

WILLIAM MILLER AND THE GREAT DISAPPOINTMENT
A LEGACY OF HERESY

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to address the life and legacy of William Miller. From simple beginnings, he was an accomplished leader who was persuaded by Bible prophecy from deism to faith and became a Baptist preacher. Unfortunately, through apocalyptic date setting, he inadvertently formed a new sect which became the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. This presentation will first give a broad overview and summary of the Miller's early life and conversion, and then it will offer several key points of analysis. The first point of analysis will be Millers' exegesis, which naturally leads to his prediction of the Second Advent and the resulting Millerite movement. Next, the "Great Disappointment of 1844" will be discussed on the basis of his and others repeated failed predictions. Finally, a legacy of strange theology will be discussed in the formation of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and its principle prophets, Ellen G. White. The paper will attempt to show that although Miller was an orthodox Calvinistic Baptist, his insistent date setting, prideful resistance to criticism and lack of leadership resulted in a harmful influence and a legacy of heterodoxy.

EARLY LIFE AND CONVERSION

William Miller was born February 15, 1782 in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, the oldest of sixteen brothers and sisters. Raised on the frontier of Low Hampton, New York in a poverty-ravaged home, his opportunities were meager at best. Farm life was arduous but young William compensated for his lack of education by becoming a vociferous reader of numerous borrowed books. He was said to have a particular appetite for history. His mother, the daughter and sister

of Baptist ministers, was a strong Christian influence who instructed him in the Bible and Godly character. Miller had a comfortable, if perhaps naïve, faith until he moved to the city.

In 1803, Miller married Lucy Smith and moved to the city of Poultney, Vermont. He quickly worked his way up the social ladder and became a respected figure serving as deputy sheriff and justice of the peace.¹ However, he encountered a great deal of hypocrisy amongst Christians which caused him to doubt his simple faith. Compounding this, his new circle of friends was much more sophisticated and skeptical than the folks on the farm. They introduced him to the works of Thomas Paine, David Hume and Voltaire. Critical arguments like Paine's in *The Age of Reason* were caustic to his immature faith:

There are also many who have been so enthusiastically enraptured by what they conceived to be the infinite love of God to man in making a sacrifice of himself, that the vehemence of the idea has forbidden and deterred them from examining into the absurdity and profaneness of the story.²

An influential founding father, Paine presented a systematic polemic against the Bible identifying it as nothing but mythology. This sort of critique cut Miller to the heart; he felt he had been duped. He began by questioning the supernatural events in the Bible and eventually stopped attending church.

Like his newly acquired urbanite friends, Miller became a deist. Deism is a religious belief system that allows for a divine creator but denies that God interacts personally with His creation. The universe is seen as a giant clock which the creator simply wound up and left to wind down unattended. Drawing from Paine and others like him, deism holds that “true religion

¹Earlke Cairns, “Miller, William” in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*.ed. J. D. Douglas, Earle E. Cairns and James E. Ruark (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 660.

² Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* (New York: The Truth Seeker Company, 1898), 14.

is a natural religion grounded in reason rather than any authoritative special revelation.”³ In this view, the universe strictly follows natural law leaving no room for the supernatural. Accordingly, Miller rejected the inspiration of the Bible, deity of Jesus Christ and the power of prayer. Even so, his moral outlook was steady and he did his best to maintain high character.

At this point, he was an established leader in the community serving as a constable and justice of the peace. When the British army threatened, Miller was quick to join the militia and quickly rose to Captain during the War of 1812. He was a skillful soldier who won the admiration and loyalty of his fellow men. In fact, when Miller volunteered for service forty seven other men signed up with him on the condition that they would serve under his command.⁴ During the war Miller’s deism was challenged. He is said to have played a decisive role in the battle of Plattsburgh at turning point in the war. It seemed miraculous. Consequently, Miller believed that God had intervened and his faith was rekindled.

At the conclusion of the war in 1815, Miller moved back to Low Hampton, New York and purchased a two hundred acre farm near his boyhood home. The events at the battle of Plattsburgh haunted him and he began to ponder religious matters. Consequently, he soon began to attend a local Baptist church pastored by his Uncle. One Sunday, he was asked to read a lesson concerning Isaiah 53, a very compelling Messianic prophecy, precisely describing Jesus’ suffering and sacrificial death some six hundred years prior to His birth. Aware of his own need of Savior, Miller described his reaction:

³ C. Stephen Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 32.

⁴ Anne Devereaux Jordan, *The Seventh Day Adventists: A History* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1988), 26.

I saw that the Bible did bring to view just such a Saviour as I needed; and I was perplexed to find how an uninspired book should develop principles so perfectly adapted to the wants of a fallen world. I was constrained to admit that the Scriptures must be a revelation from God. They became my delight; and in Jesus I found a friend. The Saviour became to me the chiefest among ten thousand; and the Scriptures, which before were dark and contradictory, now became the lamp to my feet and light to my path. My mind became settled and satisfied.⁵

This culminated in 1816 with his rededication to the Lord.⁶ Miller then dedicated himself to Bible study in order to resolve the alleged contradictions and absurdities that had devastated his former faith. He resolved to harmonize Genesis to Revelation letting scripture interpret scripture. As a means of avoiding presuppositions, he resolved to employ only a concordance in his quest.

It was during this two year period of intense study that Miller like many in his day became fascinated with prophecy, especially end time prophecy. The early nineteenth century was the apex of the historicist school of prophetic interpretation, a tradition that had been building for centuries since the reformation. The historicist approach, posits that the book of Revelation provides a detailed accounting of Revelation and Daniel's prophecy which supplies a synopsis of Church history from the first century until the second coming of Christ. Biblical scholar, G.K. Beale, characterizes historicism in this way, "Typically this view identifies parts of the Apocalypse as prophecies of the invasions of the Christianized Roman Empire by the Goths and the Muslims. Further, the corruptions of the medieval papacy, the reign of Charlemagne, the Protestant Reformation, and the destruction wrought by Napoleon and Hitler have been seen as

⁵ William Miller as quoted in Ellen Gould White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*, (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911), 319.

⁶ Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, *131 Christians Everyone Should Know*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 190.

predicted by John.”⁷ This was by far the dominate view of the day. According to Collins, Miller was not alone in positing 1843, “That year was a date commonly put forward by historicist premillennialists in Britain and America.”⁸ In fact, David Rowe argues that Miller’s appeal was his rationality and traditional hermeneutic.⁹ The nineteenth century was replete with various ideas predicting the Second Advent and Miller soon became one of the most famous.

THE MILLERITE MOVEMENT

After two years he was convinced he understood the key to the return of Christ based on Daniel 8:14: “For 2,300 evenings and mornings. Then the sanctuary shall be restored to its rightful state” (Da 8:14). Miller interpreted this passage to refer to the cleansing of the earth, as the “sanctuary” by Jesus Christ at his second coming. But as was popular at the time, Miller used the year-day formula found in other prophecies like seventy weeks of Daniel 9 and Ezekiel 4:6b “...Forty days I assign you, a day for each year.” He believed the seventy weeks which ended at the crucifixion were within the 2300 years. Thus, he employed the seventy weeks point of origin to set a beginning point at 457 BC, the decree to rebuild Jerusalem by Artaxerxes I of Persia, and moved forward 2300 years. Miller wrote, “I was thus brought, in 1818, at the close of my two years’ study of the Scriptures, to the solemn conclusion, that in about twenty-five years from that

⁷ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 46.

⁸ William P. Collins, “Millennialism, the Millerites, and Historicism” *World Order* 30 (December 1998):17.

⁹ David Rowe, *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 13.

time [1818] all the affairs of our present state would be wound up.”¹⁰ In other words, he arrived at 1843 as the date of the Second Advent.

Modern scholars understand these to be literal days signifying the period from 170 BC to the death of the high priest Onias III on December 14, 164 when Judas Maccabeus cleansed and rededicated the temple (1 Mac. 4:52).¹¹ Accordingly, a criticism often leveled against Miller is that his isolation and self-taught hermeneutic led to his erroneous conclusions. For example, Richard Abanes writes, “His difficulties were compounded by his refusal to use scholarly resources (such as Bible commentaries), lack of formal training, and limited linguistic skills.”¹² However, it is important to recognize that Miller was not alone in his historicist hermeneutic. Christian leaders from a broad spectrum, Jonathan Edwards to John Wesley, believed that Jesus was likely to return 1260 years from AD 606 when the Pope had declared himself universal bishop based on Revelation 12:6 and other passages. For instance, the Revelation commentary heralded by Spurgeon and others in the nineteenth century, *Horae Apocalypticae*, set a date as well:

At the same time that the fall and complete commencement of the period appeared on strong and peculiar historic evidence (especially that of the then risen ten diademed Romano-Gothic Papal horns) to have about synchronized with the epoch of Phocas’ decree A.D. 606; and the corresponding epoch of end with the year 1866.¹³

Thus, it seems that the use of commentaries might have only resulted in a date some twenty years subsequent. Miller’s hermeneutic was not at all far from the norm of his day.

¹⁰ Leroy Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, vol. 4 (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1954), 463.

¹¹ *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1604.

¹² Richard Abanes, *End-Time Visions: the Road to Armageddon?* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1998), 214.

¹³ Edward Elliot, *Horae Apocalypticae* vol. 4 (London : Seeley, Jackson, and Halliday, 1862), 237.

At first Miller only told his friends and family about his conclusions. He attended a particular Baptist church where his friends and family encouraged him to share his ideas. While initially reluctant, Miller describes hearing from God:

It came home to me with more force than ever, "Go and tell it to the world." The impression was so sudden, and came on with such force, that I settled down into my chair, saying. "I can't go Lord." "Why not?" seemed to be the response; and then all my excuses came up, my want of ability, etc.; but my distress became so great, I entered into a solid covenant with God, that, if he would open the way, I would go and perform my duty to the world.¹⁴

He seems sincere and it appeared to Miller that his prayer was immediately answered as an invitation to speak at a neighboring church came in that very day. Indeed, at his first appearance in Dresden, New York, a revival broke out in 1831.¹⁵ This bolstered his confidence and certainty. Shortly thereafter, he was invited by Baptist, Methodist, and Congregational churches all over the northeast, so many that after a year he could accept no more invitations.

Beginning in 1832, he wrote a series of articles promoting his prediction in a local Baptist paper, the *Vermont Telegraph*. In 1833, he put this into pamphlet form and that same year he was licensed as a Baptist preacher.¹⁶ Also in 1833, a dramatic meteor shower occurred which seemed to be a harbinger of the end times as per Jesus' teaching on "...great signs from heaven" (Lk 21:11). One eyewitness reported, "The whole firmament, over all the United States, being then, for hours, in fiery commotion! No celestial phenomenon has ever occurred in this country, since its first settlement, which was viewed with such intense admiration by one class in the

¹⁴ R. M. Devens, *American Progress: The Great Events of the Greatest Century*, (Topeka, KS: Herbert S. Reed, 1896), 308.

¹⁵ "Millennialism in America" in J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions* (Detroit: Gale Research, 2003), 121.

¹⁶ Earle Cairns, "Miller, William" in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. ed. J. D. Douglas, Earle E. Cairns and James E. Ruark (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 660.

community, or with so much dread and alarm by another."¹⁷ Given these seeming marks of authentication, it is easy to empathize. Everything Miller experienced appeared to confirm his eschatological hypothesis and his message increasingly gained traction in the culture. For the next decade, he was an itinerant evangelist, preaching the imminent return of Jesus to large crowds. It is abundantly clear that he sincerely believed every word of it.

In 1836, he published what became a bestselling book on the subject, *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ, About the Year 1843*.¹⁸ The book was such a success that many prominent pastors including Josiah Litch, Joseph Bates, Henry Dana Ward and Charles Fitch joined Miller.¹⁹ Most remarkably, Joshua Himes invited Miller to preach in his Boston church. Himes had the promotional talent to lift the movement into national prominence. In March of 1840, Himes began publication of the movement's magazine, *Signs of the Times*. In October, they held a transformative conference at Chardon Street Church in Boston. The "Millerite" movement took on national prominence.

The Boston conference was so wildly successful that other conferences in cities across the Northeast and Midwest were held to herald Miller's apocalyptic message, which Himes had sloganeered as "the midnight cry." While he never intended to start a new denomination, he was drawing followers from nearly all of the protestant churches. Intentional or not, the "Millerites" had formed a new sect that was also labeled the "Adventists." One such Adventist wrote, "Most of them loved their churches, and could not think of leaving. But when they were ridiculed, oppressed, and in various ways cut off from their former privileges ...they shook off the yoke,

¹⁷ Devens, *American Progress*, 228.

¹⁸ Douglas, *The New International*, 660.

¹⁹ Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 121.

and raised the cry, 'Come out of her, My people.'"²⁰ They were leaving their home churches to follow Miller. While some grew militant, others later regretted it.

Miller was unwavering and did little to mitigate the attrition of local congregations. As the movement grew, the established denominations began to increasingly speak against Miller's alarmism. In response, some of the Adventists grew increasingly intolerant of Christians who did not accept their prophetic scheme. In other words, they were so confident they were unwilling to accept any dissent. For them, the exegesis was sound and the logic incontrovertible. This is a common error amongst fanatics: they become too enamored by their own opinions to be objective. They soon began to label the holdouts and their churches as "Babylon" based on Revelation 17. Miller did little to dissuade them. As a leader, he should have. As the date approached it is estimated that Miller gained well over 50,000 followers, some estimate up to 100,000.²¹

The backlash from the abstaining churches ensued as Millerites were subjected to church discipline and excommunicated. In fact, an annual meeting of Methodist ministers adopted a resolution which is likely characteristic of the mainline opinion:

Resolved, that the peculiarities of that theory relative to the second coming of Christ and the end of the world, denominated Millerism, together with all its modifications, are contrary to the standards of the church, and we are constrained to regard them as among the erroneous and strange doctrines which we are pledged to banish and drive away.²²

²⁰ Emma Howell Cooper, *The Great Advent Movement*, (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1968), 31.

²¹ William M. Alnor, *Soothsayers of the Second Advent* (Old Tappan, NJ.: Fleming H Revell Co, 1989), 58.

²² Cooper, *The Great Advent*, 31.

Adventists began being expelled from their churches. Notably, at the Maine Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, L. S. Stockman, a leader in the denomination²³, was tried before his presiding elders and expelled for heresy.²⁴ Also, Robert Harmon, the father of soon to be prophetess, Ellen G. White, was removed along with the entire family.²⁵ To add fuel to the fire, the increasingly charismatic behavior at Adventist tent meetings fueled the popular press and the *New York Christian Advocate* carried a series of critical articles against Millerism.

William Miller stood firm. Rather than moderating his claims or extending charity to the churches, he proclaimed certainty. It is fair to argue that Miller was sincere and his prayers were seemingly confirmed. Perhaps, this prideful resoluteness was a greater error than his prediction because even the apostles expected to see Christ to return in their lifetime. While he had only named the year 1843 in the book and articles, on January 1, 1843 he got more specific:

I believe the time can be known by all who desire to understand and to be ready for His coming. And I am fully convinced that sometime between March 21st, 1843, and March 21st, 1844, according to the Jewish mode of computation of time, Christ will come, and bring all His saints with Him; and that then He will reward every man as his work shall be.²⁶

It is important to note that he set no day nor hour in deference to “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mk 13:32). In this way, he claimed to accept Jesus’ admonition but believed the *year* was crystal clear by

²³ “Minutes of the annual conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church” (T. Mason and G. Lane for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1840).

²⁴ Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 121

²⁵ Cooper, *The Great Advent*, 31.

²⁶ William Miller quoted in Francis D. Nichol, *The Midnight Cry* (Washington, DC, Review and Herald Publishing, 1945), 48.

exegesis. Even so, a deadline is inferred by the outward bound of the range which is a specific day.

In late February, an unexpected large comet appeared in the sky, a seeming harbinger of the Second Advent. This is known as “the great comet of 1843” and is listed as one of the greatest of all time. According to astronomers, it is from a group of comets “which has produced some of the most brilliant comets in recorded history.”²⁷ Thus, it is not surprising that anticipation mounted amongst the true believers. A huge Millerite temple was built in Boston. Charles Fitch pushed the “come out of her” movement to new levels albeit against Miller’s wishes. Yet, he failed to denounce it. The rhetoric between the Adventists and the denominational churches grew more heated. As the inside boundary of March 14, 1843 came and went, the movement reached a fever pitch. One scholar has estimated that the Millerites collaterally influenced up to one million American Christians to become anxiously expectant.²⁸

THE GREAT DISAPPOINTMENT

As days went by, the Millerites were unfazed but the newspapers and the general public began to jeer. Nonetheless, Miller’s prediction allowed for an entire year of intense expectancy. As 1844 came to pass Miller appealed to the Jewish calendar and encouraged his followers, “Shall we give up the ship? No, No...”²⁹ In fact, some were expressing doubts but they were dissuaded by the faithful. As the deadline loomed, it seems even Miller was having second thoughts. An editorial in February 1844 edition of *The Midnight Cry*, conceded, “If we are

²⁷ Joe Rao, “The Greatest Comets of All Time,” Space, <http://www.space.com/3366-greatest-comets-time.html> (accessed 08/16/2012).

²⁸ Collins, “Millennialism,” 18.

²⁹ Eva Shaw, *Eve of Destruction: Prophecies, Theories, and Preparations for the End of the World* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1995), 65.

mistaken in the time, we feel the fullest confidence that the event we have anticipated is the next great event in the world's history."³⁰ Even so, Miller's followers did not pick up on this subtle moderation. It was too late to attenuate the fervor of the movement and largely by default Miller did great damage to local churches.

The February 1844 issue of *The Midnight Cry* featured a long article on "Babylon." The author exhorted his readers "I ask your attention to the fact, that John [the revelator] heard, as distinctly, 'a voice from heaven, saying, COME OUT OF HER, MY PEOPLE, as he did that the hour of His judgment is come.'"³¹ Accounts report *pastors* from Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and Episcopal churches leaving their denominations to minister in makeshift Millerite tabernacles which were erected around the country, even Canada. The majority were Baptist.³² While Miller was convinced that the Roman Catholic Church was within Babylon, he expressed doubt that it included Protestantism. Even so, he did little to stop the exodus by making indecisive statements like, "I am not certain but that God will confound all of our sectarian churches, and bring out His people from among them."³³ In response, many of his followers had not only left their churches but also quit their jobs. Certain or not, Miller had declared war in the minds of the denominational leadership.

In 1844, as the outward boundary of March 14 passed without the second coming, some of the most radical Millerites lost control. Various newspaper accounts report Millerites jumping from trees and roofs expecting to be raptured. The headline of a Boston newspaper mocked,

³⁰ Nichols, *The Midnight*, 63.

³¹ Nichol, *The Midnight*, 63.

³² Rowe, *The Disappointed*, 9.

³³ Nichol, *The Midnight*, 63.

“What? – not gone up yet?” and speaks of Miller and “the mischief he has done the past year in filling our lunatic asylums.”³⁴ Miller had earlier written of his views, “If this chronology is not correct, I shall despair of ever getting from the Bible and history a true account of the age of the world.”³⁵ In May 1844, Miller wrote to his followers, “I confess my error and acknowledge my disappointment. Yet, I still believe that the day of the Lord is near, even at the door; and I exhort you, my brethren, to be watchful, and not let that day come upon you unawares.”³⁶ Some were disillusioned and left the movement. Even so, the multitude of enthusiastic followers could not all be turned away.

Resolved and unrepentant, the hard core Adventists began to make adjustments to Miller’s chronology. Samuel Snow claimed to have found the problem with the initial calculation. He made the necessary corrections based on a “tarrying time” and predicted October 22, 1844, as the real date of return. Although he was reluctant at first, Miller was persuaded of the new date and rejoined the movement. He wrote, “I see a glory in the seventh month which I never saw before. Although the Lord had shown me the typical bearing of the seventh month, one year and a half ago, yet I did not realize the force of the types. . . . Thank the Lord. I am almost home, Glory! Glory! Glory!”³⁷ Eventually Himes, Fitch and the other leaders signed on and expectant tensions reached new levels of hysteria.

³⁴ Nichol, *The Midnight*, 127.

³⁵ Abanes, *End Time*, 224.

³⁶ Nichol, *The Midnight*, 66.

³⁷ Nichol, *The Midnight*, 87.

On October 22, the Adventists gathered to wait on the Lord. Of course, it was a colossal failure, even worse than before. The collateral damage to the people's faith was horrific. A fragment of a manuscript by a Millerite, Hiram Edson, is preserved in an Adventist history:

If this had proved a failure, what was the rest of my Christian experience worth? Has the Bible proved a failure? Is there no God, no heaven, no golden home city, no paradise? Is all this but a cunningly devised fable? Is there no reality to our fondest hope and expectation of these things? And thus we had something to grieve and weep over, if all our fond hopes were lost. And as I said, we wept till the day dawn.³⁸

The Great Disappointment, as the Adventists termed the non-event of October 22, 1844, left the crusade in turmoil. This time, there was no speedy recovery. After Miller publicly acknowledged his mistake, he dissociated himself from the movement.³⁹ Most of the others followed suit. Miller never set another date and died a humbled man five years later.⁴⁰ All the same, a core of the group remained incorrigible. Perhaps, they were driven by resentment of their former churches and the years of contention. In the end, all resentment is pride.

Reaching for straws, Hiram Edson speculated that Miller's assumption that the sanctuary represented the earth was the problem and that it actually represented the sanctuary *in heaven*. Now the cleansing conveniently became an invisible judgment. Accordingly, the October 22, 1844 date was modified to denote when Christ entered the Holy of Holies in the heavenly sanctuary, not the Second Coming. This remnant group became the Seventh-day Adventist Church of today and this modification is called the doctrine of the pre-Advent Divine

³⁸ Nichol, *The Midnight*, 94.

³⁹ M.E. Dieter, "Adventism" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology: Second Edition* ed. Walter A. Elwell, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 28.

⁴⁰ Alnor, *Soothsayers*, 59.

Investigative Judgment.⁴¹ Frankly, it seems like a lame excuse. Miller was simply mistaken. The lesson to be learned here is that it is perfectly fine and even commendable to be fascinated by prophecy and to study various interpretations, but to never set dates and, no matter how compelling, to follow Paul's teaching in 2 Thessalonians. The purpose of that letter leads many interpreters to infer that some of the Thessalonians were so sure that the day of the Lord was upon them that they had quit their jobs. Paul had rebuked them and providentially anticipated the error of the Millerites (as well as Harold Camping and countless others).

A LEGACY OF HETERODOXY

The mainline denominations were vindicated but not all were so caustic as to belittle the wounded Christians. Many Millerites went back to their home churches. To make matters worse, as discussed above, several other historicist dates, like 1866, came and went. This was also the time of German higher criticism, anti-supernaturalism and the rise of liberalism. Of course, William Miller now looked foolish and the liberals made sport of him incessantly. Accordingly, the spectacle fueled theological liberalism and many began to frown on the study of Bible prophecy. Additionally, it helped to promote the futurist interpretation based on the historical grammatical hermeneutic advocated by John Nelson Darby and popularized in the Scofield Reference Bible. This view is still dominant today.

As well as the rationalist reaction, the Adventist movement spawned a number of new heresies. In addition to Edson, the infamous inventor of the invisible investigative judgment was Joseph Bates who was responsible for insisting the Saturday Sabbath was a set ordinance. The third and most influential figure was Ellen G. White. She was reared in the movement as Ellen

⁴¹ Roy Adams, "The Pre-Advent Judgment" *Adventist World*, <http://www.adventistworld.org/article.php?id=136>. (accessed 8/16/2012).

Gould Harmon. Her father, Robert, was expelled from the Methodist church for Millerism, as discussed above. She married James White, one of the leaders of the Millerite movement, and became an important leader herself. Adventists believe that Ellen White had a gift of prophecy and most of the doctrines identified with Seventh-Day Adventism today are a direct result of her so called “revelations.” A few examples are discussed by way of example.

White promoted many strange ideas including the belief in extraterrestrials. In her book *Patriarchs and Prophets* she wrote of Christ traveling from planet to planet attending to the spiritual needs of alien races:

It was the marvel of all the universe that Christ should humble Himself to save fallen man. That He who had passed from star to star, from world to world, superintending all, by His providence supplying the needs of every order of being in His vast creation--that He should consent to leave His glory and take upon Himself human nature, was a mystery which the sinless intelligences of other worlds desired to understand.⁴²

Exo-theology aside, most modern Adventists revere her books. Though some Seventh-Day Adventists go so far as to posit White’s writings equal with Scripture, it is not the official position of the church, which ostensibly claims the Bible as its only source of authority. However, it seems that theory often differs from practice and most Adventists still accept her writings as authoritative.

In the more recent material, Seventh-Day Adventists argue for orthodox biblical positions regarding the deity of Christ, the Trinity, the Bible and the way of salvation.⁴³ However, their most distinctive doctrine is the necessity of Saturday Sabbath keeping. This seems problematic in light of the New Testament (Acts 20:6-7; 1 Cor 16:2; Col 2:16-17). Still predicting the imminent

⁴² Ellen Gould White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1890), 69.

⁴³ Larry A. Nichols, George A. Mather and Alvin J. Schmidt, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Cults, Sects, and World Religions*, 268 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006).

eschaton, Seventh-Day Adventists claim that blasphemous Sunday worship will soon be forced on everyone because Ellen White wrote, “Those who yield the truth of heavenly origin, and accept the Sunday Sabbath, will receive the mark of the beast.”⁴⁴ Unfortunately, this sort of rhetoric is ubiquitous in their literature. They also identify Jesus as Michael the archangel,⁴⁵ a view which is problematic given that Michael lacked the authority to rebuke Satan in Jude 9 and angels are created beings. Even though he would not have approved of these teachings, Miller’s legacy is a spirit of confusion.

CONCLUSION

This paper offered a summary of the life of Baptist preacher William Miller and an analysis of the Millerite movement. After offering a brief summary, the paper sought to show that Miller’s exegesis was by no means uncommon for his day. In fact, his conclusions were right in line with the standard works of the period like *Horae Apocalypticae*. Answered prayer and celestial events also seemed to authenticate Miller’s ideas. It is easy to empathize with his sincere belief. Because Christians live in the tension of the already/not yet paradigm, it is expected and even appropriate that they believe his arrival is imminent. But views on eschatology are necessarily speculative and should be held loosely and with charity. Of course, a great tragedy could have been prevented had Miller been more humble and tentative with his speculations. His inability to consider proper criticism caused great harm. He should have spoken against the “come out of her” movement which emptied and divided local churches. It was this battle which led to resentment fueled sectarianism by the Seventh-Day Adventist

⁴⁴ Ellen Gould White, *Maranatha, The Lord Is Coming*, (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1976) 164.

⁴⁵ e.g. “It thus seems clear that Michael is none other than the Lord Jesus Himself.” Francis D. Nichol, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Volume 4* (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1978), 860.

Church. It seems that Miller's greatest downfall was his pride, alarmism and special pleading once his interpretation failed. It is to his credit that he accepted the failure even when his followers persisted. Unfortunately, the fruit of his error is still ripening on the vine as the Seventh-Day Adventist movement is alive and well. The relationship between these points was shown. In the end, it seems that these points support the idea that a prideful preacher leaves a legacy of heterodoxy.

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