



Understanding the 1,260-year Prophecy

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A legal solution

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The prophetic period of “times and times and the dividing of time” (Dan. 7:25, KJV), has been historically understood by Adventists as comprising a period of 1,260 years during the Middle Ages. Prior to the French Revolution, Christian thinkers gave a range of views about when the period started and ended. But with the rise of Napoleon, and the exile into captivity of the pope by French general Berthier, there was

a rare moment of near prophetic unanimity among Protestant expositors, who declared that this period ended in A.D. 1798. It was a matter, then, of running the period backward to find the starting point, which would be A.D. 538.¹

After the shock and clarity of the events of the 1790s subsided, however, some scholars could not see a decisive event in A.D. 538 that matched the clarity of a pope being exiled and dying in jail. Some thought that the beginning was signaled by the third horn of Daniel 7 being uprooted, which was the defeat of the Ostrogoths by Justinian's general Belisarius in 538.

The trouble was that the decisive "defeat" appeared a little anticlimactic, as it involved the breaking of the Ostrogoth siege of Rome by Belisarius. The event was just one stage in an ongoing conflict that continued for at least two decades. The Ostrogoths regained Rome in the 540s, and needed to be dislodged again. The Ostrogoths were not fully defeated until about A.D. 553. So what made the 538 battle so much more prophetically significant and decisive than similar victories in the 540s and the final battle in 553?²

The lack of a clear answer has caused some expositors to argue that 538 has no inherent significance, and was merely chosen because of its convenient relationship to the decisive ending in 1798. This has caused some scholars, including some Adventists, to move away from

viewing the 1,260-year prophecy as having a literal, historical application, and as being more of a symbolic number. This approach has also gained ground in relation to some other prophetic time periods, such as those found in the fifth and sixth trumpets of Revelation.

In this article I maintain that rather than military events, we should consider the creation or dissolution of legal structures. This legal approach, I believe, provides a firmer basis for this, and perhaps other, prophetic time periods.

Traditional Adventist Approaches

As early Adventists adopted the prophecy as part of the historicist heritage, most prophetic expositors tied the timing of the beginning of the 1,260 years with military victories of Rome to the final uprooting of the three horns by the little horn of Daniel 7:8, 20, 24. This shows up in several written works, including Uriah Smith's *Daniel and the Revelation* and *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* on the book of Daniel, among others.

An important exception to this trend is Ellen White. In *The Great Controversy*, she simply wrote that in the sixth century "the bishop of Rome was declared to be the head over the entire church. Paganism had given place to the papacy. The dragon had given to the beast 'his power, and his seat, and great authority.' Rev. 13:2. And now began

the 1260 years of papal oppression. . . . Dan. 7:25.”³ Here, Ellen White focuses on the moment of empowerment with legal authority.

However, some Adventist scholars are starting to think of the 1,260 years in terms of general or even symbolic periods of time, and moving away from being overly concerned with specific starting and ending times. This move toward an idealistic or symbolic position regarding the time periods of Revelation begins to disconnect Revelation from actual history. This method would certainly be a very different approach to the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation than that expressed by our pioneers, or exhibited by Ellen White in *The Great Controversy*.

A Legal Framework for the 1,260 Years

A careful study of Daniel 7:24-26 and some related prophetic passages reveals that the decisive events of the terminal moments of the 1,260 years should be understood primarily legally, rather than militarily. Once this legal framework is understood and given its due weight it becomes clearer how the 538 event relates to the 1798 event. In a nutshell, the Justinian Code, which was completed in 534, “enacted orthodox Christianity into law,” placed the pope as the formal head of Christendom, “ordered all Christian groups to submit to [his] authority,” and gave him civil power of life and death over heretics.⁴

This code, however, did not become legally promulgated and enacted on the ground until the siege of Rome was lifted in 538. Justinian's general, Belisarius, had entered Rome unopposed at the end of 536, but shortly thereafter the Ostrogoths came and laid siege to Rome. After about a year the siege was broken, and Belisarius had control of Rome and its environs.⁵ It was then that the provisions of the code elevating the Papacy could actually be implemented by Belisarius beyond the borders of Rome itself. The Gothic Wars continued, with the Ostrogoths being finally driven out in 553.⁶

But these later battles and sieges did not nullify the papal-centered legal system that had been put into place in 538. Even when Rome fell again to the Goths, they did not control the Papacy, as at that time it was operating outside Rome. "After 538," Adventist scholar Jean Zukowski observed, "the papacy never came back under the control of the Ostrogothic kings."⁷ The papal system, placed at the head of Christendom and given the power of life and death over heretics by the Justinian Code, endured in the West for more than 1,000 years, being given a great boost in the legal revolutions of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, forming the legal scaffolding of many modern states.⁸ That is, until the secular revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where the code and its religious character were explicitly rejected.

These secular revolutions began with the French Revolution, which soon led to the capture and exile of the pope by Berthier in 1798. But again, more significant than the military/political event of the capture and exile was the replacement of the religious-centric Justinian Code by the secular Napoleonic Code. The secular code was implemented by the famous bill number 8 of February 15, 1798, where General Berthier declared Rome an independent republic and “in consequence, every other temporal authority emanating from the old government of the Pope, is suppressed, and it shall no more exercise any function.”⁹

I believe that this focus on the legal, rather than the military, is justified and even required by the biblical passages surrounding the 1,260-year period. While the uprooting of the three horns is certainly relevant and connected to the rise of the little horn, the biblical text does not emphasize military as being decisive in the timing of the 1,260-year prophecy. Rather, the key verse is Daniel 7:25, which says that the saints shall be “given into his hand for a time and times and half a time.” The key moment related to the time period is not something the little horn does to conquer or assert itself; rather the focus is on the time that the little horn is “given” certain authority and dominion. This would best be fulfilled by a legal act of another bestowing authority, which is precisely what the Justinian Code did.

Thus authority came to the Roman church through a combination of legal, ecclesiastical, and military events. The Goths held Rome and Italy prior to 536 and the arrival of Belisarius. The pope, Silverius, had been chosen by the Gothic king, Theodahad. Justinian hand-picked a Roman deacon, Vigilius, to be pope. In 537, Belisarius sent Pope Silverius into exile, and eventual death, and put in place Vigilius. Pope Vigilius is the first pope with unquestioned loyalty to Justinian and his new code, which in 538 becomes meaningfully effective for the first time.¹⁰

There is a clear and parallel symmetry in the 1,260-year period *starting* with a pope being exiled and replaced with one hand-picked by the emperor under the auspices of a new legal code (the Justinian Code—one that elevates the Roman church to official, legal priority), and *ending* with a pope being exiled by an emperor and a religious code replaced by a secular rule (the Napoleonic Code, a secular system that rejects the idea of a special place for the church).

Conclusion: A Legal Focus

The history of church and state relations is exceedingly helpful to an understanding of prophecy. The uprooting of three horns is a historical process over a period of time, from the 470s to the 550s. But legal enactments can provide a more precise time boundary for relating to historical developments. For this reason, I believe, the

Bible often focuses on legal enactments when dealing with historic time periods in prophecy. Viewed through the legal prism, the 538 event now stands as a true bookend to the 1798 event.

To consider a legal framework of prophetic interpretation is not to suggest that the traditional view of military events and battles is irrelevant, but rather that the relevance of these events is primarily that of helping begin or end legal and governmental regimes. It offers a more unified, historically grounded, real-world interpretation of prophecy. And is this not an appropriate principle and focus for a Book and a God concerned less with force and coercion, and more with displays between forms of governance based on contrasting principles of love and power?

¹ Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978).

² See Will Durant, *The Age of Faith* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), pp. 108-110.

³ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), p. 54.

⁴ Durant, p. 112.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁷ Jean Carlos Zukowski, "The Role and Status of the Catholic Church in the Church-State Relationship Within

the Roman Empire from A.D. 306 to 814” (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2009), p. 160.

⁸ Ibid., p. 114.

⁹ Constitution of the Roman Republic, translated from the Authentic Italian Edition (1798), is a “Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man and of Citizens,” with a tabulated series of Articles of (1) Rights and (2) Duties, followed by the text of the Roman Constitution. (Original Title: Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana, adottata per acclamazione dei comizi nazionali in Lione, Anno I, 26 Gennaio 1802.)

¹⁰ Vigilius’ first year of rule under the Justinian Code would have been in 538. His sovereignty, as a practical matter, does not take effect until after the breaking of the siege in 538. Zukowski, p. 160.

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