

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Faculty Publications

3-29-2001

How Long, O Lord?: Wrestling with the Timing of the Advent

Jerry Moon

Andrews University, jmoon@andrews.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs>



Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), and the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Moon, Jerry, "How Long, O Lord?: Wrestling with the Timing of the Advent" (2001). *Faculty Publications*. 3588.

<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs/3588>

This Popular Press is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

“How Long, O Lord?”

Wrestling with the timing of the Advent

BY JERRY MOON

AS THE CLASS IN SEVENTH-DAY Adventist history concluded a discussion on the Adventist pioneers and Christ’s soon coming, a student of English as a second language excitedly waved his hand. “You must not mean *soon*,” he blurted out. “*Soon* means *near, right away*. That must not be the right word.”

How soon is *soon*? What justification do Adventists have for continuing to speak of the second coming as *soon*?

Of course, the problem didn’t begin with Adventists. Jesus explicitly warned that His coming would be *delayed* (Matt. 25:5), that the delay would tempt to unfaithfulness (Luke 12:45), and that attempts to specify the time of His coming would be futile (Matt. 24:36).

Seventh-day Adventists have always held that the Millerite Adventists were on solid ground in calculating the 2300-day prophecy from 457 B.C. to 1844.¹ The Millerite mistake was in assuming that the 2300 days extended to the Second Coming. After the disappointment, some Adventists set further dates for the Second Coming. But Ellen White was shown in 1850 that all such schemes would fail, and that “never again” would the Adventist message be based on a specific time.²

The church as a body accepted that counsel and has adhered to it, although individuals have periodically put forth unofficial speculations about the date of the Second Advent.³ There is a solid theological reason that no specific time period reaches to the Second Coming. An

organizing motif of Seventh-day Adventist theology is the great controversy theme; the concept that there is a cosmic struggle between Christ and Satan being played out on the stage of human history over the issue of God’s character and His law.⁴

This concept assures that evil will eventually be completely eradicated, but not until all the intelligent beings of the universe are convinced that God is indeed love, that His will and law are perfect, and that rebellion against Him constitutes a denial of ultimate truth and reality. Thus when sin and sinners are destroyed, all will know that in removing this cancer from the universe, God acted in love and in the best interests of all—both righteous and wicked.

In some sports a game lasts a specified period of time. But if the regular time expires with the score tied, the game goes into overtime, which continues until one team wins.

Adventists hold that at some point unknown to humans the game went into overtime, to be ended, not by the clock, but by the divine Victor, working through humans who are faithful to Him. This framework of belief has given rise to at least five Adventist approaches to understanding the apparent delay.

1. Perhaps the earliest is the study of the historical fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Adventists hold the conviction that an any-moment expectation of the Second Coming is not supported by Scripture. After listing some signs of His coming, Jesus specifically noted, “but the end is not yet” (Matt 24:6). Paul warned his readers that the second coming would not occur until after the career of



*The secret
of readiness
for Christ's
return
is the decision
to be faithful
this present
moment.*

the “man of lawlessness” (2 Thess. 2:3, NIV).

Daniel and Revelation mention several major prophecies, yet future, that would occur before the Second Coming. Some of these are revealed in sufficient clarity as to form the basis for a consensus of interpretation. Examples include the enforcement of the mark of the beast (Rev. 13:16, 17; 14:9-12), the loud cry of Revelation 18:1-4, and the seven last plagues of Revelation 15 and 16. Other prophecies, such as the king of the north in Daniel 11, the 144,000 of Revelation 7, and Armageddon in Revelation 16, have been more controversial. On these the church has not

taken an official position, although over time a general consensus has developed—sometimes through trial and error.

For example, during World War I, when a British army in Palestine was threatening a Turkish army encamped at Megiddo, Seventh-day

Adventists (with many other Christians) wondered if this could ignite the battle of Armageddon. F. M. Wilcox, then editor of the *Review*, “warned Adventist evangelists to be cautious” about such speculations. But some, in their zeal to be relevant, seemed unable to resist reading the

Bible through the lens of current headlines. But, those who predicted the battle of Armageddon and the defeat of the Ottoman Turks (thought to be the “king of the north”) found their views discredited when the war ended without the occurrence of either.⁵ During World War II, the specter of Armageddon was again raised, and some identified the Japanese with the “kings from the east” in Revelation 16:12.⁶ These experiences tended to increase support for the understanding that Armageddon represents a spiritual conflict, not a military one.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong in correlating prophecy with history. Fulfilled prophecy strengthens faith that God is in charge of history, that His purposes are being worked out, and that He will prevail in the end. But the headlines must be interpreted by Scripture, not vice versa.

2. In another approach some have attempted to resolve the tension between God’s perfect knowledge of the future and the human experience of delay by placing virtually the entire emphasis on the former. A favorite quotation is that “like the stars in the vast circuit of their appointed path, God’s purposes know no haste and no delay.”⁷ But the context focuses on specific time prophecies, particularly the 70 weeks of Daniel 9, which had a precisely dated fulfillment. Other prophecies are often conditional. Later in the same book Ellen White avers, “By giving the gospel to the world it is in our power to hasten our Lord’s return. We are not only to look for but to hasten the coming of the day of God. 2 Peter 3:12, margin.”⁸ God is more eager than we are to end the war between good and evil and halt the mayhem of sin—but not until the war is won. To end the war by an arbitrary cosmic deadline before the conflict is won would give the enemy the victory.

3. A third approach to the timing of the Second Coming is linked to the harvest motif of such scriptures as Mark 4:26-29 and Revelation 14:14-20. These passages indicate that the Second Coming will not

occur until the harvest is fully ripe. The ripening of the harvest refers to character development. Ellen White comments on Mark 4:29 that “Christ is waiting with longing desire for the manifestation of Himself in His church. When the character of Christ shall be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own.”⁹ This too is related to the great controversy theme. Christ’s victory over Satan involves not only a profession of faith on the part of His people, but an actual day-by-day love union with Jesus that persistently molds them into His likeness. As a reminder that preaching the gospel can never be a substitute for living the gospel, this approach, though subject to much misunderstanding, is an important complement to the fourth one.

4. Yet another approach is based on Matthew 24:14: “This gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a tes-

timony to all nations; and then the end will come” (RSV). Ellen White declares unequivocally that the coming of the Lord “will not tarry past the time that the message is borne to all nations, tongues, and peoples.”¹⁰ Because the spreading of the gospel is something that can be done with great vision and single-minded dedication, or halfheartedly, or not at all, human choices affect how long it will take.

Thus Matthew 24:14 appears to be the single most significant sign of the nearness of Christ’s return. The encouraging part is that the Adventist message is being proclaimed in 205 countries and 725 languages. Since 1990 Adventist Global Mission pioneers have initiated mission work in 2,000 previously unentered people groups. The challenge is that there are still 900 population groups of more than a million members each in which the message has yet to be heard.¹¹

5. The last approach to the issue of delay is the realization that for