

# THE BIBLE AND HISTORY

By Paul Penno Jr.

February 25, 2012

David Irving is the author of a book, "Hitler's War," in which he denies that there were gas ovens at Auschwitz and that Hitler did not authorize the extermination of Jews. His book has stirred a storm of comment regarding historians. In France and Germany it is against the law to publish such statements that are considered historical lies. The comment in the press regarding Irving's book has stirred much discussion about the evil results of twisting and distorting historical facts. Irving "is a falsifier of history," says Lawyer Richard Rampton.

The person who loves Bible truth is also concerned about the importance of historians telling the truth about history. He who lies about the past lies about the future; "we cannot escape history," said Abraham Lincoln. A distorted or falsified history spells ruin for the future of a nation, which is why German leaders view with alarm all efforts to falsify the history of Germany's past lest a future generation in ignorance or misinformation repeat that sad history.

The same honest concern applies to the history of God's work. The NIV for Jeremiah 8:8 reveals the prophet as telling the Kingdom of Judah that their historians have falsified their national history and in so doing plunged their nation into ruin. "How can you say, 'We are wise for we have the law [torah] of the Lord,' when actually the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely?" Likewise, the scribes and

Pharisees in Jesus' day "handled falsely" their history and thereby prepared to lead the nation to crucify the Son of God. A wise writer has warned the church that "we have nothing to fear for the future except as we forget the way the Lord has led us and His teaching in our past history."<sup>1</sup> Jesus says, "Take heed that no man deceive you" (Mt. 24:4). To be deceived is not merely a temporary setback, it can be fatal.

In this time of great crisis for God's work of proclaiming the gospel to all the world, it is especially important that the history of the work of the Holy Spirit not be "falsified" as wrote the ancient scribes in Jeremiah's day. Those who dig into the facts of national or church history and present them honestly are to be welcomed not resented or silenced. "Prove all things," says the inspired apostle, and "hold fast that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21). You want your doctor to be careful and accurate when it comes to your health; it's also important to remember that the health of the church is involved with honest history.

Denominational leaders, conference officials, pastors, and thoughtful lay members share an agonizing concern. Is Heaven concerned also? It's the most difficult problem the Lord has wrestled with in 6000 years!

The usual answer is, "The latter rain is the solution. It will refresh and awaken the church."

But haven't we been seeking it for 150 years? And we've learned that large baptisms don't solve the

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen White, *Life Sketches*, p. 196.

problem, for new members quickly become infected with our old virus of lukewarmness. If we baptized a billion new members, they would soon catch the same disease. Our churches in the Third World are fast becoming like us in the Western World.<sup>2</sup>

“Then let’s pray more earnestly!” Again, a good answer. We are told to pray for the latter rain. The Jews at the Wailing Wall are also praying, incessantly, for their Messiah to come. But they first have a duty to do—to read the New Testament, recover faith in the Messiah whom their fathers crucified, and repent. Does Heaven see that *we also have a duty to do* before our prayers for the latter rain can be heard?

Jesus says, “Because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (Rev. 3:16, NIV).

Another popular answer to our question is, “Put the members to work winning souls. That will revive them.” “Work” has always been healthful for us. But how do you get a lukewarm church to work, other than in spurts? Will it be true at last that righteousness has to be by works? If works must bring it, won’t we have the cart before the horse?

Another suggestion: “The organized church is hopeless; join the offshoots. They’re not lukewarm.” But how do we know? Their saying so doesn’t make it so. Give them time. History has proven that a zeal without knowledge soon fails.

Our problem has been with us a long time.

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<sup>2</sup> This is evident as living standards rise in the Third World, and as Adventists from there emigrate to Europe, Australia, or the U.S.

I remember as a youth reading and hearing the frequent solemn appeals from church leaders to “make a covenant with God by sacrifice,” “let nothing between the soul and the Saviour,” give Him our all. When at camp meetings we were called to reconsecration, almost everyone would jump to his feet. Then we’d go home as lukewarm as before. Occasional revivalists shoot across the sky like meteors, camp meetings are abuzz, and then again we’re back where we were.

We heard the solemn appeals from the General Conference presidents, W. A. Spicer (1922-1930), C. H. Watson (1930-1936), and J. L. McElhany (1936-1950). Elder Watson drove around Southern Junior College campus in his tiny Bantam Austin—setting an example of economy and sacrifice to those driving Chevys and Buicks. There was the awe-inspiring revivalist, Meade MacGuire. All these revivals and reformations have ended in continued lukewarmness. Even “celebrationism” seems not to have helped.

#### When We Almost Broke Through

Prominent among General Conference presidents who pleaded for a change was Elder Robert H. Pierson (1966-1979). Totally devoted, he did his best. Thirty-five years ago he wanted the church to recover the 1888 new covenant message, but then came the Palmdale Conference of early 1976 when he was persuaded instead to yield his support to the Australian “new theology” as the path to revival. The soul-stirring 1973-74 Annual Council Appeals that he inspired became history. The wordliness he decried is now rampant. And the “new theology”

sucked hundreds of ministers and thousands of members out of church fellowship. (It was not new covenant truth!)

Ancient Israel's experience illuminates ours. Abraham's justification by faith was to have been the guiding light of a nation's world mission. "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed," the Lord promised (Gen. 12:3). Abraham made no promise in return; all he did was believe the Lord's promise (Gen. 15:6). *That promise of God was the new covenant.*

Before the giving of the law at Sinai with "thunders, and lightings," earthquake, fire, and the death boundary, the Lord tried to re-establish the same new covenant with Abraham's descendants: "If you will indeed listen [Hebrew] to My voice, and keep [cherish, Hebrew] My covenant [His new covenant promise to Abraham], *then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people*" (Ex. 19:5).<sup>3</sup> Of all nations in the world, they were to be "the head and not the tail" (Deut. 28:13). But Mt. Sinai was the turning point in the nation's destiny, for they refused the Lord's new covenant of justification by faith. Instead of humbly saying "Amen" to *God's* promise as Abraham did (the Hebrew word for "believe" is amen), the people promised a works program of obedience, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Ex. 19:8). *That was the old covenant.* The nation bound themselves to a long detour that

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<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew word often translated "obey" means "listen" (*shamea*). The word translated "keep" in this text is *shamar*, which in Genesis 2:15 means to "cherish," to treasure, to prize highly, but not explicitly "obey."

would finally lead them to the terrible deed of Christ's crucifixion.

#### There Were Ups and Downs in Israel's History

David seems to have understood that the Lord's new covenant promise included total national preeminence in the world: "I will appoint a place for My people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own and move no more; nor shall the sons of wickedness oppress them anymore, as previously. . . I will subdue all your enemies" (1 Chron. 17:9, 10).

Solomon for a time grasped the promise, praying "that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God; there is no other" (1 Kings 8:60). Translated into simple English, this meant that there were to be no cruel world empires to trample down the earth, such as Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Grecia or Rome. Israel would have remained forever the benevolent super-power of the world. But Assyria rose to terrorizing world dictatorship in 933 B.C., almost the exact time Kings Rehoboam and Jeroboam began their slide into apostasy in 931. From then on there was seldom anything in Israel but old covenant disappointment, century after century. Two fantastic phenomena evolved side by side: apostasy deepening in both Israel and Judah, paralleled by Assyria's growing terrorism. As God's people's apostasy became almost total, Babylon's and at last Rome's rule became ever more oppressive.

Who can imagine how much needless suffering the world at large had to endure! It all came as the direct result of the old covenant which Israel

fastened upon themselves at Sinai. This fatal choice was the beginning of the detour which must after many centuries finally lead God's people back to the justification by faith that Abraham experienced. There is no evidence that any king after David truly understood it. Probably Paul was the first to discern this significance of Israelite history as a detour leading back eventually to the new covenant given to Abraham: "The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Gal. 3:24).

Even the way the law was given at Sinai in Exodus 20 was the result of their old covenant. Did the Lord have to frighten Abraham in that terror-induced way? He simply wrote the law in his heart. In contrast, at Sinai He must write it on tables of stone! And even the sanctuary was an accommodation to the people's unbelief because Paul says the *old* covenant required an "earthly sanctuary" (Heb. 9:1). Build it, the Lord said, "that I may dwell *among them*," since because of their old covenant unbelief He could not dwell in them as He wanted to do (Ex. 25:8). The Levitical sacrificial service with its rivers of blood, which the Lord never "delighted in," was the result of the people's unbelief (cf. Isa. 1:11-14).<sup>4</sup>

A bird's-eye view of Israel's story demonstrates old covenant unbelief impelling them to final ruin. Monarch after monarch dragged their nation downhill. Not one ruler of the northern kingdom ever did what was "right," although the Lord pleaded with

them by numerous prophets and messengers (2 Kings 17:13, 14). Finally in 722 B.C. Assyria crushed them forever as a nation and scattered them irrevocably among the Gentiles. Even "the tail" disappeared.

Meanwhile, Judah steadily rebelled. Several of their kings did desperately try a stop-gap of revival and reformation, such as Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and last of all, beloved young Josiah. But Scripture shows that each simply tried to renew an old covenant revival. Never was new covenant justification by faith recovered. They were sincerely blind to the faith which Abraham had experienced. The problem was not that they had an "organization;" it was their heart-alienation.

Hezekiah (729-686 B.C.) narrowly missed going down in history as the greatest king ever to sit on David's throne. If he had said "amen" when the Lord told him, "Set your house in order, for you shall die" (2 Kings 20:1), his outstanding performance would have left no record of evil in his reign. But even he was not reconciled to God!

When he pouted and begged to be healed, telling the Lord it's not fair ("Haven't I served with 'a perfect heart?'" ) the Lord added 15 years to his life; then came tragedy. The healed king proudly exposed the nation's secrets to their future enemy Babylon, and sired the worst ruler Judah ever had—Manasseh. The kingdom bottomed out when he taught the people "to do more evil than the nations whom the Lord had destroyed before the children of Israel" (2 Chron. 33:9). Good king Hezekiah's reformation evaporated in thin air when

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<sup>4</sup> See also Jer. 6:20, 7:22; Amos 5:21-27, etc.

his wicked son ascended the throne. The people followed him into evil as eagerly as they had followed Hezekiah into old covenant reformation. Faithful Hezekiah's son is cited as the prime reason for their national ruin (Jer. 15:4).

#### Josiah Was the Last Reprieve.

This young king's zeal for the Lord was unbounded (639-608 B.C.). Again, in deep piety he sought to renew the old covenant: "He made all who were present in Jerusalem and Benjamin take their stand for it" (2 Chron. 34:31, 32). But the prophetess Huldah had to tell him sadly that it was too late; all this "reformation" was only veneer-deep. Utter disaster must "gender [its] bondage" to the ruin of the nation and their captivity in an alien land (cf. Gal. 4:24).

Josiah even surpassed Hezekiah in his devotion to the Spirit of Prophecy, zealous in following every detail as he knew it—especially Deuteronomy. Never had a king so meticulously obeyed the written word. The young Jeremiah rejoiced. But while maintaining such devotion to the written Spirit of Prophecy, Josiah managed to reject its living demonstration. The problem was that the renewed "spiritual gift" came through the most unlikely avenue that king or people could imagine—the mouth of a supposedly pagan king!

Pharaoh Necho of Egypt was leading his army in opposition to the rising power of Babylon. Josiah thought it his duty to attack him. Didn't Moses in the Spirit of Prophecy tell Israel to oppose the heathen? But the zealous king couldn't discern how Necho was on God's errand. He warned Josiah, "Refrain

from meddling with God, who is with me, lest He destroy you" (2 Chron. 35:21). The Chronicler says the king "did not heed the words of Necho from the mouth of God." The Lord was forced to let the young king die of his battle wounds (vss. 22-24). Jeremiah was heart-broken, for Josiah's revival fizzled out with his untimely death. From then on it was downhill all the way.

#### Reliving Josiah's blindness.

Like Josiah, is it possible for us as Seventh-day Adventists to think we are super-loyal to "the Spirit of Prophecy" while at the same time rejecting its living demonstration? That actually happened in 1888; our brethren were replaying Josiah's "tape." In rejecting that "most precious message" "sent from heaven" they imagined they were loyal to Ellen White's *past writings* while setting aside the Lord's living message.<sup>5</sup>

Are we replaying Israel's old covenant revivals and reformations? Sober reflection forces an answer: as a body we are as lukewarm now as we were a century ago. When "we" "in a great degree" and "in a great measure" rejected that "most precious" new covenant truth that came in the 1888 era, "we" locked ourselves into "many more years" of an old covenant detour as surely as did Israel at Sinai.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Uriah Smith's and G. I. Butler's letters to Ellen White of Feb. 17, 1890, Sept. 24, 1892 (*Manuscript Memories of 1888*, pp. 152—157, 206—212). The Lord not only sent "prophets" to Israel, but "messengers" also (2 Chron. 36:16).

<sup>6</sup> See Letter 184, 1901; *Evangelism*, p. 696.

The faith-experience of the new covenant was the main focus of leadership-opposition to the 1888 message. While they opposed Jones and Waggoner, they actually preferred the essential motifs of the old covenant. Ellen White was shown in vision that these revered leaders were wasting their time trying to urge a view different from Waggoner's, for she was "shown" that he was right.<sup>7</sup> Especially in 1890 and on until 1907 the opposition to the 1888 Good News view of the two covenants won the day.<sup>8</sup>

Motif analysis can demonstrate that old covenant ideas have continued to predominate in our experience, especially in our children's lessons and literature. Even our Commentary leans to the view of those who rejected the 1888 message.<sup>9</sup> Our revivals and reformations have followed the pattern of those of Israel, including the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Not yet have we as a church body truly recovered the new covenant which "we" largely rejected a century ago. The famine predominates alike in both orthodox and "independent" ministries.

Who can estimate the confusion and tragic apostasies that have come because of the unsatisfied hunger within the church (and the world) for that "most precious" gospel? Speaking of Uzzah

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<sup>7</sup> See Ellen White Letters 30, 59, 1890; also George Knight, *Angry Saints*, pp. 75, 76, 92, 93.

<sup>8</sup> See Sabbath School Lessons, Third Quarter, 1907; letter of A. T. Jones to their author, R. S. Owen, Feb. 20, 1908.

<sup>9</sup> See article "Covenant," SDA Bible Dictionary, p. 229; this statement aptly defines the Commentary position as basically the same as those who rejected.

irreverently grabbing the sacred ark, Ellen White in 1890 pleaded with her brethren, "Take your hand off the ark of God, and *let the Spirit of God come in and work in mighty power*" (1888 Materials, p. 543).

That little word "let" means that the Holy Spirit is eager to go to "work." When that new covenant message is rescued from the oblivion of the archives, He can feed it like heavenly manna to our famishing world.

A converted Jew likened his people's problem to a farmer driving a horse and wagon to town. A wheel falls off; does he look for it further ahead down the road, or does he go back to where it fell off?

If the Jews must recover what they lost 2000 years ago, is it too humiliating for us to go back and recover what we lost a century ago?

Going back to retrieve what he lost would be the farmer's only hope, wouldn't it?

Jesus said something very strange that has puzzled many people since the day He said it: "Whosoever shall fall on this Stone [Himself, His history as Saviour of the world] shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder" (Mt. 21:44).

The leaders of the nation were planning to kill Him; Caiaphas, the high priest, hated Him; Pilate the Roman governor would deliver Him, knowing He was innocent, to death; and King Herod would agree to His death. The greatest judicial travesty in all history! Jesus had just reminded them of the well-known story of building Solomon's temple. One large stone had baffled the workmen—they couldn't figure out where to put it and they abandoned it in

the weeds, to the heat of summer and the frost of winter and the storms. Finally they discovered that it was the “head stone of the corner,” where it proved to be an exact fit. So, said Jesus, He is the “head stone which the builders rejected.”

So far, it is clear. But why the idea of anyone “falling on the Stone and being broken”? Well, Peter was an example of such a person. Arrogant and proud, he was sure he would never give in to pressure and deny his Lord, but before the rooster crowed in the morning he had denied Jesus three times. Peter wept bitterly when he realized the sinfulness of his own heart. His repentance was deep. He “fell upon the Stone and was broken.” The love of self was broken up; his heart was broken. It was reported in early times that ever afterward there was a tear glistening in his eyes. On the other hand, look at Caiaphas, Pilate, Herod: all they have is the final judgment. Christ will not grind them to powder—what will do it is their own history. He will not say a word to condemn them in that final judgment; they will do it themselves. They will salvage nothing for eternity.

A wise writer has used this text about the *Stone* in appealing to church members to let the Holy Spirit melt their proud hearts, and to teachers in Christian schools whose self-centered pride hides Jesus from the view of their students, and to ministers and church leaders who repeat Peter’s denial of Christ. It’s an *either/or* judgment we all face: self must be humbled eventually. Either “by our own voluntary choice to take up the cross on which self is crucified,” *or* to go on making self the center of our

heart’s devotion. The former calls for tears of melted-heart repentance now; the latter points to “powder” being blown away like dust in a windstorm, an eternal record of nothingness. Herod, Caiaphas, and Pilate have given us an expensive object lesson.

What can God in heaven do to awaken “this present evil world” in which we live? The story of Nineveh may illustrate how He works. He cared about that wealthy pagan city (and Assyrian empire) with “more than 120,000 persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand” (Jonah 4:11). He pitied their ignorance of truth which Israel had “kept away from the world.” We do not read that He sent a literal “angel” to teach them (except for the angels at the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, His messages have always been sent by humans under His guidance). So God chose Jonah and sent him, “go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it” (1:2). But the messenger was unwilling; he did not have the compassion of heart that God had. Almost by coercion God sent him again, and his mission proved fantastically effective. “The people of Nineveh believed God, . . . from the greatest of them even to the least of them. For word [even] came to the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king” (3:5-7). For once Jesus’ prayer was answered, “Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven”! The world’s most cruel empire was on the way to being converted!

But the Lord's messenger stumbled, staggered, and failed. Jonah could have become a greater than Billy Graham to Assyria itself, and the history of the four cruel empires, Babylon, Medo-persia, Greece and Rome, would have been different.

God also had a problem with His messenger to the Kingdom of Judah (worse than Assyria!) in Josiah its last "good" king. Almost fanatical in following the Spirit of Prophecy of his day (the books of Moses), he rejected its living demonstration in the message from Pharaoh Necho; and Josiah's reformation failed (2 Chron. 35, 36). But in the great final Day of Atonement, all the failures of ancient Israel and Judah must and will at last be rectified in a repentance of the ages (Rev. 3:19, 20). Then at last "Nineveh" will be given the Lord's message (18:1-4), and Christ will be honored.

For nearly 2000 years, the gospel has been proclaimed in the world. But is it being proclaimed in its fullness, in its pristine power? Jesus proclaimed it, yes, by His words and by His life and by His great sacrifice on His cross, and His resurrection. His disciples surely proclaimed the gospel clearly, for they "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). All kinds of sinners were redeemed from sin ("fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, effeminate, abusers of themselves with mankind, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers, extortioners," are all listed by Paul in 1 Cor. 6:9, 10; and then he adds, "and such were some of you: but ye are washed, . . . sanctified, . . . justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our

God" (vs. 11). The gospel was demonstrated to be "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth" (Rom. 1:16). The "power" was in the message that they, Paul especially, proclaimed. But in history an enemy arose who obscured its light. Jesus and Paul warned against his (or its) perversion of the gospel (Mt. 24:24; Gal. 1:6, 7; 2 Thess. 2:3-7). Daniel describes this great development in history as the "little horn" (8:9-25; 7:8, 20-25). Revelation describes the same power as "the beast" (13:1-17). John calls this power "the Antichrist" (1 Jn. 4:1-3). It obscures, twists, distorts, misrepresents the pure true gospel so that its "power" to "save to the uttermost" is compromised. It has been the curse of history. But now in the last days the gospel is to be restored in its full pristine power to be demonstrated again as "the power of God unto salvation" in the great antitypical or cosmic "Day of Atonement," when the world's true High Priest "cleanses the [heavenly] sanctuary" (see Dn. 8:14). This work will involve preparing a people for translation, to see Jesus come the second time. Luther, Calvin, the Wesleys, were led by God to launch the great Protestant Reformation—wonderful. But in their day they could not grasp the full light of the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary, that final work of the one true High Priest. That will fully recover "the truth of the gospel" that must "lighten the earth with glory" (Gal. 2:5; Rev. 18:1-4). Let that "light" come soon!

Someone has sent in a deeply thought-provoking question: "Why must the 'Latter Rain' gift of the Holy Spirit come only at the end of history? Why



has God withheld that gift all through these 2000 years of history? In other words, what's the difference between the 'Early Rain' and the 'Latter Rain'?"

I belong in God's kindergarten but let me try to respond:

(1) It's not unwillingness on God's part to give but humanity's unreadiness to receive. Ah yes, even *unwillingness* to receive! Jesus Himself expressed the principle: "I have many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now" (Jn. 16:12).

(2) *Our* sinfulness has been deeper than *we* have realized. "Thou . . . knowest not," says the True Witness (Rev. 3:17).

(3) God's infinite knowledge of mankind's unreadiness to receive the final blessing of the Holy Spirit has informed His prophetic foreknowledge. When the prophecy declares "Unto 2300 days [years] then shall the sanctuary be cleansed," it means that not until then CAN it be cleansed (Dan. 8:14). Human history must be allowed to work itself out through the ages. Not until "the time of the end" can Daniel's prophecy reach fulfillment, "Knowledge shall be increased" (12:4).

(4) The sanctuary service of ancient Israel illuminated the principle: only on the final Day of Atonement could the High Priest enter the Most Holy Apartment to "cleanse the sanctuary," because only then would the people in the typical service permit a final cleansing "from all your sins" (see Lev. 16:29, 30). Thus, in the antitypical service in the heavenly sanctuary, our great High Priest has been willing all along to prepare His people for His

second coming as "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS" (He loves them and wants them to be with Him!), but not until the end of history has that dilatory "Bride" "made herself ready" for the "marriage of the Lamb" (see Rev. 19:7-16).