

TEMPORAL DISCREPENCIES  
IN THE ADVENTIST READING OF REV 11:1-13:  
A BRIEF CORRECTION

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Textual indications frame the temporal sequences of many visions in Revelation—a fact commonly appreciated by Adventists, who carefully conform their historicist interpretations to these details. For example, Adventists calculate the length of the “42 months” in Rev 13:5 (equivalent to 1,260 prophetic days; cf. Dan 7:25; Rev 12:6,14) as extending over a period of 1,260 years: from 538-1798 CE. Events in both the first and last years of that period (the defeat of the Ostrogoths in 538 CE, and the capture of Rome by Berthier in 1798 CE) purportedly fulfill the demands of the prophecy with precision. Adventists show like rigor when identifying the boundaries of other “time prophecies” (e.g. 2,300 days in Dan 8:14; 70 weeks in Dan 9).

However, classical Adventist interpreters have exercised an uncharacteristic liberality when treating the events described in Rev 11:1-13 (which passage also references a 1,260 day period). So far from manifesting the same attention to detail (as in the above examples), their interpretation violates the explicit chronology of the text.

Rev 11:3 describes the length of time allotted “the two witnesses” to witness (i.e., testify), also referred to as “the days of their prophesying” (Rev 11:6): ““And I will grant my two witnesses authority to prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days, wearing sackcloth.”” Rev 11:7 then describes the events following this period: “Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them.” Consequently, the corpses of the witnesses lie dead in the streets “for three and a half days” (Rev 11:9). At the end of this second period, God restores their life and assumes them into heaven (Rev 11:11-12); judgment follows (Rev 11:13). (The seventh trumpet also follows, announcing the consummation of the Age: Rev 11:15-19.)

In *The Great Controversy* (1911), White comments on each element of the prophecy, beginning with the 1,260 days. Following her contemporaries, she aligns this period with the one referenced in Rev 13:5:

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 1260 years of papal supremacy began in A.D. 538, and would therefore terminate in 1798. (GC 266)

She then identifies the two witnesses as “the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament” (GC 267), and the Beast in 11:7 as the revolutionary government of France (GC 273). Strangely, however, she assigns the “murder” of the two witnesses to a date *within* (or *towards* the conclusion of) the 1,260 days—not one immediately after them (as if the event terminates that period):

“When they shall have finished [are finishing] their testimony.” The period when the two witnesses were to prophesy clothed in sackcloth, ended in 1798. As they were approaching the termination of their work in obscurity, war was to be made upon them by the power represented as “the beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit.

This prophecy has received a most exact and striking fulfillment in the history of France. During the Revolution, in 1793...

...

The atheistical power that ruled in France... did wage such a war against God and His holy word as the world had never witnessed. The worship of the Deity was abolished by the National Assembly. Bibles were collected and publicly burned with every possible manifestation of scorn. (GC 268-269,273)

White’s citation of Rev 11:7 attempts to defend this interpretation, suggesting the words “are finishing” (in brackets) as a more fitting translation of the verb commonly rendered “have finished.” Unfortunately, this decision is unwarranted in the Greek text where John uses an Aorist verb (ὅταν τελέσωσιν [Aorist Act. Subj.: finished/ended] τὴν μαρτυρίαν αὐτῶν; 11:7), explaining that the Beast murders the witnesses “[lit.] when they finished their testimony” (placing the 1,260-day period strictly in the past). Chronologically then, the murder of the witnesses terminates (or immediately follows the termination of) the period of their prophetic activity; the prophecy’s fulfillment could scarcely occur at any point *during* the “days of their prophesying.”

Reason also demands this chronology, noting the impossibility of “prophesying” while lying slain in the streets of Jerusalem. If one permits the translation “when they [are finishing] their testimony,” the sentence still has the termination of their prophetic activities in view (which discontinuation logically occurs at their physical death, rendering even the alternative translation inconsequential). If White identifies the year 1798 as the conclusion of the 1,260-day period, the murder of the two witnesses properly occurs at (or immediately after) 1798.

Moreover, White's reading also obscures the timing of the resurrection of the two witnesses, described in 11:11. (The assumption of the two witnesses occurs *immediately* upon their resurrection in Rev 11:11-12.) Equating these events with the repealing of the anti-religious legislation, June 17, 1797 (cf. Smith 539), she notes:

It was in 1793 that the decrees which abolished the Christian religion and set aside the Bible passed the French Assembly. Three years and a half later a resolution rescinding these decrees, thus granting toleration to the Scriptures, was adopted by the same body. (GC 287)

In the Adventist reading, God recalls the prophets in 1797 ("three and a half years later")—too early to fulfill the 1,260 days. Thus, having hastened the martyrdom of the two witnesses to a time within the period of prophetic activity, White must now shorten the period entire. (In fact, no classical Adventist commentator addresses this discrepancy.)

Historicist interpretations of Daniel and Revelation hold chronological precision in particular esteem; ergo, Adventists regard October 22, 1844 as the precise fulfillment of Dan 8:14. However, no such accuracy is possible (or attempted) in Adventist treatments of Rev 11. Abiding by the interpretive standards applied to other passages, and identifying the 1,260 days in Rev 11:7 to the "period of Roman ascendancy," one must exclude the French Revolution as a possible fulfillment of the prophecy entire. White's ostensibly inspired endorsement of this reading cannot excuse its flaws.

#### Works Cited

Smith, Uriah, *The Prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation*, Hagerstown: Review and Herald (1972).

White, Ellen G. 1950. *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (1911). Nampa ID: Pacific Press.