

Apocalyptic and Free Will

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Adventism, historically speaking, is firmly grounded in apocalypticism, as indeed also was early Christianity.¹ Adventism, as an heir of Millerism, was born of the study of the books of Daniel and Revelation, supplemented by the Little Apocalypse of the Olivet Discourse (Mark 13, Matthew 24-25, Luke 21), and even, during the beginnings of the movement, some attention to 2 Esdras.²

It has become commonplace to distinguish between two types of Hebrew literary prophecy: classical and apocalyptic. Classical prophecy had its roots in the warnings and promises of Deuteronomy 27-30. The summation is 30:15-18:

See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping

¹ One of the most important chapters in the *New Testament* was Daniel 7. From verses 9-18 come some of its most important motifs and terminology: the final Judgment, the Son of Man, the Kingdom of God, the Saints.

² See "A Word to the Little Flock," reprinted in *Earliest Seventh-day Adventist Periodicals* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2005), Part I. The tract was an account of visions received by Ellen White, but references to passages throughout the Bible are incorporated, as well as multiple references to 2 Esdras 2, 6, 15, 16, 43. There is also one reference to Wisdom of Solomon 5:1-5. The scriptural references for the visions are said to have been supplied by James White. But that is enough to establish early Adventist interest in this apocryphal apocalypse. In respect to canonical biblical books some apocalyptic flavor has also been detected in Zechariah.

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his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you this day, that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess.³

As Isaiah puts it succinctly, “If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken: (Isaiah 1:19, 20).

All the classical prophecies are warnings or promises that are explicitly or implicitly conditional upon the response and behavior of the people of Israel. It assumes that they have within their power the ability to choose the path that they will take, and the fulfillment is in this age. The predictions of disaster will be fulfilled only if the people does not respond to them by repentance and obedience. In other words, classical prophecy is predicated on the assumption of free will.⁴

Apocalyptic prophecy is different. It assumes that the future is completely out of human control. Divine intervention comes from without and brings history to an end, and the history is predetermined from the beginning. The present world is hopeless, but in the end God will be victorious, and he has total control of events. As Gowan says, “The basis for this hope is strongly *deterministic* theology which appears most prominently in two places: where the existence of evil is explained . . . and where the future is predicted. Obviously the seer can know what the future will be only if it has already been determined by someone with the power to assure that things will come out that way, and they firmly believe that to be true about the God of Israel.”⁵

³ All biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

⁴ A typical description of classical prophecy, in contrast to apocalypticism, is that in it “the future grows out of the present and salvation and fulfillment are looked for in history;” it is conditional; the prophetic messages were preached; and they were often poetic in form. Thus Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 477.

⁵ Donald E. Gowan, *Bridge Between the Testaments: Reappraisal of Judaism From the Exile to the Birth of Christianity*, 3rd ed., Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series, 14 (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1995) 361. Gowan also suggests a formal distinction: Classical prophecy would have first been preached and was usually expressed

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Examination of a book like Daniel seems to confirm the accuracy of this description. Not only do we see a scripted scenario, but there are time tables that will be followed. The train is on a track, and it will not be derailed, diverted, or detained. There is nothing that any human can do to change the destiny that is predicted.⁶

In the first century of our era the three principle Jewish denominations were differentiated partly by the ways in which they responded to the apocalyptic vision. The Sadducees, who accepted as canonical only the five books of Moses, believed totally in free will.⁷

The Essenes, who cherished every apocalypse they could get their hands on, were strongly deterministic in their outlook.⁸ They believed that God had revealed his unalterable plan to them. In their view, all prophecies were for the time of the end, which was their time. They could be understood by inspired interpretations, called *pesharim*, supplied by their leader, the Teacher of Righteousness.⁹ By putting the time prophecies of Daniel together with certain other prophecies they were able to calculate when the end of the age would come. After one disappointment their final calculation was that the end would come in A.D. 70.¹⁰

in poetry, while apocalyptic prophecy was a literary production written in prose.

⁶ That Daniel is deterministic has been vigorously disputed by Dalton D. Baldwin, "Free Will and Conditionality in Daniel," in *To Understand the Scriptures: Essays in Honor of William H. Shea*, ed. By David Merling (Berrien Springs, MI: The Institute of Archaeology/Siegfried H. Horn Archaeological Museum, 1997), 163-72. Baldwin points to numerous references in Daniel that imply that ". . . divine action in reference to human beings is conditioned on their free choices." Furthermore, if Daniel was written to encourage Jews to remain faithful, it implies that they had the capability not to do so (165). On this see below.

⁷ Josephus *Jewish War* 2.162. Also Philo of Alexandria defended free will and opposed fatalism. See *De providentia* 1.80.

⁸ Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.18. Most scholars accept that the sect of the Dead Sea Scrolls were Essenes, so we may also note IQS 3.15, "From the God of Knowledge comes all that is and shall be. Before ever they existed He established their whole design, and when, as ordained for them, they come into being, it is in accord with His glorious design that they accomplish their task without change. The laws of all things are in His hand and He provides them with all their needs." Translation from Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 4th ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 101.

⁹ F.F. Bruce, *Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 2nd ed. (London: Paternoster, 1961), 70-79.

¹⁰ Hartmut Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran: On the Essenes, Qumran, John the Baptist, and Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 205-209.

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The Pharisees, like many after them, sought to have it both ways. As the influential Rabbi Aqiba b. Joseph said, “All is foreseen, but freedom of choice is given.”¹¹

Apocalyptic prophecy is predicated on the proposition that God has a script, a plan the outworking of which is inevitable. The detailed scenarios and time tables hardly make sense otherwise. Later extensions and interpretations only intensify this picture by elaborating details. Adventism has latter-day *pesharim* which spell out the future history of such entities as the Catholic Church, Protestantism, and the United States of America.¹² The possibility is not entertained that any of these entities can change course and proceed in a different direction than the one that is marked out.

What happens when apocalypticism, with its strong determinism and insistence upon God’s irresistible sovereignty and complete control over history and the destiny of men, becomes laminated to Arminianism with its vigorous resistance to determinism? Among the propositions set forth in the Arminian Remonstrance of 1610 are that God’s saving grace is not irresistible, and that it is possible for Christians to fall from grace. It follows that no one is predestined, apart from his own choice, to damnation or salvation. These views were taken up by English and American Methodism, and by the anti-Calvinist Christian Connexion, and from these they passed into Adventism. In this view the human will is not only free but potent, at least to the extent that it can choose to serve God. Typical statements are these:

God does not force the will of His creatures. He can not accept an homage that is not willingly and intelligently given. A mere forced submission would prevent all real development of mind or character; it would make man a mere automaton.¹³

¹¹ Mishnah *Aboth* 3:16.

¹² See, for example, Uriah Smith, *The Prophecies of Daniel and Revelation*, Vol. 1: *Daniel*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1944), 270-334; Uriah Smith, *Synopsis of the Present Truth: A Brief Exposition of the Views of S. D. Adventists* (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1884), 47-61; Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan: The Conflict of the Ages in the Christian Dispensation* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1926), 495-716.

¹³ Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1908), 48.

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What you need to understand is the true force of the will. This is the governing power in the nature of man, the power of decision, or of choice. Everything depends on the right action of the will. The power of choice God has given to men; it is theirs to exercise. You can not change your heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections; but you can *choose* to serve Him.¹⁴

Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator,—individuality, power to think and to do.¹⁵

In the officially affirmed doctrinal statement of the Adventist Church, known as the “Fundamental Beliefs,” article 7, entitled “The Nature of Man,” we find it stated thus:

Man and woman were made in the image of God with individuality, the power and freedom to think and to do. Though created free beings, each is an indivisible unity of body, mind, and soul, dependent upon God for life and breath and all else¹⁶

It would seem, then, that Adventism was originally deterministic in its eschatology and antideterministic in its anthropology. Its soteriology is delicately poised between the two. Over time the theology has been gradually moving to the side of indeterminism. The Second Coming of Christ has been made postponable and conditional upon human action of various kinds. The translation of 2 Peter 3:12 is favored that reads, “waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God.” The Lord delays his coming out of mercy: “The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish” (2 Peter 3:9). The development of genuine godliness becomes almost a prerequisite for the Day of the Lord, as is also the completion of the missionary task (Matthew 24:14). A common expression of Adventist piety is “Let’s finish the work so the Lord can come.” It is hard to imagine a sentiment more out of tune with the emphasis on divine sovereignty that

¹⁴ Ibid., 52.

¹⁵ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1903), 17.

¹⁶ *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, revised ([Hagerstown, MD]: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1990).

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is characteristic of apocalypticism. It looks like classical prophecy in an apocalyptic disguise.

Nevertheless the paradox is sometimes felt, and indeed it is one that has been felt ever since the first century.¹⁷ How serious is it, and how can it be resolved?

One answer to the problem is to say that the destiny of the aggregate is determined, but not that of the individual. Thus Gowan notes that apocalypticists

remain faithful to the Old Testament in that their determinism does not extend to the destiny of the individual. Although repentance is seldom spoken of, apostasy is seen as a definite possibility and, although there is nothing one can do to alter the course of history it is necessary to exhort believers to remain faithful so that they may come out on the right side when the end comes.¹⁸

This turns on its head the teaching of the staunchly deterministic Augustine of Hippo. Needing to explain 1 Timothy 2:4 (“[God] who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”) he says “all men” means every sort of man, “the human race in all its varieties of rank and circumstance” (with the word “all” having the same force as in Luke 11:42), but it does not mean every individual.¹⁹ In any case, the will of God cannot be overcome by the will of man.

Thus, in complete contrast to Augustine’s view, the fate of individuals is not sealed ahead of time, but that of the nations or groups to which they belong is predestined. A possible objection to this distinction between the individual and the aggregate is the Bible concept of corporate personality. To a certain extent every individual shares the fate of his nation or his group. But there are exceptions, like Noah and his family, like Abraham, and like Rahab. They chose to be different.

¹⁷ Whether the messianic redemption will come at a predestined time or can be hastened or delayed by Israel’s behavior was the subject of a classic debate between R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus and R. Joshua b. Hananiah in Talmud Bavli *Sanhedrin* 97b ff. The issue is also the subtext of 2 Peter 3.

¹⁸ Gowan, *Bridge*, 361. Most of the references cited by Baldwin, “Free Will and Conditionality,” come under this rubric.

¹⁹ Augustine *Enchiridion* 103.

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Another option is to ignore the paradox by distinguishing between destiny and foreknowledge, and to say, like R. Aqiba: “All is foreseen, but free will is given.”²⁰ This entails accepting that God does not control the choices that people make, but he has foreknowledge of what they will choose; and on the basis of that foreknowledge he decrees their fate. Thus Justin Martyr was at pains to explain why prophecy does not defeat human responsibility:

So that none may infer from what we have said that the events we speak of, because they were foreknown and predicted, took place according to inevitable destiny—I can explain this too. We have learned from the prophets, and declare as the truth, that penalties and punishments and good rewards are given according to the quality of each man’s actions. If this were not so, nothing would be left up to us. For if it is destined that one man should be good and another wicked, then neither is the one acceptable nor the other blameworthy. . . .²¹

But we do say that deserved rewards are irrevocably destined for those who have chosen to do good, and likewise their just deserts for those [who have chosen] the opposite. But God did not make man like other [beings], such as trees and animals, which have no power of choice. For he would not be worthy of rewards or praise if he did not choose the good of himself, but was so made. . . .²²

Finally, after quoting Deuteronomy 30:15, Isaiah 1:16-20, and Plato’s *Republic* 617E, Justin concludes:

So when we say that things yet to happen have been prophesied, we do not say that they take place by inevitable destiny, but since God foreknows what all men will do, and it is his decree that each will be rewarded according to the quality of his actions, he foretells by the prophetic Spirit what he will do in accordance with the quality of what they do.²³

²⁰ Mishnah *Aboth* 3:16, quoted above.

²¹ Justin *Apology* 1:43. Translations of Justin are taken from Cyril C. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.* 1:44.

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Justin was fighting Valentinian Gnosticism, which taught that people are hylics, psychics, or pneumatics by destiny. But that was not Augustine's problem, and he had no patience for such a line of argument as Justin's. Commenting on Romans 9:10-18 (the case of Jacob and Esau), he remarks:

Now if the apostle had wished us to understand that there were future good works of the one, and evil works of the other, which of course God foreknew, he would never have said, "not of works," but "of future works," and in that way would have solved the difficulty, or rather there would have been no difficulty to solve. . . . But he will have mercy on whom he will.²⁴

Perhaps it is a question of whether a choice is a work. If we are saved by our own choice, are we still saved by God's grace?

But the question we must address is: Are the scenarios and time tables of apocalyptic prophecy an expression of God's foreknowledge or a declaration of God's plan? More practically, can anyone—whether individual, nation, or church—do anything different from that which has been foretold? If not, foreknowledge looks very much like predestination, and we have a verbal distinction without a practical difference.

A third way to resolve the paradox is to remove or reduce the difference between apocalyptic and classical prophecy. We may recall again Gowan's observation, already quoted, that in apocalyptic "Although repentance is seldom spoken of, apostasy is seen as a definite possibility and, although there is nothing one can do to alter the course of history it is necessary to exhort believers to remain faithful so that they may come out on the right side when the end comes."²⁵

But even beyond that, the difference between the two kinds of prophecy may not be absolute. After all, the classic example of conditionality in prophecy is Jonah, whose prophecy of doom included an unambiguous time table: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"²⁶ On the apocalyptic side, Daniel concludes the *peshet* of Nebuchadnezzar's dream

²⁴ Augustine *Enchiridion* 98. Augustine discusses the whole issue at length in *Enchiridion* 97-103. Translation from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff; reprint (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004).

²⁵ Gowan, *Bridge*, 361.

²⁶ Jonah 3:4.

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by suggesting that his prophesied destiny might be averted or at least modified somewhat by repentance: “Break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your tranquillity.”²⁷ The Book of Revelation is replete with warnings and promises that imply the need to make right decisions, and with appeals for repentance.²⁸

If the distinctiveness of apocalyptic prophecy is diminished there are losses and gains. On the one hand, certainty about future events is reduced.²⁹ On the other hand, fatalism and the futility of human effort is reduced. The kind of hope that is dependent upon God’s sovereign power is replaced with hope that is placed on the potency of human decisions and effort. God is still in the picture as the Rewarder and Punisher, but the outcome depends on what we do.³⁰ The attractiveness of apocalypticism, and whether one wants to drink it without mixture or drink it diluted probably depends on the degree of pessimism or optimism of the times.

We have reviewed three ways of dissolving the paradox that is produced when apocalypticism is laminated to Arminianism: (1) distinguish between aggregate destiny and individual destiny; (2) distinguish between foreknowledge and predestinating decree; (3) dissolve the distinction between classical prophecy and apocalyptic prophecy, resolving the tension between them in favor of free will.

There remains only a fourth way to deal with the problem: Simply accept the paradox as paradox and live with it. It would not be the only antinomy in Christian theology.

²⁷ Daniel 4:27.

²⁸ E.g., 2:5, 10, 16; 3:5, 18; 9:20; 14:9-12; 18:4; 21:7, 8; 22:14, 15.

²⁹ If this direction is taken, the possibility opens up that the Pope may declare that Christians should keep the seventh-day Sabbath, and the United States of America may end up as a paragon of national virtue.

³⁰ Thus Baldwin concludes: “Daniel is not written from a deterministic world view. The condemnation of the rebellious choices of beastly powers, the many appeals to free right choice and the frequent description of God’s action as conditioned on human free choices indicate that the books is written from a world view that includes free choices and conditionality.” “Free Will and Conditionality,” 172.

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