

Manuel Lacunza: The Adventist Connection

by Sergio Olivares

Would you let me see the book, please?"

The question has moved from the routine to the classic. Almost every visitor to our university library wants to see "the book." The library does not have the entire book, but only a handwritten extract with the title, "The Coming of the Messiah in Glory and Majesty." Written by Manuel Lacunza, a Jesuit priest, the manuscript is beautifully composed in 19th century Spanish and is written in artistic calligraphy. Its yellowing pages carry the smell of antiquity. Dated 1820 and written under the pseudonym of Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra, the manuscript had been apparently copied by Trinitarian Fathers of San Carlos, in Rome, using four possible European sources. One footnote underscores its authenticity: "Nothing has been lost in phrases or concepts of the author, because this is an original Spanish copy of what he himself composed." ¹

To me, a professional historian, an Adventist, and a Chilean like the author, everything about the book is exciting. Who is the real author? What made him write this controversial text? What influence did the book have? Does its content have any validity for us, who live almost two centuries later?



The author

Manuel Lacunza was born to an aristocratic family in Santiago, Chile. Although economically well-to-do, he opted for the religious life and joined the Jesuit order. As a student, he was intelligent, dedicated, sociable, and happy. Early in life, he excelled as a public speaker and eventually became a teacher. ²

When in 1768 Carlos III, the Spanish monarch, expelled the Jesuits from Spain and all its colonies, Lacunza and his fellow Jesuits were arrested and taken to Europe. After months of a torturous journey in leaky ships, the prisoners were dropped off in the city of Imola, near Bologna, Italy. There they languished until 1799, when the Spanish crown lifted the restrictions against the Jesuits and allowed them to return to their native lands. Lacunza refused to return. On June 18, 1801, his body was found on the outskirts of Imola, with the cause of his death unknown. ³ Lacunza spent the 10-year exile in Imola devoted to reflection and writing. He

devoted to reflection and writing. He maintained a steady correspondence with his family and friends in Chile. In his nostalgic letters he imagined himself traveling back to Chile, finding recreation in its scenery. He missed his loved ones and his native food. "Only those," he wrote, "who have lost it know what Chile is. There isn't the least compensation here--and that is the pure truth." 4 The exile was painful. He identified himself with the lot of his banished brothers: "Everybody looks at us as at a tree totally dry, incapable of reviving or as a corpse buried in oblivion." 5

Nevertheless, the suffering was not in vain; he saw in it an opportunity to share in the sufferings of Christ: "Because to serve God in truth, there cannot be anything with an better purpose than the present state in which we find ourselves, that is of humiliation and of carrying our cross." 6 Although bitter, the exile was not fruitless. Out of that solitude and suffering arose his great contribution to the Christian world: "The Coming of the Messiah in Glory and Majesty."

Lacunza's work

What motivated Lacunza to write this book? His detractors pointed to the psychological frustrations of exile and the later suspension of his religious order. 7 Others interpreted it as a conservative Christian reaction to the Enlightenment, especially to Deism, which was in vogue among both Catholics and Protestants. 8 Others saw it as a result of Lacunza's intense personal study of the Bible, particularly the books of Daniel and Revelation, independent from the church fathers or theologians. 9

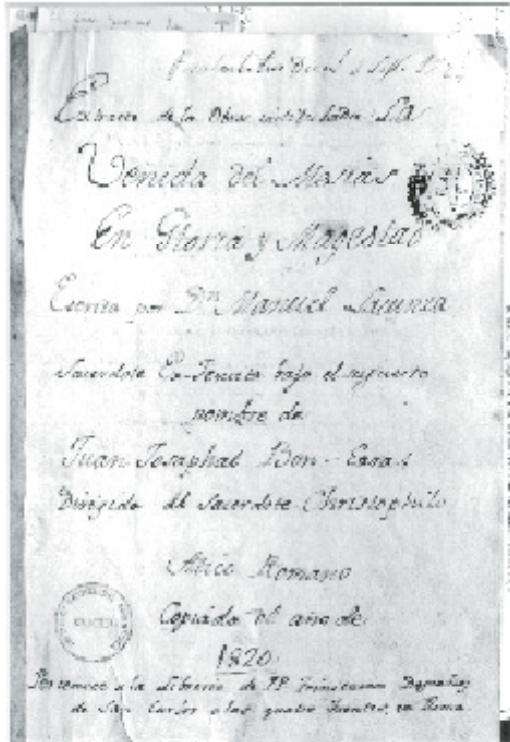
Lacunza himself gives three reasons for writing the book: (1) To prompt the priests to shake the dust from their Bibles; (2) to call the attention of those who were running toward the "abyss of incredulity for lack of knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ"; and (3) to help the Jews by providing them with a "full knowledge of their Messiah." 10 Lacunza's methodology is of particular interest: Study of the Bible, reflection, and prayer. When he found a point that was difficult to understand, says his recording secretary Fr. Gonzalez Carvajal, he said, "Let us suspend the work while we ask with more insistence for divine illumination." He is supposed to have stated that "his book was more the result of his knees than of his head." 11 Even Lacunza's critics acknowledged his deep spirituality and genuine prayer life. 12

Lacunza's book is divided into three parts. In the first he outlines his method, in contrast with the traditional systems. It includes a study of the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, arguing in favor of a literal interpretation. Next, he discusses the value of tradition in the interpretation of Scripture, distinguishing between "articles of faith and controversial conjectures." He goes on to elaborate his basic premise:

"Jesus Christ will return from Heaven to earth when His time comes, at the appropriate time and moment that the Father Himself has placed under His own power. He will come accompanied not only by the angels, but also by the saints previously resurrected--of those, I say, that will be judged worthy of that time and of the resurrection of the dead. . . . He will not come in a hurry, but more deliberately than is usually thought. He will not only come to judge the dead but also and in the first place the living. Consequently, this judgment of the living and the dead cannot be only one judgment, but rather two very diverse judgments, not only in essence and in manner but also in time. From this we conclude (and this is the main point that deserves attention) that there has to be considerable space of time between the awaited coming of the Lord, and the judgment of

the dead or universal resurrection."¹³

The second part of Lacunza's work is devoted to an examination and interpretation of the prophecies of Daniel 2 and 7 and the Antichrist. In the third part Lacunza elaborates on the second coming of Christ, the judgment, the new heaven and New Earth, the new Jerusalem, the millennium, the final judgment, and the eternal happiness of the redeemed.



Title page of the manuscript copy of Lacunza's work, kept in the library of Chile Adventist University.

International reactions

Lacunza's work had an immediate impact. While he was still writing it, partial versions of the text circulated in manuscript form, causing great distress to the author, because of the misinterpretations that began to appear.¹⁴ As could be expected, the first to see the work and the first to react were his fellow Catholic clergymen. Some applauded him; others denounced both the content and the methodology of his work.

The critics concentrated especially on five areas: (1) The tacit rejection of the church fathers as the primary source of biblical interpretation; (2) the acceptance of a literal interpretation of the Bible as opposed to the traditional allegorical method; (3) his identification of the Antichrist as a moral body; (4) his indirect criticism of the Roman hierarchy by connecting it to the second beast of Revelation 13 and the whore of chapter 17; (5) the projected role of the Jewish people in eschatology. Lacunza also taught an earthly millennium, separated by two resurrections--one for the righteous, the other for the wicked. This teaching aroused much controversy, as the Catholic Church had abandoned the doctrine from the third century onward.¹⁵

Many of Lacunza's admirers and defenders were fellow Jesuits. ¹⁶ One of them wrote,

"About the work of Manuel Lacunza, I believe it was written to bring great glory to our Lord, and for the benefit of the holy Church.... Let the Father of lights be infinitely praised, that he has illuminated the author in the understanding of the Holy Scripture." 17 The reactions of South American writers also deserve mention. One historian praised the work as "the Chilean book that has reached the highest peak as an intelligent effort; in other words, as the work of a mind that has been able to deepen a concept and to present it to the world with the spiritual force necessary to awaken its attention and to penetrate profoundly in the human soul.... It is the Chilean work that has reached the highest celebrity and the only one that has had universal repercussions until the present." 18 So significant was the book in South American religious history that one of the founding fathers of Argentina, Manuel Belgrano, provided in 1816 his own funds to publish in London a four-volume edition of Lacunza's work. Many Spaniards praised it. Cortés, in his biographical dictionary, considers Lacunza "one of the glories of this century's theology," who "elevated biblical exegesis to a height that no other modern author has reached, either in Europe or the Americas." 19

Félix Torres Amat, renowned translator of the Vulgate version of the Bible into Spanish, recommended Lacunza's work in one of his notes as "worthy of deep reflection, particularly by those who dedicate themselves to the study of the Scriptures, as it gives light to the understanding of many obscure passages." 20

The official Roman Catholic reaction came in 1819, eight years after the first Spanish edition was printed in Cádiz in 1811. On January 15, the Tribunal of the Sacred Office in Madrid ordered that the work be taken out of circulation. Later, in September 1824, Lacunza's work was included by Pope Leo XII in the index of forbidden books, with the terse notation, "in any language."

However, a work of this caliber could not remain confined to the Spanish and Spanish-American Catholic circles. Through various translations into the main European languages, Lacunza's book was widely read and discussed. Edward Irving, a popular Presbyterian preacher in London, published in 1827 an English version under the title *The Coming of the Messiah*. 21 However, in his introduction, Irving pointed out how he differed from Lacunza in some areas. Irving interpreted one day in prophecy as one year. He rejected the futurist interpretation of Revelation and held that the Antichrist was an individual. 22

As a result of the wide circulation of Lacunza's writings in Europe, his views were thoroughly discussed during the interdenominational prophetic conferences held in Albury Park, England, in 1826-1830.

The Millerite connection

Across the Atlantic in the 1830s, several of William Miller's associates were acquainted not only with the writings of Irving but also with the prophetic discussions held at Albury Park. Josiah Litch, one of the Millerite leaders, attributed Irving's interest in Bible prophecies to his reading of Lacunza:

"[His] book fell into the hands of Edward Irving. The eyes of this renowned and eloquent preacher were opened to the glorious truth of the premillennial coming of Christ of which he became an ardent partisan. He began to translate Ben-Ezra, and then to write numerous works on the same topic. During some time, these works produced the same resonance in England which Miller obtained years later in our country." 23

Thus Lacunza becomes a key link in the chain of interpreters of Bible prophecy who saw human history inexorably leading to the glorious return of Christ. This point was thoroughly demonstrated by Alfred Voucher, an Adventist scholar who for years conducted careful research in the best libraries of Europe and the Americas on the life and work of Lacunza. 24



Title page of the printed edition of Lacunza's book in Spanish, published in London, 1826.

Lacunza and the Adventist interpretation

No study of Lacunza would be complete without pointing out that even though there is a connection between his work, the Millerite movement, and the beginnings of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, there are significant differences between his prophetic interpretation and ours. These differences, which Vaucher has pointed out, can be summarized as follows:

We do not share Lacunza's interpretation of the kingdoms of Daniel 2, which fuses Babylon with Medo-Persia. Neither do we accept his twofold identification of Daniel's symbolic "beasts" with spiritual deviations such as heresy, schism, hypocrisy, and idolatry linked with particular kingdoms. Although we come close to Lacunza's concept of the Antichrist as a system or moral body, we do not accept his specific interpretation of the apocalyptic symbols. We also part company with Lacunza in his belief that the Jews as a race will be converted and that they will have a decisive role in the final events, particularly in the millennial reign. According to Voucher's summary evaluation, "the eschatological system of Lacunza, like all human systems, is imperfect and is subject to

revision. It contains some outdated elements." 25

How about similarities between our interpretation and that of Lacunza? At least two should be underlined: (1) His categorical position of favoring the biblical text over tradition; and (2) his principal thesis of the coming of the Messiah in glory and majesty accompanied by the resurrection of the righteous, followed by a universal judgment after the millennium.

Curiosity or readiness?

Now, back to the question with which we began this article. "Would you let me see the book, please?" Everyone who visits our university is curious to see Lacunza's book--to touch it, to feel it, even to smell it. But the book's message is not about curiosity.

Lacunza's heart burned with a passion for the return of His Lord.

Eschatology must not be relegated to curiosity or to controversy, but to readiness. A thorough study of the Bible must lead to a transformed, committed, and joyful life.

Lacunza's forceful words are ever pertinent: "Jesus Christ will return from Heaven to earth when His time comes, at the appropriate time and moment that the Father Himself has placed under His own power." Maranatha!

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Notes and References

1. This valuable manuscript is under the custody of the library of Chile Adventist University. Quotations appearing in the text of this article have been translated from the Spanish by the author.
2. Walter Hanish Espíndola, "El Padre Manuel Lacunza (1731-1801): Su hogar, su vida y la censura española," *Historia* [Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile], 8 (1969), pp. 181-185.
3. Diego Barros Arana, *Obras Completas* (Santiago de Chile, 1911), pp. 139-168.
4. Juan Luis Espejo, "Cartas del Padre Manuel Lacunza", *Revista Chilena de Historia y Geografía*, 9 (1914), p. 219.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 217.
7. Francisco Enrich, *Historia de la Compañía de Jesús en Chile*, quoted by Emilio Vaisse, "El Lacunzismo: sus Antecedentes Históricos y su Evolución," *Revista Chilena de Historia y Geografía*, 4 (1917), pp. 410-411.
8. Mario Góngora, "Aspectos de la Ilustración Católica en el Pensamiento y la Vida Eclesiástica Chilena (1770-1814)," *Historia* [Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile], 8 (1969), p. 61.
9. Francisco Mateos, "El Padre Manuel Lacunza y el Milenarismo," *Revista Chilena de Historia y Geografía*, 115 (1950), pp. 142-143.
10. Manuel Lacunza, *La Venida del Mesías en Gloria y Magestad*, Dedicatory, London (1826).
11. Francisco Mateos, *Op. cit.*, p. 143.
12. Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo, *Historia de los Heterodoxos Españoles*, VI (Madrid 1930), p. 482 and following.
13. Quoted by Walter Hanish Espíndola. "Lacunza o el Temblor Apocalíptico," *Historia* [Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile], 21 (1986), pp. 356-357.
14. Walter Hanish Espíndola. "El Padre Manuel Lacunza," *Historia*, 8 (1969), p. 202.

15. Juan Buenaventura Bestard, quoted by Mario Góngora, "La Obra de Lacunza en la Lucha Contra el Espíritu del Siglo en Europa, 1771-1830," *Historia* [Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile], 15 (1980), p. 47.
16. Miguel Rafael Urzúa, "El R. P. Manuel Lacunza (1731-1801)," *Revista Chilena de Historia y Geografía*, 11 (1914), p. 288.
17. José Valdivieso, "Carta Apologética en Defensa de la Obra de Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra," included as Appendix to volume 3 of Lacunza's *La Venida del Mesías en Gloria y Majestad* (London: Carlos Wood, n.d.), p. 332.
18. Francisco Antonio Encina, *Historia de Chile* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Nascimento), vol. 5 (1946), pp. 631-632.
19. Quoted by Miguel Rafael Urzúa, *Las Doctrinas del P. Manuel Lacunza* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Universo, 1917), p. 9.
20. Félix Torres Amat, *Sagrada Biblia*, commentary on Revelation, chapter 20.
21. This was the second English translation, following the Ackerman London edition of 1826, which is considered the most exact.
22. See Félix Alfredo Vaucher, *Lacunza, un heraldo de la Segunda Venida de Cristo*. (Mountain View, Calif.: Publicaciones Interamericanas, 1970), p. 54.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
24. See Vaucher, *Une célébrité oubliée: Le P. Manuel de Lacunza y Díaz (1731-1801)*, Collonges-sous-Saleve, Haute Savoie, France: Imprimerie Fides, 1941; 2nd edition revised, under the title of *Lacunziana: Essai sur les propheties bibliques*, 1968. Note 22, above, provides information on the Spanish edition of Vaucher's work.
25. Vaucher, *Lacunza*, p. 101.

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