WILLIAM MILLER
AND THE RISE OF ADVENTISM
I remain as ever looking for the Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.

Wm. Miller
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AND THE RISE OF ADVENTISM

George R. Knight
Contents

A Word to the Reader .................................................................................................................................7

PART I: Moving Toward the Year of the End

Chapter 1: Millennial Passion ....................................................................................................................13
- Revival of the Study of Prophecy
- Millennial Conflict
- Millerism and the Second Great Awakening

Chapter 2: The Making of a Millennialist: William Miller’s Early Years ..............................................21
- Not Always a Rebel
- The Deistic Years and the War of 1812
- Back to Christianity
- An Enthusiastic Bible Student
- To Preach or Not to Preach

Chapter 3: Miller’s Mission to the World ..................................................................................................38
- A Profile of Miller the Man
- A Profile of Miller’s Message
- A Profile of Miller’s Results

Chapter 4: Enter Joshua V. Himes: Mission Organizer ...........................................................................56
- Meet J. V. Himes
- Himes Meets Miller
- “The Napoleon of the Press”
- Organizational Strategist
- Himes Under Criticism

Chapter 5: More Millennial Missionaries ..................................................................................................78
- Josiah Litch Joins the Adventist Mission
- The Millerite Camp Meetings
- The Zealous Charles Fitch
- Additional Millerite Leaders
- Black and Female Lecturers

PART II: The Year of the End

Chapter 6: Entering the Year of the End ....................................................................................................105
- Progressively Focusing on the Time
- A Year of Expectancy and Evangelism
- Non-Millerite Responses to the Arrival of the Year

Chapter 7: Coming Out of Babylon .........................................................................................................119
- “Boundary Crisis”
- Growing Resistance to Millerism
- Toward Millerite Separatism
- “Babylon Has Fallen”
Chapter 8: The Spring Disappointment ................................................................. 134
  • A “Final” Evangelistic Thrust        • But Christ Did Not Come

Chapter 9: The Tarrying Time ........................................................................... 141
  • Persevering in “the Work”        • Fanaticism in the Ranks

Chapter 10: The “True Midnight Cry” .............................................................. 159
  • A New Message        • “Real” and “Perceived” Fanaticism in the Seventh Month
  • New Leaders        • Moving Toward October 22
  • Older Leaders Join the Seventh-Month Movement

Chapter 11: The October Disappointment .......................................................... 184
  • Immediate Reactions        • The Shut Door and the Forming of the Battle Line
  • A Leadership in Turmoil
  • The Scattering Time

PART III: Moving Away From the Year of the End

Chapter 12: Adventism’s Radical Fringe ............................................................. 209
  • The Rise of the Spiritualizers        • The Shaker Temptation
  • Aberrant Adventism        • “Who Is We?”

Chapter 13: The Albany Reaction .................................................................... 228
  • Up to Albany        • From Albany to Miller’s Death
  • Albany        • The Albany Denominations
  • Immediately After Albany

Chapter 14: The Sabbatarian Disentanglement .................................................. 251
  • Born in Confusion        • The Third Angel
  • New Personalities        • The Gathering Time
  • New Doctrines: The Answer to Confusion

Chapter 15: Millerism at 170 ............................................................................. 277
  • The Changing Shape of Adventism        • And What of the Passion?
  • The “Why” of Success

NOTES ...................................................................................................................... 291

INDEX ...................................................................................................................... 327
A Word to the Reader

William Miller has been called “the most famous millenarian in American history.” Between 1840 and 1844, his message that Christ would come “about the year 1843” swept across the United States and beyond. Although seen as a harmless aberration at first, by 1843 Miller’s teaching polarized individuals and churches as they faced the year of the end of the world.

After the passing of the year of the end, several Adventist denominations arose out of the ranks of the disappointed Millerites. The most significant of those denominations were the Advent Christians and the Seventh-day Adventists.

William Miller and the Rise of Adventism provides a historical overview of Millerism. Part 1 deals with the personalities and ideas that shaped Millerite Adventism as it approached the time of the expected Second Coming. Part 2 examines the events and tensions of that climactic year. And part 3 treats the development of Adventism after the passing of the expected time for Christ to come.

Thus a first purpose of this book is to set forth a comprehensive overview of Millerism. While several books have appeared on the topic, none thus far have sought to be comprehensive. William Miller and the Rise of Adventism seeks to fill that gap.

A second purpose of this volume is to explore possible reasons for Millerism’s surprising success. Beyond the usual sociological explanations that highlight external factors for that success, the present work argues that the vital internal dynamic that thrust the Millerites into the flow of history was a deep certainty, based upon concentrated study of the apocalyptic prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation, that Christ
was coming soon and an impelling conviction of personal responsibility to warn the world of that good yet fearful news. In short, the Millerites were mission driven because they saw themselves as a prophetic people with a message that the world desperately needed to hear. That certitude appears to be the internal mainspring that led the Millerites to dedicate their all to their task.

Such a deeply held conviction seems to be a precondition to success in all types of millennial movements. Without that prophetic certainty and its accompanying sense of urgent responsibility, millennial movements begin to atrophy. With their mainspring absent, they lose their dynamic for vitality and growth.

Scholars largely neglected serious study of Millerism until the 1980s. For decades that study was largely frozen between the poles of Clara Endicott Sears’ Days of Delusion (1924) and Francis D. Nichol’s The Midnight Cry (1944). While the first of those books was anecdotal and critical, the second was scholarly but admittedly apologetic. In spite of its defensive flavor, Nichol’s work did much to correct misconceptions about Millerism in scholarly works touching upon the topic.


My own work on the topic was first published in 1993 as Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism. I was indebted not only to those scholars listed above, but also to the unpublished work of many other students. Of special value were the unpublished research of David Arthur and Everett Dick. Two other informative studies have been P. Gerard Damsteegt’s Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission and the fourth volume of LeRoy E. Froom’s The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers. While those last two focus more on Miller’s system of prophetic interpretation than on the history of Millerism, they provide students of Millerite history with an abundance of insight unavailable in other secondary works.
Needless to say, the volumes and research listed above have greatly increased our knowledge of both Millerism and the world in which it developed. The present book not only builds upon previous published and unpublished research into Millerism, but it endeavors to extend and enrich that research. I have indicated my many other scholarly debts in the notes.

As noted above, the original title of this book was *Millennial Fever and the End of the World*. Outside of editorial changes and the updating of statistics and some of the bibliographic entries, the content remains largely the same. I have, however, corrected those factual errors that have come to my attention.

Since the initial publication in 1993 several works dealing with Miller and the rise of Adventism have come off the press. Foremost among those especially dedicated to Millerism have been David Rowe’s *God’s Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World* and the doctoral dissertation by Tommy L. Faris on William Miller as a man of “common sense.” Another valuable contribution to the field is Gary Land’s historiographical essay on Millerism. New works especially helpful on the post-disappointment rise of Sabbatarian Adventism include Gerald Wheeler’s *James White: Innovator and Overcomer*, my *Joseph Bates: The Real Founder of Seventh-day Adventism*, and the doctoral dissertations of Alberto Timm and Merlin Burt. The Adventist Classic Library sponsored by Andrews University Press has also made several additions to the study of Millerism and the rise of Adventism. Included in that series are republications of Isaac Wellcome’s *History of the Second Advent Message* with an introduction by Gary Land, Sylvester Bliss’ *Memoirs of William Miller* with an essay by Merlin Burt, Joseph Bates’ *Autobiography* with an essay by Gary Land, and James White’s *Life Incidents* with an essay by Jerry Moon. In addition to those works, my *1844 and the Rise of Sabbatarian Adventism* republished many of the most important Millerite and early Sabbatarian Adventist documents along with introductory essays.

My appreciation continues to go out to the many libraries and archives that provided me with documents during the fifteen years of my initial study of Millerism. Foremost among those libraries and archives were those at Andrews University, Aurora University, Oberlin College, Cornell University, the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the American Antiquarian Society. Ongoing gratitude for my early study of the topic is also extended to Sandra White of the interlibrary loan department of Andrews University, to Louise Dederen and Jim
William Miller and the Rise of Adventism

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Part I

MOVING TOWARD
THE YEAR OF
THE END
In 1818 a recent convert to Christianity came to the shocking conclusion that Jesus Christ would personally and visibly return to earth to set up His eternal kingdom in about twenty-five years—1843. That conclusion filled William Miller with both joy and uneasiness. The joy stemmed from his belief that the sorrows of earth would soon be over; the uneasiness, from both the realization that he had a responsibility to warn the world if his conclusions were true and the nagging fear that his calculations could be wrong.¹

**Revival of the Study of Prophecy**

Miller was not alone in his hope for a soon-coming millennial kingdom. “America in the early nineteenth century,” claims Ernest Sandeen, “was drunk on the millennium.”² Christians of all stripes believed they were on the very edge of the kingdom of God.

The frightfully destructive Lisbon earthquake of 1755 had directed the minds of many to the topic of the end of the world, but the most important stimulus found rootage in the events of the French Revolution in the 1790s. The social and political upheavals then taking place reminded people of biblical descriptions of the end of the world. Eyes were turned to the biblical prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation by the violence and magnitude of the French catastrophe.³

In particular, many Bible students soon developed an interest in the time prophecies and the year 1798. In February of that year, Napoleon’s general Berthier had
William Miller and the Rise of Adventism

marched into Rome and dethroned Pope Pius VI. Thus 1798, for many Bible scholars, became the anchor point for correlating secular history with biblical prophecy. Using the principle that in prophecy a day equals a year, they saw the capture of the pope as the “deadly wound” of Revelation 13:3 and the fulfillment of the 1260-year/day prophecy of Daniel 7:25 and Revelation 12:6, 14 and 13:5.4

Bible scholars, notes Sandeen, believed they now had “a fixed point in the prophetic chronology of Revelation and Daniel. Some of them felt certain that they could now mark their own location in the unfolding prophetic chronology.”5

At last, many suggested, the prophecy of Daniel 12:4 was being fulfilled. Six hundred years before the birth of Christ, Daniel had written: “But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end: many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased” (cf. v. 9). Because of world events, many came under conviction that they had arrived at the “time of the end.” As never before, the eyes of Bible students literally “ran to and fro” over Daniel’s prophecies as they sought to get a clearer understanding of end-time events. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed an unprecedented number of books being published on the Bible’s apocalyptic prophecies.

A belief in the fulfillment of Daniel 12:4 and the unlocking of the 1260-year/day prophecy of Daniel 7:25 encouraged students of prophecy to continue their exciting explorations. They soon came across the 2300-day prophecy of Daniel 8:14: “Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed.” LeRoy Froom has documented the fact that more than sixty-five expositors on four continents between 1800 and 1844 predicted that the 2300-year/day prophecy would be fulfilled sometime between 1843 and 1847. While there was a general consensus on the time of the prophecy’s fulfillment, however, there were widely differing opinions over the event to transpire at its conclusion.6

Thus there was a sense in which Miller was in good company. After all, he also had come to his conclusion through studying the 2300 days of Daniel 8:14.7 Miller, however, radically differed with nearly all of his contemporaries on the concluding event of the prophecy.

Beyond the 2300 days, the key symbols of Daniel 8:14 were the sanctuary and its cleansing. Through systematic study, Miller concluded that the only things the sanctuary could represent in the 1840s were the earth and the church. He also had come to believe that the cleansing would be by fire. After all,
didn’t Peter write: “But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men” (2 Peter 3:7)?

Miller’s ultimate conclusion was that the cleansing of the earth by fire at the end of the 2300 days represented the coming of Christ in judgment. Therefore, the Second Advent would take place about 1843, before the one thousand years, or millennium, of Revelation 20. At that time

the dead saints or bodies will arise, those children of God who are alive then, will be changed, and caught up to meet the Lord in the air, where they will be married to him. The World and all the wicked will be burnt up (not anihilated [sic]) and then Christ will descend and reign personally with his Saints; and at the end of the 1000 Years the wicked will be raised, judged and sent to everlasting punishment.

Millennial Conflict

The conclusion that Christ would come about 1843, before the millennium, was the point at which Miller differed from nearly all of his contemporaries. The conventional wisdom of the day was that Christ would come at the close of the one thousand years.

As a result, George Bush, professor of Hebrew and Oriental literature at New York City University, could write to Miller:

While I have no question that well-informed students of prophecy will admit that your calculation of the Times . . . is not materially erroneous, they will still, I believe, maintain that you have entirely mistaken the nature of the events which are to occur when those periods have expired. . . . The expiration of these periods is to introduce, by gradual steps, a new order of things, intellectual, political and moral. . . .

The great event before the world is not its physical conflagration, but its moral regeneration.

Charles Finney, the greatest American evangelist of the second quarter of the nineteenth century, also set forth the prevailing view when he penned in 1835 that “if the church will do her duty, the millenium [sic] may come in this country in three years.” A few years later, Finney wrote: “I have examined Mr. Miller’s theory, and am persuaded, that what he expects to come after the judgement, will come before it [i.e., the millenium].”

The Oberlin Evangelist, in combating
Millerism, noted in 1843 that “the world is not growing worse but better” because of the efforts at reform being carried out by the churches and other reformers. Henry Cowles could write in like manner that “the golden age of our race is yet to come; . . . numerous indications of Providence seem to show that it may not be very distant.” But, he hastened to add, “the event cannot take place . . . without appropriate human instrumentality. . . . The Church therefore might have the Millenium [sic] speedily if she would.”

In summary, Bush, Finney, Cowles, and others were not out of harmony with Miller on the nearness of the millennium but on its meaning and the events needed to bring it about. For them the soon-coming millennium would be a thousand years of earthly peace and plenty brought about through social reform, national progress, and personal perfection. It was that vision that fueled the multiplicity of social and personal reforms characterizing much of the nineteenth century. One of the century’s most powerful ideas was that the millennial kingdom could be brought about by human effort.

That idea not only stood at the center of religious reform, but it also energized Americans in the political realm. From as early as the 1630s, the founders of the Puritan commonwealth had seen New England as a religious/political experiment that would be as a “city upon a hill” to enlighten the Old World.

That perspective was greatly heightened by the American Revolution and its resulting democratic “experiment.” Even secular Americans came to have a sense of millennial destiny in the nineteenth century as they came to see themselves as “God’s New Israel” and a “Redeemer Nation.” Thus Ernest Tuveson can speak of a “secular millennialism.” Undergirding such perspectives were the extremely positive evaluations of human nature and a concept of the infinite perfectibility of humanity that the nineteenth century inherited from the previous century’s Enlightenment.

In other words, social and religious leaders believed that, in spite of a rather brutish past, recent political and technological breakthroughs had begun to provide the machinery for the creation of heaven on earth, with the United States leading the way. Based upon such thoughts, the Anglo-Saxon world of the early nineteenth century was filled with hundreds of social and personal reform movements for the betterment of human society.

Reform societies arose in the early nineteenth century in almost every conceivable area of human interest. It was in these decades that campaigns for the abolition of slavery, war, and the use of alcohol
became major factors in American culture. In addition, there were societies established for the promotion of public education; better treatment of the deaf, blind, mentally incapacitated, and prisoners; the equality of the sexes and races; and so on. Beyond the social realm, one finds organizations sponsoring personal betterment in such areas as moral reform and health—including the American Vegetarian Society.14

Religionists and secularists generally pooled their energies and resources in the hope of perfecting society through social and personal reform. But religionists went beyond their contemporaries through the establishment of such entities as Bible societies, home and foreign mission societies, Sunday-school unions, and associations for the promotion of Sunday sacredness.

The first half of the nineteenth century was awash in formal societies aimed at individual and social perfection. Such associations were not at the edges of American society, but at its very heart. While the roots of the reform efforts are found in the late eighteenth century, such efforts came to a climax between the 1820s and the 1840s.

Thus Millerism was born into a world rife with millennial expectation: a world affected by millennial passion to such an extent that it is almost impossible for citizens of the twenty-first century, who have witnessed two world wars and innumerable holocausts in the political, economic, and social realms, to grasp its power. Modern people have come to see that new inventions do not necessarily mean social and moral progress. They know that too often the technological and communicative advances of the last two centuries have been put to less than constructive uses.

As a result, the optimism of the early nineteenth century has evaporated. On the other hand, that optimism was quite real to people 170 years ago. In fact, it was the mainspring that fueled their many efforts to bring about the millennium. If people worked harder at reform, the belief ran, they could have a part in ushering in the thousand years of increasing peace and plenty that would climax with the second coming of Christ at the end of the millennium.

It was that positive millennial vision and hope that Millerism challenged. It was a challenge to the core belief of mainline America that the golden age could be brought about through human effort. Thus what Ruth Alden Doan has called the “Miller Heresy” was not in Adventism’s doctrines but in its “radical supernaturalism.”15

At Millerism’s very foundation was a pessimism that human society would not
achieve its grandiose schemes. Instead, the solution to the human problem would come through God’s breaking into history at the Second Advent. That alternative solution set forth in God’s Word would have at least two effects: (1) It would make the Adventist solution immensely popular with those sectors of the population that were also becoming disillusioned with human programs in the late 1830s and early 1840s, and (2) it would eventually lead to a showdown in the churches between the optimistic believers in human effort and the pessimistic Adventists as the “year of the end” approached.

**Millerism and the Second Great Awakening**

Meanwhile, the rise of Adventism took place during America’s greatest religious revival. That revival, known as the Second Great Awakening, did more than anything else in the history of the young nation to transform the United States into a Christian nation.

The early decades of the nineteenth century saw (1) a turning away from Deism (a skeptical belief that rejects Christianity with its miracles and supernatural revelation), which many had come to associate with the atrocities of the French Revolution, and (2) a turning toward evangelical Christianity. A large portion of a generation of Americans (including William Miller, as we shall see in chapter 2) were affected by that change. Between 1800 and 1850, the percentage of church members in the nation increased from about 5 or 10 percent to about 25 percent. Beyond membership figures, Christianity saw a new birth in the life of the nation. One effect of that new birth was the millennial drive inherent in many of the reform movements noted above.

Millerism was born into a world excited with religion and religious themes. Religion was a dynamic, growing enterprise in the United States in the 1830s and 1840s, and Millerism was well adapted to capitalize on that dynamic expansion.

Recent scholarship has repeatedly pointed out the essentially orthodox nature of Millerite Adventism. As Whitney Cross put it, aside from Millerism’s advocacy of the personal coming of Christ in the 1840s, Miller achieved no startling novelty. His doctrine in every other respect virtually epitomized orthodoxy. His chronology merely elaborated and refined the kind of calculations his contemporaries had long been making but became more dramatic because it was more exact, and because the predicted event was more startling.
Again, David Rowe notes, “Millerites are not fascinating because they were so different from everyone else but because they were so like their neighbors.” Unlike the Mormons and Shakers and other radical groups of the period, the Millerites were both traditional and orthodox in their theology and lifestyle. “In this fact,” Rowe points out, “lies the secret of their success.” It was easy for most Americans to accept Millerism once they accepted the premillennial return of Christ, since they did not need to adjust other aspects of their belief structure.

By the late 1830s, the revivalistic enthusiasm of the period between 1825 and 1835 was beginning to wane. Even the Billy Graham of the day—Charles Finney—had settled into a professorship at Oberlin College in Ohio, from which he still made annual evangelistic forays. But evangelism was no longer his full-time business.

Beyond the waning of evangelistic excitement, the severe Panic (or economic depression) of 1837 and its continuing effects into the early 1840s had dampened the optimism of many Americans regarding the efficacy of human effort to bring about the millennium. It should be noted that “prices fell farther between 1839 and 1843 than between 1929 and 1933—42 percent as against 31 percent.” Such brutal statistics (coupled with several natural disasters of the period) made many wonder what had happened to human progress.

Thus Miller’s message spoke to the times. It is probably no accident that enthusiasm for his message took a giant step forward in 1838 and 1839. In addition, we should keep in mind the fact that agricultural prices, after falling sharply between 1841 and 1843, finally reached their lowest point in March 1843, at the very time that Millerism was moving into its climactic phase.

In the troubled world of the late 1830s, Millerism began to make sense to more people. People were looking for answers in both their personal and social worlds.

Miller had a message that seemed to many to provide those answers. As a result, throughout the 1830s and early 1840s, he (and later his ministerial colleagues) received an unending stream of invitations to hold revivals in the churches of the evangelical denominations. Pastors found in Miller a man who could revive the sagging evangelistic thrust of the Second Great Awakening.

Millerism, therefore, has been viewed by several scholars as the final segment of the Awakening. Everett Dick has demonstrated that the “maximum point in gains [of church members in several denominations] came at the exact time that
William Miller and the Rise of Adventism

Miller expected Christ’s advent.” And Richard Carwardine notes that “in strictly statistical terms the peak of the Awakening came in this adventist phase of 1843-44.”

The Millerite crusade, therefore, should not be seen as a separate movement from the Second Great Awakening, but as an extension of it. As such, Dick is probably correct in his assessment that “William Miller may justifiably be considered the greatest evangelistic influence in the northeastern United States between 1840 and 1844.”

Unfortunately for Miller and his cause, most converts made by Adventist preachers between the 1830s and mid-1842 were probably converts to general Christianity rather than to Adventism’s peculiar premillennial doctrine. But that would change as Millerism approached the year of the end of the world.

Students of American history have put forth several reasons for what Cross calls “the amazingly rapid growth” of Millerism. Part of that growth can be explained by such sociological forces as economic depression and disillusionment with reform. But the phenomenon extends beyond those explanations.

The present book argues that the vital conviction that thrust the Millerites into the flow of history was a deep certainty, based upon concentrated study of the apocalyptic prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, that Christ was coming soon and that they had a personal responsibility to warn the world of that good yet fearful news. In short, they saw themselves as a prophetic people with a mission to present a message that the world desperately needed to hear.

Just as the postmillennial churches were thrust into social reform in the belief that they needed to do their part to bring about the millennial kingdom, so the Millerite Adventists were catapulted into a “preaching frenzy” by their conviction in the nearness of the Second Coming. Their mathematical demonstrations of that nearness greatly intensified that burden as they sought to warn a world of the rapidly approaching climactic event of the ages.