

Sunday Laws and Bible Prophecy

By Jon Paulien

Introduction

COVID-19 has changed many things in this world. Before COVID, people who wanted your expertise invited you to get on an airplane and visit their interesting part of the world. After COVID, they could invite you to address their people from the comfort of your own office or home. As a result of such invitations I have been able to interact with Seventh-day Adventist people and others in the Bahamas, Newfoundland, Malaysia, the Philippines, Europe and more. These events have usually involved some question and answer periods and have allowed me to take the pulse of the Seventh-day Adventist movement in ways that might not have been possible otherwise.

The one issue that seems to be on the minds of more SDAs outside the Western world than any other is the concept of future Sunday laws, particularly in the United States. This may come as a surprise to people in the West, who are well aware that Sunday laws are not on the radar in Western public conversation right now. But for many Seventh-day Adventists in the Caribbean, Africa and Asia, the concept of Sunday laws is a real and imminent threat of critical importance. The narrative goes something like this: “Ellen White [special messenger to the SDA Church—1827-1915] clearly predicted, based on visions from the Lord, that before the end of time, the US Congress will pass a national Sunday law, enforcing worship on Sunday by all Americans. Laws like this will then be adopted in Europe, and ultimately by the entire world.”

The special appeal of this idea is that it would be the single, clearest, and most measurable sign of the End believers in the Second Coming of Jesus have. The idea that the gospel will be preached in the whole world as a witness to all nations is clear (Matt 24:14), but the fulfillment of that prediction would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to verify. The idea that famines, earthquakes and pestilences will increase before the End still leaves open the issue of how bad these events have to be in order to qualify as apocalyptic. How massive and frequent are the earthquakes to come? How severe the pestilences? Determining that the End is at hand on the grounds of any particular earthquake, famine or pestilence has proven to be a fool’s errand through the centuries. But in contrast to these other “signs”, a specific law in the halls of Congress of the United States of America is an observable, measurable sign of the End! The belief is that when such a law is being debated in Congress and is about to pass, we can all know that the End is at hand. I get it. This concept is clear, simple, and very attractive for people who like to know how and when things will end up. It gives them something unique and specific to look for in the news cycle. For those who hold this belief, it feels good to have “inside knowledge” in a matter of such importance.

I have been familiar with this scenario for many decades. I was raised on it myself. I have read the book *The Great Controversy* many times, and have long accepted the broad sweep of its insights. But this scenario has faded somewhat in many people's minds because it describes a world that seems very foreign to current realities. For example, a lawyer friend who has worked on religious liberty issues in the halls of the US Congress recently told me that there is zero interest in passing Sunday laws in Congress today. In fact, pretty much any law supportive of religion would be seen in an unfavorable light right now. So I began to ask myself some questions. Does the certainty so many people express regarding a particular detail of the future conform to biblical principles of prophetic interpretation? Was the very purpose of such a prediction to satisfy our curiosity about the timing of the End? Are we using the gift of prophecy in ways it was never intended to be used?

I have no issue with the general concept that in the final crisis of earth's history, legislation related to the ten commandments in general and the Sabbath in particular will play an important role in the unfolding of events before the Second Coming. That conviction has a solid basis in Scripture and in the writings of Ellen G. White, as I will show below. What troubles me about the recent excitement over future Sunday laws is the laser focus on a single, specific event as a sign of the End; the passage of a national Sunday law in the halls of the United States Congress. I don't doubt that such an event could take place. But if one reads LeRoy Froom's *Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, projecting such details into the immediate future has never gone well over the last 2000 years. Fixing on a detail like this can blind us to the larger picture of prophecy. We can have an unbalanced focus that causes us to forget prophetic features that are more vital to spiritual survival, like a living relationship with Jesus Christ. And if events take even a slightly different path than the one we anticipate, we can miss the real thing when it comes, just as many of the Pharisees did back in the First Century.

Believers and Scholars

As I explore this controverted topic, I should mention that I come at topics like this from two different angles, and I don't always distinguish them clearly when I speak, which can lead to confusion. First of all, I am a believer. As a lifelong Seventh-day Adventist and a loyal son of the church, I believe in the inspiration of the Bible. I believe and teach the 28 Fundamentals of Adventist faith. I believe that God spoke to Ellen G. White (1827-1915) in ways He does not speak to me, which gives her important authority in my life. I have made strong personal commitments to the above, and that means my default position on the issue of Sunday laws in the final period of earth's history is grounded in Adventist understandings of the book of Revelation and in the book *The Great Controversy* and its many predecessors. This is what I believe, and I am not ashamed of it.

I also come to topics like this as a scholar. My role as a scholar of faith is to test and probe what I believe on the basis of the best biblical, historical, and experiential evidence available. I have

often spoken with confidence on biblical and theological topics, only to discover later that I had misread the Bible or misread the writings of Ellen White. So I undertake scholarly work first for myself, but also for the church I love. I am motivated to do this by a powerful statement from the pen of Ellen G. White herself. “It is important that in defending the doctrines which we consider fundamental articles of faith ***we should never allow ourselves to employ arguments that are not wholly sound.*** These may avail to silence an opposer but they do not ***honor the truth.*** We should present sound arguments, that will not only silence our opponents, but will bear the closest and most searching scrutiny.” Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 708. This is my goal in the following. I do not write this to trouble the saints, but to strengthen and clarify what the Scriptures and the Spirit of Prophecy teach. On the other hand, the saints sometimes need a little troubling, and I’ll leave the outcome of that in God’s hands.

An example of how good scholarship can clarify and strengthen faith happened in the Daniel and Revelation Committee of the General Conference, which met from 1981-1992. As the youngest member of that committee, I am in a good position to tell the story. When we came to Revelation 13 (from 1988-1991) we noticed that Uriah Smith (early Adventist commentator on Revelation) saw parts of Revelation 13 as historical (occurring during the Middle Ages primarily) and parts of it as eschatological (occurring at the very End). But it was not clear from his writings that this distinction could be based on the text of the Bible itself, it seemed more intuitive than exegetical. As we looked at the chapter carefully in the original Greek, however, I believe God guided us to look carefully at the main verb tenses in the chapter. We discovered that in Revelation 13:1-7 and 13:11 the main verbs were all in past tenses, while in 13:8-10 and 13:12-18 they were all in present and future tenses. These tenses coincided with the divisions Smith had made on theological grounds. The parts of chapter 13 Smith had placed in the Middle Ages were all in past tenses in the Greek! And the parts he had placed in the future were all in present and future tenses in the Greek. None of us would probably have noticed this shift alone, but studying together, we were able to greatly strengthen an important Adventist understanding. What Adventists had earlier taught and *Great Controversy* had affirmed, proved to be supported by careful Greek exegesis.

In addition to the Greek tenses, we also came to notice that when John (or Jesus) introduced a new character into a vision, he usually gave a visual description of that character and also a summary of that character’s history or back story before continuing the vision. When the beast is seen coming up out of the sea, there is a visual description (Rev 13:1-2), followed by the beast’s previous history (13:3-7). Then the beast acts in the context of the vision itself (13:8-10). After this, a beast from the earth arises. There is a brief visual description and back story (13:11). Then comes a vision of that beast’s collaboration with the first beast in the final crisis (13:12-18). If you will check the previous paragraph, this distinction tracks exactly with the tense shifts in the passage. This is exegetically compelling and gives strong support to the way Uriah Smith and other Adventists have read Revelation 13 in the past, even if they did not base their understandings on direct exegesis of the original text.

So godly scholarship, while testing, probing and sometimes challenging what we have believed, is done in service to the church. When such scholarship supports what the church has always believed and taught, such scholars can become quite popular. On the other hand, when the basis for a teaching proves not as strong as we had thought, the scholar who points that out is often vilified as an unbeliever. Yet both processes are necessary if we are to “honor the truth”. Misuse of Scripture is a major reason many people become atheists. Misuse of Ellen White is a major reason many people reject her ministry. Godly scholarship can help protect church from underplaying things that are actually solid or overplaying things that are not. Either way, the process is necessary and important.

The Approach to Be Taken

In the material that follows, I will seek to explore three lines of evidence in relation to the topic of Sunday laws and the prophecies of the End-time. 1) What can we learn about unfulfilled prophecy from fulfilled prophecy? In anticipating specific types of Sunday laws, are we paying attention to how the Bible itself moves from prediction to fulfillment? We will review my previous study of fulfilled prophecy in the Bible (the fuller summary is in chapter 2 of *The Deep Things of God* [2004] and the full research is presented in *What the Bible Says About the End-Time* [1994]), seeking guidelines that pertain to the specific prediction of a national Sunday law in the USA. 2) We will take a careful look at Revelation 13:13-17, the source passage in the Bible for the idea of a national/international Sunday law. Is that prediction as clear in the Bible as some have thought? Are there other ways that a counterfeit of the true Sabbath could occur? 3) We will take a close look at the key statements in the writings of Ellen White that are used to support the idea of a national Sunday law. How clear are those statements? What in her time and place was she referring to? Are similar conditions in play today? We will take up these three lines of evidence one by one.

Part 1: How God Works in the World

Unfulfilled prophecy has been the bane of prophetic interpreters for millennia. Even Seventh-day Adventists have a somewhat checkered history with it, as the Great Disappointment indicates. When we talk about Sunday laws in the final events of earth’s history, we are dealing with unfulfilled prophecy. We are projecting from the words of the prophecy to an expected outcome that makes sense to us. But history is littered with attempts to do just that, most of which turned out to be incorrect [for the whole picture of the history from New Testament times until the end of the 19th Century see LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, 4 volumes (Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1950-1954)].

So how can or should one be able to speak with confidence about an unfulfilled prophecy? The answer to that question seems obvious once you mention it. You assess the likely outcome of

an unfulfilled prophecy on the basis of fulfilled prophecy in the Bible. As you visit the fulfilled prophecies of the Bible, you begin to get a sense of how God works in the world, how He moves from prediction to fulfillment, how His earlier actions project what His later actions will be like. Fulfilled prophecy gives us the needed perspective to make educated judgments about unfulfilled prophecy. I have reported on my study of fulfilled prophecy in the book, *What the Bible Says About the End-Time*, and in an updated and shortened summary in chapter 2 of my book, *The Deep Things of God*. I will summarize the principles I discovered in that study here, with a brief proof text or two for each principle. The more detailed argument can be found in the above books. But here I will summarize just enough to address the topic at hand.

Principle One (1): God is consistent. This principle should not be controversial. If God is God, one would expect a certain consistency in His words and actions. What God says, He will do. What He does, He will do again. This is at the core of what prophecy is all about, it is grounded in God's consistency. Because He is consistent, we anticipate that God's words project how He will act in the future. For example, in Micah 5:2 the prophet predicts that the coming Deliverer would be born in Bethlehem. And so He was. But not only does God fulfill His own words, God's previous actions project how He will act in the future. Prophecy exists because God can be counted on to do what He says and repeat what he does. And it is tempting to leave things there, enough said. But as one works with fulfilled prophecies, it becomes clear that this principle needs to be balanced by a second one.

Principle Two (2): God is not always predictable. While God is consistent, sometimes He surprises us. Because God is God, we cannot expect to fully fathom His words and actions before they happen. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts and His ways are higher than our ways (Isa 55:8-9). There is a consistency in God's actions between creation, the Flood and the Exodus, for example. But careful analysis shows that God does not repeat every detail of the earlier actions in the later actions. Fulfilled prophecy also shows that God does not always fulfill every detail of an earlier pattern or prophecy. For example, in Isaiah 11:15, the prophet predicts that in the return from exile to Babylon, God will dry up the Euphrates River with a scorching wind. But when the fulfillment arrives, it is Cyrus' engineers that dry up the river. The direct action of God is not in view. Does that make Isaiah 11:15 a false prophecy? Absolutely not! God spoke through Isaiah in the language of the Exodus (as we will see later). At the time of fulfillment, God was able to achieve the same result without the kind of miraculous intervention that was necessary to get His people out of Egypt earlier.

So a certain amount of sanctified caution is called for in assessing unfulfilled prophecy. "How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways. For who has known the mind of the Lord. . . ?" (Rom 11:33-34, ESV). The Spirit of God is like the wind, "You cannot tell where it is coming from or where it is going" (John 3:8, NIV). To suggest that God's consistency requires that He fulfill our understanding of every word and detail of a prophecy is to have failed to observe the actual data of Scripture. When we assert that we have mastered the details of the

future on the basis of prophecy, we have opened ourselves up to disappointment and even self-deception.

Principle Three (3): *God is creative.* God is not limited to the words and actions of the past. The antitype doesn't simply carry out the type in a point by point correspondence. God can transcend what He has done before, adding new elements not discernable from the prophecy or God's prior actions. In Isaiah 43:18-19 (NIV) it says, "Forget the former things, do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!" This passage is in the context of God's promise to repeat the Exodus experience in Israel's future deliverance from Babylon. But He is clear that the fulfillment will not be limited to a repeat of the historical details of the Exodus. God will transcend the Exodus by adding unexpected new aspects to the fulfillment. Taken together, these three principles should caution us not to be overly certain of every detail of a divine prediction before the fulfillment arrives. Let God be God!

The above three principles are at the core of the way God works in the world. While God is always consistent with Himself, His ways are not our ways, and our readings of unfulfilled prophecies are usually wrong; because we don't always fully understand God's intentions or the impact of subsequent history on how that prophecy might be fulfilled. He also has the right to do a "new thing" if He so chooses. God's consistency gives us confidence in the future that He holds in His hands. His unpredictability and creativity help us stay humble as we watch the events taking place around us. We want to know everything that God intends for us to know without assuming more than He has actually revealed.

I came to discover these three principles some forty years ago when I translated the book of Genesis from the original Hebrew into English as part of my doctoral work. As I worked my way through the first nine chapters of Genesis, I noticed multiple parallels of language between the flood story and the creation story. God's actions in the two stories were remarkably similar. They were clearly written to show that consistency in God's actions. But I also noted that not every detail of the creation story was repeated in the flood story. So I saw that God's future actions cannot be predicted in detail on the basis of His previous actions. When it came to the Exodus, the pattern of consistency and unpredictability was repeated. But there were also new elements beyond the pattern. And these elements set a pattern for the Old Testament prophets and also the New Testament. God's mighty actions in the books of Moses set the pattern for the prophets from Isaiah through Malachi.

Principle Four (4): *God Meets People Where They Are.* Whenever God reveals Himself to a prophet, He does so within the prophet's time, place and circumstances. All language is based on the sum total of a people's experience. So God communicates to the prophets in their vocabulary, not His, for His language would not be understood. This is one of the clearest biblical principles that is not stated in so many words in the Bible. But while not directly stated, it is demonstrated, over and over. A major example is the four gospels. The one story is told in four different ways to reach a wide variety of minds. The principle is also demonstrated in the

person of Jesus Christ, who came to earth as a First-Century Jew, accustomed to the ways of Galilee. To understand the fulfillment of a prophecy, one must first understand the language, time and place of the prophet. This is true of Ellen White as much as anyone else God has communicated with.

Principle Five (5): *God Often Spiritualizes History.* Beginning with the Exodus story, we see a spiritualization of God's historical actions in creation and the Flood (Exod 14:21-22). The basic scenario and language is repeated, but God uses that vocabulary in a figurative or spiritualized way; moving from Adam to Israel, Eden to Canaan, and a chaotic, water-covered world to the spiritual chaos of Israel's slavery in Egypt. In the prophets, the Exodus story becomes the model for God's spiritual transformation of His people in the future (Mic 7:15-20). The same kind of thing happens in Revelation 13, where Pentecost, Pharaoh's magicians, Mount Carmel, the creation of Adam, Nebuchadnezzar's image, and Solomon's apostasy all provide context for the great spiritual conflict at the end of time. In the New Testament generally, the things of Israel are applied to the spiritual community of the church and the language of Israel's geography is applied to the whole world. To miss the spiritualization of a prophecy's roots is to miss the point of the prophecy.

Principle Six (6): *God Uses the Language of the Prophet's Past and Present to Describe the Future.* This is related to principle four, but moves from the general to the specific. God meets people where they are. He speaks to prophets in the language of their times, places and circumstances. So divine predictions of the future are framed as natural extensions of the prophet's time, place and understanding. The Flood was an unraveling of creation followed by a new creation. The eschatology of Deuteronomy 28 depended on Israel's obedience or disobedience to the covenant moving forward. The return from Babylon was a replay of the Exodus. In the book of Revelation, the final events described in Revelation 13 are drawn from many Old Testament precedents. The fire from heaven (Rev 13:13-14) recalls Elijah's experience on Mount Carmel. The deceptions of the land beast (Rev 13:13-14) remind the readers of Pharaoh's magicians (Exod 7:10-11, 20-22; 8:6-7). The worship of the image of the beast (Rev 13:15) recalls Nebuchadnezzar's image and the death decree there (Daniel 3). The mark on the forehead and the hand (Rev 13:16-17) recalls the ten commandments as expressed in Deuteronomy 6:6-8. And the 666 of Revelation 13:18 may allude to Solomon's apostasy (1 Kings 10:14 in context). Nearly the entire book of Revelation is made up of recollections of God's dealing with Israel in John's past.

Understanding the original context of Ellen White's statements regarding a national Sunday law in the US can bring us more clarity on the way such statements might or might not be fulfilled in our own future. What matters is not what we think a prophecy must mean, but how God actually works in the world, how He moves from prediction to fulfillment. If we believe that Ellen White's inspiration is similar to that of the biblical prophets, then her predictions that are not yet fulfilled should be evaluated on the basis of fulfilled prophecy in Scripture.

Principle Seven (7): *Prophetic Fulfillments Are Most Clearly Understood As or After They Occur.* The record of Christian predictions on the basis of prophecy has not been a good one. The earlier six principles help explain that sorry track record. Part of the problem is the very purpose of prophecy. Prophecy was not given to satisfy our curiosity about the future (although that is the way many approach prophecy), it is given to teach us how to live today and to strengthen our faith at the time of fulfillment. Jesus says essentially this in John 14:29: “I have told you now before it happens, so that *when* it does happen you will believe.” As or after a prophetic fulfillment, it will become evident what God was doing and faith will be strengthened. The same principle should caution us not to expect crystal clarity regarding the future in advance of the fulfillment.

Principle Eight (8): *There Are Two Types of Prophecy, Classical and Apocalyptic.* The way prophecy is fulfilled is impacted by this distinction. Apocalyptic prophecy is seen in the visions of Daniel 2 and 7 and in passages like Revelation 12. Biblical apocalyptic is filled with chains of unusual imagery, like multi-layered metal statues (Daniel 2), a series of fantastic beasts with features unlike those normally seen in nature (Daniel 7), and horns (Dan 7:8, 11, 25) and vultures (Rev 8:13) that speak. Apocalyptic tends to involve a series of historical events running one after another from the prophet’s day until the End. Dual or multiple fulfillments should not be expected, because the prophecy covers the whole span of history from the prophet’s day until the End. Apocalyptic prophecies tend to be unconditional, God sharing the large strokes of history that He foresees will take place, regardless of human response.

In contrast, classical prophecy is seen in books like Isaiah, Hosea and Jeremiah. There is a strong focus on the immediate situation, and if the end of all things is in view, the End is seen as a natural extension of the prophet’s situation, time and place. So immediate and end-time events are often mixed together in such prophecies. There are strong conditional elements, as the fulfillment of such prophecies is dependent on human response (Jer 18:7-10). Since such prophecies combine the immediate situation with a glimpse of the further future, such prophecies can have dual or multiple fulfillments as the centuries roll by and various aspects of the prophecy fit various situations.

In scholarly terms, the distinction between the two types of prophecies can be seen in their genre. They are different types or styles of literature. From that perspective, I have always understood the writings of Ellen White to fit the classical style of prophecy. This is self-evident, it seems to me, in regard to the Testimonies for the Church. There she speaks to her immediate situation, encouraging fidelity to God and to Scripture. Where she speaks of the future, she describes it as a natural extension of the immediate situation (we will see this in part 3), rather than clear predictions of things that don’t exist in her day. For example, she does not foresee nuclear war or power, she doesn’t speak of cell phones, computers, the internet, Islamic terrorism, space travel, World Wars I and II, or the rise of secularism and post-modernism. When she describes police action at the end of time, the police are wearing swords (GC 631, 656), something much more common in her day than today! The faces of those awaiting Jesus

return are “pale” with anxiety (EW 269; GC 639), something natural to say in the nearly all-White reality of the northern USA in the 1850s. When she described the Second Coming of Jesus to Joseph Bates (Letter 7, 1847; cf. EW286), she saw “the pious slave rise in triumph and victory, and shake off the chains that bound him, while his wicked master was in confusion. . . .” That view was in perfect harmony with a future grounded in her time and place. But slavery was abolished in America in June of 1865. It was abolished in the whole world in 1890 (with a few lingering exceptions). Circumstances alter cases. Prophecy is not given to satisfy our curiosity about the future in every detail. It is given to inspire a faithful response on the part of the reader.

It does not mean God was incapable of sharing the 20th Century or our present and future with Ellen White, only that such a revelation was evidently not central to His purpose for her prophetic ministry; encouraging faithfulness to God and careful attention to the Scriptures. And regarding prophecy she herself says, “The promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional.” *Last-Day Events*, 38. A good example of conditional prophecy is, perhaps, her declaration in 1856 that some with her that day would live to see Jesus come (1T 131-132, 124). Obviously, the conditions for that prophecy were never met and we are still here in 2021. Critics have often used that prediction to accuse her of being a false prophet, but the accusation is based on an unbiblical understanding of how prophecy works, or, in other words, how God works in the world.

Recently, in response to questions arising out of discussion of these issues, the Biblical Research Institute surprised me by declaring that when Ellen White speaks about end-time events, her comments are to be taken as unconditional, in that they are interpreting apocalyptic prophecies. This is a direction I have not heard before in thirty-five years of interactions with the church’s leaders and scholars. Since the document was very brief, it is hard to know on what basis the assertion was made. Ellen White herself did not write in apocalyptic style and she did not give a clear chain of events from her day to the end, as apocalyptic prophets did. So to be fair, I will give those who proposed this approach time to elaborate on the biblical and Spirit of Prophecy grounds that led them to make such a claim. I encourage readers to withhold judgment on this issue until the church’s scholars can give the topic closer attention. As a scholar, I do not want anyone to take my proposals here as a final word, but I am seeking to expose evidence that will help the church draw the best conclusions possible. In that conversation, I trust that principles drawn from fulfilled prophecy will play a major role in developing the church’s position on unfulfilled prophecies.

Part 2: Final Events in Revelation 13:13-17

The portion of Scripture that is widely cited as predicting Sunday laws at the end of time is Revelation 13:13-17. I will take a fresh look at the passage with Adventist beliefs about this element of the future in mind. Let me say, first, that a church’s beliefs on a topic should be

exegetically defensible, but do not need to be exegetically compelling. Doctrine comes under the heading of systematic theology, where Scripture, tradition, reason and experience all play a role. Not all Adventist beliefs (such as avoiding tobacco) are grounded in biblical exegesis alone. For Adventists, insights from the pioneers, current understandings, scientific research, and the teachings of Ellen White all play a role in formulating doctrine. But, in Adventist understanding, doctrine must not contradict Scripture, it must at least be defensible in light of Scripture.

Since Revelation never uses the words Sabbath or Sunday, it is possible that exegetical certainty in the matter of Sunday laws at the End is not available from Scripture alone. But such lack of exegetical clarity is true of many doctrines. For example, the word Trinity does not appear in the Bible, and nowhere does the Bible contain many of the Chalcedonian formulas with regard to Jesus Christ. But while they go beyond the specific data of Scripture, these doctrines can be defended from the evidence of Scripture. They are a contextualization of Scripture in light of the questions and issues raised in the centuries after the New Testament. And that is sufficient for believers to make a commitment to such teachings, even if we “see through a glass darkly” on some of the details. We will find that the concept of Sunday laws at the end of time does not contradict Scripture, and it is compatible with the evidence of Scripture, even if not every part of the evidence proves completely compelling.

As mentioned above, the key text regarding Sunday laws at the End is Revelation 13:13-17 (my translation): “And he [the land beast] does great signs, so much so that he causes fire to come down out of heaven to earth in the presence of men. And **he deceives** those who live on the earth because of the signs which he was given to do . . . saying to those who live on the earth that they should make an image to the beast. . . . And he [the land beast] was permitted to give breath to the image of the beast, in order that the image of the beast might speak and might cause whoever does not worship the image of the beast **to be killed**. And he [the land beast] **controls everyone** . . . so that he might place a mark upon their right hands or upon their foreheads, so that **no one might be able to buy or sell** except the one who has the mark, the name of the beast or the number of his name.”

This passage exhibits the two outstanding characteristics of Satan’s method for persuading people at the end of time. In Revelation 13:13-14 there is the method of deception. Satan brings fire down from heaven in a false Pentecost or a counterfeit Mount Carmel showdown. He uses great signs to persuade the people of earth that he is the true God, the one worthy of worship. He is not so in fact, but he uses “signs and lying wonders” to deceive (see also 2 Thess 2:9 and 16:13-14) those who live on the earth. But not everyone is easily deceived. So in Revelation 13:15-17, he uses the method of intimidation or force. Those who refuse to worship the image of the beast are to be killed. Those who refuse to receive the mark of the beast will not be able to buy or sell. So Satan’s two primary methods are force and deception. This is in direct contrast with God’s methods. God always speaks the truth, and never forces anyone to follow or worship him. The final crisis is a showdown between rival claims to be God and two different methods of persuasion.

The Image of the Beast (Rev 13:13-15)

The deception of Revelation 13:13-14 results in the formation of an image to and of the beast, presumably the first beast of Revelation 13, the one that came up out of the sea. “And he [the land beast] was permitted to *give breath to the image* of the beast, in order that the image of the beast might speak and might cause whoever does not worship the image of the beast to be killed.” Rev 13:15. Typical of Jewish apocalyptic literature, the book of Revelation never quotes the Old Testament, but it alludes to it very frequently; using key words, phrases, ideas and structures to signal the reader to incorporate OT knowledge into the interpretation of a passage. We saw such allusions to the OT in 13:13-14: the experience of Elijah on Mount Carmel (fire from heaven) and the deceptive miracles of Pharaoh’s magicians.

The combination of image and breath is an unmistakable allusion to the early chapters of Genesis. God created male and female in His own image (Gen 1:26-27), using His breath to install the software of life into Adam’s earthy body (Gen 2:7). More than just oxygen, God was installing the life principle, with its unique personality and traits, and that life principle included the “image of God.” That phrase is not used for the creation of animals. So there was something very godlike about Adam and Eve. They reflected God’s character in their own.

The beast from the sea is in the image of the dragon (Rev 13:1, cf. 12:4), which is also defined as the ancient serpent, the devil, and Satan (Rev 12:9). So the phrase “image of the beast” implies a similar relationship to Satan as Adam originally had to God. Revelation 13:15 is telling us that at the end of time Satan will seek to implant his image into the human race in contrast to the image and character of God. Just as God’s breath installed His design into the human race, Satan at the End will use demonic spirits to install his own design into the human race (Rev 16:13-14). The contrast could not be more stark. Satan’s character prizes lies (deception—Rev 13:13-14) and force (Rev 13:12, 15-17). Both qualities are summed up by Jesus in John 8:44. In contrast, God always speaks the truth (Rev 3:14; 15:3) and prizes human freedom (Rev 22:17). God never forces anyone. So the two sides in the final conflict grow increasingly apart as they model more and more the character of the god they worship.

The ultimate outcome of setting up an image of the beast is to exhibit the murderous character of Satan (John 8:44) in a death decree. When the image of the beast comes to life it will “cause whoever does not worship the image of the beast to be killed.” Rev 13:15. This is a clear allusion to the Plain of Dura event in Daniel 3. There an image was set up for worship. All who would not worship Nebuchanezzar’s image were to be thrown into the fiery furnace. Likewise, at the end of time, a decree goes forth that all who would not worship the image of the beast, all who will not conform to the beast’s (Satan’s) character, will be killed. Two other OT death decrees may also be in mind here, the lion’s den incident of Daniel 6, and the genocidal decree of Haman in the book of Esther (3:6, 13). The final era of earth’s history will include a replay of

earlier attempts to destroy God's people. But that is not all that Satan has in mind for the End-time.

The Forehead and the Hand (Rev 13:16-17)

The text of Revelation 13 continues with verse 16: "And he [the land beast] controls everyone . . . so that he might place a mark upon their **right hands** or upon their **foreheads**. . . ." In the biblical world the forehead represents the mind, the will, the personality. The hand is representative of action. So these symbols represent two kinds of response to the call to worship the image of the beast. There are those who are fully committed to the agenda and character of Satan and his allies, and there are others who don't really care, but they go along in order to preserve their jobs and their lives (Rev 13:16-17).

As we have seen, Revelation 13:14 alludes to the OT showdown over worship at Mount Carmel. This fits well with the central theme of Revelation chapters 13 and 14, worship. This portion of the book makes reference to worship of the dragon (Rev 13:4), the beast from the sea (Rev 13:4, 8, 12; 14:9, 11) and the image of the beast (Rev 13:15; 14:9, 11). In all, there are exactly seven occurrences of the word "worship" in this part of Revelation. In contrast with these seven is the single call to worship "Him who made the heaven, and the earth, and the sea, and the fountains of water." Rev 14:7. The call to worship the image of the beast is a universal one, it goes out to the full range of social classes. "And he [the land beast] controls everyone; the small and the great, the rich and the poor, the free and the slave; so that he might place a mark upon their right hands or upon their foreheads. . . ." Rev 13:17.

Along with the call to worship the image of the beast or be killed, a new element is introduced. A mark is placed on all who are willing to worship the image of the beast. The mark is defined as the name of the beast or the number of his name (13:17). These likely correspond to the forehead and the hand. Names in the Hebrew context represent character. As noted above, some are marked because of their heart and soul commitment to Satan's agenda to mold human beings in his own image (name on forehead). Others are marked because they are willing to go along with that agenda to preserve their own lives and prosperity in this world (hand and number).

These texts reflect a sharp polarization in the world as we approach the End-time. Revelation predicts three types of people in the world at the end. One group is the saints, who are called by many names (the remnant, the 144,000, the great multitude, the kings of the east, the called, chosen and faithful followers of the Lamb). The second group is a worldwide alliance of religion; called Babylon, the Great City, the Great Prostitute, and the woman who rides the beast. Babylon is the sum total of the unholy trinity; the dragon, the beast and the false prophet (Rev 16:13, 19). The third group are those without a heart and soul commitment to either camp. These are the secular, political and military powers of the world, also named by

many names and symbols (Euphrates River, kings of the world, many waters, kings of the earth, the beast of Rev 17, the ten horns, the cities of the nations, seven mountains and seven kings). When these secular powers agree to enforce the death decree of Revelation 13:15, they make a “hand” commitment to the beast and his image. Satan desires worship from all, but he is willing to settle for forced worship, self-centered worship. This is a clear contrast between his character and God’s. God desires only genuine, heart commitment. This contrast in character is further underlined as we explore the meaning of the mark of the beast in Revelation.

The Mark and the Seal

How shall we understand the “mark of the beast” in the context of Revelation 13? The most obvious parallel to the mark is the seal of God. The seal is placed on the foreheads of God’s servants (the 144,000) to protect them from Satan’s destructive efforts when the four winds of the earth are released (Rev 7:1-3). An evident parallel to the seal of God is the 144,000 having the Lamb’s name and His Father’s name written on their foreheads (Rev 14:1). In the Hebrew context names and foreheads are associated with a person’s character. So the seal of God seems to have something to do with the character of those being sealed.

This is supported by the wider use of sealing in the New Testament. In Ephesians 1:13, sealing by the Holy Spirit is the consequence of a faith response to the gospel. It represents the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life. This sealing includes a lifelong experience of the Spirit after conversion (Eph 4:30). It is the evidence that a person truly is known by God and belongs to Him (2 Tim 2:19). In the Second Christian Century, sealing was associated with baptism. So the seal of God has to do with the character transformation that happens as a consequence of a genuine relationship with God. In a sense, it represents the restoration of the image of God in human beings.

Revelation 7 and 14 place this sealing in an end-time context, as does Ellen White: ““(The seal of God) is not any seal or mark that can be seen, but a settling into the truth, both intellectually and spiritually, so they cannot be moved.” *SDABC, vol. 4, 1161, Last-Day Events, 219-220*. Ellen White understands the last-day sealing to be a deepening of commitment and a completion of Christian maturity. Those who have to pass through the trials of the end-time cannot be the kind of believers Paul talks about in Ephesians 4:14, “Tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine. . . .” Likewise, at the End, Satan is forming his own image into those committed to his side of the conflict. That makes the mark of the beast the mirror counterpart of the seal of God. The three angels (Rev 14:6-12) and the three frogs (Rev 16:13-14) both go out to the nations of the world. The end result is three types of people, as mentioned earlier. Those fully committed to God (the sealed), those fully committed in opposition to God (marked on the forehead), and those who go along with the beast and its image in order to preserve their lives and economic opportunities (marked on the hand). Just as the seal of God provides protection to God’s people at the End (Rev 7:1-3, cf. Ezek 9:1-7), so the

mark of the beast provides unbelievers “protection” against the death decree and economic boycott of Revelation 13:15-17.

There is one further element to the mark of the beast. It is part of the beast’s counterfeit of the first four commandments of the Decalogue. The forehead and the hand echoes Moses’ call for Israel’s complete commitment to the commandments of God (Deut 6:4-8). In contrast, the beast and his image violate the first four commandments. The first commandment says to have no other gods before Yahweh. The dragon and the beast seek to be worshiped as gods (Rev 13:4, 8). The second commandment forbids the worship of images, the beast sets up an image to be worshiped (Rev 13:15). The third commandment forbids taking the Lord’s name in vain, the beast is full of blasphemy (Rev 13:1, 5-6). The mark of the beast is in defiance of the Sabbath, which is central to God’s side of the conflict in Rev 14:7 (cf. Exod 20:11). If the law of God is a transcript of His character, you can see what is happening here. To receive the mark of the beast is a rejection of God’s character and an affirmation of Satan’s. Satan’s character, in contrast with God’s, will be fully revealed in the final conflict.

The Mark of the Beast as an Anti-Sabbath

The previous paragraph underlines that the Sabbath is a crucial issue in the final conflict. It also suggests that some counterfeit of the Sabbath will be central to the beast’s actions in the same conflict. What is less clear in the text at first glance is exactly what form that counterfeit will take. I can think of four possible options for this aspect of the mark of the beast: 1) it could be another day than the one specified in the commandment (as in Sunday), 2) it could be a rejection of any day as a Sabbath (Sabbath abolished), 3) it could be treating every day as a Sabbath, hence no day is treated as special (similar to number 2), or 4) it could be forcing people work or forbidding worship on Sabbath. When dealing with Revelation 13, Ellen White normally works from number 1, but on at least two occasions she mentions number 4. Is it possible to narrow these options further on the basis of the Bible alone? I believe it is.

The mark of the beast passage (Rev 13:13-17) is found in the larger context of Revelation 13 with its two beasts, one from the sea and one from the earth. The sea beast is introduced in the first two verses of the chapter. “And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear’s, and its mouth was like a lion’s mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority.” Rev 13:1-2. This is clearly an allusion to Daniel 7. There is a beast coming up out of the sea. That beast is an amalgamation of a leopard, a bear and a lion. The beast has seven heads and ten horns (the four beasts of Daniel 7:3-8 combined have seven heads and ten horns). So it is plain that John had Daniel 7 in mind as he wrote out his vision.

The connection with Daniel 7 becomes even stronger when you consider verses 5-7 of Revelation 13. “And a mouth was given to him (the beast from the sea), speaking great things

and **blasphemies**, and he was given authority to operate for **forty-two months**. He opened his mouth in order to speak blasphemies against God, to blaspheme His name and His tabernacle, those who are in heaven. And to him it was given to **make war with the saints** and to conquer them. And to him was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation.” This clearly looks back to the little horn of Daniel 7:20-25. The little horn is a religious power that persecutes the saints for a period of three and a half prophetic years.

But there is one aspect of the little horn that may be particularly relevant to the meaning of the mark of the beast. This found in Daniel 7:25, ESV. “He shall speak words against the Most High, and shall wear out the saints of the Most High, and shall **think to change the times** (Aramaic: *tzimnîn*; Greek: *kairous*) **and the law** (Aramaic: *dath*; Greek: *nomon*); and they shall be given into his hand for a **time, times, and half a time**.” The times of Daniel 7:25 are sacred appointed times and the term law generally has to do with the law of God in the Old Testament. The little horn power would seek to change laws related to appointed times. This combination of law with sacred times can apply to only one of the ten commandments, the commandment related to the Sabbath. Since the ten commandments are a crucial background to Revelation 13 and 14, the allusion to Daniel 7 suggests that a change of the Sabbath day itself is the counterfeit John would likely have had in mind.

The mark of the beast as an alternate Sabbath day is further supported by the recognition that the Sabbath is a “sign commandment”. According to Anthony MacPherson,¹ “sign commandments,” like circumcision and the Sabbath, are specific practices that God designates as “signs”. What is significant for our purpose is that sign commandments involve the active performance of laws specific to Yahweh. They are not simply the prohibition of immoral conduct. They function as a sign because they are actionable and observable and identify a person as specifically loyal to Yahweh, as opposed to other gods. It is a specific worship practice that distinguishes the followers of Yahweh from others. MacPherson points out that the mark of the beast in Revelation has several similarities to a sign commandment. The mark involves participation in some form of ritualized worship practice. Identifying it with Sunday fits that idea better than the other options for a Sabbath counterfeit.

MacPherson’s conclusions are relevant here.² For him, the mark of the beast both imitates and seeks to replace the Sabbath. The mark brings together the name and the number (Rev 13:17) of the beast in a way reminiscent of the Sabbath with its declaration of the name of God, Yahweh, and God’s “number,” the seventh-day. Both the mark and the Sabbath restrict people from working, but for different reasons, the mark is punitive and the Sabbath is restorative. To keep the Sabbath includes not buying or selling (Neh 13:15-22). And both the mark and the Sabbath are universal in intent and affect all classes of people (Rev 13:16-17; Exod 20:8-11). So the mark actually reverses what the Sabbath intends. The Sabbath protects the vulnerable

¹ Anthony MacPherson, “The Mark of the Beast as a “Sign Commandment” and “Anti-Sabbath” in the Worship Crisis of Revelation 12-14”, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 43, volume 2, 269-271.

² MacPherson, 278-280.

(slaves, animals, foreigners) while the mark oppresses. The Sabbath frees from work, the mark is about power and control. The Sabbath offers allegiance to the Creator, the mark expresses allegiance to the beast. Each one is a fitting sign, reflecting the character of the one who gives the sign.

Having said all that, the word “Sunday” is obviously not in the book of Revelation, not even the phrase “the first day of the week.” So exegesis of Revelation alone cannot settle the issue. Here it is important to remember that if Adventist doctrines had to be exegetically compelling in order to be accepted, Adventists would not have many doctrines at all. A church’s doctrines combine what can be learned from Scripture with tradition, reason and experience. Such doctrines must be exegetically defensible. In other words, they cannot be in clear contradiction to Scripture, they must be compatible with an honest reading of Scripture. But not everything Adventists believe is compelling on the basis of exegesis alone.

This is relevant to the issue of Sunday laws in Revelation. The idea of a Christian power that would one day change the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday is exegetically defensible from Revelation 13, it is clearly compatible with the evidence of the text. It is even the most likely option, from a purely exegetical perspective. But for even greater clarity and certainty, Seventh-day Adventists look to the counsel of Ellen G. White, not as the primary authority, but as a supplemental witness in determining the right reading of the Scriptural text where exegesis is not definitive. In the following we will look at the evidence of Ellen White herself in the context of American religious history.

Part 3: The Principles and Ellen White

As we get into the key statements of Ellen White regarding national Sunday law legislation in the USA at the End, we must keep in mind that it is an unfulfilled prophecy. Human beings have an extremely poor record when it comes to predicting future events on the basis of unfulfilled prophecy. To improve on that dismal record, it is critical to keep in mind the biblical evidence regarding fulfilled prophecies. In the fulfilled prophecies of the Bible we have a record of how God moves from prediction to fulfillment. These fulfilled prophecies pointed us to a number of principles that can help us avoid the mistakes of the past when it comes to prophecies that are not yet fulfilled.

The most important of those principles for our purpose are principles 2, 4 and 6. I will review them briefly here. Principle 2 states that God is not always predictable. The fulfillment is often somewhat of a surprise when it comes. God does not fulfill every detail of His predictions for a number of reasons. The most important one is that most prophecies are conditional (Jer 18:7-10, LDE 38—Ellen White says there that “God’s promises and threatenings are alike conditional”). Whenever a prophet speaks of political events on earth, those prophecies are conditional, because fulfillment depends on the behavior of the nations or entities involved. If

an ungodly entity repents, God will not perform the doom He had promised. If a godly entity falls into apostasy, God will not fulfill the positive promises He has made to it (Jer 18:7-10).

Principle 4 is that God meets people where they are. That means that most prophecies contain elements that are particularly focused on the time and place of the prophet. Prophecies need to be read in the light of the original context in which they were given. Principle 6 is related to principle 4. It states that God uses the language of the prophet's present and past to describe the prophet's future. That means that prophecy is a natural extension of that prophet's time and place. So another reason God is not always predictable is because the prophecy was given in a form that makes sense in the prophet's time and place but may not fully encompass what God knows about the future. When the fulfillment arrives the outcome will not be exactly as readers of the prophecy may expect. This is evidenced over and over in the Old Testament prophets, with Isaiah 11:15-16 being one of the most dramatic cases, as noted earlier.

Many Seventh-day Adventists treat the predictions of Ellen White as if they were exempt from these biblical patterns. Anything she says about the future is an exact picture of that future and is unchangeable simply because she said it. I would humbly suggest that such a view of inspiration not only fails to account for the biblical evidence listed above, it places Ellen White's own inspiration in jeopardy. The classical case is her statement in 1856 that some people then present would be translated alive when Jesus returns (*Life Sketches*, 321). If one sees all of Ellen White's predictions about the end-time as fixed and unconditional, this incident would call her inspiration and truthfulness into question. But anyone familiar with the patterns of fulfilled prophecy in the Bible would immediately think of Jonah. Prophecies (such as the timing of the Second Coming) that are subject to human response are conditional, even if the conditions are not stated. In my view, Ellen White's inspiration is not in question should every detail of a prediction not be fulfilled to the letter. With that in mind we are ready to review her key statements regarding a national Sunday law in the US Congress at the end of time.

The Key Statements of Ellen White

The first of the best-known Sunday law statements of Ellen White is in *The Great Controversy*, page 573. I will quote the full statement and then make some brief comments: "In the movements now in progress in the United States to secure for the institutions and usages of the church the support of the state, Protestants are following in the steps of papists. Nay, more, they are opening the door for the papacy to regain in Protestant America the supremacy which she has lost in the Old World. And that which gives greater significance to this movement is the fact that the principal object contemplated is the enforcement of Sunday observance--a custom which originated with Rome, and which she claims as the sign of her authority. It is the spirit of the papacy--the spirit of conformity to worldly customs, the veneration for human traditions above the commandments of God--that is permeating the Protestant churches and leading them on to do the same work of Sunday exaltation which the papacy has done before them."

Note first that this statement concerns “the enforcement of Sunday observance” in the United States. It is something that had been commonly done in Europe where the Roman Church had much more authority than she ever had in the United States. But the driving force behind the enforcement of Sunday in the Nineteenth Century was the Protestant leadership of the US government. Ellen White is not talking about some distant, future event, the movements to enforce Sunday observance were “now in progress in the United States”. She was speaking about current events in her context and the implications of those current events for the future.

She returns to this matter on page 579 of *The Great Controversy*: “It has been shown that the United States is the power represented by the beast with lamblike horns, and that this prophecy will be fulfilled when the United States shall enforce Sunday observance, which Rome claims as the special acknowledgment of her supremacy. But in this homage to the papacy the United States will not be alone. The influence of Rome in the countries that once acknowledged her dominion is still far from being destroyed. And prophecy foretells a restoration of her power. . . . In both the Old and the New World, the papacy will receive homage in the honor paid to the Sunday institution, which rests solely upon the authority of the Roman Church.

“Since the middle of the nineteenth century, students of prophecy in the United States have presented this testimony to the world. In the events now taking place is seen a rapid advance toward the fulfillment of the prediction.”

In this statement Ellen White is clearly making reference to Revelation 13 when she mentions the beast with the lamblike horns (Rev 13:11). She indicates that this prophecy will be fulfilled when the United States as a nation shall enforce Sunday observance. In some form this will also occur in the “Old World”, a common reference in Ellen White’s time for Europe. And once again, she makes it clear that this is not some distant, future event. The movement toward Sunday enforcement is already in motion and moving rapidly toward an outcome that would include both the United States and Europe. Her prophecy of the future was a natural extension of things occurring in her day.

All in all, Ellen White makes perhaps a hundred references to Sabbath-Sunday issues at the end of time. This is central to her picture of the End. But GC 579 is different from the earlier ones, and it has attracted special attention for that reason. What is different about this statement is that it is not referring merely to Sunday legislation here and there in various states, but that it would be a national occurrence. To see the significance of this difference, it is helpful to know that the story of the *Great Controversy* came in seven editions (*Early Writings*, *Spiritual Gifts*, *Spirit of Prophecy*, *Story of Redemption*, and three editions of *The Great Controversy*—1884, 1888, 1911). The first five editions (through the 1884 edition of GC) speak in general about Sunday legislation without the specifics of a national Sunday law legislated in Congress. It is only in the year 1888, the same year that Senator Henry Blair introduced a national Sunday law into the Senate, that we see the addition of a national movement to enforce Sunday observance in her projections of the End. I have gone through two collections of all of Ellen White’s statements on Sunday laws. I have found only two statements about a national Sunday

law, and both of them were written in the year 1888 (later statements, like the 1911 edition of GC, are reprints of the earlier statements).

Ellen White returns to the issue of Sunday laws at the end of time on page 592 of *The Great Controversy*: “The dignitaries of church and state will unite to bribe, persuade, or compel all classes to honor the Sunday. The lack of divine authority will be supplied by oppressive enactments. Political corruption is destroying love of justice and regard for truth; and even in free America, rulers and legislators, in order to secure public favor, will yield to the popular demand for a law enforcing Sunday observance. Liberty of conscience, which has cost so great a sacrifice, will no longer be respected. In the soon-coming conflict. . . (Rev 12:17).” This statement is less specific than the previous one. In GC 592 Ellen White foresees church and state working together in America toward universal observance of Sunday. This observance will be supported by “oppressive enactments” in the plural. But her use of the singular in “a law enforcing Sunday observance” is compatible with the previous idea of national legislation. In this passage she once again underlines her understanding that this is a “soon-coming conflict,” and this time supports the term “conflict” with a quotation of Revelation 12:17.

A brief statement on this topic was included in the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary (volume 7, page 976): “The decree enforcing the worship of this day is to go forth to all the world. In a limited degree, it has already gone forth. In several places the civil power is speaking with the voice of a dragon, just as the heathen king spoke to the Hebrew captives.” There are two elements here that are not in *The Great Controversy*. First, she states that the decree enforcing worship of Sunday is to be worldwide, not just in the United States. Second, even that development was already in progress at the time she wrote this statement. It was a live development in the time when she was living.

The final statement I will share with you here is the most specific of all. It was included in the *Review and Herald* toward the close of 1888 (December 18, 1888 issue). “When our nation, in its legislative councils, shall enact laws to bind the consciences of men in regard to their religious privileges, **enforcing Sunday observance**, and bringing oppressive power to bear against those who keep the seventh-day Sabbath, the law of God will, to all intents and purposes, be made void in our land; and national apostasy will be followed by national ruin. . . . If, in our land of boasted freedom, **a Protestant government** should sacrifice every principle which enters into its Constitution, and propagate papal falsehood and delusion, well may we plead, “It is time for thee, Lord, to work, for they have made void thy law.” The United States, in its legislative councils (presumably the House of Representatives and the Senate, although she does not specifically name them), will enact laws to enforce Sunday observance. If we take the plural “laws” literally, she did not have a specific act in mind, but multiple enactments. The model for such enactments was right before her at that time, in Senator Blair’s bill. She makes one additional comment that will prove interesting. In her understanding, this legislation will be the action of a “Protestant government,” which was also a reality in her day.

This is a summary of, in my view, the five most pertinent statements regarding the subject at hand. Will these predictions necessarily be fulfilled in exact detail at some point simply because she said things in a certain way? From a believer's perspective that would be the simplest answer. But the scholar raises the uncomfortable point, do the biblical principles regarding fulfilled prophecy suggest some caution with regard to exactly how unfulfilled prophecies like these will play out in the future?

Ellen White and the Biblical Prophetic Principles

The standard assumption among many Adventists is that every single prediction made by Ellen White must be fulfilled at some point in the future, without conditions. This assumption is similar to that which the Pharisees applied to the Old Testament in Jesus' day. We all know how that worked out. Considering both the principles of prophetic interpretation of the Bible and the realities of history since the 1880s, I would suggest we exercise a little caution before uncritically embracing the standard assumptions about future Sunday laws in the United States and elsewhere. If Ellen White were alive today, there is at least a chance that her depiction of the End would be somewhat different than it was in the 1880s. Let's look at the evidence for that caution.

First of all, an unconditional approach to Ellen White's predictions is contrary to the evidence of fulfilled prophecies in the Bible. We noticed there that (2) God is not always predictable, that (4) God meets people where they are, that (6) God uses the language of the prophet's past and present to describe the future, and that (7) fulfillments of prophecy are best understood as or after the fulfillment. I would argue that an appropriate interpretation of Ellen White's unfulfilled prophecies would be and should be very much in line with the biblical evidence.

Let's look briefly at the context of her most specific statements regarding a national Sunday law in the late 1880s. At that time, SDAs and many other Americans saw three great threats to the American identity. The first was the fear of Protestant apostasy; that Protestantism in America would lose its focus on the principles of the Reformation, which also undergirded the founding principles of the American nation. The second major threat was the rise of Roman Catholicism in the United States. In 1840 Catholics made up about 5% of the US population. By the mid-1880s, due to massive immigration from places like Ireland, Italy, and Poland, Catholics made up 17% of the US population and Catholicism was flexing its political muscles in the US for the first time. This alarmed both Protestants and Adventists. The love for bars and carnivals that Catholics brought with them from Europe caused many Americans to feel that the social order and morality was being undermined. The third major threat was the rise of spiritualism as a major influence in the political discourse of the time. Ellen White's famous statement about "reaching hands across the gulf" names all three of these threats (GC 588). A union of these three forces was seen as the greatest threat to both Adventism and the American republic. *The Great Controversy* was speaking to recognizable issues that were at the forefront of public

discussion at that time. And it did so in a compelling, up-to-date way. It was “present truth” for her time.

Protestantism reacted to these developments in two ways, one more popular than the other with Adventists. First was the drive to ban the production and sale of alcohol in the United States, a movement that later came to be called Prohibition. Ellen White found common cause with the Women’s Christian Temperance Union on this issue and she sometimes spoke at their rallies. But the WCTU and other Protestant entities also saw Sunday legislation as a way to preserve America’s character as a Protestant nation. They sensed that the country was changing and felt that Sunday laws were an excellent way to hold back the tide. Ellen White’s most famous statements on Sunday laws were written in the midst of the above developments. That’s why I believe they are to be understood in the light of the biblical principles outlined at the beginning. God was using Ellen White’s past and present language and experiences to paint a picture of the future. Her outline of that future was, therefore, a natural extension of her time and place. Her visions met her squarely where she was. Given how much the world has changed in the last 130 years, it would be surprising if the outcome of the end-time turned out to be more predictable than the many prophecies fulfilled in Bible times. “The promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional.” LDE 38.

The Changing World of Ellen White

The world that Ellen White experienced in the 1880s was soon to change dramatically. Protestantism remained a major, if not dominant, force in American politics for a number of decades. But after the failure of national Sunday legislation in the period of 1888-1890, Catholicism retreated from being a major player in the American political scene until Vatican II and the rise of John F. Kennedy in the late 1950s. And while spiritualism has remained at the fringes of American consciousness, its role in the public square rapidly diminished after 1890. With Ellen White’s death, a new threat to the American way of life became increasingly powerful, the rise of secularism/liberalism. It offered a direct threat to the “Protestant government” of the United States that was largely taken for granted when *Great Controversy* was first written. Protestantism fought back during the Liberalism/Fundamentalism controversy, but the Scopes trial in the 1920s and the collapse of Prohibition in the early 1930s signaled the death knell of Protestant dominance in American politics. So the three main threats to the American way of life in the 1880s were now supplanted by a much greater threat, that the Christian values upon which America was founded would be totally set aside in favor of a pluralistic, secular order.

Another major feature of Ellen White’s world was colonialism. Virtually the entire world was either ruled by nominally Christian powers like England, France, Spain and Germany, or deeply influenced by the economic and political power these European nations wielded. The concept of an international Sunday law was quite conceivable in the colonial era. But the colonial era

began to unravel in the wake of World War II, and European dominance of Africa and Asia had almost totally evaporated by the early 1960s. The world today is a very different world than the world of Ellen White in the late Nineteenth Century. And that is a serious challenge for anyone who wishes to project the details of her world into the Twenty-First Century. God meets people where they are. It is reasonable to expect that a prophetic voice arising today would say at least some things about the future that would surprise us.

The scenario Ellen White projects in *Great Controversy* is deeply embedded in the very specific politics and issues of the 1880s and a little after. It addresses the very things the nation at large was discussing and includes all the major political players of the time. It is not the story of some far future for the United States of America, the story she tells is a natural extension of Ellen White's time and place, much as we have seen in the classical prophets of the Bible. I remind you of her own statements in that regard. What she wrote about in GC concerned "movements now in progress" (GC 573). "In the events now taking place is seen a rapid advance toward the fulfillment of the prediction. . . ." (GC 579). What she was describing was a "soon-coming conflict" (GC 592). In fact, "The decree. . . has already gone forth" (7 SDABC 976). And it would be enforced by "a Protestant government" (RH, December 18, 1888). The world has changed massively in the last 125 years. Like the writers of the New Testament, Ellen White did not seem to perceive how long a period of time would come after her. In her own words, "The angels of God in their messages to men represent time as very short. Thus it has always been presented to me. It is true that time has continued longer than we expected in the early days of this message. Our Saviour did not appear as soon as we hoped. But has the Word of the Lord failed? Never! It should be remembered that the promises and the threatenings of God are alike conditional." (*Evangelism*, 695-696). I believe that principle needs to be applied to her Sunday law predications as well. There is very little in her writings that directly describes the world in which we live.

There has been more change in the last hundred years than in the previous 6000, but you won't find most of those changes in her writings. You won't find any explicit descriptions of nuclear war or nuclear power. There is no mention of computers, the internet, or cell phones. There is no mention of space travel by human means. There is no prediction of Communism, the two world wars, or Islamic terrorism. There is no specific description of an America that is becoming increasingly secular or post-modern. This is exactly what fulfilled prophecy in the Bible would lead us to expect when reading her work. Prophecy was not given to satisfy our curiosity about the future. It was given to teach us how to live today. When we use prophecy for other purposes, things inevitably go wrong.

Like the biblical prophets, when Ellen White describes the future it is in the language, time, place, and circumstances of the time in which she wrote. This is illustrated by the fact that she writes about a national Sunday law in Congress only in the immediate context of a bill in the Senate to establish a national Sunday law (1888). Before that time she speaks in more general terms about Sunday legislation, language appropriate to a time in which there were many local

Sunday laws, but no push for a national one. As noted earlier, there were seven editions of the Great Controversy vision and she updated each edition to reflect changes in the world current in that time. This is exactly the pattern that you find when you look at the fulfilled prophecies of the Bible.

How Clear Is Ellen White on Unfulfilled Prophecy?

It is often assumed that when Ellen White makes a “clear” statement about either the meaning of the Bible or about the unfulfilled future, all issues are settled and discussion on the topic should be closed. And statements are often produced that seem to imply that as well. But I would humbly suggest that such statements should be balanced by her own expressions of uncertainty about the future. These are not often given their full weight in the discussion. One example is found in *Testimonies for the Church*, volume 6, page 17: “The mark of the beast is exactly what it has been proclaimed to be. **Not all in regard to this matter is yet understood** nor will it be understood until the unrolling of the scroll.” This statement was published in 1900, twelve years after the two key Sunday law statements of 1888. I understand her to be saying that one can have confidence in the broad outline of the mark of the beast, yet allow God freedom of action at the time of fulfillment. Prophecies are most clearly understood at or after the time of fulfillment (John 14:29). What is a little unclear to me in this statement is whether or not she includes herself in the admission, “Not all in regard to this matter is yet understood. . . .”

Perhaps clearer is a statement she wrote a year later: “**We are not now able to describe with accuracy the scenes to be enacted in our world in the future**, but this we do know, that this is a time when we must watch unto prayer, for the great day of the Lord is at hand.” *Selected Messages*, volume 2, page 35. In describing the great day of the Lord as being at hand, I would understand her to be speaking of the future in the classical sense rather than the apocalyptic sense. In classical prophecy “the Day of the Lord” was always portrayed as near, to motivate earnest faithfulness among those awaiting the End. It seems to me that in using the pronoun “we”, Ellen White is explicitly including herself among those who are not able to describe the future “with accuracy”, as she puts it, or as I have been saying, in every detail. While God is consistent, He is not always predictable, and she seems to allow for that here. The broad outlines are clear enough to live by, especially where they have explicit exegetical support in Scripture, but there are things about the future it would not be good for us to know (Acts 1:6-7) and we should not presume to know them ahead of the fulfillment.

There is one further statement from 1901 that seems pertinent to the principles being outlined here. “**It is not (God’s) will that (believers) shall get into controversy over questions which will not help them spiritually**, such as, Who is to compose the hundred and forty-four thousand? This those who are the elect of God will in a short time know without question.” *Selected Messages*, volume one, page 174. In developing a series on the mark of the beast I was seeking

to be helpful to those who are confused about the issue. But in responding to requests to present this issue, the topic seems to have produced more heat than light. The details of just how the mark of the beast will work out is not the crucial issue in our walk with God. I believe it is wise for us to become familiar with the way God works in the world, to understand Revelation 13 as far as we can, and to become familiar with what Ellen White has to say about the mark of the beast. But if debating about the exact outcome of these predictions becomes the central focus and divides people into opposing camps, this topic may do more harm than good.

Undermining God's Purpose for Prophecy

The evidence drawn from fulfilled prophecy in the Bible shows us that prophecy is given as a natural extension of the prophet's time and place. God meets people where they are and the prophecy engages the world as the prophet knows it. Because that world is in constant change, now more than ever, we can expect that some elements of a prophecy may not be fulfilled, because the conditions for fulfillment have not been met. In the case of the expectation that national Sunday laws will someday be enacted in the US Congress, the conditions for that were very strong in the late 1880s, but none of those conditions were in place any longer by the time of World War I. Such Sunday laws would have to occur now in a world that is vastly different than the one Ellen White was familiar with.

As we have seen, most statements on the topic by Ellen White see Sunday laws as the fulfillment of Revelation 13, and this builds on the most likely reading of Revelation 13 as well. But her most popular statements are the ones that seem to suggest a specific national law passed in the United States Congress. This would make for a specific and attractive "sign of the End". And such a law may very well occur. But I have found only two statements regarding national Sunday laws in Congress, and they were both written in the period around 1888 where they are a logical extension of the situation in place at that point in time.

There are two ways to undermine God's purpose for prophecy. One is to ignore the prophecies of the Bible and Ellen White. This is widely seen as a problem among students of the Bible. But another way to undermine the Bible is popular among enthusiasts of the Bible and, therefore, harder to see as a threat. It is to over-specify the details of a prophecy so that a particular scenario becomes fixed in people's minds to the point that the fulfillment comes as a surprise and even a deception to the very ones anticipating it.

This happened in Jesus' day. The Pharisees in Jesus' day were avid students of prophecy. We know this from books that exist to this day, like Fourth Ezra, Second Baruch and First (or Ethiopic) Enoch. These books reflect a mindset of deep consideration of the prophecies, leading to charting of events leading up to the Messiah. Failing to fully understand how fulfilled prophecy works in the Bible, the Pharisees built up an expectation, based on their study of the

Bible, that caused them to reject Jesus when He came, because He did not fulfill their “biblical” expectations. This was a tragic error, and it could have been avoided by more attention to the conditionality of classical prophecy and the way prophecies are a natural extension of the prophet’s time and place. The messianic prophecies were fulfilled by Jesus, but in a way different from the way the Pharisees expected.

My concern is that Adventists could be making a similar mistake today in investing so much energy in the idea that a national Sunday law in the US Congress will be the specific trigger event of the end-time. This view is understandable, as it gives us a measurable specific that is easily observed. But the original conditions for such a law have passed, and should it never happen exactly that way, some serious, sincere Adventist students of prophecy might not be ready for the real thing when it happens, because their specific expectations are not met. More has changed in the world over the last hundred years than in the previous 6000. The expectation that this will have no impact at all on the way prophecy is fulfilled is uncertain at best. World-wide Sunday legislation could still happen, but fixing on that single detail (Congressional legislation) as the key could prove to be a major distraction when the time comes.

Summary and Conclusion

We began this series with the observation that many Seventh-day Adventists have a unique sign of the End that they feel prepares them to be ready for the return of Jesus. That sign is the passage of a national Sunday law in the Congress of the United States of America. Unlike many prophecies in the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy, this one seems to be very specific and measurable. If it happens or does not happen, we will all know. Members in far-flung parts of the world are probing both the news and underground “sources” to weigh the likelihood of such a law in the USA from year to year. This has been going on now for many decades, probably as much as a century. But is such a specific outcome in its *Great Controversy* context the absolute certainty that many deem it to be?

We examined the principles of prophetic interpretation that can be observed through the study of fulfilled prophecies in the Bible (for detail see *The Deep Things of God*, chapter two). These underline that prophecies regarding specific historical events are usually conditional. God meets people where they are. Prophecies are, therefore, couched in the language of the prophet’s time and place. The details are a natural extension of the prophet’s time and place. God does not always carry out every detail of prophetic predictions. Those who express certainty that there will be a national Sunday law in the US Congress are assuming (perhaps unintentionally) that Ellen White’s historical predictions are of a different kind from those of most biblical prophets, they are not at all conditional. They must be fulfilled in detail exactly as projected. But this assumption contradicts Ellen White’s own counsel: “. . . the promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional” (LDE 38). Prophecy is best understood as or after it

happens (John 13:19; 14:29). And Adventists have always sought to understand Ellen White's gift in the light of the biblical prophets, not as something completely unique.

We then examined Revelation 13, the passage in the Bible that is cited as evidence of such a Sunday law. We noted that Sunday laws at the end of time are a defensible reading of Revelation 13, and the most likely reading of the mark of the beast passage. But the mark of the beast concept is open-ended enough to allow God the freedom to guide the fulfillment of that prophecy at the time and in the way of His own choosing. So it seems to me that caution is advised in advance of the fulfillment. We should not try to close our understanding of a prediction before the fulfillment comes. When the time arrives, the fulfillment will be clear to those who have carefully explored the prophecies.

We then looked at Ellen White's Sunday law statements in light of the history of her time. The idea of a national Sunday law in Congress was very relevant in the 1880s and her statements to that effect all occur around the year 1888, when there was a bill in the Senate to impose a national Sunday law. I am aware of no such statements in earlier years, but there she sees local laws as evidence of something bigger to come (the something to come is not specified). We noted that the conditions in the United States that made the Senate bill plausible faded away in the decades that followed and have not returned. The United States no longer has a Protestant government, and the return of such would not be a natural extension of the current scene. So the expectation that the exact scenario of Great Controversy would be re-enacted in today's world should be held with caution. The constant expectation of a national Sunday law in the US Congress leads to speculation and conspiracy theories rather than sound biblical and historical study.

Sunday laws in our future remain, in my view, the likely reading of Revelation 13 and certainly that of *The Great Controversy*. But given what we know about fulfilled prophecies in the Bible, they may well come from a surprising direction. For example, Clifford Goldstein offers a path to international Sunday laws that would make sense in today's world. All the world religions anticipate some future figure that will dramatically impact the course of history. For the Christians, his name is Jesus. For the Jews, he is the Messiah. For the Muslims, he is the Mahdi (although many Muslims also anticipate a major role for Jesus). For the Hindus, he is Kalki. For the Buddhists, he is Matriya. Second Thessalonians (2:8-10) and Revelation (13:13-14; 16:13-14) anticipate a great end-time deception in which Satan impersonates Christ before the world (GC affirms this idea). His dazzling, end-time appearance could evoke the hopes and dreams of people of all faiths. Seizing upon these expectations, Satan could call the world to worship God on Sunday as a sign of loyalty to Jesus/Messiah/Mahdi/Kalki/Matriya and the highest hopes of their faiths. Such an outcome would fulfill both *The Great Controversy* and Revelation 13, but in an unexpected way, something fulfilled prophecy in the Bible would lead us to expect.

Ellen White herself hints at something like this in the following statement: "As we near the close of time, there will be greater and still greater external parade of heathen power; ***heathen deities will manifest their signal power, and will exhibit themselves before the cities of the***

world. . .” In the same context she also says, “. . . the Lord has called His people and has given them a message to bear. He has called them to expose the wickedness of the man of sin **who has made the Sunday law a distinctive power, who has thought to change times and laws,** and to oppress the people of God who stand firmly to honor Him by keeping the only true Sabbath, the Sabbath of creation. . .” *Maranatha*, 140. To me this statement suggests the possibility that a movement toward Sunday will not be a natural philosophical progression from where the world is today, but the result of dramatic shifts in the popular mindset, grounded in miraculous displays that transform popular opinion almost overnight, much as Goldstein suggests. But for those who are waiting for some “sign of the End” to get serious about their faith, such rapid movements may not signal themselves the way we might hope, and also may not leave any time for spiritual preparation. “The final movements will be rapid ones.” *Testimonies for the Church*, volume 9, page 11.

My concern, and the main point of this whole treatise on the mark of the beast, is that by focusing on a prediction that seems as specific and measurable as a national Sunday law in Congress, we could distract ourselves from the real thing when it happens. We need hearts that are open to revelation and open to the Holy Spirit as we navigate the challenging waters ahead. The desire for certainty can cause us to focus on specific details rather than on understanding the larger picture of prophecy. That understanding is difficult work, but it will keep us safe in the perplexing times ahead of us. Prophecy was not given to satisfy our curiosity about the future, it was given to prepare our hearts to meet the one that we worship and adore. I suggest we prioritize that task.