *Ibid*, pp. 22-23.
4. *Ibid*.
5. *Ibid*, pp. 25-27.
6. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 54, 266, 306.
7. Bacchiocchi, letter to Kevin Mortensen (via e-mail), July 11, 2002.
8. *Ibid*.
9. Kevin D. Paulson, "The Prophecy Standeth Sure," *Our Firm Foundation*, February 1998, pp. 4-7 (available on the Internet at www.hopeint.org).
10. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 598.
11. Bacchiocchi, *Endtime Issues Newsletter #86 "Islam and the Papacy in Prophecy,"* p. 1.
12. *Ibid*, p. 27.
13. *Ibid*.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
16. Robert Browning, *Justinian and Theodora* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1987), pp. 24-25.
17. *Ibid*, p. 98 (*italics supplied*).
18. *Ibid*, p. 111.
19. *Ibid*, p. 114 (*italics supplied*).
20. Katharine Scherman, *The Birth of France: Warriors, Bishops, and Long-haired Kings*, (New York: Random House, 1987), pp. 164-165 (*italics supplied*).
21. Bacchiocchi, *Endtime Issues Newsletter #86, "Islam and the Papacy in Prophecy,"* p. 22.
22. *Ibid*, pp. 22, 23.
23. "Pius VI," *Encyclopedia Americana*, vol. 22 (Danbury, CT: Grolier Inc, 2001), p. 160.
24. Malachi Martin, *The Keys of This Blood: The Struggle for World Dominion Between Pope John Paul II, Mikhail Gorbachev, and the Capitalist West* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), front inside flap.
25. *Ibid*, p. 23.
26. Scherman, *The Birth of France*, p. 25.
27. Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ* (New York: MJF Books, 1944), pp. 671-672.
28. _____, *The Age of Faith*, (New York: MJF Books, 1950), p. 784.
29. Will & Ariel Durant, *The Age of Louis XIV*, (New York: MJF Books, 1963), p. 73.
30. Bacchiocchi, *Endtime Issues Newsletter #86, "Islam and the Papacy in Prophecy,"* p. 27.
31. Robert D. Brinsmead, *Judged by the Gospel: A Review of Adventism* (Fallbrook, CA: Verdict Publications, 1980), p. 102.
32. *Ibid*.

33. White, The Great Controversy, p. 54.
34. Ibid, p. 266.
35. Ibid, p. 306.
36. Simon Schama, Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), p. 257.
37. Bacchiocchi, letter to Kevin Mortensen (via e-mail), July 11, 2002.
38. See Arthur L. White, Ellen G. White: The Later Elmshaven Years, 1905-1915 (Washington, D.C: Review and Herald Publishing Assn, 1982), pp. 330-332.
39. Brinsmead, Judged by the Gospel, p. 301.
40. Bacchiocchi, endtime Issues Newsletter #86, "Islam and the Papacy in Prophecy," pp. 9-17.
41. White, Great Controversy, p. 588; Testimonies, vol. 5, p. 451.
42. _____, Great Controversy, pp. 593-594.
43. _____, Selected Messages, vol. 3, pp. 83-84.