

Writing Against Wr

Early Adventists blistered their culture for tolerating human slavery.

BY BILL KNOTT

*“With two horns like a lamb a beast arose—
So with two leading forms a power has risen,
Two fundamental principles, than which
In all the earth none can be found more mild,
More lamb-like in their outward form and name.
A land of freedom, pillared on the broad
And open basis of equality;
A land reposing 'neath the gentle sway
Of civil and religious liberty.
Lamb-like in form, is there no dragon-voice
Heard in our land? no notes that harshly grate
Upon the ear of mercy, love and truth?
And put humanity to open shame?
Let the united cry of millions tell—
Millions that groan beneath oppression's rod,
Beneath the sin-forged chains of slavery,
Robbed of their rights, to brutes degraded down,
And soul and body bound to other's will—
Let their united cries, and tears, and groans,
That daily rise, and call aloud on Heaven
For vengeance, answer; let the slave reply.*

*O land of boasted freedom! thou hast given
The lie to all thy loud professions, fair,
Of justice, liberty and equal rights;
And thou hast set a foul and heinous blot
Upon the sacred page of liberty;
And whilst thou trafficest in souls of men,
Thou hurl'st defiance, proud, in face of Heaven
Soon to be answered with avenging doom.”¹*

THE 21-YEAR-OLD AUTHOR OF these incendiary lines about his native country must have smiled as he wielded an old penknife to trim the pages of each of the 2,000 copies of the journal in which they appeared.² As one of the newest members of a young editorial team, he was gratified that his 35,000-word, wide-ranging poem had attracted the attention of the editor, James White.³ Uriah Smith's 1853 blank-verse poem was so large that it had to be divided in half and printed in successive editions of the weekly *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*,⁴ the fledgling journal of the as-yet-unnamed and unorganized group of ex-Millerites that would eventually become the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

More importantly, Smith's biting words announced a new and radical turn in the editorial approach of the four-year-old magazine. The vast majority of the articles in the *Review's* first years had dealt with the perpetuity of the Ten Commandments, the sacredness of the seventh day of the week, and an Adventist doctrine of the investigative judgment that would precede the second coming of Jesus. Smith's poetic jeremiad revealed a willingness to engage with at least one of the pressing social issues of the day—slavery. In so doing, the editors signaled to Adventist readers that they were coming to terms with what would soon be called the “delay” in the Second Advent. Still protesting that they would never be “of” the world, they were nonetheless acknowledging that they would have to live “in” it, at least for a while longer.



A New Angle

It is crucial to note, however, that neither Smith's 1853 denunciation of American slavery nor those of his editorial colleagues during the next eight years arose only from their social or political beliefs. Yes, they were publishing in Rochester, New York, center of the famed "burned-over district" and home to a wide array of reformist movements seeking to remake almost every feature of American social life. Without exception, each member of the editorial staff was a "Yankee," born and bred: most hailed from Maine and New Hampshire, and were certainly steeped in the increasingly abolitionist culture of radical Evangelicalism. But it was their Millerism—and specifically their adherence to and development of a historicist interpretation of biblical prophecy—that caused them to identify the United States as one of the three great persecuting powers described in the thirteenth chapter of Revelation.

Millerite Adventists, including the seventh-day variety, drew upon more than 300 years of Protestant historicist interpretation in identifying the first two beasts of Revelation 13 with pagan and papal Rome. Protestants from Martin Luther and the English Reformers through seventeenth-century American Puritan writers such as John Cotton, John Eliot, and Cotton Mather had laid the

groundwork. A long interpretative tradition identified a historical succession in the prophetic symbolism of John's "beastly powers" by which the military tyranny of imperial Rome became the political and ecclesiastical tyranny of the medieval and Reformation-era Papacy.

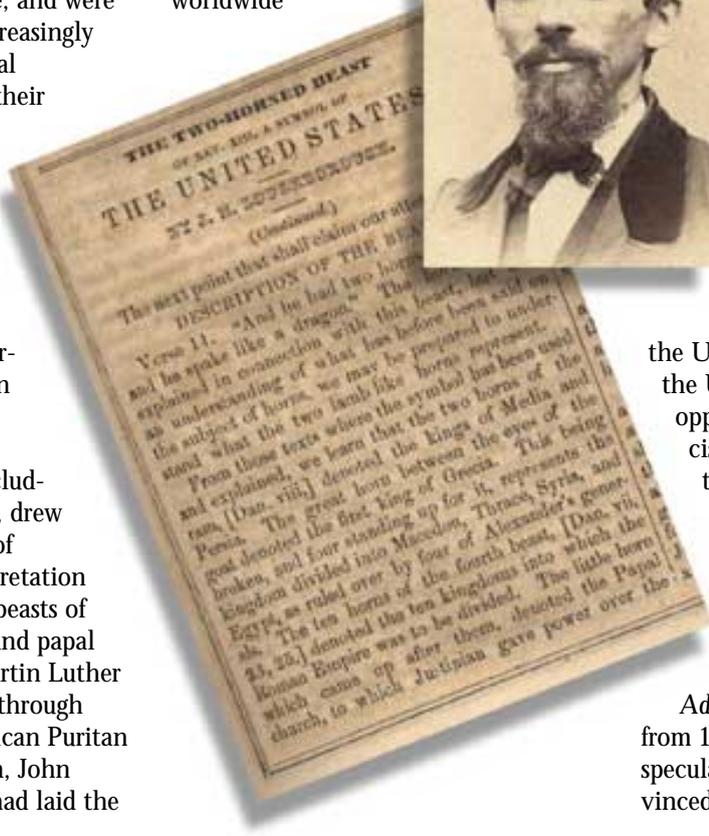
Cross-referencing the book of Revelation with the Old Testament prophecies of Daniel had led Protestant authors to identify the predicted reign of the papal "second beast" with a period of 1260 years. Millerite Adventists, along with other Evangelicals, had concluded that this 1260-year period had ended in 1798, when Napoleon Bonaparte's armies invaded the Papal States and made Pius VI a prisoner, inflicting the "deadly wound" predicted by the apostle. The logic of their approach now dictated that they look for a contemporary political power, symbolized by the third or "lamblike beast" of Revelation 13, that would help the wounded papal authority reestablish its worldwide

hegemony. The new political power would persecute God's true saints who "keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus" (Rev. 12:17),* especially including the seventh-day Sabbath.

By so doing, that political power would demonstrate its predicted true character: it would "speak like a dragon," (Rev. 13:11) and cause "all, both small and great, both rich and poor, *both free and slave*" to be "marked" indicating submission to papal authority (verse 16). Even more ominously, it would exercise almost total economic control: "No one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name" (verse 17).

The "seventh-day" Adventists weren't the first to identify America with the "two-horned beast" of Revelation 13. Ebenezer Frothingham, a leading minister of the eighteenth-century Great Awakening, had made the connection explicit more than a century earlier.⁵ The contribution of the *Review* authors and editors was to identify the United States as the third beast *because* it mandated submission to papal authority, tolerated (and even embraced) a culture both "free and slave," and dominated an economic system built on these evils. Slavery wasn't only morally reprehensible, and thus a "foul blot"⁶ on the national character of the United States: it also identified the United States as the predicted oppressive power that would exercise control immediately before the second coming of Jesus.

J. N. Loughborough



Indicting the Nation

Like all detailed prophetic interpretation, this is complicated stuff. But for the editors who assembled the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* from 1853 to 1861 it wasn't simply speculative inquiry. They were as convinced of their identification of the

United States as the predicted persecuting power as they were of the necessity of keeping the seventh-day Sabbath or of the nearness of the Second Coming.⁷ It was the apparent contradiction between appearance and character that fascinated them: the third beast appeared “lamblike” and mild, but acted like a dragon. It was only a short step to an identification with a young nation that purported to embrace the republican and “mild” principles of toleration and freedom of conscience, but was already enslaving more than three and a half million of its own inhabitants.

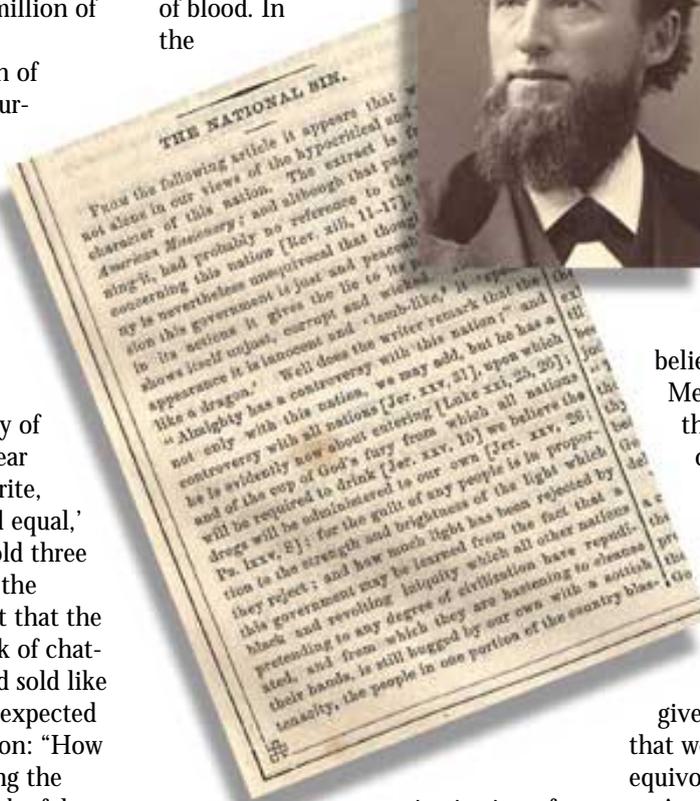
So it was that a succession of *Review* authors and editors during this eight-year span lined up to indict the United States for failing to live up to its first principles. According to E. R. Seaman the Fugitive Slave Law was “the foulest stain that ever blotted the history of any nation, especially one whose professions are entirely of an opposite character.”⁸ A year later J. N. Andrews would write, “If ‘all men are born free and equal,’ why then does this power hold three millions of human beings in the bondage of slavery? Why is it that the Negro race is reduced to rank of chattels personal, and bought and sold like brute beasts?”⁹ James White expected little in the way of reformation: “How much of the prophecy relating the two-horned beast remains to be fulfilled? It has arisen with its lamb-like horns. Its dragon voice has been heard speaking forth sentiments of oppression, the reverse of its lamb-like profession of freedom and equal rights among all men. We believe his voice is yet to be heard denying the true Christian his right of conscience in the service of God.”¹⁰

Resident editor Uriah Smith pressed the indictment even more pointedly:

“Says the Declaration of Independence, ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator

with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness;’ and yet the same government that utters this sentiment, in the very face of this declaration, will hold in abject servitude over 3,200,000 of human beings, rob them of those rights with which they acknowledge that all men are endowed by their Creator, and write out a base denial of all their fair professions in characters of blood. In the

Uriah Smith



institution of slavery is more especially manifested, thus far, the dragon spirit that dwells in the heart of this hypocritical nation.”¹¹

Proslavery ministers also came in for thinly-disguised scorn in the pages of the *Review*. A reprinted article from *The Wesleyan* confidently asserted, “The Bible no where lends its high and solemn sanction to any form of moral evil.”¹²

John Loughborough argued that proslavery clergy ought at least to apply Scripture consistently:

“The ministry of these churches South argue that there is no moral

wrong in slavery; for it is a patriarchal institution, and was sanctioned by the Lord in the ceremonial law. If they contend that it is morally right to hold slaves now because they were held in patriarchal times, then it must be morally right to use them as they were used then. Then every one could go free at the jubilee every seventh year, unless he loved his master and wanted to abide with him. Let those who contend for patriarchal slavery here, carry it out fully and give the slaves one jubilee, and what would be the result?”¹³

The Breadth of Evil

Articles and editorials appearing in the magazine also castigated specific institutions that appeared to be tolerating the fundamental wrong that *Review* writers believed slavery to be. The Methodist Episcopal Church and the American Tract Society, both of which endured protracted debates about slavery, were frequently cited for a lack of moral courage. John Wesley’s description of slavery as “the sum of all villainies” was regularly quoted,¹⁴ and significant space was given to reprints from other journals that were critical of the Methodist equivocation regarding slavery.¹⁵

A reprinted article also scorned the American Tract Society, one of the most influential of the interdenominational movements of the era, for its unwillingness to denounce slavery:

“A religion that dares not rebuke stealing, adultery, and blasphemy, under the general name of slavery, is a whited sepulchre, and is in alliance with the bitterest foes of Christ. If the American Tract Society, through a squeamish conservatism, a most unmartyr-like fear and liberalism has been betrayed into this sin, let it repent, and bring forth works meet for repentance.”¹⁶

The drumbeat of Adventist opposi-

PHOTOS: REVIEW AND HERALD; PUB. ASSN. FILE

tion to slavery only increased as the 1850s progressed. The Fugitive Slave Law was routinely lambasted, both for its inherent moral depravity and for the evidence it provided of how the proslavery forces were controlling the national political agenda.¹⁷ Lengthy accounts of the capture of fugitive slaves in Northern cities were printed, and their captors were regularly denounced.

Review authors and writers routinely scorned the celebrated “national reconciliations” of the pre-Civil War era—the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the Compromise of 1850—as Northern acquiescence to Southern political domination.¹⁸ The costs of slavery in human and economic resources were deplored as well. Review editors read the recent history of their country as the outworking of slave-holding power upon the national government:

“I hesitate not to say that this government has been so administered, for the last quarter of a century, as to be destructive of the lives, the liberties and the happiness of a portion of the people; in short, it has become destructive of the very objects for which it was established. Its influence and its powers have been exerted to extend the most barbarous system of human bondage known to mankind. Three distinct and separate wars have been waged to uphold and maintain the system of American slavery. More than three hundred millions of dollars have been drawn from the pockets of our laboring people, and paid out by government for that purpose, and more than five hundred thousand human victims have been sent to premature graves to uphold and maintain the interests of an institution which the present administration and its supporters are seeking to extend and eternise.”¹⁹

Even presidents were criticized for dillydallying about slavery. “At this critical moment [March 28, 1854, during the presidency of New Hampshire native Franklin Pierce] the astounding proposition comes from the citizen who is now president,” a reprinted

piece opined, “to repeal the statute which secures the immeasurable blessings of freedom to Nebraska, and to establish therein the dire institution of African Slavery.”²⁰ A reprint from the *London Freeman*, general paper of English Baptists, criticized the 1856 election of James Buchanan and tweaked freedom-loving Americans at the same time:

“The election of Mr. Buchanan was a great triumph of the worst of causes; of slavery and slaveholders over Christianity and Christian churches; and it was gained by the defection of the great Quaker State, Pennsylvania, from the principles of its founder!

*Even presidents
were criticized
for dillydallying
about slavery.*

America is the most degraded, at present, morally and religiously, of all free and Protestant countries. It is the reproach of evangelical Christendom. Her slaveholders defy both God and man, and the freemen of the free states sacrifice their own political freedom and the personal rights of the negro, to a low and noisy political party! The United States are to us a greater grief than heathendom and popery, for the names of Christianity and Protestantism, of civil and religious liberty, are blasphemed through them. Oh, that the free states may burst their fetters, get rid of the accursed thing, and join the mother country in heading the march of Christianity and civilization!”²¹

The Supreme Court’s *Dred Scott* decision (which allowed for the re-enslavement of a previously freed slave) was denounced by Uriah Smith²²

and again in a lengthy extract of a speech by Abraham Lincoln from the celebrated Lincoln-Douglas debates of the 1858 Illinois senatorial campaign. The increasing agitations and violence in Kansas were also duly noted. While the Review editors were clearly favorable to the antislavery forces attempting to settle in Kansas, they printed an article that deplored the northern Evangelical ministers who endorsed violence as a solution to the territory’s crisis:

“Are these men following Jesus? Are they harnessing themselves and followers with gospel weapons? Are they exhibiting implicit confidence in the perfect law of God? Do they acknowledge that there is but one Lawgiver for the Christian? Do they hear Paul say, ‘The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God, to the pulling down of strongholds?’ 2 Cor. 10:4. Are they finally heeding the scriptures that they professedly teach?”²³

Activism, Not Politics

In light of what today would be regarded as the increasing “politicization” of the Review’s content through the 1850s, it is remarkable how firmly most Review authors and editors

avoided direct political involvement. During the Buchanan-Fremont presidential contest of 1856, Uriah Smith pronounced both the Democratic and Republican candidates unsuitable because they weren’t committed to the eradication of slavery. Just one week before the November election, corresponding editor R. F. Cotrell reiterated the futility of voting:

“But you can vote against slavery, says one. Very well; supposing I do, what will be the effect? In the last great persecution, which is just before us, the decrees of the image will be against the ‘bond’ as well as the free. Bondmen will exist then till the last—till God interposes to deliver His saints, whether bond or free. My vote then cannot free the slaves; and all apparent progress towards emancipation will only exasperate their masters, and cause an aggravation of those evils

it was intended to cure. I cannot, therefore, vote against slavery; neither can I vote for it.”²⁴

Not all *Review* readers appreciated the non-political approach of the editorial team. Because the magazine also functioned as a kind of billboard for isolated Seventh-day Adventists, strongly-worded letters to the editor were a regular feature. Anson Byington, a New York relative of the man who would become the first president of the denomination when it officially organized in 1863, complained that the *Review* was abandoning the moral high ground by not advocating more direct action:

“Bro. Smith: I have taken the *Review* some six or seven years and have been much edified with its contents. Having been engaged for the last twenty-five years in the antislavery cause, I have regarded the *Review* as an auxiliary until the last two or three years, in which it has failed to aid the cause of abolition. And as I want my money for abolition purposes, I must discontinue the paper when the three dollars herein enclosed are expended.

“I dare not tell the slave that he can afford to be contented in his bondage until the Saviour comes however near we may believe his coming. Surely the editor of the *Review* could not afford to go without his breakfast till then. If it was our duty to remember those in bonds as bound with them eighteen hundred years ago, it must be our duty still. ‘When saw we thee hungry or athirst, sick or in prison, and did not minister unto thee.’”²⁵

Byington lamented, “Alas! we saw the slave in prison, but on reading the prophecy that there will be bondmen as well as freemen at Christ’s coming, we have excused ourselves from any efforts for his emancipation.”²⁶

The editors clearly felt the need to defend themselves from the implication that they weren’t completely serious about their opposition to slavery. With more than a touch of indignation, they answered Byington by stressing their inability to do anything practical about the social evil:

“The dragon spirit . . . dwells in the heart of this hypocritical nation.”



ILLUSTRATION FROM THE BOOK UNCLE TOM'S CABIN, BY HARRIET BEECHER STOWE

“Our feelings in regard to slavery could hardly be mistaken by any who are acquainted with our position on the law of God, the foundation of all reform, the radical stand point against every evil. Slavery as a sin we have never ceased to abhor; its ravages we have never ceased to deprecate; with the victims locked in its foul embrace, we have not ceased to sympathize. But what is to be done? The tyranny of oppression secludes them from our reach.”²⁷

The *Review* editors must have realized that such protests of helplessness rang hollow in a magazine that had frequently celebrated the courageous acts of those resisting the Fugitive Slave Law and had condemned institutions that refused to declare themselves forthrightly against slavery.

Nonetheless, they reaffirmed their belief that political activity was shortsighted and distracting in light of the imminent end of the world predicted in Bible prophecy. Then, and only then, would slaves experience the emancipation that Byington and other more radical Adventists sought to achieve for them now:

“In saying this, we do not tell the slave that he can afford to be content in slavery, nor that he should not escape from it whenever he can, nor that all good men should not aid him to the extent of their power, nor that this great evil should not be resisted by any and all means which afford any hope of success. All this should be done. And we rejoice when we hear of one of that suffering race escaping beyond the jurisdiction of this dragon-hearted power. But we would not hold out to him a false ground of expectation. We would point him

to the coming of the Messiah as his true hope. We would proclaim to him the near approach of the great Jubilee, and bid him not despair under his accumulated woes.”²⁸

No Golden Millennium

With a fundamentally pessimistic view about human progress and the uplift of the race that grew out of their eschatological vision, the “seventh-day” Adventists of the 1850s set their faces like flint against the prevailing

optimism of their Evangelical subculture about the future of the American nation. Their repeated tirades against American iniquities made apparent that they shared no optimism that a “golden” millennium might begin in America and move eastward to bless the Old World.²⁹ Not only was the nation not, as some Protestant clergy were proclaiming from influential pulpits, “destined to lead the way in the moral and political emancipation of the world,”³⁰ but the United States was prophesied to play a profoundly malignant role in the world crisis that preceded the Second Advent.

When the Civil War commenced in April 1861, the *Review* saw little reason to alter its pessimistic assessment of America’s future. As Southern states seceded from the Union and prepared for war, the editors denounced the pro-slavery sentiments of “traitors and thieves”³¹ even as they lamented the inevitability of the coming conflict.

Four months after the shelling of Fort Sumter, Uriah Smith wrote an editorial introduction to a reprinted article from the abolitionist journal *American Missionary* entitled “The National Sin.” While the article itself at least implied that America, purged of the evil of slavery, might again become the object of God’s special affection, Smith offered no such positive prediction. His editorial note is an apt summary of the consistent position that he and his *Review* colleagues had articulated during the previous eight years.

“From the following article it appears that we are not alone in our views of the hypocritical and wicked character of this nation. . . . Though in appearance it is innocent and ‘lamb-like,’ it ‘speaks like a dragon.’ Well does the writer remark that the ‘Almighty has a controversy with this nation;’ and not only with this nation, we may add, but he has a controversy with all nations [Jer. 25:31], upon which he is evidently now about entering [Luke 21:25, 26]; and of the cup of God’s fury from which all nations will be required to drink [Jer. 25:15] we believe the dregs will be administered

to our own [Jer. 25:26; Ps. 125:8]; for the guilt of any people is in proportion to the strength and brightness of the light which they reject; and how much light has been rejected by this government may be learned from the fact that a black and revolting iniquity which all other nations pretending to any degree of civilization have repudiated, and from which they are hastening to cleanse their hands, is still hugged by our own with a sottish tenacity, the people in one portion of the country blasphemously endeavoring to defend it by the Bible, and too many of the rest conniving at both its existence and its arrogant claims.”³²

As the *Review*’s editors saw it, the Almighty’s controversy with the nation wouldn’t end with either a blood atonement offered from the veins of its young men or with a grant of divine forgiveness. Only the second advent of Jesus, whose announced mission was “to proclaim release to the captives” and “to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18) would finally erase all distinctions between “slave” and “free.” Their passionate opposition to the moral wrong of slavery was part and parcel of their Adventism, and an illustration of the truth that persons completely committed to the reality of God’s new world often make the best citizens of this one.

* Bible texts in this article are from the New Revised Standard Version.

¹Uriah Smith, “The Warning Voice of Time and Prophecy,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 23, 1853.

²Oliver Jacques, “Driven by a Dream,” *Adventist Review*, May 24, 2001.

³*Ibid.*

⁴The journal now known as the *Adventist Review*.

⁵Ebenezer Frothingham, “The Articles of the Separate Churches,” in *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences*, ed. Alan Heimert and Perry Miller (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1967), p. 452.

⁶James White, “True Reforms and Reformers,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 26, 1856.

⁷A new archival resource, *Words of the Pioneers*, produced by the Adventist Pioneer Library, allows a full-text search of all content in the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* in this period.

⁸E. R. Seaman, “The Days of Noah and the

Sons of Man,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 13, 1854.

⁹J. N. Andrews, “The Three Angels of Rev. XIV, 6-12,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Apr. 3, 1855.

¹⁰James White, “Revelation Twelve,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Jan. 8, 1857.

¹¹Uriah Smith, “The Two-Horned Beast—Rev. XIII,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Mar. 19, 1857.

¹²“The Decalogue,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Dec. 13, 1853.

¹³J. N. Loughborough, “The Two-Horned Beast of Rev. XIII, a Symbol of the United States,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 2, 1857.

¹⁴*Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Mar. 6, 1855; “Methodism and Slavery,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 27, 1858.

¹⁵“Methodism and Slavery,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 27, 1858.

¹⁶In *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 21, 1857.

¹⁷“The Nebraska Bill,” *Foreign News, Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Mar. 7, 1854; J. N. Loughborough, “The Two-Horned Beast,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Mar. 21, 1854.

¹⁸Loughborough, “The Two-Horned Beast of Rev. XIII,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 9, 1857.

¹⁹J. R. Giddings, reprinted in *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Feb. 5, 1857.

²⁰New York *Tribune*, Feb. 18, 1854, in Loughborough, “The Two-Horned Beast,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Mar. 28, 1854.

²¹“What Is Said of Us,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Apr. 8, 1858.

²²Smith, “The Two-Horned Beast—Rev. XIII,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Mar. 19, 1857.

²³E. Everts, “Follow Me,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Aug. 14, 1856.

²⁴R. F. Cottrell, “How Shall I Vote,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Oct. 30, 1856.

²⁵Anson Byington in *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Mar. 10, 1859.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷Editorial note, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Mar. 10, 1859.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹Jonathan Edwards, “The Latter-Day Glory Is Probably to Begin in America,” in *God’s New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*, ed. Conrad Cherry (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. 55.

³⁰Lyman Beecher, “A Plea for the West,” in *God’s New Israel*, p. 123.

³¹William S. Foote, “Notes on Men and Things,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Apr. 16, 1861.

³²Smith, “The National Sin,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Aug. 20, 1861.

Bill Knott is an associate editor of the *Adventist Review*.

