

1844

II

After the Disappointments

Two dates were proposed for the end of the world and the coming of Christ otherwise called the Second Advent. One in the spring, the other in the autumn of 1844. The events did not take place. Disappointments replaced expectations based on speculation. The speculation was that a word within a text was taken to mean the whole earth. It seems extraordinary to us to understand how the term 'sanctuary' could be interpreted to mean 'the whole of creation', the world.

Statements, i.e. claims, about the future are known only if the result can in some way be tested and confirmed. It is not possible in the present to test a claim about the future. If the reference is to the future there are no present means of confirmation or refutation. Talk can be and sometimes precariously only in terms of probability.

It is similar with many religious claims, when the reference is to some heavenly, or trans-terrestrial sphere as is the case with the problem we are considering. We cannot confirm that our speculation is correct, nor that it is the correct speculation to apply to the problem we have under consideration. Until the result it assumes takes place, we shall never know! In the meantime, our only time, we have no means of confirming what is proposed.

We shall consider Edson's enthusiastic prophetic speculation and with it raise the question, How is it possible to justify the complex generation of sanctuary hermeneutic involved with Hiram Edson's treatment, a literalism that finds symbols and then interprets them in an eccentric 'prophetic' manner. Below, we take as example how the repeated occurrence of the word 'time' is made the basis for an elaborate and fantastic speculation.

The task is to produce a persuasive post-excitement mentality. The Great Disappointment of 1844 led to reappraisal on the part of those who had expected the coming of Christ but whose hopes had been dashed. The attitude is not to abandon everything, but to construct a future for faith. The aim is to save the situation and at the same time to save the hermeneutic which produced the disappointment. They went on re-interpreting employing the same method in spite of the severe warning of the Disappointment, that is to say in spite of the previous error it produced. The decision was to abandon the result, (how could they do otherwise?) but not the method. In doing so to await the revelation from God and be assured of receiving genuine divine guidance with the same certainty that assured believers that Miller was divinely guided. So it came to pass that Edson and his companions justified the sanctuary hermeneutic. Two words are central, 'sanctuary' and 'time'.

How did they, how can we, how, justify the tortuous generation of sanctuary hermeneutic involved with the Hiram Edson treatment, a literalism that finds symbols and then interprets them by producing an eccentric ‘prophetic’ answer? Their continuing use of the hermeneutic illustrates the persuasive post-excitement mentality of the disappointed but hopeful emerging community, each giving support to each other. In the assurance that they had found a way to discover an answer they did not consider that they should examine the method of interpretation they were employing. They assumed its valid use and often said something like the following.

We must not abandon everything. We shall retain the hermeneutic and in this way shall save it. It has more to do, much more! We save the situation as we save and apply the same hermeneutic that has got us this far. So we reinterpret in spite of the warning of the immediately previously experienced events. We do not consider that it was the method of interpretation that led us to disappointment. So we will continue to employ it, since the prevailing method of interpretation is satisfactory, and will still in post disappointment days show its acceptability by being productive. This general principle will continue to prevail in the community for decades, even centuries, to come. The end result justifies the starting point and the procedure.

This process of interpretation demands a focus on certain ideas and principles and neglect of others. Certain words are key. Use them (so to speak) to experiment with exegesis in hope of getting a positive result. The acceptable result will, it was believed, provide more than ample justification for the continuing employment of the method, with little concern that it be examined and either justified or rejected.

The ‘method’ of interpretation was to gather passages from all parts of Scripture and, taking them together as the proper subject matter, relate them as seemed fit. They were, when possible, related to dates and historical events to constitute the ‘more sure word of prophecy’. So time and number became of basic importance. Numerical references found in the text were used to calculate dates for historical events. The key words in the case we are considering were ‘sanctuary’ and ‘time’.

For Edson ‘sanctuary’ is key while ‘time’ is experimental. **ftn1** If I had trained my hair to stand on end, it would mostly certainly have stood very erect as I read his comments on Leviticus 26, and observed his extreme fascination with the word ‘time’. He did not discern the difference between (1) ‘time’ as denoting a particular period, and (2) ‘time’ as expressing succession as in the phrase ‘for the second time’, ‘for the last time’. He lumps the repeated terms together and makes an aggregate of ‘seven times’ as a result. In each occasion of the word ‘time’ it means the same, and so is fit for prophetic interpretation. Thereon hangs his tale.

Taking ‘time’ to mean ‘year’, taking ‘year’ to mean 360 days, taking a day to mean a year, from ‘seven times’ he deduces a period of 2250 years. Since there are, he finds, seven prophetic ‘times’ in the chapter, this means 2520 years (7 times 360 = 2520). The community encourage him in his search to provide an interpretation. He submits to the ‘examination and inspection of the brethren.’ They await and will hopefully endorse his conclusions. That is how results follow and are accepted as divine truth.

Edson wrote a long series of articles which he called ‘The Times of the Gentiles, and the deliverance and restoration of the remnant of Israel from the seven times, or 2520 years of Assyrian or pagan and papal captivity considered.’

The community encourage him to provide an interpretation to meet their situation and are happy to accept the one he suggests, are we suggest that the conclusion is as is not more important than the method employed to produce it. He had of course to find an appropriate date to begin the calculation. Having found it he arrived at the literal date of A.D. 1798. He then connected political and international events with that year, and claimed that he ‘time of the end’ had its start at that point. This thus confirmed that it was quite appropriate to continue to live in expectation of the end, the Advent! So, while he set no date for it, it nevertheless would be relatively soon, and so hope for it may continue.

It is a case of the end justifying the means! The unintended pun is quite appropriate. Unfortunately the procedure is not unknown in biblical interpretation, even without the making of numeral and historical coincidences.

While claiming that the 1844 date was ‘uninvalidated’, but not explaining why, he turned to an elaborate and very lengthy treatment of the above subject. Basing his reasoning on his reading of Leviticus 26 he finds that the 2520 years begin in 723 B.C. with the imprisonment of King Hoshea and so end with a final date in A.D. 1798 with the downfall of the papacy, ‘the saints thereby being delivered from the papal power.’

Edson shows no interest at all in the picture of the God displayed in the chapter but is obsessed with the urge to find material that can be extracted for purposes of prophecy. Such neglect involves serious failure of discernment. He misses the basic understanding, in this case of a God threatening to punish in real history, the history of the Hebrew people.

One wonders whether this hermeneutic is what Froom and his followers are so concerned to defend. Notice how one speculative system leads to another.

One speculative system, fundamentalism, whose essential principle is a particular doctrine of biblical inspiration as the ground for biblical authority, coupled with a literalist interpretation of the text, provided the means for a second speculative prophetic system. This system of interpretation, when itself duly modified, provided the means for a third resultant speculative system, with its concern for numbers calculation and dates. In turn it produced a millennial eschatology with its intricate detail of concern with probation, investigative judgment, final punishment and reward. So the emerging community can be thankful for extended time. The seven ‘times’ of the text provide assurance that there is real time to grasp. However the time will be short, for after 1798 it is the ‘time of the end’. Time enough to consolidate, organise and witness.

The problem of adequate hermeneutic is how to interpret Scripture seriously and faithfully. Can it be a proper method of biblical interpretation to select texts from anywhere in Scripture, then to connect one text with another and another and another, without regard for historical background, history of transmission or opinions of

knowledgeable interpreters. Pick a passage anywhere and another and another and coordinate what you have chosen according to a theme you are employing. When it is completed, accepted and handed down as worthy, you defend it by any means you speculate will preserve it. Or you place it beyond the need for any such defence. It is interesting that William Miller called this system he employed a ‘promiscuous’ method of interpretation!

In my early days of philosophical study I was introduced to the idea of ‘thought experiment’, an idea well worth considering. In one way its meaning overlaps with the notion of ‘speculation’. When completed, since at the outset one is unsure whether it is a valuable exercise or not, the result must be evaluated to see if it proves to be worthy. That it may not is hinted at in the term ‘experiment’. Here it also contrasts with the term ‘speculation’ which sometimes, perhaps often, carries the overtone of being insecure, in terms of its truth value, especially as it often means ‘only speculation’, i.e. not to be taken seriously.

The context in which the speculation emerges will often determine whether it will be taken as unquestionable or as an experiment in thought with the aim of providing the best explanation, whether the best explanation can be shown to be true or not. That raises the question of how we shall define ‘truth’. It also requires us to know what it means to give a good explanation.

Take our example above. Edson’s thought about time, dating, and a literal sanctuary in space was by him and many of his fellow believers taken to be true, without further consideration. They did not think of it as an experimental exercise but a grasp of the truth and as such immediately worthy of belief. There was no need to test it. It provided an immediate solution to the urgent problem and the key to future developments within the divided community of Adventists. The basis for this they found in passages in the selected apocalyptic Scriptures that they considered authenticated their speculations. They defended their interpretation of the inspired Scripture by means of further speculative assertions about its authority. They saw the results as revelation from God.

But now there had been a shift. No longer was confirmation found by the application of the numerical prophecy to the concrete, earthly reality, where it had been tested and proved false. Rather the shift took place by attention being moved to the non-material, ethereal, ‘heavenly’ realm. Here no such confirmation was available. If a sense of urgency was still desirable, other means had to be found to achieve and sustain this attitude. This follows a well-documented pattern with groups that experience failure of prophecy. What is important now is to create and maintain the cohesion of the group. And this is accomplished by continuing conversation within the group, as it frames an alternative interpretation of the prophecy that is acceptable to them and which forms a basis for significant agreement over the revised interpretation. Once a basic agreement has been established, that consensus can be significantly elaborated and eventually become the accepted and required system of belief of the developing group. Ways are then found to claim that the body of beliefs are authoritative. **ftn2**

Basic to all of this is the acceptance of a particular speculation about the Bible, as Scripture. This is an interpretation of the inspiration of the writings. It’s a twofold

speculation leading to an assertion that inspiration grounds the authority of Scripture on the one hand, and on the other insists that since established as authoritative the sentences of Scripture, are to be taken as literally true and so when interpreted the doctrine that results has divine authority. The result of such speculation is an assertion of the undeniable authority of Scripture and also the teaching derived from it.

Footnotes

1 'Review and Herald', January 3 1856, number 14, 'The Times of the Gentiles'.

2 Cf. the discussion of Festiger, Leon, Riecken, and Henry, and Schacter, Stanley, *When Prophecy Fails*. Harper Torchbooks, 1964. For a brief summary of the argument of this book and examples see Ian Leslie, *Born Liars*, pp. 185ff. Speaking of 'the recurrence of sects or cults that prophesied a worldwide cataclysm on one particular date or another that would sweep away everyone except for the true believers' he writes,

Only those who believed in the teachings of the group would then enjoy salvation and eternal happiness. Festiger noted that when the predictions of these groups proved false, as they invariably did, the group rarely disbanded or dispersed, at least not immediately. After the initial dismay, the cultists would strengthen their conviction, defy the scorn of non-believers, and take to the streets to assert, with increased fervour, the righteousness of their cause.