

Bible Echo and Signs of the Times

JOHN SKRZYPASZEK

John Skrzypaszek, D.Min. (Australian College of Theology) is the director of the Ellen G. White/SDA Research Centre and a lecturer at the Avondale University College. Before his current role, he served as a Ministerial secretary and Personal Ministries director. Polish by birth, Skrzypaszek takes a keen interest in heritage, spirituality, and identity studies. His research aims to explore the relevance of heritage for life's journey in the 21st century. He has authored 19 peer-reviewed publications and 15 magazine articles. He is married to Brenda and has two sons.

The *Bible Echo and Signs of the Times* was the first journal published by the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church in Australia and the South Pacific region. It commenced publication in Melbourne in January 1886, just seven months after the first missionaries from the United States settled in Australia.

During the 1884 General Conference session Stephen N. Haskell was asked to lead in the establishment of mission work for the SDA Church in Australia. He selected four families to join him in this assignment: "J. O. Corliss, evangelist and editor; M. C. Israel, pastor and evangelist; William Arnold, a colporteur; and Henry Scott, a printer."¹ The group of missionaries arrived in Australia in June 1885.²

Soon after the arrival in Melbourne, J. O. Corliss, M. C. Israel, and printer Henry L. Scott began preparations to commence publishing a paper, initially in the rented "Burnham House" in North Fitzroy, Melbourne. They prepared the set-type for the first edition of the *Bible Echo and Signs of the Times* journal in a rather humble and primitive environment—a bedroom of one of the workers. Then they carried it to a nearby printer and ran it on a press.³ In January 1886 the first eight thousand issues of the 16-page monthly paper were printed.⁴

The first editorial, titled "Our First Paper," described the purpose of publishing the journal. It stated: "To many the name of the journal, *Bible Echo and the Signs of the Times*, will be a sufficient explanation. For the benefit of others, we will state that the design of the publishers is to make the paper a thorough exponent of the Bible."⁵ In



Bible Echo & Signs of the Times, Melbourne, January 1886.

Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre, Australia.

his 1886 report to the General Conference Haskell delineated three key benefits of the printed pages. First, he believed that literature broke the barriers of prejudice among the influential businesspeople. Second, it provided an opportunity to share beliefs in a nonthreatening manner. Third, it created a space for culturally oriented ownership referred to as the “pride of the Colonies.”⁶

By 1889 the early success of the journal meant that it was published semimonthly rather than monthly. In April 1889 the Echo Publishing Company Limited launched its official business in a new three-story building erected on land purchased in Best Street. Even though the economy of the country was experiencing a downturn, the business prospered hand in hand with the growth of the church.⁷ The editorial remarks in the first edition of 1889 announced the change, notifying the readers of a price increase from “three shillings and sixpence to five shillings and sixpence.”⁸ It also appealed for support highlighting the spiritual benefits of the journal and its missionary impact. “We ask our friends of the cause in the colonies to stand by us with the support of their prayers and labor. Our living preachers are few, but this journal shall, with God’s help, ‘echo’ the truth of His Word, and while warning the people faithfully of the dangers which threaten us, invite them to the sheltering banner of the truth as it is Jesus.”⁹

In 1892 the editors introduced another change in the general appearance of the journal by shortening its title to *The Bible Echo*. The editorial note stated, “We hope that all our readers will enjoy the appearance of our new paper. . . . Our paper is now almost nearly seven years and it appears in new sinews and tissues and a brand-new complexion.” The editors aimed to make the paper more “attractive and readable.”¹⁰ By 1892 the price of the weekly annual subscription increased to six shillings in clubs of more to one address per year and seven shillings for a single subscription.

In 1894 the progressing success of the journal led to another significant change. In the first edition of 1894 the editors announced the reduction of the journal’s pages from 16 to eight pages, and it became a weekly journal. “This number begins volume 9 of the Bible Echo. It was started in 1886 as a 16-page monthly, but after two years it was made a semi-monthly. It is now changed to an eight-page weekly.” They also assured the readers that the previous change “met with the approval of nearly all of the readers.” They also promised to retain the quality of the *Bible Echo’s* content as a “source of light and blessing to men.”¹¹ However, while the previous editions of the journal included some pictorial illustrations and photos, the first weekly edition excluded the visuals.

A further modification came in 1903 with the change of the journal’s name from *The Bible Echo* to *Australasian Signs of the Times*. The editors informed the readers about the alteration as follows. “On account of the federal postal laws, it becomes necessary to make some changes to the ‘Bible Echo’ in order to have it registered as a newspaper. This will account for alterations in makeup and matter found in this issue.” They assured the readers they would do the best to “make the Australasian Signs of the Times a safe counselor and helper.”¹² The subscription price for 12-month post free in Commonwealth was four shillings and sixpence; five or more copies, four shillings; and 12 or more copies, three shillings and sixpence.

The success of the journal was not only a result of the passion, drive, commitment, and foresight of the early pioneers, but the content of the publication provided ongoing spiritual, moral, and biblical content. As correctly observed in the 1889 editorial: "Our living preachers are few," but by echoing the truth of the Word, "it [the journal] invites them to the sheltering banner of truth as it is in Jesus."¹³

From its inception, articles by Ellen G. White appeared in most editions.¹⁴ Her first article, "Science and the Bible in Education," challenged the readers with a visionary view of a higher view of education. "The education begun here will not be completed in this life; it will be going forward through all eternity." Such a visionary stance inspired people in the antipodes with a higher view of life seen from the perspective of eternity. During her tenure in Australia (1891–1900), her articles in the journal provide an ongoing spiritual, moral and biblical apologetic for the struggles and challenges confronting pilgrims on life's journey.

The contribution of the *Bible Echo and Signs of the Times* journal to the growth of the SDA Church in Australia cannot be quantified. The magazine continues publication in the South Pacific Division as *Signs of the Times*.¹⁵

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NOTES

1. Arthur White, *Ellen White, Woman of Vision* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 274.
2. *Seventh-day Adventist Online Yearbook*, "Australian Mission Including New Zealand and Other Pacific Islands," 131–133, accessed January 7, 2020, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/YB1888.pdf>.
3. "The History and Progress of the Echo Publishing Company, Limited," *Australasian Union Conference Report 2*, no. 6 (July 19, 1899): 5.
4. Allan Lindsay, "Australia," in *The Ellen White Encyclopedia*, ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2013), 625.
5. "Our First Paper," *Bible Echo and Signs of the Times*, January 1886, 8.
6. S. N. Haskell, "The Australian Mission," *Historical Sketches of Foreign Mission*, ed. George Knight (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 2005), 96.
7. See "Echo Publishing Company, Limited."
8. "Please Read," *Bible Echo and Signs of the Times*, January 1, 1889, 16.
9. Ibid.
10. "We hope that all our readers . . .," *The Bible Echo*, August 15, 1892, 256.
11. "This number begins volume 9 . . .," *The Bible Echo*, January 1, 1894, 8.
12. "The Bible Echo," *Australasian Signs of the Times*, January 16, 1903, 48.
13. "Please Read."
14. Allan Lindsay, "Bible Echo and Signs of the Times," in *The Ellen White Encyclopedia*, ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2013), 659.
15. See "Signs of the Times, South Pacific Division."

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