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**“A Feast of Reason”: The Roots of William Miller’s Biblical Interpretation and
its influence on the Seventh-day Adventist Church.**

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School of History, Philosophy, Religion, and Classics

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Abstract

During the late eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, the Second Advent movement was a potent religious force in both Europe and North America. Its adherents focused on a specific date for the literal fulfilment of Christ's Second Advent—his return to earth to establish his kingdom. In America, the rising prosperity and growth of social democracy of the Jacksonian era evoked a fervid optimism that for many focussed on utopian visions of America's millennial glory. Such an environment proved fertile ground for the theories of William Miller, and his followers, the Millerites, who became the largest and most influential early nineteenth-century American premillennial group.

William Miller (1782-1849) was a primarily self-educated farmer living in upstate New York who, while raised a Baptist, became a Deist as a young man. Following his participation in the War of 1812, he first questioned and then rejected his Deist beliefs, undergoing a dramatic conversion experience and rejoining the Baptist Church. In order to respond to the questions of his Deist friends regarding the Bible's reliability and their accusations that the Bible contradicted itself, Miller began a systematic reading of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

While reading, Miller became convinced that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ to the earth would take place, "about the year 1843". He began to publicly proclaim this Second Advent message in 1831, and soon gathered a large number of followers who accepted his message. Miller came to his conclusions because of the particular way in which he approached Scripture—seeing the Bible as a "feast of reason"—and by using a very systematic approach influenced by Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and based on Historicist principles. Miller approached the Bible "rationally" and a belief in the Bible's perspicuity, literality, and truthfulness, was at the core of his hermeneutical approach. While he himself refrained from setting an exact date, he eventually

accepted the October 22, 1844 date predicted by Samuel S. Snow. When this date passed without Christ's return, the majority of Millerites gave up their beliefs.

A minority of Millerites maintained their beliefs in the soon return of Jesus Christ and/or the significance of October 22, 1844. These groups developed a variety of explanations for Jesus' non-appearance on that date and either reinterpreted the event linked to October 22, 1844 or set other dates for Christ's return. The Seventh-day Adventist denomination that formally formed in 1860 out of these Millerite believers was one such group who developed an alternative scenario allowing them to maintain their belief in the significance of the October 22, 1844 date. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is now a 17 million strong denomination with a worldwide presence that reads and interprets the Bible using an approach that owes a great deal to Miller's hermeneutic.

Keywords

william miller, hermeneutics, seventh-day adventist church, christianity, adventist, millerism

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INTRODUCTION

Background

The early nineteenth century was a time of religious ferment in America. Utopian millennialism was being promulgated by Charles Finney and other preachers during the Second Great Awakening; numerous Utopian communities had been established—including John Humphrey Noyes' Oneida Community, while Joseph Smith and the Mormons looked to the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. Also during this period, the Shakers proclaimed that Christ had come spiritually in the person of Mother Ann Lee, and Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Transcendentalists were attempting to perfect human society.

One of the more influential figures contributing to this ferment was William Miller, a New York State farmer and Baptist preacher. Miller was a premillennialist whose mathematical calculations focussed on the imminent Second Coming of Christ—the biblical Second Advent. The Millerite movement captured the imaginations of a large segment of the American population and eventually resulted in the formation of several new American Christian denominations. The fragmentation of the Millerite movement following the Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844 also marked a turning point in the history of the interpretation of biblical prophecy—the end of the dominance of the historical method for the exegesis of biblical prophecy.

The Millerite movement had a large impact on American society of the time. Between 50,000 and 200,000 people accepted Miller's views, with up to a million being influenced by Miller's teachings. Merlin D. Burt emphasises the significance of these numbers when he points out that though the population of the United States at the time was just over 17 million, the population in the north-east—where Miller's labour was largely confined—was about 10 million. Thus, one tenth of the population in this area were influenced by Miller's teachings on the Second Advent of Christ.¹

Miller arrived at his conclusions because he approached the Bible in a particular way—seeing the Bible as a “feast of reason”—and by using a very systematic approach influenced by Scottish Common Sense Philosophy. Miller utilized an historicist approach to interpretation, approaching the Bible “rationally”; and a belief in the Bible's perspicuity, literality, and truthfulness, was at the core of his hermeneutical approach.

Burt points out that “William Miller, as the leader and foremost proponent of American Adventism, laid a theological foundation that has remained significant for the Adventist

¹ Joseph Bates, *A Vindication of the Seventh-day Sabbath, and the Commandments of God: With a Further History of God's Peculiar People, From 1847 to 1848* (New Bedford, MA: Press of Benjamin Lindsey, 1848). Merlin D. Burt, “Historical Introduction,” in *Adventist Classic Library: Memoirs of William Miller*, ed. George R. Knight (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2005), vii.

denominations that arose after 1844.”² Of the denominations which have their roots in Miller’s teachings, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the largest with over 17 million members. The Seventh-day Adventist church retains a number of characteristics associated with its Millerite heritage, including an ongoing expectation of Christ’s soon return, the interpretation of biblical prophecy through the lens of Historicism—including the prophetic year/day concept, and an emphasis on the biblical text’s perspicuity and literality.

Statement of purpose

A view that Miller’s Bible study was conducted in isolation and that his “Rules of Interpretation” were developed completely independently is common in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This view is unsustainable when the historical evidence is examined.

This thesis seeks to demonstrate:

1. That Miller’s hermeneutics were in fact, not particularly original, innovative, or new. Rather, the hermeneutical methods that Miller used were those then in vogue in nineteenth-century America—a literal, perspicuous, historicist approach, influenced heavily by the emphasis on human reason and individual freedom present in the ideas of the then dominant Common Sense Philosophy.
2. That the dominant approach to biblical hermeneutics within the Seventh-day Adventist Church clearly relies heavily on the approach espoused by William Miller and has undergone little change since Miller first published his principles in 1840. In the twenty-first century, Seventh-day Adventists continue to emphasise Millerite principles like “scripture interprets scripture”; “the Bible is perspicuous”; a literal reading of scripture; the harmonization of Bible passages; and the need for a “spiritual” understanding; though the Millerite origin of these principles is rarely acknowledged.

A Review of the Literature

Participant memoirs provide the earliest literature on William Miller and Millerism. The most important of these works is the biography of Miller himself—*Memoirs of William Miller: Generally Known as a Lecturer on the Prophecies, and the Second Coming of Christ* authored by Sylvester Bliss and first published in 1853.³ Bliss work was a reworking of Miller’s own memoirs—

² Burt, “Historical Introduction,” xv.

³ Sylvester Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller: Generally Known as a Lecturer on the Prophecies, and the Second Coming of Christ* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1853). Apollos Hale wrote the first three chapters, though Bliss appears as the sole author in the book’s publication details. It was recently reprinted by Andrews University Press in 2005; with a new introduction by Merlin D. Bert; as part of their excellent Adventist Classic Library.

principally his *Apology and Defence* (1845).⁴ Bliss allows Miller to speak through long extracts from his sermons, letters, published articles, and other material; and provides a well-balanced and comprehensive (albeit, very positive) picture of Miller and the Millerite Movement. Miller's other main works are his *Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology*, (1841)⁵ and his *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ About the Year 1843* (1842).⁶ James White's *Sketches of the Christian Life and Public Labors of William Miller: Gathered From His Memoir by the Late Sylvester Bliss, and From Other Sources*⁷ was published in 1875 and essentially reprints large portions of Bliss's work.

Other Millerite autobiographies include Luther Boutelle's *Sketch of the Life and Religious Experience of Eld. Luther Boutelle Written by Himself*,⁸ Hiram A. Munger's *The Life and Experience of Hiram A. Munger: Including Many Singular Circumstances Connected With Camp-meetings and Revivals*⁹; Henry B. Bear's *Henry B. Bear's Advent Experiences*¹⁰; Joseph Bates' *The Autobiography of Elder Joseph Bates; Embracing a Long Life on Shipboard, with Sketches of Voyages on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the Baltic and Mediterranean Seas; Also Impressment and Service on Board British War Ships, Long Confinement in Dartmoor Prison, Early Experience in Reformatory Movements; Travels in Various Parts of the World; and a Brief Account of the Great Advent Movement of 1840-44*.¹¹

The earliest histories of the Millerite movement were apologetic in nature and generally presented as works of denominational history. Those by Seventh-day Adventist authors include: J.

⁴ William Miller, *Wm. Miller's Apology and Defence* (Boston, MT: Joshua V. Himes, 1845).

⁵ Joshua V. Himes, ed., *Miller's Works Volume 1: Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology, Selected From the Manuscripts of William Miller With a Memoir of his Life* (Boston, MT: 1841).

⁶ Joshua V. Himes, ed., *Miller's Works Volume 2: Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ About the Year 1843 Exhibited in a Course of Lectures by William Miller* (Boston, MT: 1842). The book was first published as a pamphlet in 1836 and a number of editions were published.

⁷ James White, *Sketches of the Christian Life and Public Labors of William Miller: Gathered From His Memoir by the Late Sylvester Bliss, and From Other Sources* (Battle Creek: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1875).

⁸ Luther Boutelle, *Sketch of the Life and Religious Experience of Eld. Luther Boutelle Written by Himself* (Boston: Advent Christian Publication Society, 1891).

⁹ Hiram Munger, *The Life and Experience of Hiram A. Munger: Including Many Singular Circumstances Connected With Camp-meetings and Revivals* (Chicopee Falls, MT: Published by the Author, 1861).

¹⁰ Henry B. Bear, *Henry B. Bear's Advent Experiences* (Whitewater, OH: N.D.). This complete text of this very short pamphlet may be found in Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler, eds., *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*, Second Edition ed. (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 217-226.

¹¹ Joseph Bates, *The Autobiography of Elder Joseph Bates; Embracing a Long Life on Shipboard, with Sketches of Voyages on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the Baltic and Mediterranean Seas; Also Impressment and Service on Board British War Ships, Long Confinement in Dartmoor Prison, Early Experience in Reformatory Movements; Travels in Various Parts of the World; and a Brief Account of the Great Advent Movement of 1840-44* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1868).

N. Loughborough's *The Rise and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventists* (1892),¹² M. E. Olsen's *A History of the Origin and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventists* (1926),¹³ Francis D. Nichol's *The Midnight Cry: A Defense of William Miller and the Millerites* (1944),¹⁴ and Arthur W. Spalding's *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists* (1961).¹⁵ Books written from the perspective of the Advent Christian Church include Isaac Wellcome's *History of the Second Advent Message and Mission, Doctrine and People* (1874),¹⁶ and Clyde E. Hewitt's *Midnight and Morning*. (1983).¹⁷ Each of these histories focused on giving a respectability to the Millerite Movement thus legitimizing their respective denominational traditions.

In 1924, Clara Endicott Sears published the first non-apologetic account of the Millerites, *Days of Delusion: A Strange Bit of History*.¹⁸ Sears' work is best known for its stereotypical presentation of fanatics in ascension robes—claims now known to be totally without historical reality.¹⁹ Despite its deficiencies, Sears' work formed the basis for the historical understanding of Millerism for some decades.

In 1927 Reuben Harkness completed a PhD at the University of Chicago; his thesis was titled, "The Social Origins of the Millerite Movement."²⁰ Three years after Harkness, Seventh-day Adventist Everett N. Dick completed a PhD at the University of Wisconsin; his thesis was titled "William Miller and the Advent Crisis." Dick's manuscript was to be published by Union College (a Seventh-day Adventist institution) when the General Conference (the top administrative body of the Seventh-day Adventist Church) successfully convinced the college not to proceed. Dick's study was the first to extensively examine the original Millerite sources and is, despite its age, a valuable

¹² J. N. Loughborough, *Rise and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventists* (Battle Creek: General Conference Association of Seventh-day Adventists, 1892).

¹³ M. Ellsworth Olsen, *A History of the Origin and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1925).

¹⁴ Francis D. Nichol, *The Midnight Cry: A Defense of William Miller and the Millerites* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1944).

¹⁵ Arthur Whitefield Spalding, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists*, 4 vols., vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1961).

¹⁶ Isaac C. Wellcome, *History of the Second Advent Message and Mission, Doctrine and People* (Yarmouth, MN: I. C. Wellcome, 1874).

¹⁷ Clyde E. Hewitt, *Midnight and Morning* (Charlotte, NC: Venture Books, 1983). The work is the first of a three volume set outlining the history of the Advent Christian Church. The other two volumes are: *Responsibility and Response*, (1986), and *Devotion and Development* (1990).

¹⁸ Clara Endicott Sears, *Days of Delusion; A Strange Bit of History* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1924).

¹⁹ For a comprehensive refutation of Sears' claims see, James Ehrlich, "Ascension Robes and Other Millerite Fables," *Adventist Heritage: A Magazine of Adventist History* 2, no. 1 (1975): 8-13; reprinted as James Ehrlich, "Ascension Robes and Other Millerite Fables: The Millerites in American literature," *Adventist Education*, October/November 1994, 18-22. See also Nichol, *The Midnight Cry: A Defense of William Miller and the Millerites*, 139-160.

²⁰ Reuben E Harkness, "Social Origins of the Millerite Movement" (PhD, University of Chicago, 1927).

work, and a reminder of the dangers of censorship.²¹ Dick's work was not published until 1994—posthumously—and is an excellent study that contextualizes Millerism in nineteenth-century American culture very effectively.²²

In 1944, Alice Felt Tyler published *Freedom's Ferment*, a work that repeated—like Sears' *Days of Delusion*—typical stories of Millerite fanaticism. Despite this uncritical acceptance of such anti-Millerite tales, Tyler clarified the movement's role as part of that era's millennial fervour.²³ That same year, Seventh-day Adventist author Francis D. Nichol, published his well-researched work, *The Midnight Cry: A Defense of William Miller and the Millerites*.²⁴ Apologetic in nature, *The Midnight Cry* was a direct response to Sears' *Days of Delusion*. In his introductory "To the Reader of this Book", Nichol stated that he had "not attempted to write an objective history of Millerism. Instead, as the subtitle declares, this is "A Defense of William Miller and the Millerites."²⁵ In 1952, Nichol again responded to the claims of Millerite fanaticism in the academic journal, *Church History*. His paper, "The Growth of the Millerite Legend", provided a comprehensive examination and refutation of the more extreme claims regarding the Millerites; including the so-called "ascension robes", and claims of insanity and suicide.²⁶

In 1950, Whitney Cross' book *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* was published, providing an in-depth, pioneering study of the social origins of revivalism that unlike most previously published non-Adventist works, viewed the Millerites as religiously orthodox.²⁷

It was not until the 1970s that academic interest in Millerism—both inside and outside the Seventh-day Adventist Church—resurged. In 1970, Ernest R. Sandeen published a landmark study, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millennialism 1800-1930* that examined Millerism as part of a broad-based transatlantic fundamentalist movement.²⁸ That same year, David T. Arthur, an Advent Christian historian, completed a PhD thesis "'Come Out of Babylon': A Study

²¹ Gary Land, "Foreword," in *William Miller and the Advent Crisis* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1994), vii-ix.

²² Everett N. Dick, *William Miller and the Advent Crisis* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1994).

²³ Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1962).

²⁴ Nichol, Francis D. *The Midnight Cry: A Defense of William Miller and the Millerites*. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1944).

²⁵ Nichol, *The Midnight Cry: A Defense of William Miller and the Millerites*, 13.

²⁶ Francis D. Nichol, "The Growth of the Millerite Legend," *Church History* 21, no. 4 (1952): 296-313.

²⁷ Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: A Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1950).

²⁸ Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

of Millerite Separatism and Denominationalism, 1840-1865.”²⁹ In 1972-1973 a conference on American Adventism was held at Loma Linda University. Ten of the papers presented were published in 1974 as *The Rise of Adventism*, including two on Millerism by Ernest R. Sandeen and David T. Arthur.³⁰ Importantly, the book also contained a very comprehensive bibliography of Millerite sources compiled by Vern Carner and Sakae Kubo. This bibliography formed the basis for the extensive microfiche collection *Millerites and Early Adventists* published by University Microfilms in 1978.³¹ Mention must also be made of David A. Dean’s 1977 DTh thesis: “Echoes of the Midnight Cry: The Millerite Heritage in the Apologetics of the Advent Christian Denomination, 1860-1960”.³² In 1978, Ingemar Lindén’s, *The Last Trump: An Historico-Genetical Study of Some Important Chapters in the Making and Development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* was published.³³ Lindén’s work is a history of early Seventh-day Adventism with a focus on Ellen G. White; however his first chapter focuses on Millerism’s roots in revivalism, perfectionism and apocalypticism.

The 1980s saw the publication of three excellent monographs—David L. Rowe’s *Thunder and Trumpets: Millerites and Dissenting Religion in Upstate New York, 1800-1850* (1985)³⁴, Michael Barkun’s *Crucible of the Millennium: The Burned-over District of New York in the 1840s* (1986)³⁵, and Ruth Alden Doan’s *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism and American Culture* (1987)³⁶; as well as a collection of conference papers published as *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* edited by Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler (1987).³⁷ This collection of eleven papers provides the basis for most historians’ current

²⁹ David T. Arthur, “‘Come Out of Babylon’: A Study of Millerite Separatism and Denominationalism, 1840-1865” (PhD, University of Rochester, 1970).

³⁰ David T. Arthur, “Millerism,” in *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-nineteenth-century America*, ed. Edwin S. Gaustad (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1974), 154-172, Edwin S. Gaustad, ed., *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-nineteenth-century America* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1974); Ernest R. Sandeen, “Millennialism,” in *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-nineteenth-century America*, ed. Edwin S. Gaustad (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1974), 104-118.

³¹ See Jean R. Hoornstra, ed., *Millerites and Early Adventists: An Index to the Microfilm Collection of Rare Books and Manuscripts* (University Microfilms International, 1978).

³² David A. Dean, “Echoes of the Midnight Cry: The Millerite Heritage in the Apologetics of the Advent Christian Denomination, 1860-1960” (DTh, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1977).

³³ Ingemar Lindén, *The Last Trump: An Historico-Genetical Study of Some Important Chapters in the Making and Development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1978).

³⁴ David L. Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets: Millerites and Dissenting Religion in Upstate New York, 1800-1850* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985).

³⁵ Michael Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium: The Burned-over District of New York in the 1840s* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986).

³⁶ Ruth Alden Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1987).

³⁷ Numbers and Butler, eds., *The Disappointed*.

understanding of Millerism; and it presents a comprehensive overview of the Millerites as ordinary Americans.

In 1993 Seventh-day Adventist historian George R. Knight published the most recent and complete history of Millerism in 1993: *Millennial Fever and The End of the World*.³⁸ Though written for a general audience—and targeting Seventh-day Adventists—Knight’s work is comprehensive, balanced, and well referenced.

Besides the aforementioned works of Cross and Rowe which both focus on the heartland of Millerism—the state of New York—a number of other geographical studies have been completed. These include Ira V. Brown’s 1943 paper “The Millerites and the Boston Press.”³⁹; N. Gordon Thomas’ 1957 MA thesis “The Millerite Movement in the State of Ohio”⁴⁰; Thomas’ 1967 PhD thesis “The Second Coming in the Third New England: The Millerite Impulse in Michigan, 1830-1860”⁴¹; and Madeline Warner’s 1975 paper “The Changing Image of the Millerites in the Western Massachusetts Press”⁴². Two papers on Millerism in Canada focus on the Eastern Townships area: Denis Fortin’s “‘The World Turned Upside Down’: Millerism in the Eastern Townships, 1835-1845”⁴³ and Jack I. Little’s 2004 essay, “Millennial Invasion: Millerism in the Eastern Townships of Lower Canada”.⁴⁴ Two studies that focus on Great Britain are Louis Billington’s 1967 paper “The Millerite Adventists in Great Britain, 1840-1850”⁴⁵; and the 1984 PhD thesis by Hugh Dunton: “The Millerite Adventists and Other Millenarian Groups in Great Britain, 1830-1860”⁴⁶.

³⁸ George R. Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993). Recently reprinted as George R. Knight, *William Miller and the Rise of Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2010).

³⁹ Ira V. Brown, “The Millerites and the Boston Press,” *New England Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1943): 592-614.

⁴⁰ N. Gordon Thomas, “The Millerite Movement in the State of Ohio” (MA, Ohio University, 1957). See also N. Gordon Thomas, “The Millerite Movement in Ohio,” *Ohio History* 81, no. 2 (1972): 95-107.

⁴¹ N. Gordon Thomas, “The Second Coming in the Third New England: The Millerite Impulse in Michigan, 1830-1860” (PhD, Michigan State University, 1967). Published as N. Gordon Thomas, *The Millennial Impulse in Michigan, 1830-1860: The Second Coming in the Third New England* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989).

⁴² Madeline Warner, “The Changing Image of the Millerites in the Western Massachusetts Press,” *Adventist Heritage: A Magazine of Adventist History* 2 (1975): 5-7.

⁴³ Denis Fortin, “‘The World Turned Upside Down’: Millerism in the Eastern Townships, 1835-1845,” *Journal of Eastern Townships Studies* 11, Fall (1997): 39-59. See also Denis Fortin, *Adventism in Quebec: The Dynamics of Rural Church Growth, 1830-1910* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2004).

⁴⁴ Jack I. Little, “Millennial Invasion: Millerism in the Eastern Townships of Lower Canada,” in *Anglo-American Millennialism, From Milton to the Millerites*, ed. Richard Connors and Andrew Colin Gow (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 177-204.

⁴⁵ Louis Billington, “The Millerite Adventists in Great Britain, 1840-1850,” *Journal of American Studies* 1, no. 2 (1967): 191-212.

⁴⁶ Hugh Dunton, “The Millerite Adventists and Other Millenarian Groups in Great Britain, 1830-1860” (PhD, University of London, 1984).

Other items of interest include Gary Scharnhorst's 1980 paper "Images of the Millerites in American Literature"⁴⁷; Ginger Hanks Harwood's 2001 study "'Like the Leaves of Autumn': The Utilization of the Press to Maintain Millennial Expectations in the Wake of Prophetic Failure";⁴⁸ David L. Rowe's 1975 paper "Elon Galusha and the Millerite Movement"⁴⁹; and Gluder Quispe's recent bibliographic article on the Millerite leader Charles Fitch, "The Five Stages of Charles Firtch's Life (1805-1844)."⁵⁰

Until recently, a comprehensive, scholarly biography of William Miller himself was noticeably nonexistent. Robert Gale's 1975 book, *The Urgent Voice: The Story of William Miller* was written for a Seventh-day Adventist audience at a popular level.⁵¹ It is a readable but superficial & generally unreferenced account of Miller's life. In 2008, David L. Rowe published *God's Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World*.⁵² Rowe's work does not discuss Miller's hermeneutical methods in detail; however it is a comprehensive and detailed biography that provides great insight into Miller's life and cultural background. Mention must also be made of Tommy L. Faris' 2007 PhD thesis: "William Miller: A Common Sense Life". Faris provides both an in-depth biographical account of Miller's life and an examination of the role that Scottish Common Sense Philosophy likely played in the development of Miller's beliefs.⁵³

A number of writers have pointed out that the hermeneutical approach taken by the Seventh-day Adventist Church—both historically and currently—is directly dependent upon the hermeneutics of William Miller. Everett N. Dick states that "The Millerite movement bequeathed a system of prophetic interpretation and biblical literalism that helped shape the character of Adventism that arose from its ruins."⁵⁴ Similarly Alberto R. Timm, "Seventh-day Adventists inherited their early views of scripture from their former denominations and the Millerites";⁵⁵ and

⁴⁷ Gary Scharnhorst, "Images of the Millerites in American Literature," *American Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (1980): 19-36.

⁴⁸ Ginger Hanks Harwood, "'Like the Leaves of Autumn': The Utilization of the Press to Maintain Millennial Expectations in the Wake of Prophetic Failure," *Journal for Millennial Studies* 3, no. 1 (2001). Online at: <http://www.mille.org/publications/winter2001/Harwood.html>

⁴⁹ David L. Rowe, "Elon Galusha and the Millerite Movement," *Foundations* 18, no. 3 (1975): 252-260.

⁵⁰ Gluder Quispe, "The Five Stages of Charles Firtch's Life (1805-1844)," *Journal of the Asia Adventist Seminary* 12, no. 2 (2009), 167-191.

⁵¹ Robert Gale, *The Urgent Voice: The Story of William Miller* (Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1975).

⁵² David L. Rowe, *God's Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008).

⁵³ Tommy L. Faris, "William Miller: A Common Sense Life" (PhD, Columbia University, 2007).

⁵⁴ Everett N. Dick, "The Millerite Movement, 1830-1845," in *Adventism in America: a History*, ed. Gary Land (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1998), 1.

⁵⁵ Alberto R. Timm, "A History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on Biblical and Prophetic Inspiration (1844-2000)," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 10, no. 1/2 (1999): 487.

Edmund Parker, “The Millerite background is a key element in understanding the development of the SDA church”.⁵⁶

Despite the recognition of this connection, very little work has been done on either Miller’s hermeneutics, those of the early Adventists, or the hermeneutical methods employed by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Steen R. Rasmussen examined Millerite historicism in his MA thesis, noting “Central to the work of Miller, of course, was his prophetic interpretation. Yet comparatively little has been written on Miller’s method of interpretation.”⁵⁷ Similarly, Ulf Lennart Gustavsson’s paper, “Aspects of the Development of Prophetic Interpretation Within the Seventh-day Adventist Church,” and Kai Arasola’s book *The End of Historicism*, focus almost exclusively on Miller’s historicist approach to biblical prophecy.⁵⁸ In particular, Arasola examines the way in which historicism was sidelined as a method of prophetic exposition following the Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844. Anne Freed’s article, “‘A Feast of Reason’ The Appeal of William Miller’s Way of Reading the Bible”,⁵⁹ provides a good but very brief introduction to the topic; while R. Dean Davis’ unpublished paper “Hermeneutical Principles of Early Adventist Interpreters”⁶⁰ is similarly very brief.

Mention must be made here of David A. Dean’s 1977 DTh thesis, “Echoes of the Midnight Cry: The Millerite Heritage in the Apologetics of the Advent Christian Denomination, 1860-1960,” which focuses on the Advent Christian Church—numerically the second-largest of the denominations tracing their heritage to the Millerite Movement.

In 1974, Donald Neufeld briefly surveyed the hermeneutics practiced by the early Adventists in his chapter, “Biblical Interpretation in the Advent Movement”. Neufeld wrote “No complete survey of the Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutic from 1840 to the present has yet been attempted. The need for such a work may well be pointed up both by this chapter and this book.”⁶¹ Since Neufeld’s survey, a number of brief surveys have been attempted, including, C. Mervyn

⁵⁶ Edmund A. Parker, “Islands and Bridges: A Study of Seventh-day Adventist Hermeneutics, Beginning in 1844 and Ending in 1957” (MA, La Trobe University, 1991), 25.

⁵⁷ Steen R. Rasmussen, “Roots of the Prophetic Hermeneutic of William Miller” (MA, Andrews University, 1983), 6.

⁵⁸ Kai Arasola, *The End of Historicism: Millerite Hermeneutic of Time Prophecies in the Old Testament* (Uppsala: University of Uppsala, 1990).

⁵⁹ Anne Freed, “‘A Feast of Reason’ The Appeal of William Miller’s Way of Reading the Bible,” *Adventist Heritage: A Magazine of Adventist History* 16, no. 3 (1995): 14-21, 44.

⁶⁰ R. Dean Davis, “Hermeneutical Principles of Early Adventist Interpreters, 1976,” Center for Adventist Research, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

⁶¹ Don F. Neufeld, “Biblical Interpretation in the Advent Movement,” in *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Gordon M Hyde (Washington, DC: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1974), 121.

Maxwell's, "A Brief History of Adventist Hermeneutics",⁶² and Alberto R. Timm's, "Historical Background of Adventist Biblical Interpretation".⁶³ The most comprehensive attempt has been Edmund Parker's 1991 MA thesis, "Islands and Bridges: A Study of Seventh-day Adventist Hermeneutics, Beginning in 1844 and Ending in 1957."⁶⁴ Parker surveys Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutics, but his thesis is limited to the period 1844 to 1957, leaving Seventh-day Adventism's most recent history unexamined. Thus Neufeld's words are still true thirty-six years later in 2010.

Generally speaking, Seventh-day Adventism has been inadequately studied—historically, sociologically, and theologically. As Malcolm Bull noted in 1989, "Seventh-day Adventism is one of the most important religious movements native to the United States.... Despite this, Adventism has received little scholarly attention and is usually treated only as a postscript to the failure of Millerism."⁶⁵ Similarly, Bull and Keith Lockhart noted that "Despite being one of the most important religious movements native to the United States, Seventh-day Adventism has been unjustly ignored."⁶⁶ Bull and Lockhart made a major attempt at redressing this situation by drastically expanding and republishing their aforementioned work in 2007.⁶⁷ This second edition of *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventists and the American Dream* is the most comprehensive review and analysis of Seventh-day Adventism ever published. Due to the broad scope of the work however, it does not examine the history of Seventh-day Adventist biblical interpretation closely.

An Overview of the Contents

Chapter 1 outlines the history of William Miller and the Millerite Movement and briefly examines the historical and theological development of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.

Chapter 2 examines William Miller's approach to biblical interpretation—his biblical hermeneutic.

⁶² C. Mervyn Maxwell, "A Brief History of Adventist Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 4, no. 2 (1993): 209-226.

⁶³ Alberto R. Timm, "Historical Background of Adventist Biblical Interpretation," in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach* ed. George W. Reid (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2006), 1-14.

⁶⁴ Parker, "Islands and Bridges".

⁶⁵ Malcolm Bull, "The Seventh-day Adventists: Heretics of American Civil Religion," *Sociological Analysis* 50, no. 2 (1989): 177.

⁶⁶ Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-Day Adventism and the American Dream* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1989), ix.

⁶⁷ Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-Day Adventism and the American Dream*, Second ed. (Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 2007).

Chapter 3 examines the type and degree of influence that the prevailing culture, and intellectual and philosophical currents—such as Common-sense Philosophy, Deism, and Freemasonry—may have played on the formation of Miller’s hermeneutics.

Chapter 4 looks at the written works Miller accessed and was likely influenced by.

Chapter 5 discusses Adventist hermeneutics after Miller, revealing the direct influence of Miller’s hermeneutical methods on both early Adventist and contemporary Seventh-day Adventist methods of biblical interpretation.

CHAPTER 1 – A History of William Miller, the Millerites, and the Adventists.

An Introduction to the Second Advent Movement

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Second Advent movement was the dominant religious force in both Europe and North America. Its adherents focused on a specific date for the literal fulfilment of Christ's Second Advent—his return to earth to establish his kingdom. According to Earnest R. Sandeen, “America in the early nineteenth century was drunk on the millennium.”¹ Some idea of the cultural milieu of this time may be gained from a statement by John Humphrey Noyes—founder of the utopian Oneida Community:

The whole world seems to be looking for a Revolution. Some expect an orthodox Millennium; others a golden age of phrenology; others still, a psychological regeneration of the human race; and not a few are awaiting, in anxious or hopeful suspense, the trump of the Second Advent, and the day of judgment.²

Similarly, Charles G. Finney declared in 1835: “If the church will do her duty, the millennium may come in this country in three years.”³

As David Davis points out, “Expansion and material progress in the Jacksonian era evoked a fervid optimism and... nationalists became intoxicated with visions of America's millennial glory. The simultaneous growth of prosperity and social democracy seemed to prove that Providence would bless a nation that allowed her citizens maximum liberty.”⁴ Such an environment proved fertile ground for Miller's theories, and Millerism became a “diverse, popular movement of both the rabble and the respectable.”⁵ Indeed, the Millerites became “the largest and most influential early nineteenth-century American premillennial group.”⁶

William Miller was certainly not the first person to utilize Bible prophecy to predict Christ's Second Advent—nor even the first American. In 1646 Thomas Parker, minister at Newberry, Massachusetts, published *The Visions and Prophecies of Daniel Expounded* which predicted the

¹ Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 42.

² Noyes, John Humphrey. *The Berean*. (Putney, VT, 1847), 52; in Sandeen, “Millennialism,” 115. Emphasis added.

³ Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, New ed. (New York: F. H. Revell, 1868), 306.

⁴ David Brion Davis, “Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature,” in *Essays on Jacksonian America*, ed. Frank Otto Gatell (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 258.

⁵ Jonathan M. Butler, “The Making of a New Order: Millerism and the Origins of Seventh-day Adventism,” in *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee, 1993), 191.

⁶ Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 44.

end of the world in about “twenty years before 1860”.⁷ Deacon William Aspinwall of Boston published his 1653 book *A Brief Description of the Fifth Monarchy, or Kingdome That Shortly Is to Come into the World*, and suggested that the Millennium would begin no later than 1673.⁸ In 1710, Increase Mather, stated that the 1,260 years of the Antichrist’s rule mentioned in Revelation 12:6 were “almost finished.”⁹ In 1794 the Reverend David Austin of Elizabethtown, New Jersey, published *The Millennium; or, The Thousand Years of Prosperity, Promised to the Church of God, in the Old Testament and the New, Shortly to Commence*, which predicted that Jesus would return on 15 May 1796.¹⁰ The Reverend Jedediah Morse, a Congregational pastor in Charlestown, Massachusetts, predicted in 1810 that the Millennium would dawn about 1866.¹¹ No-one else however, gained such a popular and widespread following as William Miller, a New York Farmer—the “most famous of all American premillennialists”.¹²

William Miller

William Miller was born on February 15, 1782 in Pittsfield, Massachusetts—the eldest of the sixteen children of William and Paulina Miller (nee Phelps). He moved with his parents at the age of four to Low Hampton, New York where he lived with his family until his marriage in 1803.¹³ At the time of the family’s move, Low Hampton was a frontier area—“an almost uninhabited wilderness.”¹⁴ Miller’s father leased one hundred acres of land which he cleared, constructed a log cabin, and planted wheat.¹⁵ The family’s time in Low Hampton was initially marked by poverty. While the log cabin was eventually replaced with a more comfortable frame house, the lease of twenty bushels of wheat remained, and there was no money to spare.¹⁶

⁷ Thomas Parker, *The Visions and Prophecies of Daniel Expounded* (London: Paxton, 1646), 154.

⁸ William Aspinwall, *A Brief Description of the Fifth Monarchy, or Kingdome That Shortly is to Come into the World* (London: M. Simmons, 1653).

⁹ Increase Mather, *A Discourse Concerning Faith and Fervency in Prayer, and the Glorious Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, on Earth, Now Approaching*; quoted in Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988). Accessed online at: <http://www.signaturebookslibrary.org/seekers/Introduction.htm>

¹⁰ Harris E. Starr, “David Austin,” in *Dictionary of American Biography*, ed. Allen Johnson, Dumas Malone, and Harris E. Starr (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1943), 432.

¹¹ Jedediah Morse, *Signs of the Times* (Charlestown: 1810), 22, 34.

¹² Dick, “The Millerite Movement, 1830-1845,” 2.

¹³ Himes, ed., *Evidence from Scripture*, 7. Randolph Roth, “Can Faith Change the World? Religion and Society in Vermont’s Age of Reform,” *Vermont History: The Proceedings of the Vermont Historical Society* Vol. 69, Supplement (2001): 8, incorrectly places Miller’s birthplace in Granville, New York.

¹⁴ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 7.

¹⁵ Hewitt, *Midnight and Morning*, 6.

¹⁶ Hewitt, *Midnight and Morning*, 6, 8.

Miller joined the Low Hampton militia and eventually rose to the rank of Sergeant.¹⁷ The first reference to the militia found in Miller's diary is dated June 30, 1801 when Miller was 19: "I had orders for training." On July 3, Miller states that he "went to company training", while on September 8, 1801 a third reference is found, stating, "I went to company training." Six days later Miller writes that he "went to Grandville to general training."¹⁸

Miller moved to Poultney, Vermont following his marriage to Lucy Smith in 1803, and read himself into Deism soon after.¹⁹ As a Deist, Miller claimed that he had not rejected God, though he certainly rejected the Bible as God's Word in any shape or form: "While I was a Deist, I believed in a God, but I could not, as I thought, believe that the *Bible* was the *word of God*."²⁰

While in Poultney, Miller was elected to a number of civil offices, beginning with the office of Constable.²¹ Elected to the office of Deputy Sheriff in 1809, Miller had by that time, become a young man of considerable community standing. When called to furnish bond for his appointment as Deputy Sheriff, "responsible persons voluntarily offered their names, so that several times the amount required was at his command."²² Despite a limited formal education, Miller had become known as someone with a degree of literary skill. To celebrate the anniversary of independence, Miller wrote a patriotic hymn that was sung by the community as part of the local celebrations.²³ According to Bliss, "this production, with others in prose and poetry, made him at once a notable in the community; secured to him a wide circle of friends, and opened the way for his promotion to office and honor."²⁴

By this time Miller had become a relatively wealthy man, having a house, land and two horses.²⁵ In addition to his service as Constable and Deputy Sheriff, Miller also served as a Justice of the Peace.²⁶ This was again a position of considerable responsibility. In Miller's time, Justices of the Peace were nominated and appointed annually by the General Assembly. Originally they had power to try all actions of a criminal nature, where the fines came within the sum of forty shillings,

¹⁷ Gale, *The Urgent Voice*, 14.

¹⁸ William Miller, "The Diary of William Miller, 1798-1803," MSS 23 #9 Vermont Historical Society.

¹⁹ Wayne R. Judd, "William Miller: Disappointed Prophet," in *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 18. Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets*, 4, however, gives an incorrect date of 1804.

²⁰ Himes, ed., *Evidence from Scripture*, 9.

²¹ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 22. Bliss does not give a date for Miller's appointment as Constable.

²² Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 23.

²³ A fragment of the hymn is reproduced in Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 20-21.

²⁴ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 21.

²⁵ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 23.

²⁶ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 22. Bliss does not give a date for Miller's appointment as Justice of the Peace.

and the corporal punishment did not exceed ten stripes. They could also try civil actions (other than actions of defamation, replevin, trespass upon the freehold, and where the title of land was concerned), where the debt and other matters in demand did not exceed the sum of four pounds; and also determine on all specialties, notes of hand, and settle accounts not exceeding the sum of eight pounds. They could also bind over to be tried, by the County or Supreme Court, all criminal offenders the enormity of whose offenses surpassed their power to try.²⁷

On June 30, 1825, Miller attended a dinner in nearby Whitehall in honour of the visiting French aristocrat Lafayette. He recorded in a letter to his brother-in-law and sister: “I have this day been to Whitehall, to see the celebrated Marquis de Lafayette, that made such a conspicuous figure, half a century ago, in our Revolution.”²⁸ Such an invitation is another indicator of Miller’s stature in his local community.

Miller’s Deist beliefs were to last until 1816; though his doubts about Deism were evident some years before—and were particularly strengthened by his experiences as an officer in the War of 1812.²⁹ Miller commented concerning his decision to enter military service: “I fondly cherished the idea, that I should find one bright spot in the human character, as a star of hope: *a love of country*—PATRIOTISM.”³⁰

Miller was commissioned a lieutenant in the Vermont militia on July 21, 1810. Two years later, on June 18, 1812, war between England and the United States was declared. Shortly after—on November 7, 1812, Miller was promoted to captain. With this promotion came the task—as was the norm—of recruiting his own company. Miller’s company proceeded to Burlington and once there, Miller was transferred to the 30th Infantry Regiment in the regular army of the United States with the rank of lieutenant. On June 13, 1813, he was sent as a recruiter to his home territory—Rutland County. This posting was very short, lasting only until July 7, 1813, when Miller was ordered to rejoin his regiment in Burlington. Miller saw little or no action at this time, spending a period sick—first with fever, then an infection. In a letter to his wife Lucy on October 31, 1813, Miller wrote, “I am very sorry that I cannot tell you of hair-breadth escapes and dismal sights, hideous

²⁷ H. P. Smith and W. S. Rann, eds., *History of Rutland County Vermont with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Some of Its Prominent Men and Pioneers* (Syracuse: D. Mason & Co., 1886), 259. Accessed online at: <http://maozi.middlebury.edu/SharingVTHistory/BooksPamphlets/HRC/DirectoryHRC.htm>

²⁸ Quoted in Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 84.

²⁹ This conflict, despite its name, lasted from 1812 to 1814; and occurred between British and American forces. It centred on unfulfilled provisions from the Peace of 1783, which had secured American independence. Conflict was eventually provoked by the refusal of Britain to recognize American neutral and maritime rights—especially during the Anglo-French war. Peace was finally made at the treaty of Ghent in December 1814. “War of 1812,” in *Chambers Dictionary of World History*, ed. Bruce P. Lenmann and Katharine Boyd (Edinburgh: Larousse, 1994), 968.

³⁰ Himes, ed., *Evidence from Scripture*, 10. Original emphasis.

yells and war-whoops; but so it is. I have seen nothing like an enemy.”³¹ In the new year Miller was reposted home as a recruiter and on February 1, 1814, he was promoted to captain.³² On August 12, 1814, Miller was ordered to Plattsburgh where he took part in what was to become for him, a pivotal battle, when on September 11, 1814, an American force of 1500 regulars and 4000 volunteers defeated 15,000 British troops in the Battle of Plattsburgh.

You may well conceive, by my unconnected mode of writing, that I am as joyful as any of them. A naval and land engagement, within the compass of a mile or two, and fifteen or twenty thousand engaged at one and the same time, is superior to anything my eyes ever beheld before. How grand, how noble, and yet, how awful! The roaring of cannon, the bursting of bombs, the whizzing of balls, the popping of small arms, the cracking of timbers, the shrieks of the dying, the groans of the wounded, the commands of the officers, the swearing of the soldiers, the smoke, the fire, everything conspires to make the scene of a battle both awful and grand!³³

Miller came to view the outcome of this battle as miraculous and therefore at odds with his deistic view of a distant God far-removed from human affairs. He later wrote, “It seemed to me that the Supreme Being must have watched over the interests of this country in an especial manner, and delivered us from the hands of our enemies....So surprising a result, against such odds, did seem to me like the work of a mightier power than man.”³⁴

Following his discharge from the army on June 18, 1815, Miller returned to his wife and children in Poultney. Shortly after his return however, he moved with his family back to Low Hampton. Miller’s father had died on December 30, 1812, of the “pestilence” and a sister had succumbed to the same disease three days previously.³⁵ The likely reason for this move therefore, was to enable Miller—now free from his army commitments—to assist in the care of his widowed mother. He “paid off the mortgage on his mother’s farm where she now lived with William’s brother Solomon and acquired for himself a 200-acre farm about a quarter of a mile to the west.”³⁶

Throughout this time period Miller was deeply concerned with the question of death and an afterlife. As Rowe points out, “From 1812 to 1815 death surrounded him.”³⁷ He had begun to reflect upon his own mortality following the deaths of his father and sister; and his experiences as a soldier. Miller apparently felt that there were only two options possible following death: annihilation, and accountability—neither of which he was comfortable with. In his own words:

³¹ William Miller to Lucy Miller, October 31, 1813.

³² Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 40-41.

³³ William Miller to Lucy Miller, September 12, 1814.

³⁴ Quoted in Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 52-53.

³⁵ Hewitt, *Midnight and Morning*, 15.

³⁶ Hewitt, *Midnight and Morning*, 15.

³⁷ Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets*, 6.

Annihilation was a cold and chilling thought, and accountability was sure destruction to all. The heavens were as brass over my head, and the earth as iron under my feet. Eternity!— what was it? And death— why was it? The more I reasoned, the further I was from demonstration. The more I thought, the more scattered were my conclusions. I tried to stop thinking, but my thoughts would not be controlled. I was truly wretched, but did not understand the cause.³⁸

Once in Low Hampton, Miller took tentative steps towards regaining his Baptist faith. At first he attempted to combine both, publicly espousing Deism while simultaneously attending his local Baptist church.³⁹ His attendance turned to participation when he was asked to read the day's sermon during one of the local minister's frequent absences. His participation changed to commitment one Sunday when he was reading a sermon on the duties of parents and became choked with emotion. Miller records the experience:

Suddenly the character of a Savior was vividly impressed upon my mind. It seemed that there might be a Being so good and compassionate as to Himself atone for our transgressions, and thereby save us from suffering the penalty of sin. I immediately felt how lovely such a Being must be; and imagined that I could cast myself into the arms of, and trust in the mercy of, such an One.⁴⁰

Miller's conversion in mid-September 1816 was apparently precipitated by his attendance—about a week earlier—of a revival meeting held by a “Dr. B.” in nearby Fairhaven.⁴¹

Miller's conversion meant many changes in his life. As Bliss states, Miller now determined that “henceforth, wherever he was, he must deport himself as a Christian”.⁴² One important aspect of Miller's new deportment as a Christian was personal Bible study. In his own words, Miller “lost all taste for other reading”, and applied his heart “to get wisdom from God”.⁴³ Miller's Bible study soon became more than simply devotional. Challenged by his Deist friends to justify his newfound faith, Miller did so by examining the Bible closely, declaring to one friend “If he would give me time, I would harmonize all these apparent contradictions to my own satisfaction, or I will be a Deist still.”⁴⁴ Miller gives more detail in another account:

In 1818 or 19, while conversing with a friend to whom I made a visit, and who had known me and had heard me talk while I was a deist, he inquired in rather a significant manner, ‘What do you think of this text, and that,’ referring to the old texts I had objected to while a deist. I understood what he was about, and replied, ‘If

³⁸ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 65.

³⁹ Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets*, 9.

⁴⁰ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 5.

⁴¹ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 66.

⁴² Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 68.

⁴³ Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies*, 11.

⁴⁴ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 6.

you will give me time I will tell you what they mean.’ ‘How long time do you want?’ ‘I don’t know, but I will tell you,’ I replied, for I could not believe that God had given a revelation that could not be understood. I then resolved to study my Bible, believing I could find out what the Holy Spirit meant. But as soon as I had formed this resolution the thought came to me, ‘Suppose you find a passage that you cannot understand, what will you do?’ This mode of studying the Bible then came to my mind: ‘I will take the words of such passages and trace them through the Bible, and find out their meaning in this way.’ I had Cruden’s Concordance, which I think is the best in the world, so I took that and my Bible, and set down to my desk, and read nothing else except the newspapers a little, for I was determined to know what my Bible meant. I began at Genesis and read on slowly; and when I came to a text that I could not understand, I searched through the Bible to find out what it meant. After I had gone through the Bible in this way, O, how bright and glorious the truth appeared. I found what I have been preaching to you. I was satisfied that the seven times terminated in 1843. Then I came to the 2300 days; they brought me to the same conclusion; but I had no thought of finding out when the Saviour was coming, and I could not believe it; but the light struck me so forcibly I did not know what to do. Now, I thought, I must put on spurs and breeching; I will not go faster than the Bible, and I will not fall behind it. Whatever the Bible teaches I will hold on to it.⁴⁵

Miller commenced with Genesis 1:1, studying each verse and not moving on until he felt the meaning was clear. In this way he became convinced firstly, that postmillennialism was unbiblical; and secondly, that the time of Christ’s Second Coming was revealed in Bible prophecy.

Basing his belief principally on Daniel 8:14: “Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed,”⁴⁶ and using an interpretive principle known as the “day-year principle;” Miller concluded that the cleansing of the sanctuary represented the earth’s purification by fire at Christ’s Second Coming. For Miller, and other users of this principle, a day in prophecy was read not as a 24 hour period, but rather as a calendar year—365 days instead.⁴⁷ Further, he became convinced that the 2,300 day period started in 457 BCE at Artaxerxes’ decree to rebuild Jerusalem. Simple calculation then revealed that this period would end—and hence Christ’s return

⁴⁵ Quoted in Joshua V. Himes, “The Rise and Progress of Adventism Part I,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 24, 1856, 9.

⁴⁶ King James Version (KJV). However, Arasola, *The End of Historicism*, 89, points out that “Biographical as well as scholarly literature on Millerism gives an erroneous view of Miller’s exegetical interests. Anyone reading literature on Millerism is likely to conclude that Daniel 8:14 was Miller’s only and main reason for expecting the parousia in the year 1843 and that he was interested primarily in the books of Daniel and Revelation. This is unfortunate, since it fails to do justice to Miller.... Many of those who have written on Miller have had a Seventh-day Adventist background. The result has been a ‘strongly partisan history’ which unintentionally omitted ideas that were no longer relevant for Sabbatarian Adventism.”

⁴⁷ Probably the most comprehensive justification of the “day-year principle” as currently practised by Seventh-day Adventists (and little changed from Miller’s time) is that found in William H. Shea, *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation*, Daniel and Revelation Series, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1982), 56-93.

occur—in 1843. Miller records, “I was thus brought... to the solemn conclusion, that in about twenty-five years from that time [1818] all the affairs of our present state would be wound up.”⁴⁸

J. F. C. Harrison points out that, for Miller and most of his contemporary Christians, “there was general agreement in millennial theology that the world was to be transformed by the second coming of Christ and the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. This state would last for a thousand years.”⁴⁹ The millennialists of the time could be divided into two groups: those who believed like Miller, that Christ's second coming would precede the millennium—the premillennialists, and those who believed that the second coming would follow the millennium—the postmillennialists.⁵⁰ Generally, premillennialists were predisposed towards the establishment of the millennium by divine, cataclysmic action; while the postmillennialists looked forward to the establishment of God's kingdom gradually, through human effort. As Harrison indicates, for many postmillennialists,

the millennium was secularized into a utopia or perfect state of society, to be attained through a gradual and steady march of improvement....In sharp contrast with this optimistic, reassuring, Augustan view, the premillennialist... expected no such comforting progression....Convinced that the world was evil, he looked for sudden divine intervention to destroy the existing order and establish the millennium.⁵¹

Some research has suggested that the stereotypes were less rigid. James H. Moorhead suggests that American millennialism from the mid-nineteenth century contained elements from both groups—that the optimistic hope for progress usually associated with postmillennialism was fused with the sense of impending crisis usually associated with premillennialism. This fusion of “progress and apocalypse” was the dominant eschatology in mid-nineteenth-century America.⁵² Furthermore, for most Americans, it was “the orientation and anticipation of millennialism in general that was most important to the generations of the 1820’s and 1830’s and careful distinction about the chronology of the end took second place to that general cultural tone.”⁵³ Many Millerites were active in social issues—working for reform while awaiting the end.⁵⁴ Joshua V. Himes was an

⁴⁸ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 11-12.

⁴⁹ J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming- Popular Millenarianism 1780-1850* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 4.

⁵⁰ Harrison, *The Second Coming*, 4. A third category: amillennialism—where either the present age is viewed as the millennium, or the millennium is seen as purely symbolic was not popular during this time. For a diagram of the three views, see Arasola, *The End of Historicism*, 69.

⁵¹ Harrison, *The Second Coming*, 7.

⁵² James H. Moorhead, “Between Progress and Apocalypse: A Reassessment of Millennialism in American Apocalyptic Thought,” *Journal of American History* 71, no. 3 (1984), 524-542.

⁵³ Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture*, 14-15.

⁵⁴ Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 82.

avowed abolitionist while Angelina Grimke Weld, an abolitionist, women's-rights advocate, and Millerite wrote in 1845:

I fully believe in the downfall of every Earthly throne and the overthrow of every political government—the annihilation of every Ecclesiastical establishment and the dissolution of every sect and party....But I am calm, hopeful, happy, for I see arising out of their ruins the Everlasting kingdom of God.⁵⁵

Whatever view was taken, such millennial ideas were based on a quite literal interpretation of Revelation 20 and its five references to a period of a thousand years—a millennium:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till *the thousand years* were ended. After that he must be loosed for a little while. Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom judgment was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life, and reigned with Christ *a thousand years*. The rest of the dead did not come to life until *the thousand years* were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with him *a thousand years*. And when *the thousand years* are ended, Satan will be loosed from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations which are at the four corners of the earth, that is, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the broad earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city; but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever. Then I saw a great white throne and him who sat upon it; from his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and all were judged by what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and if any one's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Quoted in Ron Graybill, "The Abolitionist-Millerite Connection," in *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1993), 147.

⁵⁶ Revelation 20, Revised Standard Version.

As Ruth Alden Doan points out, by the mid-nineteenth century, postmillennialism had become the dominant eschatological position of American Protestants. In contrast, “Premillennialism has, since that time, been the rallying point of only dissenting minorities.”⁵⁷

The Millerite Movement

Although Miller was convinced of his calculations by 1818, he continued to study privately until 1823 to ensure the correctness of his interpretation. In 1845 Miller reflected: “During that time, more objections arose in my mind than have been advanced by my opponents since; and I know of no objection that has since been advanced, which did not then occur to me.”⁵⁸ In September 1822, Miller formally stated his conclusions in a twenty-point document, including article 15, “I believe that the second coming of Jesus Christ is near, even at the door, even within twenty-one years,—on or before 1843.”⁵⁹ This document however, remained private, despite his personal convictions: “The duty of presenting the evidence of the nearness of the advent to others,—which I had managed to evade while I could find the shadow of an objection remaining against its truth—again came home to me with great force.”⁶⁰

Miller did eventually share his views—firstly to a few friends privately, and later to some ministerial acquaintances. He was disappointed at the lack of response from those he spoke to: “To my astonishment, I found very few who listened with any interest. Occasionally, one would see the force of the evidence; but the great majority passed it by as an idle tale.”⁶¹ A somewhat reluctant messenger, Miller recorded his unwillingness to engage in a public ministry, despite having felt a “call” to do so from 1818:

I tried to excuse myself for not going out and proclaiming it to the world. I told the Lord that I was not used to speaking; that I had not the necessary qualifications for gaining the attention of an audience; that I was very diffident, and feared to go before the world; that I was slow of speech and of a slow tongue. But I could get no relief.⁶²

⁵⁷ Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture*, 14.

⁵⁸ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 15.

⁵⁹ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 79. For some reason, Miller left article 20 incomplete, stating: “I believe in the ordinance of the Lord's supper, to be” As Bliss points out, it seems likely that this list was meant to continue with further belief statements. Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 80.

⁶⁰ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 15.

⁶¹ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 15.

⁶² Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 92. Miller makes an almost identical quote: “The more I presented it in conversation, the more dissatisfied I felt with myself for withholding it from the public. I tried to excuse myself for not going out and proclaiming it to the world. I told the Lord that I was not used to public speaking, that I had not the necessary qualifications for gaining the attention of an audience; that I was very diffident, and feared to go before the world; that they would ‘not believe me nor hearken to my voice,’ I was ‘slow of speech and of a slow tongue.’ But I could get no relief.” Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 16. Here he quotes from Exodus 4:1 & 4:10, likening himself to Moses—also a reluctant messenger.

Bliss points out that during this time period,

there were few prominent incidents in his life to distinguish him from other men. He was a good citizen, a kind neighbor, an affectionate husband and parent, and a devoted Christian; good to the poor, and benevolent, as objects of charity were presented; in the Sunday-school was teacher and superintendent; in the church he performed important service as a reader and exhorter, and, in the support of religious worship, no other member, perhaps, did as much as he. He was very exemplary in his life and conversation, endeavored at all times to perform the duties, whether public or private, which devolved on him, and whatever he did was done cheerfully, as for the glory of God. His leisure hours were devoted to reading and meditation; he kept himself well informed respecting the current events of the time; occasionally communicated his thoughts through the press, and often, for his own private amusement, or for the entertainment of friends, indulged in various poetical effusions, which, for unstudied productions, are possessed of some merit; but his principal enjoyment was derived from the study of the Bible.⁶³

By 1824 Miller had also become involved in some sort of Missionary Society. He writes in a November 3, 1824 letter to a Bro. Ashley that:

I shall forward my yearly dues by the bearer of this letter perhaps my dear Bro this may be the last time I shall ever contribute to the missionary Board. But while the Lord gives me breath I hope I shall feel anxious for the cause, and willing to do all that our society requires, to try to raise a missionary spirit in our Brethren. Oh! That they might feel the importance of being coworkers [*sic*] with God- for the time is at hand when the captivity of Zion shall return and her walls will be built up. Let light be communicated. We ought to do much for the translation and printing the scriptures in different language. Do remember me to the missionary Board. I have been but little or no use to them for the year past. But they have my best wishes and I hope they may select some person in my place that may be more useful.⁶⁴

Miller makes no mention of this membership in his *Memoirs*, nor does his biographer Bliss. However, Rowe's recent work has established Miller's contributions to the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society formed by the Baptist Church in Vermont, and notes that Miller was appointed "second vice president" by the association in 1824.⁶⁵

Miller states that he began his public lecturing in the town of Dresden on "the first Sabbath in August, 1833."⁶⁶ However, as Bliss points out, "The printed article from which this is copied was written in 1845. By an examination of his correspondence, it appears that he must have begun to lecture in August, 1831. So that this date is a mistake of the printer or an error in Mr. Miller's

⁶³ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 80-81.

⁶⁴ William Miller to Bro. Ashley, October 3, 1824. Original emphasis. Miller's letter is difficult to read, the above is an accurate rendition to the best of my ability.

⁶⁵ Rowe, *God's Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World*, 88.

⁶⁶ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 18.

memory.”⁶⁷ Rowe’s work points to Sunday August 14, 1831 as the most probable date for Miller’s Dresden sermon.⁶⁸

In 1832 Miller submitted a series of sixteen articles to the *Vermont Telegraph*—a Baptist paper. The first of these was published on May 15, and Miller writes of the public’s response: “I began to be flooded with letters of inquiry respecting my views; and visitors flocked to converse with me on the subject.”⁶⁹ In 1834, unable to personally comply with many of the urgent requests for information and the invitations to travel and preach that he received, Miller published a synopsis of his teachings in a “little tract of 64 pages.”⁷⁰ These he, “scattered, the most of them gratuitously, sending them in reply to letters of inquiry, and to places which I could not visit.”⁷¹ The tract was given the somewhat unwieldy title: *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ, about the Year 1843: Exhibited in a Course of Lectures*. Two years later in 1836, Miller’s series of sixteen lectures—possibly the same sixteen that were published by the *Vermont Telegraph*; were published in Troy, New York.⁷² These were republished in an edition of 5000 “about the first of January, 1840.”⁷³

From 1840 onwards, Millerism was transformed from an “obscure, regional movement into a national campaign.”⁷⁴ The key figure in this transformation was Joshua V. Himes—the pastor of Chardon Street Chapel in Boston, and an able and experienced publisher.⁷⁵ Though Himes did not fully accept Miller’s ideas until 1842, he established the fortnightly paper *Signs of the Times* to publicize them. The first edition was published on February 28, 1840, with Himes as editor, and was probably intended as a single issue.⁷⁶ The printers, Dow & Jackson, saw a business opportunity in the paper and proposed to continue printing issues, assuming all financial risk, if Himes continued as editor and furnished the content. Himes agreed, and the February 28 issue was reissued dated March 20, issues were then published on the first and third Wednesdays of every month.⁷⁷ While *Signs of the Times* was not the first Millerite paper, it was the “most long-lived and

⁶⁷ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 98.

⁶⁸ Rowe, *God’s Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World*, 98-99.

⁶⁹ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 17.

⁷⁰ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 19.

⁷¹ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 19.

⁷² Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 20.

⁷³ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 21.

⁷⁴ Richard L. Rogers, “Millennialism and American Culture: The Adventist Movement,” *Comparative Social Research* 13 (1991): 110.

⁷⁵ Himes was the publisher of *The Emancipator* which promoted the ideas of reformer William Lloyd Garrison.

⁷⁶ Dick, *William Miller and the Advent Crisis*, 62.

⁷⁷ Dick, *William Miller and the Advent Crisis*, 62.

successful” one.⁷⁸ As Le Roy Froom points out, periodical literature played a very important part in the rapid and widespread dissemination of Millerite beliefs. “From first to last the power of the press, in this particular form, was one of the foremost factors in the success of this now vigorous, expanding movement.”⁷⁹ In addition to the *Signs of the Times* based in Boston, Millerite papers were published in numerous cities including New York, Philadelphia, Rochester, Cleveland, and Montreal.⁸⁰ According to Bliss, there were at least 48 Millerite periodicals that would circulate in the period leading up to the Great Disappointment.⁸¹ The majority of these however, were quite short-lived—often a new paper was started whenever a Millerite evangelistic campaign entered a new area. Examples include the *Midnight Cry* in New York, the *Glad Tidings of the Kingdom* in Rochester, the *Advent Chronicle and Tent Reporter* in Buffalo, the *Western Midnight Cry* in Cincinnati, and the *Southern Midnight Cry* in Washington.⁸²

As well as publications based on geography, the Millerites issued various papers targeting different groups. *The Advent Message to the Daughters of Zion* focused on female readers, and was first published in May, 1844.⁸³ *The Advent Shield* was a more academically orientated paper published in Boston and edited by Joshua V. Himes, Sylvester Bliss, and Apollos Hale.⁸⁴ Its announced purpose was to “defend the doctrine from the attacks of the enemies, to exhibit the unscriptural position of the opponents, and furnish the truth to those who were ready to receive it.”⁸⁵ While only three issues were produced: in May 1844, January 1845, and a final issue in April 1845; it was the largest of the Millerite papers, the first two issues each having 144 pages, and the final having 250.

As the various dates of Christ’s predicted return approached, Millerite publishing went into high gear. In May 1843, 21,000 copies of the various Millerite papers were published for distribution each week. In New York alone, in the five month period ending April 1843, 600,000 copies of various publications were distributed. In December 1843, Himes proposed the publication

⁷⁸ Donal Ward, “Religious Enthusiasm in Vermont, 1761-1847” (PhD, University of Notre Dame, 1980), 231-232.

⁷⁹ Le Roy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, Vol. IV, (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1954), 621. For an examination of the role of the press in the consolidation of Adventism after 1844, see Hanks Harwood, “‘Like the Leaves of Autumn’: The Utilization of the Press to Maintain Millennial Expectations in the Wake of Prophetic Failure.” Note however, that Hanks Harwood consistently mislabels the Adventist periodical *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* as *The Sabbath Review and Advent Herald*.

⁸⁰ Billington, “The Millerite Adventists in Great Britain, 1840-1850,” 193.

⁸¹ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 141, 144.

⁸² For a detailed overview of the Millerite publishing work see Dick, *William Miller and the Advent Crisis*, 59-78, and, Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* Volume IV, 621-641.

⁸³ Dick, *William Miller and the Advent Crisis*, 76.

⁸⁴ Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, Vol. IV, 625, 629, 631-632.

⁸⁵ Dick, *William Miller and the Advent Crisis*, 76.

of one million tracts; while in May 1844, he announced that five million copies of Millerite publications had been distributed up to that time.⁸⁶

Ruth Alden Doan examined the geographical distribution of correspondents to the Millerite periodical *Signs of the Times/Advent Herald* from 1840 to 1847. Out of a total of 615 correspondents, she found that the 131 correspondents from New York State provided the largest group. Vermont provided another 107; with New England (excluding Vermont) accounting for a further 279. Outside of these areas, representation was sparse—twenty-three in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland combined; just sixty-five from the west—including twenty from Ohio; and only ten from the Southern states.⁸⁷

While it seems then, that the vast majority of Miller's followers were of local origin, his message was not limited to his local area—nor even to America. Miller preached across the border in Canada's Eastern Townships on at least three occasions: in 1835, 1838, and 1840. He made a number of converts there and gained the support of some of the local clergy.⁸⁸ At least five Millerite papers were published in Canada: the *Faithful Watchman*—published in Sherbrooke from January 1843; the influential *Voice of Elijah*, published in Montreal from June 1843; the short-lived *Hope of the Church* in St Thomas in 1844; *Behold, He Cometh* in Hamilton, and the *Bridegroom's Herald* in Toronto, both from mid-1844.⁸⁹

Miller also gained converts in Great Britain, though he never travelled there himself.⁹⁰ From 1841, Millerite evangelists appeared in Great Britain. Many were travellers or emigrants to the United States who had heard the Second Advent message there, and returned to their home districts to preach.⁹¹ One such individual, Robert Winter, was converted to Millerism at the first Millerite camp-meeting in the United States, in East Kingston, New Hampshire, held June 28-July 5, 1842. Winter had emigrated from England and although a Methodist, became pastor of a Baptist church in Vermont. Shortly after his conversion, Winter returned to England as the first known Millerite missionary. He preached in various locations—including London on at least four occasions—with some success.⁹² In 1843 he wrote, “We are travelling through town and country, sinners are

⁸⁶ Dick, *William Miller and the Advent Crisis*, 76.

⁸⁷ Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture*, 231.

⁸⁸ Denis Fortin, “‘The World Turned Upside Down’: Millerism in the Eastern Townships, 1835-1845” *Journal of Eastern Township Studies* 11:Fall (1997): 39-59. See also Little, “Millennial Invasion: Millerism in the Eastern Townships of Lower Canada,” 182.

⁸⁹ Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, Volume IV, 624-625, 628.

⁹⁰ For an overview of the Millerites in Great Britain, see Billington, “The Millerite Adventists in Great Britain, 1840-1850,” 191-212.

⁹¹ Billington, “The Millerite Adventists in Great Britain, 1840-1850,” 196.

⁹² Dunton, “The Millerite Adventists and Other Millenarian Groups in Great Britain, 1830-1860”, 109, 112.

converted, the Church made more alive to God, and ministers are writing and preaching this glorious subject, and thousands now read the Bible and pray, who entirely neglected” these activities before.⁹³

Another Millerite speaker, William Barker, wrote in 1845:

I have been lecturing in the streets and commons...and I trust some good has been done...I intend, God willing, should the vision tarry, to sound the cry indoor and out as the way may be left open this winter in London. It is now about fourteen months since I left New York for my native land; I have lectured at most of the large towns in the South of England, and likewise in Norfolk, Suffolk, and the Isle of Wight. I have lectured in chapels among different denominations and given hundreds of lectures to large and attentive congregations.”⁹⁴

Millerite literature also made converts in Great Britain. In addition to the nearly \$1000 that Miller and Himes spent supplying literature to enquirers and evangelists in Great Britain; “there is evidence that [in Liverpool, Bristol, and other ports] local Millerite pioneers borrowed copies of Miller’s works and Adventist magazines from visiting American sea captains and merchants.”⁹⁵ As well as utilizing imported American literature, two Millerite papers were published locally in Great Britain: the *Second Advent Harbinger* in Bristol, and the British *Midnight Cry* in Liverpool.⁹⁶ Other tracts and papers were published by Winter, who lamented that he did not have the funds to print the larger works.⁹⁷ In 1840, J. A. Begg of Scotland reported that,

We have had, in Great Britain and Ireland, the ‘Morning Watch,’ the ‘Christian Herald,’ ‘The Watchman,’ ‘The Investigator,’ and ‘The Inquirer,’ all ether exclusively or chiefly occupied with the illustrations or enforcement of the truths of the sacred prophecies, and hundreds of the heralds of the crown.”⁹⁸

In a letter dated November 6, 1843, published in *The Midnight Cry*, Winter enthusiastically reported on the various forms of evangelistic activity being undertaken by the English Millerites:

Our London mission is doing well—the Lord has raised up several good labourers and two or three are now lecturing on this subject in London in different chapels—and many of our friends are holding Bible meetings, and reading our Second Advent books to the people, and others are sending those books and papers about, and others are writing letters to their friends.⁹⁹

⁹³ Robert Winter, “The Cause in England,” *Signs of the Times*, 15 November, 1843, 110-109.

⁹⁴ *Advent Herald*, March 5, 1845. Quoted in Billington, “The Millerite Adventists in Great Britain, 1840-1850,” 197. Note that following the Great Disappointment, many British Millerites expected the Second Advent to take place in October 10, 1845.

⁹⁵ Billington, “The Millerite Adventists in Great Britain, 1840-1850,” 195.

⁹⁶ From, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, Volume IV, 623.

⁹⁷ Dunton, “The Millerite Adventists and Other Millenarian Groups in Great Britain, 1830-1860”, 110.

⁹⁸ Wellcome, *History of the Second Advent Message*, 174.

⁹⁹ Robert Winter, *The Midnight Cry*, January 4, 1844, 189.

The Millerite message entered Australia when Thomas Playford, living in Adelaide, was converted through the Canadian paper *Voice of Elijah* and spread the Millerite message in Australia, even publishing a book of his sermons: *Discourses on the Second Advent of Jesus Christ*.¹⁰⁰ Playford's preaching apparently resulted in a number of converts as J. N. Loughborough records the following anecdote:

When in South Australia, in 1908, I read in the Adelaide Register of November 23 the account of the death of Pastor Abbott, a veteran of ninety-five years. He had mentioned the advent movement of 1844 in some of his "reminiscences of the past." Of the work in Adelaide he said, "In 1844 the preaching of Mr. Thomas Playford on the Second Advent made a deep impression upon me in common with many others." Although they had a meeting-house that would hold five hundred persons, they had to take steps to construct a larger building. "There was no house in the place that would accommodate the people, when Mr. Playford would come to the place to speak."¹⁰¹

An English Millerite, James William Bonham, apparently sent copies of *The Midnight Cry* to Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), though no record remains of their effect.¹⁰²

In a similar manner, converts were made in Norway and Chile.¹⁰³ A letter published in *The Midnight Cry* of October 12, 1843, from a Mrs O. S. Burnham of Kaloa, The Sandwich Islands, stated that she and her husband had accepted the Millerite message and were worshipping with a small company of believers.¹⁰⁴

While apparently not a particularly charismatic preacher, Miller was seemingly an effective one. According to a contemporary who heard him, Miller was,

self-possessed and ready; distinct in his utterance, and frequently quaint in his expressions. He succeeds in chaining the attention of his auditory for an hour and an half to two hours; and in the management of his subject discovers much tact, holding frequent colloquies with the objector and enquirer, supplying the questions and answers himself in a very natural manner; and although grave himself, sometimes producing a smile from a portion of his auditors.¹⁰⁵

Miller did not limit his preaching to apocalyptic topics, but seemed to view his apocalypticism in evangelistic or revivalistic terms as well:

¹⁰⁰ Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, Volume IV, 712.

¹⁰¹ J. N. Loughborough, *Last-Day Tokens* (Warburton: Signs Publishing Company, c1909), 60.

¹⁰² Dunton, "The Millerite Adventists and Other Millenarian Groups in Great Britain, 1830-1860", 114.

¹⁰³ Josiah Litch, "This Gospel of the Kingdom," *Signs of the Times*, November 15, 1843, 54-55.

¹⁰⁴ Josiah Litch, "The Midnight Cry at the Sandwich Islands," *Signs of the Times*, October 4, 1843, 109. In 1844, a letter was received by Sylvester Bliss from Charles Burnham (O. S. Burnham's husband?) of Kaloa stating, "I have at this moment received the Signs of the Times of Nov. 29th. Where it came from we cannot tell; but suppose it must be from you. We are very much interested in the papers, and hope to see more, should time continue." Quoted in Wellcome, *History of the Second Advent Message*, 535.

¹⁰⁵ "Mr Miller," *Signs of the Times*, May 15, 1840, 31.

Be warned, repent, fly, fly for succor to the ark of God, to Jesus Christ, the Lamb that once was slain, that you might live, for he is worthy to receive all honor, power and glory. Believe, and you shall live. Obey his work, his spirit, his calls, his invitations. There is no time for delay; put it not off I beg of you, no, not for a moment.¹⁰⁶

Miller recorded that his lectures were effective: “In almost every place I visited, my labors resulted in the reclaiming of backsliders, and the conversion of sinners.”¹⁰⁷ Similar accolades were given by other observers. One such observer, L. D. Fleming wrote to the *Signs of the Times* from Portland, Maine on April 6, 1840 following a series of meetings led by Miller:

At some of our meetings since Br. M. left, as many as 250, it has been estimated, have expressed a desire for religion, by coming forward for prayers; and have probably between *one* and *two hundred* have professed conversion at our meeting; and now the fire is being kindled through this whole city, and all the adjacent country. A number of Rum-sellers have turned their shops into meeting rooms, and those places that were once devoted to intemperance and revelry, are now devoted to prayer and praise. Others have abandoned the traffic entirely and are become converted to God. One or two gambling establishments, I am informed, are entirely broken up. *Infidels, Deists, Universalists*; and the most abandoned *profligates*, have been converted.¹⁰⁸

Another observer wrote: “His [Miller’s] lectures are interspersed with powerful admonitions to the wicked....Judging from what we see and hear, we should think his lectures are making a decided impression on many minds, favorable to his theory.”¹⁰⁹ In an 1840 letter to the editor of the *Signs of the Times*, Fleming wrote: “Bro. Miller simply takes the sword of the Spirit, unsheathed and naked, and lays its sharp edge on the naked heart, and it cuts, that’s all. Before the edge of this mighty weapon, infidelity falls and Universalism withers.”¹¹⁰

Miller apparently expressed his views very strongly. A writer for the *Maine Wesleyan Journal*, having heard him preach in Portland; said, “He [Miller] is evidently disposed to make but little allowance for those who think differently from him on the Millennium; *dealing often in terrible denunciations against such as oppose his peculiar views on this point*; as he fully believes they are crying peace and safety when sudden destruction cometh.”¹¹¹ One admirer of Miller’s

¹⁰⁶ Dick, *William Miller and the Advent Crisis*, 16.

¹⁰⁷ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 19.

¹⁰⁸ Lorenzo Dow Fleming, “Miller’s Influence Upon the People,” *Signs of the Times*, April 15, 1840, 13-14. Original emphasis.

¹⁰⁹ “Mr Miller,” 32.

¹¹⁰ Fleming, “Miller’s Influence Upon the People,” 13-14.

¹¹¹ Reproduced in “Mr Miller,” 32. Emphasis added.

methods reported that “[Miller] handles Universalism with gloves of steel,” after he had preached a sermon against universal salvation that included hellfire and brimstone.¹¹²

Miller was a very busy preacher. In 1843, he is said to have toured New England and western New York, preaching eighty-five times in eight weeks.¹¹³ Two years later in 1845, he reflected upon his work, “I labored extensively in all the New England and Middle States, in Ohio, Michigan, Maryland, the District of Columbia, and in Canada East and West, giving about four thousand lectures in something like five hundred different towns.”¹¹⁴

Despite the urging of his supporters, Miller never personally set an exact date for the expected Second Advent.¹¹⁵ However, in response to their urgings he did narrow the time-period to sometime in the Jewish year 1843, stating: “My principles in brief, are, that Jesus Christ will come again to this earth, cleanse, purify, and take possession of the same, with all the saints, sometime between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844.”¹¹⁶ On February 4, 1844, he wrote to Himes:

DEAR BROTHER HIMES:- At the request of numerous friends, I herein transmit to them, through you, a brief statement of facts, relative to the many stories with which the public are humbugged, concerning the principles I advocate, and the management of my worldly concerns.

My principles, in brief, are, that Jesus Christ will come again to this earth, cleanse, purify, and take possession of the same, with all his saints, some time between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844. *I have never, for the space of more than twenty-three years, had any other time preached or published by me; I have never fixed on any month, day, or hour, during that period; I have never found any mistake in reckoning summing up or miscalculation; I have made no provision for any other time; I am perfectly satisfied that the Bible is true, and is the word of God, and I am confident that I rely wholly on the blessed book for my faith in this matter. I am not a prophet. I am not sent to prophesy, but to read, believe, and publish what God has inspired the ancient prophets to administer to us, in the prophecies of the Old and New Testaments. These have been, and now are, my principles, and I hope I shall never be ashamed of them.*¹¹⁷

March 21, 1844 passed without incident, and the majority of Millerites maintained their faith. On March 25, Miller wrote to Himes, “I am still looking for the Dear Savior.... The time, as I have calculated it, is now filled up; and I expect every moment to see the Savior descend from

¹¹² Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 149.

¹¹³ Dick, *William Miller and the Advent Crisis*, 16.

¹¹⁴ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 22.

¹¹⁵ Dick, “The Millerite Movement, 1830-1845,” 16.

¹¹⁶ Letter to Joshua Himes first published in early 1843, in the *New York Tribune*. In Dick, *William Miller and the Advent Crisis*, 96-97.

¹¹⁷ William Miller to Joshua V. Himes, February 4, 1844. Emphasis added.

heaven. I have now nothing to look for but this glorious hope.”¹¹⁸ As Knight states, the movement’s survival was a result of the fact that, “the Millerite leaders had been ‘soft’ on the time.... They allowed for the possibility of small errors in their calculations and even in some of their historic dates.”¹¹⁹ In fact, on February 28, Miller himself had written, “If Christ comes, as we expect, we will sing the song of victory soon; if not, we will watch, and pray, and preach until he comes, for soon our time, and all prophetic days, will have been filled.”¹²⁰

Further discussion and study resulted in the brief adoption of a new date—April 18, 1844, one based on the Karaite Jewish calendar (as opposed to the Rabbinic calendar).¹²¹ Like the previous date, April 18 passed without Christ’s return. In the *Advent Herald* of April 24, Himes wrote that all the “expected and published time” had passed; and admitted that they had been “mistaken in the precise time of the termination of the prophetic period,”¹²² while Josiah Litch surmised that they were probably, “only in error relative to the event which marked its close.”¹²³ Miller also responded publicly, addressing a letter “To Second Advent Believers,” and writing, “I confess my error, and acknowledge my disappointment; yet I still believe that the day of the Lord is near, even at the door.”¹²⁴

More study led the Millerites to believe that they had entered the “tarrying time”—a time of waiting after which Christ would finally return.¹²⁵ They utilized three main verses in their conclusions:

1. The parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25, particularly verse 5: “While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept.”
2. Habakkuk 3:2-3: For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry.
3. Hebrews 10:36-37: For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry. For ye

¹¹⁸ William Miller, “Letter From Mr Miller--His Position,” *The Advent Herald and Signs of the Times Reporter*, April 10, 1844, 77.

¹¹⁹ Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 162.

¹²⁰ William Miller, “Mr Miller at Washington,” *Advent Herald*, March 6, 1844, 39.

¹²¹ This was not a new thought, and had been discussed by Millerite writers as early as June 21, 1843. “Chronology,” *Signs of the Times*, June 21, 1843, 123. For a discussion of the differences between the two calendars see Schlomo Hofman, “Karaites,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference, 2007), 798.

¹²² [Joshua V. Himes], “Our Position,” *The Advent Herald and Signs of the Times Reporter*, April 24, 1844, 39.

¹²³ Quoted in Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 304.

¹²⁴ In Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 256.

¹²⁵ [Joshua V. Himes], “Our Position,” 93. See discussion in Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 165-166.

have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry.¹²⁶

This belief sustained the Millerites through the months of May to July, 1844. As Knight notes however, this period represented a “flatness in Millerite evangelism,” when even the Millerite preachers must have experienced diminished certainty.¹²⁷

In August 1844 at a camp-meeting in Exeter, New Hampshire, everything changed when Samuel S. Snow presented a message of earth-shattering proportions—what became known as the “seventh-month” message or the “true midnight cry.”¹²⁸ In a complex discussion based on scriptural typology, Snow presented his conclusion (still based on the 2300 day prophecy in Daniel 8:14), that Christ would return on, “the tenth day of the seventh month of the present year, 1844.”¹²⁹ Again using the calendar of the Karaite Jews, this date was determined to be October 22, 1844. This “seventh month message” “spread with a rapidity unparalleled in the Millerite experience” amongst the general population.¹³⁰ The situation caught many of the established leaders—including Himes and Miller himself, by surprise. Knight reports that, “There is no evidence that any of the foremost Millerite preachers accepted this grass-roots development until late September. Most did not accept it until early October.”¹³¹ “The lecturers among the Adventists were the last to embrace the views of the time, and the more prominent ones came into it last of all.”¹³²

The Great Disappointment

The sun rose on the morning of October 23 like any other day, and October 22, that day of great hope and promise was for the Millerites, the day of greatest disappointment. Hiram Edson recorded his feelings following this “Great Disappointment”: “Our fondest hopes and expectations were

¹²⁶ Other verses that did not explicitly refer to a “tarrying” were also used in support. These included: Matthew 24: 48-5 “But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming; And shall begin to smite his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken; The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for his, and in an hour that he is not aware of, And shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” The story of Sodom in Genesis 18 and 19 where God’s wrath did not fall until Lot was safely in Zoar; and the story of Noah in Genesis, particularly 7:10, where Noah spent seven days in the ark before the flood came.

¹²⁷ Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 168.

¹²⁸ Snow had previously presented this idea, it was published on February 22, 1844 in the *Midnight Cry*, and republished in the *Advent Herald* on April 3, 1844. Both times however, a cautionary note was appended by the magazines’ editors, indicating that they disagreed with Snow’s conclusions. Samuel S. Snow, *Midnight Cry*, February 22, 1844, 243-244; and Samuel S. Snow, “Prophetic Time,” *The Advent Herald and Signs of the Times Reporter*, April 3, 1844, 68-69.

¹²⁹ Samuel S. Snow, *Advent Herald*, August 21, 1844, 20. See also Samuel S. Snow, *True Midnight Cry*, August 22, 1844, 4.

¹³⁰ Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 191.

¹³¹ Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 199.

¹³² Joshua V. Himes, *Advent Herald*, October 30, 1844, 93.

blasted, and such a spirit of weeping came over us as I never experienced before....We wept, and wept, till the day dawn."¹³³ Similarly, another Millerite, Henry Emmons said,

I waited all Tuesday [October 22] and dear Jesus did not come;— I waited all the forenoon of Wednesday, and was well in body as I ever was, but after 12 o'clock I began to feel faint, and before dark I needed someone to help me up to my chamber, as my natural strength was leaving me very fast, and I lay prostrate for 2 days without any pain— sick with disappointment.¹³⁴

Not only were the Millerites dealing with their own shattered expectations, they also faced considerable abuse and even violence from the general public. On November 18, 1844 Miller wrote to Himes about his experiences:

Some are tauntingly enquiring, "Have you not gone up?" even little children in the streets are shouting continually to passersby, "Have you a ticket to go up?" The public prints, of the most fashionable and popular kind, in the great Sodoms of our country, are caricaturing in the most shameful manner of the "white robes of the saints," Rev. 6:11, the "going up," and the great day of "burning." Even the pulpits are desecrated by the repetition of scandalous and false reports concerning the "ascension" robes," and priests are using their powers and pens to fill the catalogue of scoffing in the most scandalous periodicals of the day.¹³⁵

Worse were the instances of violence—a Millerite church burned in Ithaca and two vandalized in Dansville and Scottsville.¹³⁶ In Loraine, a mob attacked the Millerite congregation with clubs and knives, while a group in Toronto was tarred and feathered.¹³⁷ Shots were fired at another Canadian group meeting in a private house.¹³⁸

Both Millerite leaders and followers were left generally bewildered and disillusioned. Responses varied: some continued to look daily for Christ's return, others predicted different dates—among them April, July, and October 1845. Some theorized that the world had entered the seventh millennium—the "Great Sabbath," and that therefore, the saved should not work. Others acted as children, basing their belief on Jesus' words in Mark 10:15 "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." O. J. D. Pickands used Revelation 14:14-16 to teach that Christ was now sitting on a white cloud, and must be prayed

¹³³ In Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 218.

¹³⁴ In Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 217-218.

¹³⁵ White, *Sketches of the Christian Life and Public Labors of William Miller*, 310.

¹³⁶ Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 222-223.

¹³⁷ Cross, *The Burned-over District*, 308.

¹³⁸ Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 222-223.

down.¹³⁹ Probably the majority however, simply gave up their beliefs and attempted to rebuild their lives.¹⁴⁰ Some members rejoined their previous denominations. A substantial number joined the Shakers.¹⁴¹

In the confusion that followed the Great Disappointment it seemed that almost every Millerite had an opinion—all of them different. Miller said that in one week he received sixteen different papers advocating different views, all claiming to be Advent papers.¹⁴² Much of the responsibility for this proliferation of viewpoints must be shouldered by Miller, whose *Rules of Biblical Interpretation* outlined a method of biblical study that encouraged each person to read the Bible and to “do theology” for themselves. By mid-1845, doctrinal lines amongst the various Millerite groups began to solidify, emphasizing their differences—a process Knight accurately terms “sect building.”¹⁴³ During this time three main Millerite groups formed—in addition to those who had simply given up their beliefs.

The first major division of the Millerite groups who had not completely given up their belief in Christ’s Second Advent; were those who focused on the “shut-door” belief. This belief was popularized by Joseph Turner and was based on that key Millerite passage: Matthew 25: 1-13—the parable of the ten virgins.¹⁴⁴ The shut door mentioned in verses 11-12 was interpreted as the close of probation. As Knight explains, “After the door was shut, there would be no additional salvation. The wise virgins (true believers) would be in the kingdom, while the foolish virgins and all others would be on the outside.”¹⁴⁵ The belief became a major issue upon the publication in January of 1845, of an article by Apollos Hale and Joseph Turner in *The Advent Mirror*.¹⁴⁶ This article tied the shut-door concept to October 22, 1844, teaching that the work of general salvation was finished at that date—Christ came spiritually as the Bridegroom, the wise virgins had entered into the wedding

¹³⁹ “Then I looked, and lo, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sickle in his hand. And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat upon the cloud, ‘Put in your sickle, and reap, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.’ So he who sat upon the cloud swung his sickle on the earth, and the earth was reaped.” Revelation 14:14-16 Revised Standard Version (RSV). Dick, “The Millerite Movement, 1830-1845,” 25.

¹⁴⁰ George R. Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1999), 26.

¹⁴¹ Cross, *The Burned-over District*, 310.

¹⁴² Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 299-300.

¹⁴³ Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 232.

¹⁴⁴ Dick, “The Millerite Movement, 1830-1845,” 25.

¹⁴⁵ Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 236.

¹⁴⁶ Apollos Hale and Joseph Turner, “Has Not the Saviour Come as the Bridegroom,” *The Advent Mirror*, January 1845, 1-4.

feast, and the door was then shut on all others.¹⁴⁷ This first group is commonly known as either the “shut-door” or “spiritualizer” group.

The widespread acceptance of the “shut-door” belief lost ground as doubts were raised about the significance of the October 22, 1844 date—if nothing happened on that date, then there could be no shut door. The opposition to these “shut-door” beliefs was led by Joshua V. Himes and make up the second post-1844 group. This faction soon gained the upper hand, even converting Miller (initially a shut-door sympathizer) to their point of view.

The third major post-disappointment Millerite group also claimed—like the Hale and Turner led group, that the October 22 date was correct. Rather than Christ returning invisibly however, they came to view the event that took place on October 22, 1844 as having been quite different. The theology of this third group appears to have had its beginnings as early as October 23, 1844—the day after the Great Disappointment. On that day, during a prayer session with a group of Advent believers, Hiram Edson became convicted that “light would be given” and their “disappointment explained.”¹⁴⁸ Some years later, Edson reported on his experiences following that meeting:

While passing through a large field I was stopped about midway of the field. Heaven seemed open to my view, and I saw distinctly and clearly that instead of our High Priest coming out of the Most Holy of the heavenly sanctuary to come to this earth on the tenth day of the seventh month, at the end of the 2300 days, that He for the first time entered on that day the second apartment of that sanctuary; and that He had a work to perform in the Most Holy before coming to this earth. That he came to the marriage at that time; in other words, to the Ancient of days to receive a kingdom, dominion, and glory; and we must wait for his return *from the wedding*.¹⁴⁹

Edson’s experience led him into an extended study on the topic with O. R. L. Crosier and F. B. Hahn. They came to the conclusion that “the sanctuary to be cleansed in Daniel 8:14 was not the earth or the church, but the sanctuary in heaven.”¹⁵⁰ Therefore, the October 22 date marked not the

¹⁴⁷ It is important to note that this doctrine did not originate with Hale and Turner, but rather as Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 237, notes, with Miller himself. See Himes, ed., *Evidence from Scripture*, 237.

¹⁴⁸ Quoted in Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 306.

¹⁴⁹ Quoted in P. Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1977), 9; original emphasis. This undated document was apparently not written until many years after this event and was probably influenced by the ideas of later authors. See Fernand Fisel, “Edson’s ‘Cornfield Vision’: Frisson or Figment?,” *Adventist Currents*, July 1983, 3; for a detailed discussion of the issues. See also Ross E. Winkle, “Disappearing Act: Hiram Edson’s Cornfield Experience,” *Spectrum* 33, no. 1 (2005): 46-51; for a more recent perspective.

¹⁵⁰ Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 305-306.

Second Coming of Christ, but rather a heavenly event. Their insights were published in early 1845 in the *Day Dawn*.¹⁵¹

Edson, Crosier and Hahn were not the only individuals thinking along these lines. Joseph Marsh admitted in October 1844 [?], that “we have been mistaken in the nature of the event we expected would occur.”¹⁵² Even earlier, in March 1844—following the spring disappointment—Josiah Litch had written, “it has not been proved that the cleansing of the sanctuary, which was to take place at the end of the 2300 days, was the coming of Christ or the purification of the earth.” He had noted that any error was most likely to be “in error relative to the event which marked its close.”¹⁵³

Millerism’s “sect-building” was hastened by the events of what is known as the Albany Conference. On March 20, 1845, the *Morning Watch* published a call by Joshua V. Himes for a conference. The Albany Conference was to have three purposes:

1. “to strengthen one another in the faith of the Advent at the door,”
2. “to consult on the best mode of unitedly carrying forth our work, in comforting and preparing the Advent congregations among us for the speedy coming of the Lord,” and
3. “to unite our efforts, for the conversion and salvation of sinners.”¹⁵⁴

Notably, the stated purpose of the conference was not to debate controversial doctrines. In fact the invitation was extended only to those Adventists who “still adhere to the original faith.”¹⁵⁵ The Shut-door Adventists and others who had developed new doctrines were therefore explicitly excluded. The biggest drawcard was to be the presence of Miller. In fact Himes wrote to Miller on March 27, 1845, saying, “all depends upon your being there.”¹⁵⁶

The Albany Conference began on April 29, 1845 and was to be, “one of the most significant Adventist meetings in the history of post-October 1844 Adventism.”¹⁵⁷ The delegates to the Albany Conference—including prominent Millerite leaders such as Miller, Himes, Elon Galusha, Josiah Litch, and Sylvester Bliss—accomplished three main tasks:¹⁵⁸

1. The production of a ten-point statement of belief.

¹⁵¹ Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 306.

¹⁵² Joseph Marsh, *Voice of Truth*, November 7, 1844, 166.

¹⁵³ Quoted in Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 304.

¹⁵⁴ Joshua V. Himes, *Morning Watch*, March 20, 1845, 96.

¹⁵⁵ Joshua V. Himes, *Morning Watch*, March 20, 1845, 96.

¹⁵⁶ In Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 268.

¹⁵⁷ Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 265.

¹⁵⁸ Notably absent however, were many other leaders, including George Storrs, Joseph Bates, Joseph Turner, S. S. Snow, and Joseph Marsh. Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 270.

2. The development of a plan for evangelism that involved further organization, including the establishment of Sunday schools and Bible classes; and the ordination of selected believers as ministers.
3. The passing of a series of resolutions that rejected a number of beliefs and practices seen as extreme; including mixed foot-washing, compulsory salutation kissing, shaving one's head, and acting childlike.¹⁵⁹

The Albany Conference Statement with its narrowing of beliefs was unacceptable to many. Millerism had been founded on Miller's open, non-restrictive approach to Bible study; and as Burt points out, "It was the freedom to discover new truths that had drawn so many Christians and Freewill Baptists to the movement. The new restrictive definitions charted a course that was unacceptable to many who had joined the movement."¹⁶⁰

Miller initially seems to have thought that Christ's Second Coming was still going to take place—that "the year of expectation was according to prophecy; but... that there might be an error in Bible chronology, which was of human origin, that could throw the date off somewhat and account for the discrepancy."¹⁶¹ In a letter dated November 22, 1844—one month after the great disappointment—Miller wrote to Bro [E.] Holmes:

But bless the Lord, he that shall come, will come, and will not tarry. Now is a very important time, much danger if we go to sleep now, it will overtake us as a thief. This the third time we have slumbered, and now we are in the time of patience. Heb. 10:36; James 5:7-11. You may enquire, How long this time of patience will last? I answer it may last as long as the farmer waits for his crop, as James cautions us to have patience as the husbandman has long patience. How long? About three or four months. Will he come then? Have patience, brother, says James: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh.¹⁶²

In 1845 he wrote in a letter published in the *Voice of Truth*: "I have a strong hope that this year will bring our glorious King, and that the scenes of the seventh month will be manifested to be the beginning of the sounding of the last trump.... Hold on brethren, I would not let go as long as we, have one cord to hold on by, or one promise to support us. If we faint not, we shall reap in due time."¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 270.

¹⁶⁰ Merlin D. Burt, "The Historical Background, Interconnected Development, and Integration of the Doctrines of the Sanctuary, the Sabbath, and Ellen G. White's Role in Sabbatarian Adventism from 1844-1849" (PhD, Andrews University, 2002), 165.

¹⁶¹ Dick, "The Millerite Movement, 1830-1845," 27.

¹⁶² William Miller to E. Homes, November 22, 1844.

¹⁶³ William Miller, *Voice of Truth*, 19 February, 1845.

Miller never gave up his belief in the Second Coming of Christ, his attitude may be summed-up in an appeal he made following the Great Disappointment: “Brethren, hold fast; let no man take your crown. I have fixed my mind on another time, and here I stand until God gives me more light, and that is, *today, today, and today*, until he comes.”¹⁶⁴ Miller died on December 20, 1849, still convinced that the Second Coming was imminent.¹⁶⁵

The Seventh-day Adventist Church

As Dunton points out, there were four main divisive doctrines being discussed by Millerites around the time of the Albany Conference:

1. Biblical prophecies relating to the Jews. The majority of Millerites believed that these prophecies would find a spiritual rather than a literal fulfilment, however the Age to Come Adventists led by Joseph Marsh believed in a literal, physical Jewish return to Palestine prior to Christ’s return.
2. Conditional Immortality was not discussed at the Albany Conference, but was a source of controversy soon after.
3. The seventh-day Sabbath was rejected by delegates at the Albany Conference, but was accepted by some members of a number of other Millerite groups.
4. Following the disappointment of October 22, there was considerable discussion regarding the continuing possibility of the conversion of sinners. The doctrine that excluded this possibility became known as the shut-door. Miller himself believed this for a short time, though he later repudiated it.¹⁶⁶

Sabbatarian Adventism

The seventh-day (Saturday) Sabbath was first brought to the attention of the Millerites by Seventh Day Baptists. Seventh Day Baptists arrived in America in 1664 when Stephen Mumford—having left England—settled in Rhode Island. By 1841, the denomination had 5,500 members with fifty churches and sixty-two ministers.¹⁶⁷ Historically, Seventh Day Baptists had been rather passive in promoting the Sabbath among other Christian groups—believing that as the Sabbath was the truth, eventually all Christians would come to accept it. However, in 1841 there was a shift in their

¹⁶⁴ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 278.

¹⁶⁵ Dick, “The Millerite Movement, 1830-1845”, 27.

¹⁶⁶ Dunton, “The Millerite Adventists and Other Millenarian Groups in Great Britain, 1830-1860”, 97-98.

¹⁶⁷ Burt, “Historical Background”, 46.

evangelistic orientation and they embarked on an aggressive mission to promote the truth of the seventh-day Sabbath to other denominations.¹⁶⁸

Official Millerite publications were generally silent or opposed to the seventh-day Sabbath: “Joshua V. Himes, Joseph Marsh, and other Adventist editors were opposed to the Sabbath and gave little notice of it in their papers.”¹⁶⁹ On April 6, 1842 the *Signs of the Times* contained the following editorial comment:

Brother B. Clark’s letter, on the Sabbath is received. We wish to have no controversy with “Seventh Day Baptists,” on the subject of the Sabbath. “Let everyone be fully persuaded in his own mind.” We both agree that there is a Sabbath—a “sign,” of the blessed Sabbath rest which remains for the People of God. “Therefore let no man judge you in meat or in drink, or in respect to a holy day, or of the new moon, or the Sabbath, which are a shadow of things to come.” Col. 2:16, 17.¹⁷⁰

Three years later, the editor of the *Midnight Cry* wrote a series of articles entitled “The Lord’s Day” which strongly stressed that “there is no particular portion of time which Christians are required by law to set apart, as holy time.”¹⁷¹ At the same time, he conceded that if there was a “particular portion of time“ which God required to be kept holy, it was “the seventh day of the week, that is Saturday.”¹⁷² A week later he again dismissed Seventh Day Baptist claims, writing: “We love the seventh-day brethren and sisters, but we think they are trying to mend the old broken Jewish yoke.”¹⁷³ Apparently, the Sabbath issue was viewed as a distraction by Millerite leaders who were focused on the Second Coming of Christ. On October 3, 1844—only nineteen days before the predicted great event, the editor of the *Midnight Cry* wrote:

We cannot afford more room for this subject now. We did not wish to grieve any dear brother or sister. We prize the Lord’s day as a blessed privilege. We believe that the constitution of man calls for a weekly rest from labor. We know the soul needs to be released from earthly cares, as often. The fourth commandment accords with the wants of all mankind. We consider the observance of the first day of the week as equally pleasing to God as the observance of the day preceding it.¹⁷⁴

Four months previously however, a Seventh Day Baptist publication, the *Sabbath Recorder*, reported that “considerable numbers of those who are looking for the speedy appearance of Christ,

¹⁶⁸ Burt, “Historical Background”, 47.

¹⁶⁹ Burt, “Historical Background”, 55.

¹⁷⁰ “To Correspondents,” *Signs of the Times*, April 6, 1842, 5. Quoted in Burt, “Historical Background”, 50.

¹⁷¹ “The Lord’s Day,” *Midnight Cry*, September 5, 1844, 69. Quoted in Burt, “Historical Background”, 50-51.

¹⁷² “The Lord’s Day,” *Midnight Cry*, September 5, 1844, 69. Quoted in Burt, “Historical Background”, 51.

¹⁷³ “The Lord’s Day,” *Midnight Cry*, September 12, 1844, 69. Quoted in Burt, “Historical Background”, 50.

¹⁷⁴ “The Lord’s Day,” *Midnight Cry*, October 3, 1844, 69. Quoted in Burt, “Historical Background”, 51.

have embraced the seventh day, and commenced observing it as the Sabbath.”¹⁷⁵ It seems then, that a significant number of Millerites did accept the seventh-day Sabbath despite their leader’s views.

The first identified Millerite to accept the seventh-day Sabbath was a minister named Frederick Wheeler. He was challenged with the Sabbath’s validity by a Seventh Day Baptist named Rachel Oakes and began to observe it in the spring of 1844. His congregations in Washington and Hillsboro, New Hampshire; followed suit.¹⁷⁶ Some months later, Thomas. M. Preble—a Free Will Baptist minister also accepted the Sabbath, though the origin of his beliefs are unknown.¹⁷⁷ However, as Knight states, with the overwhelming emphasis on the soon return of Christ, “neither Wheeler nor Preble felt a burden to make an issue of their newfound Sabbath message.”¹⁷⁸ In fact Preble and J. B. Cook, another Millerite who taught this doctrine, both later renounced their Sabbatarian beliefs.¹⁷⁹

Immediately following the Great Disappointment, Sabbatarianism remained a minority position among the Millerites. The doctrine received a significant boost however, when Preble published both an article and a tract on the topic. The tract, titled, *A Tract, Showing that the Seventh Day Should Be Observed as the Sabbath, Instead of the First Day; “According to the Commandment,”* was widely read by Miller’s followers, and the doctrine of the Sabbath was one of the schismatic issues debated at the Albany Conferences. The seventh-day Sabbath was rejected by the Albany delegates, passing a resolution to have “no fellowship with Jewish fables and commandments of man, that turn from the truth.”¹⁸⁰

In March, 1845, Joseph Bates read Preble’s tract and shared it with Crosier, Hahn, and Edson. Both Edson and Crosier accepted the seventh-day Sabbath, while Hahn was at least somewhat favourable to it.¹⁸¹ Thus, a small number of Millerites led by Bates began to keep the

¹⁷⁵ George B. Utter, “The Second Advent and the Sabbath,” *Sabbath Recorder*, June 13, 1844, 2. Quoted in Burt, “Historical Background”, 47.

¹⁷⁶ Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists*, 39.

¹⁷⁷ Two theories exist on the origins of Preble’s Sabbatarian beliefs. (1) Contact with one of Wheeler’s two nearby Sabbath-keeping congregations in Washington and Hillsboro; or (2) from William Miller’s discussion of the topic in his published sermon, William Miller, *A Trilogy by William Miller: A Lecture on the Typical Sabbaths and Great Jubilee; The Kingdom of God; Review of a Discourse* (J. V. Himes, [1842]). Miller opposed the seventh-day Sabbath but his article may still have prompted Preble to examine the topic. For a discussion of these points see David M. Young, “When Adventists Became Sabbath Keepers,” *Adventist Heritage: A Magazine of Adventist History* 2, no. 2 (1975): 7-10.

¹⁷⁸ Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists*, 39.

¹⁷⁹ Spalding, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists*, 118.

¹⁸⁰ “Proceedings of the Mutual Conference of Adventists.” (Albany: Joshua Himes, 1845). Quoted in Linden, *The Last Trump*, 82.

¹⁸¹ Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 310.

seventh-day Sabbath. In August 1846, Bates published a tract, *The Seventh Day Sabbath, a Perpetual Sign* and converted James and Ellen White to the doctrine.

Bates took the seventh-day Sabbath doctrine further than any other Sabbatarian Adventist. He gave it a distinctly eschatological overtone—in particular, he related it to the doctrine of the heavenly sanctuary then being formulated. As Knight points out, by early 1847, a cohesive theological package had been developed: “It was an eschatological theology focusing on a firm belief in the premillennial ministry of Jesus in the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary between October 22, 1844, and the second coming, and the seventh-day Sabbath as a point of conflict in the last great struggle between the forces of good and evil foreshadowed in Revelation 11 to 14.”¹⁸²

The third distinctive doctrine accepted by this Sabbatarian Adventist group was the recognition of Ellen Gould White as a prophet of God.

The Role of Ellen G. White

An understanding of Ellen Gould White’s (nee Harmon) life and teachings is essential to gaining an understanding of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s history, theology, and religious practice. One recent Seventh-day Adventist author uses the somewhat clumsy metaphor that, “Ellen G. White and the Seventh-day Adventist Church are as integrated as the union of the Anglo-Saxon languages in the formation of English speech.”¹⁸³ Indeed, as the Church’s eighteenth Fundamental Belief states,

One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. As the Lord’s messenger, *her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth* which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction.¹⁸⁴

The phrase “Spirit of Prophecy” has been widely used by Seventh-day Adventist authors in reference to White. One Seventh-day Adventist author points out that for many Seventh-day Adventists, “the term ‘spirit of prophecy,’ as used in Rev. 19:10, must... apply to anyone who had the prophetic gift.... Adventists believe that Ellen White had the ‘spirit of prophecy,’ and commonly use the term as a title, applying to her writings.”¹⁸⁵ White herself used the phrase, stating

¹⁸² Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 312-313.

¹⁸³ Herbert E. Douglass, “Ellen White and Adventist Theology,” *Dialogue* 10, no. 1 (1998): 13.

¹⁸⁴ *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 17th ed. (Secretariat, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005), 15. Emphasis added.

¹⁸⁵ Robert W. Olson, *One Hundred and One Questions on the Sanctuary and Ellen White* (Washington, DC: Ellen G. White Estate, 1981), 36.

in a 1900 letter, “We have the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ, which is the spirit of prophecy.”¹⁸⁶

White’s presence from the early days of the Church’s history, her position as the only post-biblical prophet recognized by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and her prodigious output as an author—she is credited with approximately 25 million words and 100,000 pages of handwritten manuscript—ensure her place as, “the indisputable guiding force,” behind the Seventh-day Adventist Church.¹⁸⁷

Ellen and her fraternal twin sister Elizabeth were born on November 26, 1827 in Gorham, Maine to Robert and Eunice Harmon.¹⁸⁸ A few years after the birth of the twins, Robert Harmon gave up farming and moved to the city of Portland, about twelve miles east, where he commenced work as a hatter. Her childhood was uneventful until at the age of nine she was severely injured in the face by a stone thrown by another student. White suffered recurring medical problems throughout her life that may have been related to this injury. These problems included “frequent fainting spells, dizziness, physical and emotional exhaustion, and recurring periods of excruciating depression.”¹⁸⁹ White herself attributed some of her many illnesses to this incident: “I have, since a child, been afflicted with dropsy and heart disease, occasioned by my misfortune when about nine years old.”¹⁹⁰ However, Ronald L. Numbers and Janet S. Numbers view White’s illnesses as relating to the development of a “full-fledged somatization disorder and a histrionic personality style.”¹⁹¹ It

¹⁸⁶ Ellen G. White to F. E. Belden, January 27, 1900. For a survey of the developing usage of this phrase within the Seventh-day Adventist Church see Rolf J. Poehler, “Change in Seventh-day Adventist Theology: A Study of the Problem of Doctrinal Development” (ThD, Andrews University, 1995), 249-254. For an analysis of White’s use of the phrase, see James H. Burry, “An Investigation to Determine Ellen White’s Concepts of Revelation, Inspiration, ‘The Spirit of Prophecy,’ and her Claims About the Origin, Production and Authority of her Writings” (MA, Andrews University, 1992), 58-65.

¹⁸⁷ Douglass, “Ellen White and Adventist Theology,” 13. Arthur L. White, “Ellen G. White Books in Current Circulation,” in *Notes and Papers Concerning Ellen G. White and the Spirit of Prophecy*, ed. Arthur L. White (Washington, DC: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1974). lists sixty different volumes then available in 1974. It is important to note however, that many of these are compilations of White’s articles, letters and sermons edited by the Ellen G. White Estate. The list is considerably longer now as new compilations on various topics are issued almost yearly.

¹⁸⁸ Arthur L. White, “A Brief Biography of Ellen G. White,” in *Notes and Papers Concerning Ellen G. White and the Spirit of Prophecy*, ed. Arthur L. White (Washington, DC: Ellen G. White Estate, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1974), 179.

¹⁸⁹ Delbert H. Hodder, “Visions or Partial-Complex Seizures?,” *Evangelica*, November 1981, 30.

¹⁹⁰ Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1 (Battle Creek: James White, 1858), 154.

¹⁹¹ Ronald L. Numbers and Janet S. Numbers, “Afterword: Ellen White on the Mind and the Mind of Ellen White,” in *Prophetess of Health: E. G. White and the Origins of Seventh-day Adventist Health Reform*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 215.

is also possible that her head injury resulted in White suffering partial-complex seizures that were mistakenly identified as visions from God.¹⁹²

White attempted to continue school but was able to attend classes only intermittently. She records her struggles as follows:

My hand trembled so that I made no progress in writing, and could get no further than the first examples, which are called coarse-hand. As I labored to bend my mind to my studies, the letters of my book would run together, large drops of perspiration would stand upon my brow, and I would become dizzy and faint. I had a bad cough, which prevented me from attending school steadily. My teacher thought it would be too much for me to study, unless my health should be better, and advised me to leave school.¹⁹³

Some three years later White attempted to begin studies again, enrolling in a “female seminary,” but she was physically unable to cope with the strain and had to withdraw.¹⁹⁴ Her formal education ended abruptly at this point, with White later lamenting “It was the hardest struggle of my young life, to yield to my feebleness, and decide that I must leave my studies, and give up the hope of gaining an education.”¹⁹⁵

While living in Portland, the Harmon family attended the Chestnut Street Methodist Church; and it was there that Ellen and her siblings received their early religious instruction. Robert Harmon was a pillar of the church—an exhorter, someone who would, at the close of the sermon, give an extemporaneous layperson's response to the challenge of that day's sermon.¹⁹⁶ In March, 1840,¹⁹⁷ the Harmons attended a revival at the Casco Street Christian Church in Portland, and heard William Miller preach on the second coming of Christ. White's description of the impact of these meetings on her is vivid:

[Miller's message] had a great effect upon me. I knew that I must be lost if Christ should come, and I be found as I then was. At times I was greatly distressed as to my

¹⁹² Such a diagnosis has been suggested by Molleurus Couperus, “The Significance of Ellen White's Head Injury,” *Adventist Currents*, June 1984, 17-23; and Delberet H. Hodder, “Visions or Partial-Complex Seizures?” *Evangelica*, November 1981, 30-37. However, Numbers and Numbers, “Afterword: Ellen White on the Mind and the Mind of Ellen White,” 212, refute these claims, stating, “her behaviour [in vision] also differed in many ways from what might be expected of someone experiencing complex partial seizures... [she] did not suffer the amnesia, disorientation, or terror so often associated with complex partial seizures”. See also Donald I. Peterson, *Visions or Seizures: Was Ellen White the Victim of Epilepsy?* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1988).

¹⁹³ Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2 (Battle Creek: James White, 1860), 11.

¹⁹⁴ Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Years, 1827-1862* (Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1982), 32. Cross, *The Burned-over District*, 89 points out that female seminaries emphasized “etiquette and housewifely graces at the expense of college preparatory curricula.” Also provided were “Bible reading, singing, and praying exercises”.

¹⁹⁵ Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches. Ancestry, Early life, Christian Experience, and Extensive Labors of Elder James White, and his Wife Mrs. Ellen G. White* (Battle Creek: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1880), 134.

¹⁹⁶ White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Years, 1827-1862*, 32.

¹⁹⁷ White's earliest accounts incorrectly give the year as 1839: “In 1839 Wm. Miller visited Portland, Me., and gave a course of lectures on the second coming of Christ.” White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2, 12.

situation. But it was hard for me to give entirely up to the Lord. I viewed it a great thing to be a christian [*sic*], and feared that I never should be one if I professed religion, and remained some months suffering distress of mind.¹⁹⁸

In her early teen years, deeply affected by William Miller's preaching, she longed for a deeper religious experience:

As I prayed, the burden and agony of soul that I had so long felt left me, and the blessing of God came upon me like the gentle dew. I gave glory to God for what I felt, but I longed for more. I could not be satisfied till I was filled with the fullness of God. Inexpressible love for Jesus filled my soul.¹⁹⁹

On June 26, 1842, after attending a camp-meeting at Buxton, White was baptised by immersion in Casco Bay, Portland. That same day she was received as a member of the Chestnut Street Methodist Church.²⁰⁰ White saw her baptism in very emotional terms, reflecting later, "When I arose out of the water, my strength was nearly gone, for the power of God rested upon me. Such a rich blessing I never experienced before. I felt dead to the world, and that my sins were all washed away."²⁰¹ Sometime later in 1842 White attended Miller's second course of lectures in Portland, which were given despite denominational opposition:²⁰²

This second course created much more excitement in the city than the first. With few exceptions, the different denominations closed the doors of their churches against Mr. Miller. Many discourses from the various pulpits sought to expose the alleged fanatical errors of the lecturer; but crowds of anxious listeners attended his meetings, and many were unable to enter the house. The congregations were unusually quiet and attentive.²⁰³

White fully accepted Miller's presentations and continued to attend the Advent meetings in the church on Casco Street. The Harmon family's Second Advent beliefs soon placed them at odds with the majority of Methodists in their local congregation. Following a visit from the Methodist minister and a church hearing, the family was disfellowshipped.²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁸ White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2, 12.

¹⁹⁹ Ellen G. White, *Early Writings of Ellen G. White* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1882), 12.

²⁰⁰ Burt, "Historical Background", 20.

²⁰¹ White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2, 13.

²⁰² White again gives an incorrect date in her earliest accounts, stating: "In 1841 Wm. Miller gave a second course of lectures in Portland." White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2, 14.

²⁰³ Ellen G. White, *Life sketches of Ellen G. White, being a narrative of her experience to 1881 as written by herself; with a sketch of her subsequent labors and of her last sickness, comp. from original sources* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1915), 26.

²⁰⁴ White, *Life sketches of Ellen G. White*, 53. The Harmon's final expulsion followed a lengthy examination process by four committees that met between February and June 1843, and a "committee of trial" that met on August 14, 1843. Robert Harmon appealed the decision at the September 2, 1843 "Quarterly Meeting Conference for the Portland Station," but the decision was unanimously upheld. Burt, "Historical Background", 24.

From the time of her expulsion from the Methodist Church through the experience of the Great Disappointment and beyond, White said that, “my joys, trials and disappointments were like those of my dear Advent friends around me.” Like the rest of the Millerites, White had experienced great distress following Christ’s non-return. She did not however, lose hope:

It was a bitter disappointment that fell upon the little flock whose faith had been so strong and whose hope had been so high. But we were surprised that we felt so free in the Lord, and were so strongly sustained by His strength and grace.... We were disappointed, but not disheartened.²⁰⁵

Ellen White’s importance was established primarily through two early visions—probably in December 1844, when she was 17 and not yet married.²⁰⁶ News of these visions spread and White was soon travelling and speaking to groups of Millerite followers in Maine and the surrounding area. Neither vision was however publicized further afield until January 24, 1846, when White’s account of the first vision: “Letter From Sister Harmon” was published in the *Day Star*—an Adventist paper published in Cincinnati, Ohio by Enoch Jacobs.²⁰⁷

The majority of Adventists never recognised White’s legitimacy. The 1845 Albany Conference specifically rejected any such ministry stating, “We have no confidence in any new messages, visions, dreams, tongues, miracles, extraordinary revelations, impressions, discerning of spirits, or teachings not in accordance with the unadulterated word of God.”²⁰⁸

White’s first vision was to prove instrumental in bringing the discouraged and fragmented Adventists together. She saw the “Advent people” travelling a high and dangerous path towards the city of New Jerusalem [heaven]. Their path was lit from behind by “a bright light... which an angel told me was the midnight cry.”²⁰⁹ Some of the travellers grew weary and were encouraged by Jesus; others denied the presence of the light that went out and they fell “off the path into the dark and wicked world below.”²¹⁰ White’s vision continued with a portrayal of Christ’s second coming, following which the Advent people entered the New Jerusalem. The vision ended with her returning

²⁰⁵ White, *Life sketches of Ellen G. White*, 61.

²⁰⁶ White’s first person account of these visions in White, *Early Writings of Ellen G. White*, 13-20, gives this date.

²⁰⁷ Ellen G. White, “Letter From Sister Harmon,” *The Day Star*, January 24, 1846, 31-32.

²⁰⁸ “Proceedings of the Mutual Conference of Adventists.” (Albany: Joshua Himes, 1845). Quoted in Linden, *The Last Trump*, 82.

²⁰⁹ White, *Early Writings of Ellen G. White*, 14. The phrase “Midnight Cry” is taken from the parable of the 10 virgins in Matthew 25:1-13; specifically verse 6, “At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’” NRSV. It was used by the Millerites in reference to their proclamation of Christ’s second coming in 1843/44; and then by early adventists in reference to their belief that the heavenly sanctuary had been cleansed on October 22, 1844.

²¹⁰ White, *Early Writings of Ellen G. White*, 15.

to earth feeling lonely, desolate and longing for that “better world.”²¹¹ As Godfrey T. Anderson points out, “In effect, the vision assured the Advent believers of eventual triumph despite the immediate despair into which they had plunged.”²¹²

White’s second vision concerned Crozier’s views on the October 22 disappointment. It became known as the “Bridegroom” vision and White received it in Exeter, Maine, in February 1845.²¹³ Together with a third vision where White saw the new earth, these visions:

gave continued meaning to the October 1844 experience and supported the developing sanctuary rationale. Additionally they played an important role in countering the spiritualizing views of many fanatical Adventists by portraying the Father and Jesus as literal beings and heaven as a physical place.²¹⁴

These three visions were later published as articles, a broadside, and in a tract; thus gaining White a widespread audience.²¹⁵

Organization Into a Denomination

By 1848, there were a number of Adventists convinced of the truth of one or more of the three distinctive Sabbatarian Adventist doctrines, but as Knight points out, these believers “lacked a common consensus.”²¹⁶ As Hewitt states, “The stage was now set for the melding of the sanctuary, the Sabbatarian, and the Spirit of Prophecy beliefs.”²¹⁷ Hence, in 1848, a series of six conferences were held in Connecticut, New York, Maine, and Massachusetts.²¹⁸ This first series was followed by six more in 1849, and ten in 1850.²¹⁹ The purpose of these conferences was outlined by James White as being the “uniting [of] the brethren on the great truths connected with the message of the third angel.”²²⁰

Both James and Ellen White took on a strong leadership role, working to convince the Adventists who attended of the truth as they saw it. Ellen White reported following the second meeting in Volney, New York:

There were about thirty-five present, all that could be collected in that part of the

²¹¹ White, *Early Writings of Ellen G. White*, 20.

²¹² Godfrey T. Anderson, “Sectarianism and Organisation, 1846-1864,” in *Adventism in America: a History*, ed. Gary Land (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1998), 31.

²¹³ Burt, “Historical Background”, 170.

²¹⁴ Burt, “Historical Background”, 170.

²¹⁵ Burt, “Historical Background”, 170.

²¹⁶ Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 319.

²¹⁷ Hewitt, *Midnight and Morning*, 185.

²¹⁸ Hewitt, *Midnight and Morning*, 185.

²¹⁹ Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 319.

²²⁰ James White, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 6, 1852, 5.

State. There were hardly two agreed. Each was strenuous for his views, declaring that they were according to the Bible. All were anxious for the opportunity to advance their sentiments, or to preach to us. *They were told we had not come so great a distance to hear them, but we had come to teach them the truth.*²²¹

James White's letter to a Bro. Howland following the first conference in Rocky Hill, Connecticut explains the result:

Friday morning the brethren came in till we numbered about fifty. *They were not all fully in the truth.* Our meeting that day was very interesting. Bro. Bates presented the commandments in a clear light, and their importance was urged home by powerful testimonies. *The word had effect to establish those already in the truth and to awaken those who were not fully decided.*²²²

Importantly, the individual doctrines were seen as forming an interrelated whole that was in harmony with the “basic treatment of prophecy and the personal, imminent, premillennial return of Christ as taught by Miller.”²²³

In addition to their acceptance of the doctrines of the sanctuary and the Sabbath, and their recognition of Ellen White as a prophet, these groups came to embrace the doctrine of conditional immortality. Methodist minister George Storrs was the first prominent Millerite to promote the doctrine of conditional immortality. In 1841—prior to his acceptance of Millerite beliefs in 1842, Storrs published *An Enquiry: Are the Souls of the Wicked Immortal? In Three Letters*. This work was expanded a year later into *An Inquiry: Are the Souls of the Wicked Immortal? In Six Sermons*.²²⁴ Knight points out that as Millerism was viewed as a “one-doctrine movement,” conditional immortality was not widely promoted—in fact, in April 1844, Josiah Litch began publishing a periodical in opposition to Storrs called *The Anti-Annihilationist*.²²⁵

Acceptance of the doctrine of conditional immortality was increased through the influence of James White and Joseph Bates—both previously members of the conditionalist (immortality is only given to believers), and annihilationist (as non-believers do not possess immortality they cannot burn forever in hell but are rather annihilated); Christian Connexion Church. Later, acceptance was again increased when Ellen White responded favourably. Later she reflected:

My mind had often been disturbed by its efforts to reconcile the immediate reward or punishment of the dead, with the undoubted fact of a future resurrection and Judgment. If the soul, at death, entered upon eternal happiness or misery, where was the need of a resurrection of the poor mouldered body?

²²¹ White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2, 97. Emphasis added.

²²² Quoted in White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2, 93. Emphasis added.

²²³ Hewitt, *Midnight and Morning*, 185.

²²⁴ George R. Knight, *A Search for Identity: the Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2001), 72.

²²⁵ Knight, *Search for Identity*, 72.

But this new and beautiful faith taught me the reason that inspired writers had dwelt so much upon the resurrection of the body, it was because the entire being was slumbering in the grave.²²⁶

Thus, by early 1848, a group—the Sabbatarian Adventists—had formed with basic agreement on five doctrines:

1. The original Millerite belief in the personal, visible, premillennial return of Christ was retained.
2. To this was added the new explanation for the October 22, 1844 disappointment: the two-phase ministry of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary developed by Edson and Crosier.
3. The doctrine of the seventh-day Sabbath was accepted—and its end-time importance noted.
4. Ellen White was recognised
5. Lastly, the doctrine of conditional immortality was added.²²⁷

As Knight points out, such agreement, “Not only set off the Sabbatarians from other Millerites, but from other Christians in general.... Such teachings provided the Sabbatarians with their identity.”²²⁸

Given the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s present hierarchical, highly organized church structure; it is difficult to believe that the majority of early Adventists opposed any form of church organization beyond the level of the local congregation. In 1844, the Millerite George Storrs expressed the position of many when he stated that “no church can be organized by man’s invention but that it becomes Babylon the moment it is organized.”²²⁹

As a result of these attitudes, for the first fifteen years of their existence, the Sabbatarian Adventists “were a movement without any formal organization.”²³⁰ The group was held together by the leadership of James and Ellen White, Joseph Bates, and Hiram Edson; and by the publishing of journals like *The Present Truth* and *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*.

The distrust of Storrs and many other Millerites in regard to established denominations can be traced to three sources. Firstly, the negative attitudes of most of these denominations towards the Millerites resulted in the expulsion of many, including Miller himself, from their own churches.²³¹ As Knight records,

²²⁶ Ellen G. White, “Mrs Ellen G. White: Her Life, Christian Experience, and Labors,” *Signs of the Times*, March 9, 1876. Reproduced without page numbers in *Ellen G. White Signs of the Times Articles* vol. 1 (1874-1885) (Mountain View CA: Pacific Press, 1974), 27.

²²⁷ Knight, *Search for Identity*, 74.

²²⁸ Knight, *Search for Identity*, 74.

²²⁹ George Storrs, *The Midnight Cry*, February 15, 1844, 238.

²³⁰ Linden, *The Last Trump*, 106.

²³¹ Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists*, 20.

things began to change in 1843. Millerites came under progressively more ridicule and often had to decide between their Advent belief and that of their denominations. Those choosing to retain their faith in the soon return of Christ increasingly found themselves disfellowshipped by their congregations.²³²

Secondly, there were theological factors in play—for the majority of Adventists, organization was associated with sectarianism, sectarianism with the development of creeds, and creeds were associated with the unbiblical beliefs they had already rejected. Thirdly, the strong influence of members who had come from the Christian Connexion—a group that traditionally resisted organization beyond the local congregation, played an important role.²³³ Key Adventists with a Christian Connexion background included James White and Joseph Bates; while Joseph Marsh who was a prolific writer and loudly opposed the Albany Conference’s focus on organization and eventually led the “Age to Come” Adventists; was also from a Christian Connexion background.²³⁴ These negative attitudes were however, tempered by the influence of Ellen Gould White who came from a background in the Methodist Episcopal Church—the most efficiently organised Protestant denomination in America at the time.²³⁵

The need to maintain orthodoxy was one driving force towards the establishment of a formal organization. Some individuals had been excommunicated because of “dangerous errors in the field of eschatology” and “fanciful views of unfulfilled prophecies.”²³⁶ Another contributing force was the need for some sort of legal entity in which to register property such as the new church building and publishing house built in Battle Creek, Michigan in 1855.²³⁷

In 1859 James White strongly advocated formal organisation in an editorial published in the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* on July 21. “We lack system. And we should not be afraid of that system which is not opposed by the Bible, and by sound sense. The lack of system is felt everywhere.”²³⁸ Those opposed to a centralized organization pointed to the lack of explicit biblical support for such an organization. Apocalyptic arguments were also used by some opponents, with Roswell F. Cottrell expressing the belief that the two-horned beast of Revelation 13 was the United

²³² Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists*, 19.

²³³ The Christian Connexion were also known as the Christian Connection.

²³⁴ In reference to this group, Knight states, “Extreme individualism was at the center of this group. They did not even want organization at the congregational level. Every person was to be his or her supreme authority.” Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 289.

²³⁵ Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists*, 52. See Charles Ferguson, *Organizing to Beat the Devil: Methodists and Early America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) for a history of the Methodist Church’s organization in America

²³⁶ Linden, *The Last Trump*, 106.

²³⁷ Linden, *The Last Trump*, 108. These buildings were originally registered in James White's name.

²³⁸ James White, “Yearly Meetings,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 21, 1859, 68.

States, and that the horns themselves represented the twin evils of slavery and a denominational organization.²³⁹

A “General Conference” was called by Sabbatarian leaders for September 28 to October 1, 1860. At the meeting—despite the impassioned pleas of the anti-organisation group, those delegates present voted to incorporate the publishing house and also adopted the name, “Seventh-day Adventist.”²⁴⁰ Anderson points out that “In the months following its adoption, the name “Seventh-day Adventist” began appearing regularly in announcements and notices in the *Review and Herald*. Individual churches officially adopted the name, usually by unanimous vote.”²⁴¹ Not everyone was comfortable with the decision however, and a number of Sabbatarians left the organisation. Their feelings are typified by those expressed by Waterman Phelps, who wrote in a letter to the editor of the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*:

Advent people are very dear to me. I have felt that their trials have been my trials, and their prosperity has been my prosperity. But I have not that unison of feeling at present. I feel that the union is broken, for I do not sympathize with the body of Adventists in relation to organizing under the name, Seventh-day Adventists, and enrolling names under that head. As I feel, I never could consent to have my name enrolled on any class-book, or church-book, under any sectarian name.²⁴²

Organisation began slowly, but continued steadily—the publishing house was formally incorporated on May 3, 1861, and in October of that year the first “conference”—the Michigan Conference of Seventh-day Adventists—was formed, with other areas following in 1862. In May 1863 representatives from these conferences met and formed the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists with John Byington as the first president.²⁴³ At this time the Seventh-day Adventist Church had about 3,500 members and about 30 ministers.²⁴⁴

The Modern Seventh-day Adventist Church

Modern Seventh-day Adventism is best classified as a conservative Protestant denomination with a current adult membership of over 17 million, members in over 200 countries, and a growth rate of

²³⁹ Linden, *The Last Trump*, 108.

²⁴⁰ Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists*, 63.

²⁴¹ Anderson, “Sectarianism and Organisation, 1846-1864,” 48-49.

²⁴² James White, “Organization,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 16 July, 1861, 68.

²⁴³ “Prior to 1861 the term ‘conference’ always meant a gathering of believers, who were conferring on matters pertaining to doctrine and spiritual edification. From 1861, however, when the Michigan Conference was organized, the term received a novel meaning in line with Methodist parlance to mean a geographical unit, or territory over which a board operated.” Linden, *The Last Trump*, 120 footnote 76.

²⁴⁴ Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists*, 64.

1.7% for 2008.²⁴⁵ For most non-Seventh-day Adventists, the non-cultic status of Seventh-day Adventism was resolved by the 1960 publication of evangelical scholar Walter R Martin's *The Truth About Seventh-day Adventism*.²⁴⁶ For some however, questions remain: Kenneth R. Samples in his 1988 assessment of Seventh-day Adventism stated,

With respect to the charge that Traditional Adventism is a non-Christian cult, it must be emphasized that the structure of Adventism is largely orthodox.... Presently however, it would appear that Traditional Adventism is at least aberrant, confusing or compromising biblical truth.²⁴⁷

However, another perspective is that given by the Anglican scholar, Geoffrey Paxton:

The impression that Seventh-day Adventism is little better than a non-Christian sect will not stand close examination. Adventists believe in the Holy Trinity, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the sinless life and atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and His bodily resurrection and ascension to the right hand of the Father. This is not the creed of a non-Christian sect.... No, whatever we think of this or that Adventist "distinctive," we have to recognize the movement as being *Christian*.²⁴⁸

Likewise David R. Barrett in his recent comprehensive survey of "Alternative Religions" states that Seventh-day Adventist theology, "on the whole, is straightforward mainstream Christian."²⁴⁹

²⁴⁵ The Office of Archives and Statistics, *Statistical Report 2009*). and *Seventh-day Adventist World Church Statistics*, 2008, (accessed December 13, 2010); available from <http://www.adventist.org/world-church/facts-and-figures/index.html>.

²⁴⁶ Walter R. Martin, *The Truth About Seventh-day Adventism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1960).

²⁴⁷ Kenneth R. Samples, "From Controversy to Crisis: An Updated Assessment of Seventh-day Adventism," in *CRI Journal* (1988). (Online version at: <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/cri/crj-jrnl/web/crj0005b.html>, no pagination given.) Samples divides the SDA Church into Traditional—defending mainly pre-1950 positions, and Evangelical—emphasizing the Reformation understanding of righteousness by faith, Adventism. Certainly, his division is helpful in understanding the contemporary SDA Church; though of course reality is much more complex than this. A series of four articles in *Adventist Today* divides Seventh-day Adventism into: Mainstream Adventism: Kenneth H. Wood, "The Mother of Us All: Mainstream Adventism," *Adventist Today* 2, no. 1 (1994): 4-5; Evangelical Adventism: Michelle Rader, David VanDenburgh, and Larry Christoffel, "Evangelical Adventism: Clinging to the Old Rugged Cross," *Adventist Today* 2, no. 1 (1994): 6-8; Progressive Adventism: Madelynn Jones-Haldeman, "Progressive Adventism: Dragging the Church Forward," *Adventist Today* 2, no. 1 (1994): 9-11; and Historic Adventism: Ralph Larson, "Historic Adventism: Remembering to Trust and Obey," *Adventist Today* 2, no. 1 (1994): 12-14.

²⁴⁸ Geoffrey Paxton, *The Shaking of Adventism* (Wilmington, DE: Zenith, 1977), 17. Original emphasis.

²⁴⁹ David V. Barrett, *The New Believers: Sects, "Cults" and Alternative Religions* (London: Cassell & Co, 2001), 170.

CHAPTER 2 – William Miller’s Hermeneutics

Before examining the various influences on Miller’s hermeneutics, it is first necessary to outline his approach to biblical hermeneutics.

Historicism

It is important to note that Miller’s hermeneutics were almost entirely restricted to those passages of scripture that he viewed as relating to Christ’s Second Advent—that is, the “prophetic” passages of scripture. In fact, on at least one occasion, Miller urged his followers not to “enter upon the discussion of questions foreign to that of the Advent.”¹

Miller outlined his approach to the interpretation of biblical prophecy when he wrote:

In order that the reader may have an understanding of my manner of studying the Prophecies, by which I have come to the following result, I have thought proper to give some of the rules of interpretation which I have adopted to understand prophecy.

Prophetical scripture is very much of it communicated to us by figures and highly and richly adorned metaphors; by which I mean that figures such as *beasts, birds, air or wind, water, fire, candlesticks, lamps, mountains, islands, &c.*, are used to represent things prophesied of—such as kingdoms, warriors, principles, people, judgments, churches, word of God, large and smaller governments. It is metaphorical also, showing some peculiar quality of the thing prophesied of, by the most prominent feature or quality of the figure used, as *beasts*—if a *lion*, power and rule; if a *leopard*, celerity; if a *bear*, voracious; an *ox*, submissive; a *man*, proud and independent. *Fire* denotes justice and judgment in its figure; in the metaphor, denotes the purifying or consuming up the dross or wickedness; as *fire* has a cleansing quality, so will the justice or judgments of God. “For when thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.” Therefore almost all the figures used in prophecy have their literal and metaphorical meaning; as *beasts* denote, literally, a kingdom, so metaphorically good or bad, as the case may be, to be understood by the subject in connection.

To understand the literal meaning of figures used in prophecy, I have pursued the following method:—I find the word “*beast*” used in a figurative sense; I take my concordance, trace the word, and in Daniel vii. 17, it is explained to mean “kings or kingdoms.” Again, I come across the words “*bird or fowl*,” and in Isa. xlvi. 11, it is used meaning a conqueror or warrior,—Cyrus. Also, in Ezekiel xxxix. 4-9, denotes armies or conquerors. Again, the words “*air or wind*,” as used in Rev. ix. 2, and 16, 17, to understand which I turn to Eph. ii. 2, and 4-14, and there learn that it is used as a figure to denote the theories of worldly men or vain philosophy. Again, “*water or rivers*” are used as figures in Rev. xvii. 15, it is explained to mean “people or nations.” “*Rivers*” of course mean the nation or people living on the river mentioned, as in Rev., xvi. 12. “*Fire*” is often used in a figurative sense; explained in Num. xxi. 27-28, Deut. xxxii. 22, Psal. lxxviii. 21, Heb. xii. 29, to mean justice and judgment.

As prophecy is a language somewhat different from other parts of Scripture, owing to its having been revealed in vision, and that highly figurative, yet God in his wisdom has so interwoven the several prophecies, that the events foretold are not all

¹ William Miller, “Letter From Mr Miller,” *The Midnight Cry*, May 23, 1844, 355.

told by one prophet, and although they lived and prophesied in different ages of the world, yet they tell us the same things; so you take away one, and a link will be wanting. There is a general connection through the whole; like a well-regulated community they all move in unison, speaking the same things, observing the same rules, so that a Bible reader may almost with propriety suppose, let him read in what prophecy he may, that he is reading the same prophet, the same author. This will appear evident to any one who will compare scripture with scripture. For example, see Dan. xii. 1, Matt. xxiv. 21. Isa. xlvii. 8. Zeph. ii. 15, Rev. xviii. 7. There never was a book written that has a better connection and harmony than the Bible, and yet it has the appearance of a great store-house full of all the precious commodities heart could desire, thrown in promiscuously; therefore, the biblical student must select and bring together every part of the subject he wishes to investigate, from every part of the Bible; then let every word have its own Scripture meaning, every sentence its proper bearing, and have no contradiction, and your theory will and must of necessity be correct. Truth is one undeviating path, that grows brighter and brighter the more it is trodden; it needs no plausible arguments nor pompous dress to make it more bright, for the more naked and simple the fact, the stronger the truth appears.²

Miller's hermeneutics are focused on prophetic interpretation—particularly the books of Daniel and Revelation—almost to the exclusion of other subjects. It is therefore impossible to discuss his hermeneutics adequately without discussing his interpretation of biblical prophecy. As Neufeld points out, three main schools of prophetic interpretation existed during Miller's time. These were:

1. Preterism—a belief that biblical prophecies were already fulfilled.
2. Futurism—a belief that most biblical prophecies had yet to be fulfilled—that their fulfilment will occur at some future time.
3. Historicism—a belief that “the events of Revelation have been fulfilling all through history, with some having been fulfilled, others being fulfilled, and still others yet to be fulfilled in the future.”³

By far the most popular at the time was historicism, and Miller was, like the majority of his contemporaries, an historicist. In fact, as Burt points out, historicism was “essential to the entire structure of the Millerite message.”⁴

An understanding of the historicist method of interpreting Bible prophecy is therefore essential if the hermeneutics of Miller and his followers are to be understood. The core principle of the historicist method is that God actively intervenes in human history—and has done so continuously and visibly since the beginning. Seventh-day Adventist author William H. Shea states:

From the viewpoint of the “continuous” historical school of prophetic interpretation,

² Himes, ed., *Evidence from Scripture*, 4-5.

³ Neufeld, “Biblical Interpretation in the Advent Movement,” 111.

⁴ Burt, “Historical Background”, 27.

the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation provide a divinely inspired, descriptive overview and evaluation of some of the most theologically significant events of this era. The Christian era is seen to stand in continuity with the historical description and prophetic evaluation of events in the OT era. The same God has been active in a similar way in both these dispensations.⁵

Similarly, one of Miller's contemporaries succinctly stated that "Prophecy is history in advance. History is the record of prophecy fulfilled."⁶ As Dunton points out, historicists believe that biblical prophecy is predictive and that it is possible to "relate specific nations and events to the predictions."⁷

Kai Arasola points out four main characteristics of historicism:

1. The endorsement of the year/day theory and a preoccupation with prophetic time periods;
2. The continuous historical application of various apocalyptic symbols and the synchronization of prophecy with history;
3. An identification of the Papacy as the antichrist;
4. The creation of a coherent system of interdependent synchronizations between prophecies.⁸

An examination of Miller's interpretation of Scripture reveals that he clearly is an Historicist according to Arasola's characteristics. It should be noted however, that for Miller, Arasola's third characteristic—an identification of the Papacy as the antichrist; is not something that Miller or his followers spend much time on. As Reinder Bruinsma points out, "Miller did not focus on Roman Catholicism, but on Christ's imminent Second Coming".⁹ However, like most other Protestants of the time, the Millerites viewed Roman Catholicism as an apostate power, and had "no qualms about identifying the 'little horn' of Daniel 7 and 8, the 'beast' of Revelation 13, the 'whore' of Revelation 17, and 'Babylon' of Revelation 18 as the papacy".¹⁰

The Year/Day Principle

In broad contrast with the preterist and futurist schools of prophetic interpretation, historicism distinguishes between "classical biblical prophecy" where time periods are stated literally—such as the seventy years of captivity foretold for Israel in Jeremiah 29:10: "For thus saith the Lord, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward

⁵ Shea, *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation*, 57.

⁶ [J. B. Cook], "The Doctrine of Providence," *The Advent Testimony*, March 1846, 2.

⁷ Dunton, "The Millerite Adventists and Other Millenarian Groups in Great Britain, 1830-1860", 63.

⁸ Arasola, *The End of Historicism*, 29.

⁹ Reinder Bruinsma, "Adventists and Catholics: prophetic preview or prejudice?," *Spectrum* 27, no. 3 (1999): 46.

¹⁰ Bruinsma, "Adventists and Catholics: prophetic preview or prejudice?," 46.

you, in causing you to return to this place;” (KJV) and “apocalyptic prophecy” where time-periods are also stated symbolically.¹¹

The year/day principle was not a new idea arising in the nineteenth century; indeed Arasola states that as far back as “the dawn of the second millennium of the Christian era some Jewish scholars began calculating prophetic time by counting years for days.”¹² Furthermore, he notes that this procedure enabled these scholars to date the *eschaton* “close to the year 1000 when applied to the periods of 1260 days, 1290 days, or 1335 days as found in Daniel.”¹³ Similarly, William H. Shea points out that “Jewish interpreters were first and foremost in the application of the year-day principle to the prophecies.”¹⁴ He finds evidence for the use of the year-day principle with the presence of the words “jubilees”, “weeks”, and “years” in documents that include Hellenistic Jewish works such as *The Book of Jubilees*, *Testaments of Levi*, *I Enoch*, and the Qumran documents: *11Q Melchizedek*, *4Q 384-390 Pseudo Ezekiel*, and *4Q180-181 The Ages of Creation*.¹⁵

A number of early Christian expositors beginning with Hippolytus (c.170-c.236) understood the seventy weeks of Daniel 9:24 as 490 literal years.¹⁶ The fourth century African Donatist writer Ticonius was the first Christian author to apply the principle outside of the seventy weeks. He understood the three and a half days of Revelation 11:11 as years. In turn, Joachim of Fiore (c.1132-1202) took the 1260 days of Revelation 12:6 as literal years, while Arnold of Villanova (c.1235-c.1313) applied the principle to the 2300 days of Daniel 8:14.¹⁷

Arasola points out that while the basic foundations of historicism had developed over a long period of time, it wasn't until the work of Joseph Mede that the principle was systematized: “Mede's main contribution to the study of prophecy was his system of synchronization”.¹⁸ Importantly, he synchronized seven key time prophecies found in Daniel and Revelation: Daniel 7:25, Daniel 12:7, and Revelation 12:14 (“a time and times and a dividing of time”—taken as three and a half years); Revelation 11:2-3 and Revelation 12:6 (1260 days); Revelation 13:5 (forty-two months). “Mede's version of the year-day method was simple. He made one day in apocalyptic

¹¹ Dunton, “The Millerite Adventists and Other Millenarian Groups in Great Britain, 1830-1860”, 67.

¹² Arasola, *The End of Historicism*, 32.

¹³ Arasola, *The End of Historicism*, 32.

¹⁴ Shea, *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation*, 89.

¹⁵ Shea, *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation*, 89-92.

¹⁶ “Seventy weeks are determined upon Thy people and upon Thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in Everlasting Righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy” Daniel 9:24 (KJV)

¹⁷ Dunton, “The Millerite Adventists and Other Millenarian Groups in Great Britain, 1830-1860”, 68.

¹⁸ Arasola, *The End of Historicism*, 34.

prophecies correspond to a literal solar year. With this device the 1260 days of the Roman Antichrist would last 1260 years.”¹⁹

Two biblical texts provided historicist interpreters with additional support for the year-day principle: Numbers 14:34 “After the number of the days in which ye searched the land, even forty days, each day for a year, shall ye bear your iniquities, even forty years, and ye shall know my breach of promise.” (KJV) and Ezekiel 4: 5-6: “For I have laid upon thee the years of their iniquity, according to the number of the days, three hundred and ninety days: so shalt thou bear the iniquity of the house of Israel. And when thou hast accomplished them, lie again on thy right side, and thou shalt bear the iniquity of the house of Judah forty days: I have appointed thee each day for a year.” (KJV)²⁰ Miller’s exegesis is clearly dependent upon the historicist approach—his conclusions are not possible utilizing any other approach.

Symbols & Types

For Miller and his followers, the interpretation of biblical prophecy was all about symbols. Miller noted the centrality of biblical symbols when he said: “Prophetic scripture is very much of it communicated to us by figures and highly and richly adorned metaphors; by which I mean that figures such as beasts, birds, air or wind, water, fire, candlesticks, lamps, mountains, islands, etc., are used to represent things prophesied of—such as kingdoms, warriors, principles, people, judgements, churches, word of God, large and smaller governments.”²¹

One of Miller’s key works is his *Explanation of Prophetic Figures* first published in 1841 in *Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology, Selected From the Manuscripts of William Miller With a Memoir of his Life* edited by Joshua V. Himes.²² The work consists of an alphabetic list of words followed by a very brief definition in terms of prophecy and then generally by a number of scripture references. An extract is reproduced below:

DOGS. Wicked men and teachers. Isa. 1vi. 10. Rev. xxii. 15. Ps. lix. 6-14.
DRAGON. Rome pagan. Rev. xvii. 8. Afterwards papal. Persecuting governments.
DRUNKENNESS. Intoxicated with worldly riches, pleasures and honors. Isa. Xxix.
9. Matt xxiv. 49. Luke xxi. 34.
EAGLE, denotes a people hid, or out of sight. Rev. xii. 14. iv. 7. Matt xxiv. 28.
EARTH. The Roman kingdom. Rev. xiii. 12, and xix. 2.
EARTHQUAKE. Revolutions. Hag. ii. 21,22. Rev. vi. 12. xvi. 18.

¹⁹ Arasola, *The End of Historicism*, 34.

²⁰ In 1847, a British Millerite, W. Barker, used Leviticus 25:8 as an additional proof: “And you shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall be to you forty-nine years.” It was not however, widely accepted. W. Barker, *European Advent Herald*, April 1, 1847, 64.

²¹ Himes, ed., *Evidence from Scripture*, 3.

²² Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies*, 25-32.

Such a structured approach—where the biblical text is viewed as a code that can be deciphered if a key to the code can be constructed—was not unique to Miller. Ethan Smith published a book in 1814 entitled *A Key to the Figurative Language Found in the Sacred Scriptures in the Form of Questions and Answers*.²³ Smith's book differs from Miller's in its arrangement in the form of questions and answers, and by grouping the symbols according to various themes:

Q. 19. From what sources are figures and symbols derived?

A. From the visible heavens, comprising the region of the air: — From the earth, or terraqueous globe, and its appendages: — Cities: — A city in arms: — A temple: — A highway: — The human body: — Its sustenance: — Its clothing and ornaments: — Domestic relations and blessings: -- Various utensils and actions: — Times and seasons: — Fowls; reptiles: — Singular heavenly forms: — And different species of animals.²⁴

Despite these structural differences, the content is often quite similar:

Q. 284. What other animals are taken to denote false teachers?

A. Foxes; and dogs: Ezek. xiii. 4; "O Israel, thy prophets are like the foxes in the deserts." Song, ii. 15; "Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines; for our vines have tender grapes." Isai. lvi. 10; "His watchmen are blind; they are all ignorant; They are all dumb dogs, that cannot bark; sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber." Phil. iii. 2; "Beware of dogs; beware of evil workers; beware of the concision." Dogs symbolize also all the finally reprobate: Rev. xxii. 15; "For without are dogs."—And a fox denotes a subtle [*sic*] tyrant, like Herod: Luke, xiii. 32; "Go and tell that fox."²⁵

Q. 287. Who are symbolized by Leviathan, and the dragon?

A. Abominable tyrants; and the devil. In Isai. xxvii. 1. the great tyrannical power of the last days is called, "Leviathan, that crooked serpent, and the dragon that is in the sea." In Isai. li. 9. and Ezek. xxix. 3. Pharaoh is called the dragon; probably in allusion to the crocodile of his river. And in Rev. xii. the devil is symbolized by a great red dragon of seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns upon his heads, because he manages an empire symbolized by a beast of seven heads and ten horns. And he manages his empire, [as he laboured to tempt our Saviour,] with a promise of crowns. These he is represented as having in plenty.²⁶

Q. 288. Who else are symbolized by dragons?

A. Pagans: Isai. xxxv. 7; "And the parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water; in the habitations of dragons, where each lay, shall be grass with reeds and rushes." Chap. xliii. 19, 20; "I will even make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert: and the beasts of the field shall honor me, and dragons and owls;" Or pagans shall come to the saving knowledge of the truth.²⁷

²³ Ethan Smith, *A Key to the Figurative Language Found in the Sacred Scriptures in the Form of Questions and Answers* (Exeter: 1814).

²⁴ Smith, *A Key to the Figurative Language*, 21.

²⁵ Smith, *A Key to the Figurative Language*, 93.

²⁶ Smith, *A Key to the Figurative Language*, 94.

²⁷ Smith, *A Key to the Figurative Language*, 94.

Q. 225. What is symbolized by the wings of an eagle?

A. The divine protection: Exod. xix. 4; “How I bear you on eagle’s wings, and brought you to myself.” Rev. xii 14, “And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place.” They denote also enlivening grace Isai. xl. 31; “But they that wait on the Lord, shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”²⁸

Smith pastored the Congregational Church in Poultney for over five years, from November 21, 1821 to December 1826;²⁹ and it is very likely that Miller—living only about eight kilometres (five miles) away in Low Hampton—would have been familiar with Smith’s works; particularly since Smith’s time in Poultney (1821-1826) coincided with the period of intense Bible study that followed Miller’s conversion.

Other books with similar titles and approaches include Robert Fleming’s *Apocalyptical Key, a Discourse on the Rise and Fall of Anti-Christ; or, The Pouring Out of the Vials in the Sixteenth Chapter of Revelations* (first published in 1701); the 1795 work, *A Key to the Prophecies of the Old & New Testament, Which Are Not Yet Accomplished*, by Alexander Fraser; J. T. Mathews’ *A Key to the Old and New Testaments* (3rd edition published in 1842) and Dexter Dickinson’s 1843 work, *A Key to the Prophecies and Second Advent of Christ With the Time of his First and Second Manifestations*.³⁰

A number of the symbolic meanings listed by Miller are quite similar to those given by Isaac Newton. These include:

Miller: BEASTS. Kingdoms, or powers. Dan.vii.3,17. Rev.iv.6-8. v.8,9.

Newton: “Animals also and vegetables are put for the people of several regions and conditions; and particularly, trees, herbs, and land animals, for the people of the earth politic”.

Miller: EARTHQUAKE. Revolutions. Hag.ii.21,22. Rev.vi.12. xvi.18.

Newton: “great earthquakes, and the shaking of heaven and earth, for the shaking of kingdoms, so as to distract or overthrow them”.

Miller: FLESH. Riches and honors of the world. 2Pet.ii.10-18. 1John ii.15,16. Rev.xix.18.

Newton: “the flesh, for riches and possessions”.

Miller: SEA. A large body of people. Isa.lvii.20. Dan.vii.3. Rev.vii.2,3.

²⁸ Smith, *A Key to the Figurative Language*, 78.

²⁹ George T. Chapman, *Sketches of the Alumni of Dartmouth College* (Cambridge: Fireside Press, 1867), 57.

³⁰ Robert Fleming, *Apocalyptical Key, a Discourse on the Rise and Fall of Anti-Christ; or, The Pouring Out of the Vials in the Sixteenth Chapter of Revelations* (1701); Alexander Fraser, *A Key to the Prophecies of the Old & New Testament, Which Are Not Yet Accomplished* (Edinburgh: N.P., 1795); J. T. Mathews, *A Key to the Old and New Testaments*, 3rd ed. (1842); Dexter Dickinson, *A Key to the Prophecies and Second Advent of Christ With the Time of his First and Second Manifestations* (Boston: Dexter Dickinson, 1843).

- Newton: “In the earth, the dry land and congregated waters, as a sea, a river, a flood, are put for the people of several regions, nations, and dominions”.
- Miller: SUN. As in the natural, so in the moral world, source of all light, Christ or his word. Gen.xxxvii.9. Ps.lxxxiv.11. Mal.iv.2.
- Newton: “when the Sun is Christ; light for the glory, truth, and knowledge, wherewith great and good men shine and illuminate others”.

On some topics however, Miller clearly diverges from Newton:

- Miller: ISLANDS. Small governments in Roman states. Ezek.xxvi.15,16. Zeph.ii.11. Rev.x.20. vi.14.
- Newton: “mountains and islands, for the cities of the earth and sea politic, with the territories and dominions belonging to those cities”.
- Miller: MOON. Gospel. Isa.xxx.26. Rev.xii.1. Or church. Cant.vi.10.
- Newton: “the Moon for the body of the common people”
- Miller: WIND. Doctrine, good and bad. Cant.iv.16. Isa.xxvi.18. Eph.iv.14.³¹
- Newton: “tempestuous winds, or the motion of clouds, for wars”³²

For the Millerites, the biblical text was also replete with ‘types’. Types, as Peter Harrison points out, are:

events and characters which were typical because they represented patterns or personalities which would recur in later times....In the key typological reading of scripture, Adam was a ‘type’ and Christ the ‘antitype’. The first man thus foreshadowed the perfect man; as Adam was the original author of sin, Christ was the expiator of sin; as Adam was patriarch of Israel, Christ was the head of the Church, the new ‘Israel’; and so on. In this manner the very first events recoded in scripture could be shown to be intimately linked with happenings of momentous import which had taken place thousands of years earlier.³³

Harrison also points out that typological readings and literal readings of scripture should not be seen as opposites or as incompatible. He points out that a “typological reading is as much a way of understanding history as of interpreting texts.”³⁴ For those who utilized it, it was a way of seeing God’s influence as “everpresent in the realm of history” and of God’s “participation in the ongoing human drama”.³⁵

As Doan points out, the Millerites used typology extensively. They, connected Old Testament to New and both testaments to history through a system of

³¹ Miller’s symbols and meanings are taken from Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies*, 25-32.

³² Newton’s symbols and meanings are taken from Isaac Newton, *Observations upon the prophecies of Daniel and St. John* (London: 1733), 16-23.

³³ Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 129.

³⁴ Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science*, 131.

³⁵ Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science*, 131.

typology....[Miller's] typological approach was intimately bound up with his reading of the prophecies. Just as the literal Michael of the Old Testament symbolized and prefigured the literal Christ of the New, so the symbols and figures of the prophecies in both testaments foretold and foreshadowed their own literal fulfillment in the future.³⁶

Doan also points out that Miller's typological approach was "intimately bound up with his reading of the prophecies".³⁷ For Miller, "the symbols and figures of the prophecies in both testaments foretold and foreshadowed their own literal interpretation in the future."³⁸

Miller's youthful writings display an attraction to symbols and numerical calculations well before his Bible reading led him to the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. He was fascinated with astrology and around the time of his marriage wrote copiously on astrological topics, filling "the pages of his Book of Fortune with prognostications based on calendric and astronomical considerations".³⁹ These include a list of "evil days in the month"; predictions based on the day of the week that Christmas falls; discussions of the influence of Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus, Mercury, the Sun, and the Moon; and a discussion of some of the astrological houses.⁴⁰

Synchronizations

As Arasola notes, the central goal of Miller's exegesis was "to create a harmonious and systematic exposition".⁴¹ Miller himself writes, "God in his wisdom had so interwoven several prophecies, that they tell us the same thing".⁴² While Miller's use of the 2300 days prophecy of Daniel 8:14 is widely known, in fact he used at least 15 different and parallel calculations to arrive at his 1843/1844 date. An outline of these calculations was published in the January 25, 1843, *Signs of the Times*.⁴³

Miller's fifteen points—and their support texts—are as follows:

1. Seven times (Leviticus 7)
2. Year of release (Deuteronomy 15)
3. Seven years (Ezekiel 34)

³⁶ Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture*, 91.

³⁷ Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture*, 91.

³⁸ Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture*, 91.

³⁹ Rowe, *God's Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World*, 40. Miller's *Book of Fortune* is held by the Vermont Historical Society. It is an unpaginated manuscript attached to his *Diary*.

⁴⁰ William Miller, "Book of Fortune, MSS 23 #9 Vermont Historical Society.

⁴¹ Arasola, *The End of Historicism*, 49.

⁴² Himes, ed., *Evidence from Scripture*, 4.

⁴³ William Miller, "Synopsis of Miller's Views," *Signs of the Times*, January 25, 1843, 145-150. Miller's 15 proofs are graphically summarized and reproduced in Arasola, *The End of Historicism*, 220-220-5. Notably, these proofs also form the basis of the famous Millerite evangelistic chart of 1843. A photograph of the chart may be viewed at: http://www.aurora.edu/images/jenks/1843_1a.jpg (Accessed August 13, 2010).

4. Sign of the Sabbath (6000 year chronology) (Exodus 31:13-17)
5. The Jubilees
6. Two days (Hosea 6)
7. 2300 evening/mornings (Daniel 8:14)
8. Time of the Little Horn (Daniel 7:25)
9. 1335 days (Daniel 12:12)
10. Two days (Luke 13)
11. Five months (Revelation 9)
12. 1260 days Revelation 11)
13. 1260 days Revelation 12)
14. 42 months (Revelation 13)
15. 666 (Revelation 13)

Clearly Miller's calculations were not confined to the book of Daniel but ranged throughout the entire biblical text. In 1841, Miller addressed a "Second Advent Conference" and emphasized the importance of these multiple proofs and synchronization: "How shall we know when these times will all end? I answer, when you or any other man can show by scripture rule that they all harmonize and come out in one and the same year, they cannot be far from the truth".⁴⁴ Thus for Miller, the fact that multiple proofs existed—and could be synchronized or harmonized—was in fact strong proof itself for the truth of his calculations and the exegesis they were based upon.

Miller's Systematic Approach—the Fourteen Rules.

Miller's methodical Bible study begun sometime after his 1816 conversion. He does not discuss details of his systematic process; stating only in retrospect:

I then devoted myself to prayer and to the reading of the word. I determined to lay aside all my prepossessions, to thoroughly compare Scripture with Scripture, and to pursue its study in a regular and methodical manner. I commenced with Genesis, and read verse by verse, proceeding no faster than the meaning of the several passages should be so unfolded, as to leave me free from embarrassment respecting and mysticism or contradictions. Whenever I found anything obscure, my practice was to compare it with all collateral passages; and by the help of Cruden, I examined all the texts of Scripture in which were found any of the prominent words contained in any obscure portion. Then by letting every word have its proper bearing on the subject of the text, if my view of it harmonized with every collateral passage in the Bible, it ceased to be a difficulty.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Quoted in Arasola, *The End of Historicism*, 91.

⁴⁵ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 6. Cruden refers to *Concordance of the Old and New Testaments*, a very popular Bible concordance authored by Alexander Cruden (1700-1770) and first published in London in 1737.

Such a systematic approach to Bible study was not unique. Sereno Dwight, referring to Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), wrote that Edwards' approach was to, "study every passage which he read, which presented the least difficulty to his own mind, or which he had known to be regarded as difficult by others, until such difficulty was satisfactorily removed."⁴⁶ Similarly, during the 1750s, after the Great Awakening, Charles Chauncy wrote to a friend, "I have made the Scriptures my sole study for about two years; and I think I have attained to a clearer understanding of them than I ever had before."⁴⁷ Chauncy's study led him to reject the idea of eternal punishment and embrace universalism, ideas that were published in 1784 in his work *The Mystery Hid from Ages and Generations...or, the Salvation of All Men*. To justify his unorthodox conclusions, Chauncy relied on the biblical force of his argument, "a long and diligent comparing of Scripture with Scripture." He explained to Ezra Stiles, "the whole is written from the Scripture account of the thing and not from any human scheme."⁴⁸

The earliest hint of Miller's interpretive principles is found in a portion of a letter addressed to his sister Emily in 1831:

Emily you must be established on the truth, and the "truth will make you free." I will give you a good rule by which you may be established. 1st you must believe the Word of God. 2nd you must find two witnesses (or plain texts) in that Word to make you, or to cause you, to believe the doctrine or principle laid down. You must not draw any inference, until you bring two positive witnesses to the point, and be sure you get one in the Old and one in the New Testament."⁴⁹

His first principle centres on a belief in the Bible as the word of God; a principle he continued to hold throughout his life—and one that is a direct challenge to Deist views. The second principle mentioned however—that of the "two witnesses"—is a principle that is not emphasized in Miller's later public ministry.

Miller had previously mentioned rules of interpretation in his sixty-four page *Evidence from Scripture and History* first published in 1833. This work was expanded to seventy-one pages in the next edition published in 1836, and by the 1840 edition had reached 300 pages. In the Introduction of his 1833 edition, Miller stated: "in order that the reader may have a clue to my manner of studying the prophecies, by which I have come to the following result, I have thought proper to give

⁴⁶ Sereno Dwight, "The Life of President Edwards," in *The Works of President Edwards*, ed. Sereno Dwight (New York, NY: 1830), 57.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1989), 181.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 181.

⁴⁹ William Miller to Joseph Atwood and others, May 31, 1831.

some of the rule of interpretation which I have adopted”.⁵⁰ He then proceeded to give a series of guidelines aimed specifically at the interpretation of prophecy. The text is not broken down into a list but a number of Miller’s later rules are clearly discernable. Miller began by noting that prophecy frequently contains “figures, and highly, and richly adorned metaphors”; and furthermore, these figures had both a “literal and metaphorical meaning; as beasts denote literally a kingdom, so metaphorically good or bad, as the case may be”.⁵¹ Such a statement clearly points forward to his Rule #8 from his 1840 *Signs of the Times* list: “Figures always have a figurative meaning, and are used much in prophecy, to represent future things, times and events, such as *mountains* meaning *governments*, *beasts* meaning *kingdoms*.”⁵² Similarly, his statement, “As prophecy is a language, somewhat different from other parts of scripture, the events foretold, are not all told by one prophet. And yet there is a perfect chain. They interweave their prophecies in such a manner, that you take away one, and a link will be wanting. This will appear evident to any one, who will take the pains of comparing scripture expressions of a similar kind as for example, see Dan. xii. 1, Matt. xxiv. 21, Isa. xlvii. 8, Zeph. ii. 15, Rev. xviii. 7”;⁵³ points to his emphasis on synchronization highlighted in Rule #6: “God has revealed things to come by visions, in figures and parables, and in this way the same things are often-time revealed again and again, by different visions, or in different figures, and parables. If you wish to understand them, you must combine them all in one.”⁵⁴ Parallel passages may be found for Rule #4 and Rule #5 as well. His 1833 “Introduction” did however contain some rules that were not carried over to the 1840 *Signs of the Times* list: most notably a brief discussion on typology and the aforementioned principle of the “two witnesses”—the Old and New Testaments. Both of these are however found in the Introduction to Miller’s 1840 *Evidence From Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ About the Year 1843; Exhibited in a Course of Lectures*.⁵⁵

An early list of four rules was published on April 15, 1840 in the *Signs of the Times*, with the author listed only as “R”:

⁵⁰ William Miller, *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ, About the Year A.D. 1843, and of His Personal Reign of 1000 years*. (Vermont Telegraph Office, 1833), 3.

⁵¹ William Miller, *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ, About the Year A.D. 1843, and of His Personal Reign of 1000 years*. (Vermont Telegraph Office, 1833), 3.

⁵² William Miller, “Mr Miller’s Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter,” *Signs of the Times*, May 15, 1840, 25.

⁵³ William Miller, *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ, About the Year A.D. 1843, and of His Personal Reign of 1000 years*. (Vermont Telegraph Office, 1833), 3.

⁵⁴ Miller, “Mr Miller’s Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter,” 25.

⁵⁵ *Evidence From Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ About the Year 1843; Exhibited in a Course of Lectures*. (Boston: B. B. Mussy, 1840) 3-8.

It is well to have a few plain, simple, well defined rules of interpretation by which to study the scriptures, and rigidly abide by them, lead where they may. Our rules are the following, viz.

1. The Bible contains a revelation from God to man, and of course must be [given] the best, plainest and simplest [interpretation] that can be given....
2. The Bible is always to be understood literally, when the literal sense does not involve contradictions, or is not unnatural.
3. When the literal sense involves the passage in contradiction, or expresses ideas which are unnatural, it is figurative, or parabolic, and is designed to illustrate rather than reveal the truth.
4. When a passage is clearly figurative, the figure is to be carefully studied, and the passage compared with other parts of the Word, where the same or similar figure may be employed.

With these plain and simple rules of interpretation before us, [*sic*] we invite the reader, with his Bible in his hand, to go with us into a scriptural examination of the doctrine of the 2nd coming of our dear Redeemer. We shall find the scriptures sweetly harmonize on this and all other subjects on which they treat, when properly understood. Truth is one, with many harmonious parts. Error is many, with many discordant, repulsive, heterogeneous ingredients.⁵⁶

Exactly one month after the above set of rules was published—on May 15, 1840; Miller’s fourteen “Rules of Interpretation” were published for the first time in the same periodical.⁵⁷ The article reproduced part of a letter—“all that was not personal”⁵⁸ from Miller. The cover letter to Himes—editor of *Signs of the Times* is dated April 20th, 1840, and Miller’s letter must therefore have been written sometime before this date.

Miller’s method of biblical interpretation was well known amongst his followers before 1840. In an 1834 letter, Isaac Fuller wrote to Miller noting that “many parts of the Scriptures can never be explained to make any sense *without our system*.”⁵⁹ Similarly, in 1837, Charles Cole wrote thanking him for his development of “the first clear method of studying and understanding the Scriptures.”⁶⁰

In October 1840 an anonymous Millerite author set out to answer the question, “How is the Bible to be interpreted?” The answer given was simple: “The Bible is to be interpreted by itself.”⁶¹

As the prophets had no will or choice as to what they should prophesy, so we are to

⁵⁶ “The Second Coming of Christ- 1,” *Signs of the Times*, April 15, 1840, 10.

⁵⁷ William Miller, “Mr Miller’s Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter,” *Signs of the Times*, May 15, 1840, 25-26. This set of rules was also published in William Miller, “Rules of Interpretation,” *The Midnight Cry*, November 17, 1842, 4. Apollos Hale published Miller’s rules in 1843 in a slightly different form. He omits Rule #3 and the second sentence of Rule #10, as well as presenting the rules in a different order. Apollos Hale, ed., *The Second Advent Manual* (Boston: J. V. Himes, 1843), 103-106.

⁵⁸ Miller, “Mr Miller’s Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter,” 25.

⁵⁹ Isaac Fuller to William Miller, September 7, 1834. Emphasis added.

⁶⁰ Charles Cole to William Miller, March 27, 1837.

⁶¹ “Literal Interpretation,” *Signs of the Times*, October 1, 1840, 92.

have no will or choice as to the interpretation of these prophecies: as their prophecies were not their shrewd opinion, sagacious guesses, well-constructed theories, or sincere hopes, but God's word, but God's mind; so our interpretation of the same must be by the same Divine word, and not human opinion.⁶²

In conclusion, the author of this piece listed eight "plain counsels," of which the final four give particular insight into the author's approach to interpretation:

5. "With "Cruden's" Concordance, search out *every verse in the Bible*, containing the word, or subject upon which you wish light—after reading not only the verse but the chapter in which such word, or subject stands. Frequent reading over what is dark will give you light."
6. "Read, and *Believe as a little child*, taking the *plainest and most palpable meaning of each word.*"
7. "Read your Bible *much* and with *care*, looking out every marginal reference, and *making your own.*"
8. "Whenever you take your Bible, *pray for Light–Faith–Patience–Perseverance*. Pray while you read—pray whenever you think of what you have read."⁶³

There is also a final emphasis on Jesus Christ: "You will find that the whole Bible is a prophecy fulfilled and fulfilling of Christ."⁶⁴ These rules are strikingly similar to those published by Miller less than six months before; and were in fact commented favourably upon in the next edition of the *Signs of the Times* by Miller himself: "Br. Himes—The rules which are given in the 13th No. of the 'Signs of the Times,' by a 'Bible Reader,' to interpret Scripture, I believe are very good and worthy to be known and read of by all men."⁶⁵ Miller then went on to utilize the rules to interpret Revelation 11:8.

Miller believed that the application of his rules to any biblical passage would result in its correct understanding. In outlining his own rules of interpretation, Miller wrote to Joshua Himes and the letter was then published in the principal Millerite periodical *Signs of the Times*. The letter read:

I agreed to furnish you with my rules by which to read and understand the Bible.

1. Every word must have its proper bearing on the subject presented in the Bible.
2. All scripture is necessary, and may be understood by a diligent application & study.
3. Nothing revealed in the scriptures can or will be hid from those who ask in faith, not wavering.
4. To understand doctrine, bring all the scriptures together on the subject you wish to know, then let every word have its proper influence, and if you can form your

⁶² "Literal Interpretation," 92.

⁶³ "Literal Interpretation," 93. Original emphasis.

⁶⁴ "Literal Interpretation," 93.

⁶⁵ William Miller, "Mr Miller's Letters No. 10: 'To the Bible Reader,'" *Signs of the Times*, November 1, 1840, 118. An almost identical quote was published in Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies*, 198: "DEAR BRO HIMES: The rules which are given in the 13th No. of the "Signs of the Times," by a "Bible Reader," to interpret Scripture, I believe to be good, and worthy to be known and read of all men".

theory without a contradiction, you cannot be in an error.

5. Scripture must be its own expositor, since it is a rule of itself. If I depend on a teacher to expound it to me, and he should guess at its meaning, or desire to have it so on account of his sectarian creed, or to be thought wise, gives me his wisdom, then his *guessing, desire, creed, or wisdom* is my rule, not the Bible.
6. God has revealed things to come by visions, in figures and parables, and in this way the same things are often-time revealed again and again, by different visions, or in different figures, and parables. If you wish to understand them, you must combine them all in one.
7. Visions are always mentioned as such.
8. Figures always have a figurative meaning, and are used much in prophecy, to represent future things, times and events, such as *mountains* meaning *governments, beasts* meaning *kingdoms*.
9. Parables are used as comparisons to illustrate subjects, and must be explained in the same way as figures by the subject and the Bible.
10. Figures sometimes have two or more different significations, as day is used in a figurative sense to represent three different periods of time.
 1. Indefinite
 2. Definite, a day for a year
 3. Day for a thousand years.

If you put on the right construction it will harmonize with the Bible and make good sense, otherwise it will not.

11. How to know when a word is used figuratively. If it makes good sense as it stands, and does no violence to the simple laws of nature, then it must be understood literally, if not, figuratively.
12. To learn the true meaning of figures, trace your figurative word through the Bible, and where you find it explained, put it on your figure, and if it makes good sense you need look no further, if not, look again.
13. To know whether we have the true historical event, for the fulfillment of a prophecy. If you find every word of the prophecy (after the figures are understood) is literally fulfilled, then you must look for another event or wait its future development. For God takes care that history and prophecy doth agree, so that the true believing children of God may never be ashamed.
14. The most important rule of all is, that you must have *faith*. It must be a faith that requires sacrifice, and if tried, would give up the dearest object on earth, the world and all its desires, character, living, occupation, friends, home, comforts, and worldly honors. If any of these should hinder our believing any part of God's word, it would show our faith to be vain. Nor can we ever believe so long as one of these motives lays lurking in our hearts. We must believe that God will never forfeit His word. And we can have confidence that he that takes notice of the sparrow, and numbers the hairs of our head, will guard the translation of His own word, and throw a barrier around it, and prevent those who sincerely trust in god, and put implicit confidence in his word, from erring far from the truth, though they may not understand Hebrew or Greek.

These are some of the most important rules which I find the word of God warrants me to adopt and follow, in order for system and regularity. And if I am not greatly deceived, in so doing, I have found the Bible, as a whole, one of the most simple plain and intelligible books ever written, containing proof in itself of its divine origin and full of all knowledge that heart or soul could wish to know or enjoy.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Miller, "Mr Miller's Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter," 25-26.

As Stephen O’Leary points out, Miller’s system was unusual, not because of his claim that “Scripture was the ultimate source of divine truth” but because of his claim that “Scripture itself provided the key to human interpretations of the divine message”.⁶⁷ Thus, accompanying most of Miller’s rules were his “proofs”—lists of biblical texts that were given as “proof” of the validity of twelve of the fourteen rules.⁶⁸

A close examination of these “proofs” however, shows that they seem to have little or no bearing on the rules they are said to support. For example, in support of his first rule: “Every word must have its proper bearing on the subject presented in the Bible”, Miller quotes Matthew 5:8, “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God”.⁶⁹ However, this appears to be a typographical error as the later accounts of Himes⁷⁰ and White⁷¹ amend the proof to Matthew 5:18: “For verily I say unto you, ‘Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled’”. While this does seem to be slightly more relevant, the verse does not provide the weighty “proof” that Miller seems to accord it. Indeed, most of Miller’s “proof” texts are extremely general. For example, the proofs offered in support of Rule IV include Isaiah 35:8, “A highway will be there, called the holy way; No one unclean may pass over it, nor fools go astray on it” and Proverbs 19:27, “Cease, my son, to hear the instruction that causeth to err from the words of knowledge”. Neither text bears any obvious relation to biblical interpretation. What is important about these “proofs” however, as O’Leary points out, is that they show “that Miller’s justification of his interpretative system is grounded in the uncontested assumptions of the divine origin and authority of Scripture”.⁷² Furthermore, by making Scripture, “its own expositor” Miller effaced himself and gave his interpretations divine authority.⁷³

Miller did recognise that there were a few passages that were still difficult to understand—even after following his guidelines. These included “a few things” in the prophecy of Gog in Ezekiel 39, which were still, “dark and intricate.”⁷⁴ However, such passages were problematic,

⁶⁷ Stephen D. O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 118.

⁶⁸ Miller does not list any proofs for rules 12 and 14.

⁶⁹ Miller, “Mr Miller’s Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter,” 25.

⁷⁰ Himes, ed., *Evidence from Scripture*, 20-23.

⁷¹ White, *Sketches of the Christian Life and Public Labors of William Miller*, 48-51.

⁷² O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*, 118.

⁷³ O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*, 118.

⁷⁴ William Miller, “Lecture on The Battle of Gog,” in *Miller’s Works Volume I: Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology, Selected From the Manuscripts of William Miller With a Memoir of his Life.*, ed. Joshua V. Himes (Boston, MA: Moses A. Dow, 1841), 67.

not because God designed in his revelation to make it so, to deceive, puzzle, or perplex his children, in the study of his holy word... but on account of the translators' retaining certain words, or names of places, or things, in the original language, which might have been used intelligently when Ezekiel prophesied of them in their common tongue, but which, as it respects us, have become obsolete.⁷⁵

Outside of the Millerite movement such “rules” were common. The biblical interpretation of Barton W. Stone (1772-1844)—though nowhere spelled out systematically—rests upon similar guidelines: “(1) the meaning of the Bible is clear, (2) the interpreter is free and capable, and (3) the hermeneutical method is ‘common sense.’”⁷⁶

Similarly, Alexander Campbell (1788-1866) developed a series of seven rules for biblical interpretation. These rules were first published in 1835; with Campbell noting that the Bible was of no value without “fixed and certain principles of interpretation.”⁷⁷

Rule 1. On opening any book in the sacred Scriptures, consider first the historical circumstances of the book. These are the order, the title, the author, the date, the place, and the occasion of it....

Rule 2. In examining the contents of any book, as respects precepts, promises, exhortations, etc., observe who it is that speaks, and under what dispensation he officiates.

Rule 3. To understand the meaning of what is commanded, promised, taught etc., the same philological principles, deduced from the nature of language; or the same laws of interpretation which are applied to the language of the books, are to be applied to the language of the Bible.

Rule 4. Common usage, which can only be ascertained by testimony must always decide the meaning of any word which has but one signification;....

Rule 5. In all tropical language, ascertain the point of resemblance and judge the nature of the trope, and its kind, from the point of resemblance.

Rule 6. In the interpretation of symbols, types, allegories, and parables, this rule is supreme; ascertain the point to be illustrated; for comparison is never to be extended beyond that point—to all the attributes, qualities, or circumstances of the symbol, type, allegory, or parable.

Rule 7. For the salutary and sanctifying intelligence of the Oracles of God, the following rule is indispensable: *We must come within understanding distance.*

There is a distance which is properly called the speaking distance, or the hearing distance; beyond which the voice reaches not, and the ear hears not. To hear another, we must come within that circle which the voice audibly fills.

Now we may with propriety say, that as it respects God, there is an understanding distance. All beyond that distance cannot understand God; all within it, can easily understand him in all matters of piety and morality. God himself, is the center of that

⁷⁵ Miller, “Lecture on The Battle of Gog,” 67.

⁷⁶ M. Eugene Boring, *Disciples and the Bible: A History of Disciples' Biblical Interpretation in North America* (St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1997), 19.

⁷⁷ Boring, *Disciples and the Bible*, 85. Both Stone and Campbell were prominent leaders in the early years of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

circle, and humility is its circumference.⁷⁸

Campbell aimed these rules not at the clergy or at theologians, but rather intended them to be incorporated into the daily Bible reading of ordinary Christians.⁷⁹ In an 1838 article, Thomas Campbell, co-founder of the Christian Association,⁸⁰ proposed that every family have a period of Bible study—three times per day—at each meal:

When they meet for breakfast, let them first take their spiritual meal, thus socially beginning the day with God—by reading a certain select portion of his word, with suitable questions, remarks, and exhortations for this purpose....This may be conveniently done by asking the following pertinent questions according the respective capacities of the quests, viz—1. Who is the writer or speaker of the portion read, or of any particular part of it? 2. To whom was it written or spoken? 3. What historic facts are contained in it? 5. What doctrinal declarations? 6. What invitations? 7. What promises? 8. What threatenings? Lastly, the why, when, and where these things were spoken or written, still remain to be considered, and are circumstances sometimes worthy of particular attention, in order to a correct understanding of particular passages.⁸¹

Such rules were necessary for someone like Campbell who had rejected other forms of interpretive authority: “I have endeavoured to read the scriptures as though no one had read them before me.”⁸²

As Hatch points out:

Protestants had always argued for sola scriptura, but this kind of rugged individualism set the Bible against the entire history of biblical interpretation. In this hermeneutic, no human authority, contemporary or historical, had the right to advise the individual in his spiritual quest. In order to ward off any systematic theology, these men insisted that religious discussion be limited to Bible language.⁸³

Miller’s Rules may be helpfully summarized into five areas that outline his basic hermeneutic:

1. A Perspicuous Approach
2. A Literal Approach
3. Scripture Interprets Scripture
4. A Common-sense Approach

⁷⁸ Alexander Campbell, *Christianity Restored, The Principle Extras of the Millennial Harbinger, Revised and Corrected* (Bethany, VA: M’Vay & Ewing, 1835). Original emphasis. Quoted in Boring, *Disciples and the Bible*, 85-86.

⁷⁹ Boring, *Disciples and the Bible*, 86.

⁸⁰ In 1832, Barton W. Stone merged his followers with the Christian Association formed by Alexander and Thomas Campbell to form the Disciples of Christ. E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought From the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 292. Thomas Campbell was the father of Alexander Campbell.

⁸¹ Thomas Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger* (1838). Quoted in Boring, *Disciples and the Bible*, 86-87.

⁸² Quoted in Nathan O. Hatch, “The Christian Movement and the Demand for a Theology of the People,” *Journal of American History* 67, no. 3 (1980): 559.

⁸³ Hatch, “The Christian Movement and the Demand for a Theology of the People,” 559-560.

5. A “Spiritual” Approach

A Perspicuous Approach

A foundational belief for Miller was that the Bible was perspicuous—that its meaning was easily deducible by the common reader. As he states in his second rule: “All scripture is necessary, and may be understood by a diligent application & study.”⁸⁴ He continues the theme with his third rule: “Nothing revealed in the scriptures can or will be hid from those who ask in faith, not wavering.”⁸⁵

A Literal Approach

Miller’s literalism was also far from unique amongst his contemporaries. As Yamagata points out:

American Protestantism had inherited the sixteenth century reformer’s emphasis on the Bible as the sole rule of faith and practice. The New England Puritans brought along attitudes toward the Bible that they had held in England; they were a people of “The Book.” For them the Bible was the revealed Word of God, divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit.... This reverence for the Bible was continued by premillennialists well into the nineteenth century.⁸⁶

Amongst Miller and his contemporaries, it was widely believed that the message of the Bible was—above all else—accessible. As Doan states, “Scriptures were not, for the most part, thought to be mysterious and obscure, but open to reading. After all, God gave people the Bible that they might read it. If they were to read it, certainly they could understand it.”⁸⁷ The best way for Miller and his contemporaries to access the Bible then, was through a literal reading that anyone, without specific education, or special training, could undertake. Sandeen points out that such an approach was a major factor in the popularity of the Millerite message:

The millenarian insistence upon a literal interpretation of the Scripture was perhaps their most effective recruiting argument. They argued, perhaps unfairly but nevertheless effectively, that their literalistic methods of interpretation demonstrated their fidelity to the authority of the Bible while those who, in opposing them, had recourse to allegorical or metaphorical interpretations were not taking the Bible seriously....Not only was faith in the authority of the Bible not yet undermined by higher criticism; it would appear that respect for scientific discoveries and mathematical exactitude had been rather simplistically transferred to fields such as prophetic interpretation. The complicated timetable which William Miller compiled out of the obscure, almost cabalistic references in Daniel and Revelation proved an attraction rather than a stumbling block to nineteenth-century Americans. The Newtonian God, the great watchmaker, was expected to express himself in numerical

⁸⁴ Miller, “Mr Miller’s Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter,” 25-26.

⁸⁵ Miller, “Mr Miller’s Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter,” 25-26.

⁸⁶ Masao Yamagata, “Ellen G. White and Premillennialism” (PhD, Pennsylvania State University, 1983), 56-57.

⁸⁷ Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture*, 93-94.

puzzles.⁸⁸

The Millerites believed in a “literal Bible that spelled out precise and realistic details of a fantastic end of the world.”⁸⁹ For Miller and his followers, “any and all stories in the Bible were literally true and that, as part of that literal truth, they referred to actual events in history.”⁹⁰ This approach was recognized not only by later commentators, but by Miller’s contemporaries; one of whom wrote in 1840: “Mr Miller is a great stickler for literal interpretations; never admitting the figurative unless absolutely required to make correct sense or meet the event which is intended to be pointed out. He doubtless believes, most unwaveringly, all he teaches to others.”⁹¹

Miller’s literal reading of the Bible was not unique—nor new. It was in fact, the approach of the majority of Miller’s millenarian contemporaries. One commentator in 1853 summarized their approach when he stated “The central law of interpretation by which millenarians profess always to be guided, is that of giving the literal sense.”⁹² George Duffield—the first pre-millennialist to attempt to systematize premillennialist hermeneutics—wrote “when we come to the Bible, it must be as children, to learn.”⁹³

Literalism was not however universal practice amongst new religious movements of the time. For the Shakers—followers of Mother Ann Lee—literal adherence to the Bible was supplanted by direct revelations from God.⁹⁴ Likewise, the followers of Joseph Smith, had supplanted the Bible with the *Book of Mormon*. The relatively unknown heretical preacher Talcott Patching “disapproved of the Bible... [relying] for guidance on an infallible inner light.”⁹⁵ Such practices were however, in the minority.

Sandeen points out that millenarians such as Miller,

built their movement upon a literalistic method of biblical interpretation which gave them considerable apologetic advantage. They could confront churchmen who at least tacitly accepted the infallibility of the Scriptures and urge them to become serious enough about their biblical faith to believe what was quite literally prophesied. As the swelling rolls of the millenarian ranks demonstrate; this approach could be quite persuasive....The millenarian utilized a literalistic approach to

⁸⁸ Sandeen, “Millennialism,” 114.

⁸⁹ Ruth Alden Doan, “Millerism and Evangelical Culture,” in *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 1.

⁹⁰ Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture*, 87.

⁹¹ “Mr Miller,” 31-32.

⁹² *Princeton Review* 25 (1853): 68. Quoted in Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 107.

⁹³ George Duffield, *Dissertations on the Prophecies Relative to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ* (New York, NY: Dayton and Newman, 1842), 311.

⁹⁴ Cross, *The Burned-over District*, 31.

⁹⁵ Cross, *The Burned-over District*, 39.

prophecy not because the author's intention was literalistic... but because the climate of opinion in that day offered more support for a literalist than a figurative interpretation.⁹⁶

This emphasis on the literal interpretation of the Bible continued amongst Adventists after 1844—despite the failure of the Millerite predictions. The following resolution was passed by those Adventists present at a Conference in New York, held on May 6 and 7, 1845, “Resolved, that we regard the literal interpretation of the Scriptures as the true one, except in those cases where the context, or some other Scripture, or our own senses, demand that we should adopt the secondary, or figurative sense of words.”⁹⁷

Such literal interpretations seem to have been purposefully portrayed as opposing any form of allegorical or symbolic interpretation. Miller and his contemporaries “rejected as incorrect and blasphemously derogatory of the authority of the Bible the notion that the prophecies of the Second Advent might be fulfilled symbolically in an extended period of peace and godly rule some time in the future.”⁹⁸

Scripture Interprets Scripture

Miller's statement in his fifth rule that “Scripture must be its own expositor” is central to his interpretation. “Scripture must be its own expositor, since it is a rule of itself. If I depend on a teacher to expound it to me, and he should guess at its meaning, or desire to have it so on account of his sectarian creed, or to be thought wise, gives me his wisdom, then his *guessing, desire, creed, or wisdom* is my rule, not the Bible.”⁹⁹ This foundational idea is also present in his twelfth rule: “To learn the true meaning of figures, trace your figurative word through the Bible, and where you find it explained, put it on your figure, and if it makes good sense you need look no further, if not, look again”.¹⁰⁰ It is also present in his fourth rule: “To understand doctrine, bring all the scriptures together on the subject you wish to know, then let every word have its proper influence, and if you can form your theory without a contradiction, you cannot be in an error.”¹⁰¹ In his *Memoirs*, Miller reiterates this idea: “Whenever I found anything obscure, my practice was to compare it with all collateral passages; and by the help of Cruden[’s Concordance], I examined all the texts of Scripture

⁹⁶ Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 111.

⁹⁷ “Conference of Adventists at New York,” *The Advent Herald*, May 21, 1845, 118.

⁹⁸ Sandeen, “Millennialism,” 113.

⁹⁹ Miller, “Mr Miller’s Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter,” 25-26.

¹⁰⁰ Miller, “Mr Miller’s Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter,” 25-26.

¹⁰¹ Miller, “Mr Miller’s Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter,” 25-26.

in which were found any of the prominent words contained in any obscure portion.”¹⁰²

A Common-sense Approach

The publication of Miller’s “Rules of Interpretation” in the November 17, 1842 edition of *The Midnight Cry* was preceded by the following statement, in which Joshua Himes emphasized the approach taken by Miller and his followers: “We have sought to spread the truth, not by fanatical prophecies arising out of our own hearts, but by the light of the scriptures, history, and by sober argument. We appeal only to the Bible, and give you our rules of interpretation.”¹⁰³

Above all else, Miller’s approach was a rational one. Indeed, Stephen O’Leary points out that “their emphasis on rational proof was in fact a principle factor that distinguished Miller and his early associates from other revivalists.”¹⁰⁴ Following his conversion, Miller testified that “The Bible was now to me a new book. *It was indeed a feast of reason*: all that was dark, mystical, or obscure to me in its teachings, had been dissipated from my mind, before the clear light that now dawned from its sacred pages.”¹⁰⁵ Miller’s “Rules of Interpretation” reflect this viewpoint; appealing strongly to the interpreter’s use of reason. The foundation of his rules was that any interpretation had to make “good sense” to the interpreter. This phraseology is found in Miller’s rule ten: “If you put on the right construction, it will harmonize with the Bible and *make good sense*, otherwise it will not;” in his rule eleven: If it *makes good sense* as it stands... then it must be understood literally, if not, figuratively;” and in rule twelve: “To learn the true meaning of figures... if it *makes good sense* you need look no further.”

Not only does Miller emphasise a rational approach through the use of this terminology, but even a cursory survey of his rules reveals his emphasis on reason and logic—admittedly tempered with his emphasis on the need for searching in “faith.”

Miller attracted support in part because of his rationality. He based his argument for the Second Coming on traditional methods of interpreting the Bible. He marshaled compelling historical evidence for the fulfillment of prophecy according to his hermeneutic.¹⁰⁶

It was “Miller’s sense of obligation to the requirements of rationality that prompted his study of the Bible.”¹⁰⁷ “For Miller, reason came first; it expounded the Bible.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰² Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 69.

¹⁰³ “Close of the Meeting at Newark, N.J.,” *The Midnight Cry*, November 17, 1842, 3.

¹⁰⁴ O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*, 112.

¹⁰⁵ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 12. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁶ David L. Rowe, “Millerites: A Shadow Portrait,” in *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 13.

¹⁰⁷ Bull and Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, 23.

After listing his rules, Miller goes on to state “These are some of the most important rules which I find the word of God warrants me to adopt and follow, in order for system and regularity. And if I am not greatly deceived, in so doing, *I have found the Bible, as a whole, one of the most simple, plain, and intelligible books ever written.*”¹⁰⁹ Ruth Alden Doan comments:

When Miller’s God spoke, he did not speak fuzzily or incomprehensibly, but rather finally and with clarity and assurance. The certain and clear authority of the Bible, then, fit into a system defined by radical supernaturalism. The Bible, as a product of the omnipotent God, was virtually a part of him—so great was its truth and so closely bound to the utter reality and final authority of God himself. Thus Miller could come to speak of having saving faith in the word. The word was his lifeline, his evidence, and his token of more and grander intervention to come.¹¹⁰

As James White states, “He [Miller] sought for the harmony of Scripture and found it.” Miller himself reflected upon his methods of interpretation, stating, “I was thus satisfied that the Bible is a system of revealed truths, so clearly and simply given that the wayfaring man, though a fool, need not err therein.”¹¹¹ Miller also appealed to reason outside of his “Rules of Interpretation”, stating in his “An Address to the Believers in the Second Advent Near, Scattered Abroad,” that “my brethren, reason and common sense tell us better.”¹¹² Similarly, in a letter to Himes, Miller expresses his frustration when he writes,

How many souls will brothers Phelps, Cambell [*sic*], and others, who are sticklers for the Jews' return, and for a temporal millennium, be the means of lulling to sleep; and while they are flattering themselves that their teachers are right, find, to their eternal cost, that their preparation for the eternal world was delayed a few days too long, on the vain supposition that the Jews must return and a millennium intervene. *Why will they not listen to reason and scripture?*¹¹³

An appeal to reason was a key part of Miller’s strategy as a lecturer. An examination of a number of his lectures published by Joshua Himes reveals that such an appeal was a prominent weapon in Miller’s rhetorical arsenal. In one lecture Miller makes an impassioned plea: “Who is willing to examine the evidences—to reason candidly and to reflect seriously on these things?”¹¹⁴ In another, he appeals to his audience, stating:

I have repeatedly brought you down to this time, and shown, by Scripture proof, the judgment must commence immediately. You are in your hearts convicted that what

¹⁰⁸ Bull and Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, 31.

¹⁰⁹ Miller, “Mr Miller’s Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter,” 26. Emphasis added.

¹¹⁰ Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture*, 86.

¹¹¹ In Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 70.

¹¹² Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies*, 60.

¹¹³ Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies*, 225. Emphasis added.

¹¹⁴ Himes, ed., *Evidence from Scripture*, 22. Emphasis added.

has been declared concerning the two witnesses, in this discourse, is true. *And if so, your reason must teach you that what follows under the third woe must be equally as true.*¹¹⁵

In a lecture on Revelation 12:6, Miller argued that if “men would reason on the subject of religion as they do on other subjects, there could not be an infidel in the world.”¹¹⁶ In a similar vein he stated in another lecture that,

No man can read this prophecy, from which our text is taken, and the other prophets who have spoken of these things, and understand them literally, and then read the history of the world, and compare them together carefully, *and let reason decide*, and be an infidel.¹¹⁷

... So that I can boldly say, that *reason itself would teach us* that we ought to apply ourselves diligently and faithfully to try our faith by every word of God, and examine our hope in every possible way in searching deep into the revealed truths, whether promises or prophecies, that the day of vengeance may not overtake us unawares.¹¹⁸

James White records the following account of Miller’s public dialogue with a sceptical Methodist minister who had stated that he did not believe that God had revealed the time of the Second Advent.

Mr. M. replied that he could prove by the Bible that God had revealed it; and that, if he was an honest man, he would make him acknowledge it, by asking him a few questions in reference to the Bible....

Mr. M. asked the man to read the first three verses of Dan.12.

Mr. M. then asked if the resurrection was brought to view in those verses.

[Upon receiving an affirmative answer] Mr. M. asked him to read the 6th verse – ‘How long shall it be to the end of these wonders?’ - and say what wonders were referred to....

The elderly minister ... and replied, that the ‘wonders’ referred to must mean the resurrection, &c.

“Well,” said Mr. M., “is the reply of the one clothed in linen, who swore ‘that it should be for a time, times, and an half,’ given in answer to the question, how long it will be to the resurrection?”....

Mr. M. asked who it was that gave this answer. “The other readily replied that he was undoubtedly the Lord Jesus Christ.”

“Well, then,” said Mr. M., “if the Lord Jesus Christ, in answer to the question, How long it should be to the resurrection, has sworn with an oath that it shall be for a time, times, and an half, is not the time revealed?”....

“Why,” said the minister, “I never saw this in this light before. Can you tell what is meant by time, times, and an half?”

Mr. M. “I will try. Read, if you please, the 6th verse of Rev.12.”

Min. “‘And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and three-score days.’”

Mr. M. “Now read the 14th verse.”

Mr. M. “‘And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into

¹¹⁵ Himes, ed., *Evidence from Scripture*, 203. Emphasis added.

¹¹⁶ Himes, ed., *Evidence from Scripture*, 205.

¹¹⁷ Himes, ed., *Evidence from Scripture*, 257. Emphasis added.

¹¹⁸ Himes, ed., *Evidence from Scripture*, 259. Emphasis added.

the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time.”

Mr. M. “Do not those two denote the same period of time?”

Min. “Yes.”

Mr. M. “Then must not the time given in answer to the question be the same as the 1260 days?”

The Minister acknowledged it must be so.¹¹⁹

Miller’s systematic and logical presentation—each conclusion building on the previous, and each answer coming straight from the biblical text—proved to be a powerful rhetorical method.

Miller relied on reason too in his debates with other interpreters of biblical prophecy. In a letter to Himes, Miller responded to M. Stuart’s *Hints on the Interpretation of Prophecy* by stating that “his rules of interpretation are good, his general remarks on the nature and manner of prophecy I admire; but when he comes to apply those rules, *I see neither reason nor common sense in the application.*”¹²⁰ Later in the same letter, Miller wrote of a metaphorical “child of God” who “does not stop to criticize like a Stuart, and query, and reason himself out of common sense and reason too.”¹²¹ In a later letter to Himes that discussed Stuart’s millennialist ideas, Miller wrote:

How inconsistent it is to suppose, that, after Christ has taken possession of the whole earth, after he has thoroughly purged his floor, conquered death and him that has the power of death, dashed the kingdoms of this world to pieces, and carried them away, that no place is found for them, set up a kingdom under the whole heaven, which shall fill the earth, and that an everlasting kingdom, the subjects to be the same forever, never given to another people, and his tabernacle to be with men, his dwelling with them, and they made kings and priests to God and Christ, and reign on the earth with him—then, after all this, these temporal millennium advocates say that the world is to be burned up, consumed, and annihilated! *This, to me, is both inconsistent and absurd, taught neither by Scripture nor reason.*¹²²

Miller had harsh words for those he felt were lacking in common sense: “If our learned men can reason no better than this, I would advise them to go where they can get a little common sense, before they undertake to teach people who know their right hand from the left.”¹²³

Likewise, in a published response to a sermon delivered by L. F. Dimmick, Miller used similar language, “To me, this looks more like sound orthodoxy, than the sophistry of our author, who will have a day of the Lord to run far into the future; and, long after the world enjoys a pure state, then to be burned up. *This would, to me, be neither Scripture, reason, nor common sense.*”¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ White, *Sketches of the Christian Life and Public Labors of William Miller*, 286-289.

¹²⁰ William Miller, *Miller’s Reply to Stuart’s ‘Hints on the Interpretation of Prophecy.’ in Three Letters Addressed to Joshua V. Himes.* (Boston: J. V. Himes, 1842), 8. Emphasis added.

¹²¹ Miller, *Miller’s Reply to Stuart*, 22.

¹²² Miller, *Miller’s Reply to Stuart*, 59.

¹²³ Miller, *A Trilogy by William Miller*, 47.

¹²⁴ Miller, *A Trilogy by William Miller*, 76.

In the same article he wrote in frustration: “If this is sound reasoning, then surely I cannot understand reason.”¹²⁵ A few pages later Miller again sounds frustrated, stating:

Reason would teach any man that, if it was a pentecost day all around the world, and all the families of the earth and all nations were blessed; the earth become as the garden of Eden; all kings fall before the Son and kiss him, all the judges of the earth serve him; all swords be beaten into ploughshares, and all spears into pruning-hooks; all Jews be converted, with the fullness [*sic*] of the Gentiles; all religious teachers see eye to eye, and all denominations hold the truth in harmony... if this were literally all to be true, God would not destroy the earth; for there would be no occasion for it.¹²⁶

Miller’s approach to the Bible appealed particularly to the Deists in his audiences. James White records the autobiographical account of one Deist’s conversion, copied from *The Boston Investigator*, January, 1845:

I was a warm supporter of the views of Abner Kneeland, attended his lectures and protracted dances, disbelieved in Divine revelation and a future existence, and fully accorded with Mr Kneeland’s views of religion.¹²⁷ Having read every work of note that I could obtain, and having heard many lectures opposed to God and the Bible, I considered myself prepared to overthrow the Christian faith, and feared no argument that could be brought from the Bible. With these feelings, I attended a full course of Mr. Miller’s lectures. He gave his rules of interpretation, and pledged himself to prove his position. I approved of his rules,—the word of God—to my mind, beyond a doubt; and I have taken it as the man of my counsel....I am personally acquainted with nearly one hundred who held to a similar views with Abner Kneeland, who were converted under the preaching of Mr. Miller; and we did not yield the point without a struggle, nor without due consideration. Each and every prop and refuge of infidelity and unbelief was taken away from us, and our sandy foundation was swept by the truth of the Almighty as chaff is driven by the wind.¹²⁸

Miller’s preaching and writing was initially focused specifically on answering the questions of those influenced by Deism; and it was a focus that was apparently, very effective. Miller himself reflected upon the effectiveness of his approaches, stating, “Deism has yielded to the truth of God’s word, and many men of strong minds have acknowledged that the scriptures must be of divine origin.”¹²⁹ Similarly, in a letter to Hendryx written after preaching in Lansingburgh, NY, Miller exulted in the third person: “Infidels, Deists, Universalists, Sectarians: All, all are chained to their

¹²⁵ Miller, *A Trilogy by William Miller*, 83.

¹²⁶ Miller, *A Trilogy by William Miller*, 89-90.

¹²⁷ Abner Kneeland (1774-1844) was an evangelist and minister who left the Universalist Church in 1829. In 1831 he moved to Boston to become the lecturer of the newly formed First Society of Free Enquirers and started his own newspaper, *The Boston Investigator*. Kneeland was accused of being an atheist and underwent five trials on charges of blasphemy in Massachusetts courts. He spent sixty days in the Boston jail in 1838. Kneeland called himself a Pantheist.

¹²⁸ James White, *Life Incidents* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2003), 64.

¹²⁹ William Miller, “Memoir,” *The Midnight Cry*, November 17, 1842, 2.

seats, in perfect silence, for hours, yes days, to hear the Old Stammering Man....it is God only that could produce such an effect on such audiences. Yet it gives me confidence.”¹³⁰ Similarly, he noted in his *Memoirs* that:

Infidelity in many cases has been made to yield her iron grasp on the mind of many an individual. Deism has yielded to the truth of God’s word, and many men of strong minds have acknowledged that the scriptures must be of divine origin. The sandy foundation of Universalism, has been shaken in every place where it could be reached by an attendance on the whole course of lectures.¹³¹

Not all of Miller’s audience agreed that his reading of the Bible did in fact rely on common sense. In 1843, a pamphlet called *An Appeal to the Common sense of the People or, The Miller Delusion!!!!* was published.¹³² In this short pamphlet, the anonymous author (under the pen-name “A Citizen of Boston”) attempted to use Miller’s “Common-sense” methods against him: “Gentle reader...rest assured that if you will but exercise your reason, and reflect for a moment, I will convince you that he [Miller] has already proved to be a false prophet”.¹³³ While Miller and this anonymous author clearly have different ideas about what “common-sense” will prove, both agree that it must be the foundation for any discussion on the topic.

A “Spiritual” Approach

Miller displayed—at least once—some understanding of the difficulties involved in formulating a hermeneutic when he stated in a letter to Truman Hendryx: “If as good a man as you say father West is, can twist the scriptures to accommodate his views... why may not old Miller do the same and neither of them know it?”¹³⁴ Miller then outlines his solution: “I must read the bible for myself, try all that in me lies to divest myself of prejudice, judge with candor, get rid of self, preach what I believe to be truth, try to please God more than man, and then leave all in the hands of my divine Master, and wait for his decision.”¹³⁵ Thus for Miller, this “spiritual approach” is foundational to his hermeneutics. It provides the only possibly counter to incorrect exegesis and interpretation. In short, for Miller, “goodness” or sincerity does not guarantee a correct interpretation—even when coupled with the right hermeneutical method. The interpreter must be guided by God.

The emphasis on the spirituality necessary for correct biblical interpretation in Miller’s Rule #14, was not unique, but rather reflected the beliefs of many Christian interpreters of the time. In 1844,

¹³⁰ William Miller to Truman Hendryx, July 21, 1836.

¹³¹ Miller in Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies*, 12.

¹³² A Citizen of Boston, *An Appeal to the Common sense of the People or, The Miller Delusion!!!!* (Boston, MA: 1843).

¹³³ A Citizen of Boston, *An Appeal to the Common sense of the People or, The Miller Delusion!!!!*, 7.

¹³⁴ William Miller to Truman Hendryx, July 27, 1838.

¹³⁵ William Miller to Truman Hendryx, July 21, 1838.

Barton W. Stone wrote an open letter in response to the query of a recent college graduate on the best preparation for gospel ministry. He said, “Forget not to mingle prayer to your God for direction into all truth, and that the wisdom from above may be afforded to you....Forget not meditation and prayer—pray always—pray without ceasing—Keep yourself in the love of God. Vain will be your studies without these....Yet continue in prayer.”¹³⁶

For Miller, the only way to correctly interpret the Bible was as a believer, “The most important rule of all is, that you must have *faith*”.¹³⁷ He links this faith with the accessibility and perspicuity of the Bible, promising that God will “prevent those who sincerely trust in God...from erring far from the truth, though they may not understand Hebrew or Greek”.¹³⁸ With this statement Miller also expresses his belief in a democratic Christianity—a Christianity based on the ability of the average person to read and interpret the Bible. For Miller—perhaps based on his own lack of formal education—such education may even be seen as a hindrance to understanding the Bible correctly.

Biblicism

Biblicism was a method of biblical interpretation commonly used by Miller’s Protestant contemporaries.¹³⁹ It has been defined by Francis D. Nichols as follows: “In this method one asks a question or makes a propositional statement and then cites one or more Scripture passages, in the first instance to answer the question, and in the second to support the proposition.”¹⁴⁰ Evidence of this approach is not only found in statements like those already mentioned, but can be found when Miller’s “Rules of Interpretation” are themselves examined. Each rule (other than the final) is followed by at least one Bible reference as the “evidence” of its validity. Most rules have multiple references—rule five has seven texts while rule thirteen, has five. None of the references are explained or expanded; Miller apparently viewed the texts themselves as being overwhelming evidence that needed no further comment. For Miller, the Bible spoke for itself; it offered certainty. In a letter to Hendryx in 1832, he wrote: “At any rate if the Bible is not true, then who can tell us what is truth?”¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ John Rogers, *Biography of Elder Barton Warren Stone, Written by Himself, with Additions and Reflections by Elder John Rogers*. (Cincinnati, OH: J. A. and U. P. James), 97-98. Quoted in Boring, *Disciples and the Bible*, 14-15.

¹³⁷ Miller, “Mr Miller’s Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter,” 25-26.

¹³⁸ Miller, “Mr Miller’s Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter,” 25-26.

¹³⁹ Laura L. Vance, *Seventh-day Adventism in Crisis: Gender and Sectarian Change in an Emerging Religion* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 15.

¹⁴⁰ Francis D. Nichols, “What’s Wrong With the Proof-Text Method?,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 11, 1976, 10.

¹⁴¹ William Miller to Truman Hendryx, October 1, 1832.

Within biblicism there is an “attempt to fasten one’s attention exclusively on the biblical data excluding any help from philosophy or the history of dogmatics.”¹⁴² Miller’s approach certainly reflects such a practice. In attempting to utilize the biblical text alone in his defence of the Bible, Miller was also taking on Deists such as Paine on their own terms. Paine had argued that the evidence for the Bible’s unauthenticity came from the Bible itself: “The evidence I shall produce is contained in the book itself; I will not go out of the Bible for proof against the supposed authenticity of the Bible.”¹⁴³ Miller did not appeal to miracles or other supernatural phenomena, but rather to his new-found ability to reconcile the Bible’s contradictions, making “the Bible, as a whole, one of the most simple, plain, and intelligible books ever written.”¹⁴⁴ As Rasmussen points out, “To Miller, the Bible became everything; it was the source of his beliefs *and his weapon against his opponents*.”¹⁴⁵

While lecturing in Waterford, NY, Miller met with the local Congregational minister. James White records the following incident: “Mr. Miller told the clergyman that he might ask any question he pleased, and he would answer the best he could. The minister accordingly asked him some twenty questions, *each one of which Mr. M. answered by quoting a text of Scripture*.”¹⁴⁶ Miller’s approach was quite effective. [William?] G. Stone, a Millerite convert, wrote Miller stating, “[When] I heard that you were going to lecture, I said that I would go and hear you and if you did not tell the truth, I should be able to detect you, I carried my Bible, a thing never my practice, instead of my finding you in error I found myself on a sandy foundation, and ever since then I have found Jesus the one altogether lovely and the Chief among ten thousands....”¹⁴⁷

In a September 9, 1847 letter to Joshua V. Himes, Miller concludes with the following passage:

Go on then, my brother, bring your opponents to the Bible, compel them to prove their doctrine by that sole arbiter of our faith, and depend upon it, that they must yield the victory, sooner or later. GOD and the BIBLE is your strength; and while you rely on them you will never fail....Let God and the Bible be your motto. As ever, yours in the same faith and hope.¹⁴⁸

Miller did not just emphasize the Bible, but also emphasized the Bible alone as the foundation of doctrine. Miller himself painted a vivid picture of his ministry when he stated,

¹⁴² Bernard Ramm, *A Handbook of Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), 23.

¹⁴³ Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Complete Works of Thomas Paine*, II vols., vol. I (New York, NY: Citadel Press, 1945), 531.

¹⁴⁴ Miller, “Rules of Interpretation,” 69. Emphasis added.

¹⁴⁵ Rasmussen, “Roots of the Prophetic Hermeneutic of William Miller”, 28.

¹⁴⁶ White, *Sketches of the Christian Life and Public Labors of William Miller*, 177.

¹⁴⁷ [William?] G. Stone to William Miller, July 2, 1843.

¹⁴⁸ William Miller to Joshua V. Himes, September 9, 1847.

Had you have seen the old farmer then, without education, with but limited means, almost unknown, unaccustomed to public speaking; without sympathy, authority, or recommendation from men; *going into the world with the Bible alone in his hand* to bear a solemn message to a sleeping church and a stupid world; - a message so alarming as the announcement of the speedy coming of the last judgment, and the conflagration of the world; - a doctrine so contrary to the human heart, so opposed to all the received opinions of the community; - had you have seen me under these circumstances, I am disposed to believe that you would have pronounced me very visionary and fanatical.¹⁴⁹

At the root of such statements is the Protestant Reformation mantra of “*sola Scriptura*”. As Richard Rice has pointed out however, for the Protestant reformers, the principle represented, “an affirmation of the Bible’s authority, rather than a procedural rule for biblical exegesis.”¹⁵⁰ Similarly, Timothy George notes that “The *sola* in *sola scriptura* was not intended to discount completely the value of church tradition, but rather to subordinate it to the primacy of holy Scripture.”¹⁵¹

More immediately however, it was the influence of the early 19th century American Restoration movement that lead to this becoming a foundational Millerite doctrine. As Hatch points out, between 1780 and 1830, many American denominations, sects, movements, and individuals “claimed to be restoring a pristine biblical Christianity free from all human devices.”¹⁵² The members of the Christian Association took the view, “where the holy Scriptures speak, we speak; and where they are silent, we are silent.”¹⁵³ In 1826, Alexander Campbell claimed, “I have endeavoured to read the scriptures as though no-one had read them before me, and I am as much on my guard against reading them today, through the medium of my own views yesterday, or a week ago, as I am against being influenced by any foreign name, authority, or system whatever.”¹⁵⁴ The attitudes of many American Christians of the time may be summed up by another quote from Alexander Campbell: “The Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible is the religion of Protestants.”¹⁵⁵ Similarly, Congregationalist minister Charles Beecher promoted “the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁹ Himes, ed., *Evidence from Scripture*, 55. Emphasis added.

¹⁵⁰ Richard Rice, *Reason and the Contours of Faith* (Riverside, CA: La Sierra University Press, 1991), 93.

¹⁵¹ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nasville, TN: Broadman Press, 1988), 315.

¹⁵² Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 179.

¹⁵³ Quoted in Holifield, *Theology in America*, 295.

¹⁵⁴ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, April 3, 1826, 229. Quoted in Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 179.

¹⁵⁵ Alexander Campbell and N. L. Rice, *A Debate Between Rev. A. Campbell and Rev. N. L. Rice, On the Action, Subject, Design, and Administration of Christian Baptism* (Lexington, KY: Skillman, 1844), 49.

¹⁵⁶ Charles Beecher, *The Bible a Sufficient Creed* (Fort Wayne: Times & press job office, 1846), 26.

These groups were noted for their distinctive popularist approach to the Bible; an approach that while not new had gained great popularity by the end of the eighteenth century. According to Noll, “assertions privileging the Scriptures over against all other authorities can be found as far back in the American past as one cares to look. But by the 1770s criticism of other authorities that earlier Protestants had accepted alongside Scripture was becoming more pronounced.”¹⁵⁷ In 1775 the outspoken Congregationalist Ezra Stiles complained that biblical commentaries were “becoming little more than a Vehicle to put off human Systems upon Mankind for the Scripture Verity.”¹⁵⁸ Stiles’ central desire was “to have the pure word of God by itself.”¹⁵⁹ Some 76 years later, Edward Robinson would proclaim similar sentiments: “It has ever been the glory of the Protestant Faith, that it has placed the Scriptures where they ought to be, above every human name, above every human authority. THE BIBLE IS THE ONLY AND SUFFICIENT RULE OF FAITH AND PRACTICE.”¹⁶⁰

The Restoration movement that arose in the 1790s along the eastern seaboard of the United States focussed on “restoring” the church to by returning to pure New Testament Christianity. They aimed to erase denominational lines by restoring the church with the Bible as its only creed. One of the earliest leaders of the Restoration movement was James O’Kelly of the Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1793, he withdrew from the Baltimore conference of his church and called upon others to take “The Holy Bible...our only creed, and a sufficient rule of faith and practice.”¹⁶¹ His influence was particularly felt in Virginia and North Carolina where he gained at least seven thousand followers who advocated a return to primitive New Testament Christianity.

In 1802 a similar movement among the Baptists in New England was led by Abner Jones and Elias Smith. They were concerned about denominational names and creeds, and decided to wear only the name, “Christian,” taking the Bible as their only guide.¹⁶² In 1804, in the western frontier state of Kentucky, Barton Stone and several other dissident Presbyterian preachers took similar action declaring that they would take the Bible as the “only sure guide to Heaven.”¹⁶³ In 1809 Thomas Campbell issued a “Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of

¹⁵⁷ Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 373.

¹⁵⁸ Franklin Bowditch Dexter, ed., *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (New York: 1901), 556.

¹⁵⁹ Dexter, ed., *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, 557.

¹⁶⁰ Edward Robinson, *The Bible and its Literature* (New York: Office of the American Biblical Repository, 1841), 17. Original emphasis.

¹⁶¹ W. E. McLenny, *The Life of Rev. James O’Kelly and the Early History of the Christian Church in the South* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards & Broughton, 1910), 111.

¹⁶² Elias Smith, *The Life, Conversion, Preaching, Travels and Sufferings of Elias Smith* (Portsmouth: 1816), 313-314.

¹⁶³ Robert Marshall and others, “Last Will and Testament, 1804.”

Washington”, calling for the establishment of a group of Christians that would take “the divine word alone” for their rule.¹⁶⁴ In 1835 Stone summarized his position: “The ground on which we then stood, was the Bible alone, as the only rule of our faith and practice. This ground we yet occupy, to the exclusion of all creeds of human mold, and device, as authoritative”.¹⁶⁵ In 1816 Elias Smith recorded that in his preaching he “endeavored to prove every particular from plain declarations recorded in the Bible.”¹⁶⁶ A direct link can be seen between Smith’s statement and Miller’s systematic approach to biblical interpretation: “but you know my manner of proving things. By Bible”.¹⁶⁷

Miller’s beliefs about the Bible were not unique—but rather strongly influenced by the religious cultures of his era as outlined above. It was certainly one reason why Miller gained such popularity. As Nathan Hatch points out, the common people, “Bibles in hand, relished the right to shape their own faith and submit to leaders of their own choosing.”¹⁶⁸

Using the example of the Protestant Reformers, Peter Harrison notes that one of the natural outgrowths of such attitudes was a literal approach to the biblical text. “If the Bible alone was to be the final court of appeal on matters of religious doctrine, it would need to be interpreted in a way which reduced ambiguities and multiple meanings. Only a literal method, or more strictly a method which allowed but a single meaning to be assigned to each passage of scripture, could serve this purpose.”¹⁶⁹

Similarly, Burt notes that, “Fundamental to Miller’s theology was the role of the Bible. He believed the Bible could be understood, was consistent with itself, answered human need, and revealed God’s plan for the future. As a former deistic rationalist he expected the Bible to make sense....The biblical reasonableness of Millerism brought a certainty that became a compelling power.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁴ Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington* (1809). Online version located at: <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/tcampbell/da/DA-1ST.HTM>

¹⁶⁵ Barton W. Stone, *The Christian Messenger*, February 1835, 41-42.

¹⁶⁶ Smith, *The Life, Conversion, Preaching, Travels and Sufferings of Elias Smith*, 292.

¹⁶⁷ William Miller to Truman Hendryx, October 23, 1834. Original emphasis.

¹⁶⁸ Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 183.

¹⁶⁹ Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science*, 113.

¹⁷⁰ Burt, “Historical Introduction,” xv-xvi.

Proof-texting

As Zoltán Szalos-Farkas points out, it is clear that Miller worked with “a fully-fledged proof-text exegesis”.¹⁷¹ Miller was apparently unconcerned with issues of authorship, redaction, source criticism or other issues of critical scholarship. This was to be expected, the majority of Americans—whether trained as biblical scholars or not—were not interested in these issues. “It was only in New England that critical biblical studies made a considerable impact during the period.”¹⁷² And even in New England, such interest waned towards the middle of the nineteenth century.¹⁷³

Nor was Miller interested in reading the Scriptures in the original languages. In 1844 Miller carried on a discussion with George Bush on this particular point. Bush criticized Miller’s exposition, as it was based “mainly upon the reading of the English text of the Scriptures.”¹⁷⁴ Bush went on to state that it “cannot be expected that intelligent men will receive any interpretation which is not sustained by the original.”¹⁷⁵ The “seven times” of Leviticus 26:18 was used by Bush as an example of the way in which Miller had been misled by his reliance on the English text. Miller understood this phrase to signify a time period; but in the Hebrew, Bush insisted, the phrase signified “an intimation of degree; I will punish you with a seven-fold severity.”¹⁷⁶

Miller’s reply was pointed:

What! Suppose I come to you and get your understanding of the original text, will you ensure me that I receive a better understanding from you alone, than I could have from the fifty men, equally as good as yourself, if not better, who did give us the sense in English, when they gave us the present translation? If you say Yes, I shall then believe you have as much vanity, as you say the adventists have assurance. And if you say No, then you read the original text only, with your judgment to understand and teach the English sense, and I read it in the English text, I have fifty times the weight of judgment to yourself.¹⁷⁷

Similarly, in an 1837 letter to Hendryx, Miller railed against graduates of Hamilton Seminary (now Colgate University) who, rather than relying on the Bible, take “some novel *Idea* from some of their

¹⁷¹ Zoltan Szalos-Farkas, *The Rise and Development of SDA Spirituality: The Impact of the Charismatic Guidance of Ellen White* (Cernica, Romania: Editura Institutului Teologic, 2005), 106.

¹⁷² Jerry Wayne Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America, 1800-1870* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), 8.

¹⁷³ Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America, 1800-1870*, 8.

¹⁷⁴ George Bush and William Miller, *Reasons for Rejecting Mr. Miller’s Views on the Advent, by Rev. George Bush, with Mr. Miller’s Reply. Also an Argument from Professor Bush on Prophetic Time* (Boston, MS: Joshua V. Himes, 1844), 9.

¹⁷⁵ Bush and Miller, *Reasons for Rejecting Mr. Miller’s Views on the Advent...with Mr. Miller’s Reply*, 9.

¹⁷⁶ Bush and Miller, *Reasons for Rejecting Mr. Miller’s Views on the Advent...with Mr. Miller’s Reply*, 10. Original emphasis.

¹⁷⁷ Bush and Miller, *Reasons for Rejecting Mr. Miller’s Views on the Advent...with Mr. Miller’s Reply*, 20. Original Emphasis.

standard writers as they call their *Rev. Masters*” and dress it up with “a host of classical phrases, spotted over with a little *Hebrew, Greek, & Latin*, all obtained with a few month’s study of old Pagan Philosophers, obscure writers, and classical blockheads.”¹⁷⁸

As Szalos-Farkas notes, Miller’s proof-text approach further showed an unwillingness to take into account the various literary genres of the biblical passages he interpreted. Furthermore, Miller essentially ignored the literary and historical context of a passage and was totally unconcerned with the original author’s intent for the original recipients.¹⁷⁹ Peter T. Weiler refers to this approach as “iconic reading”, stating that “Iconic readers have little or no interest in the human origin and context of the text as such”.¹⁸⁰

Miller’s proof-text approach to the scriptures was certainly not unique. In his *Memoirs*, Charles G. Finney records the approach that a certain Mr Patterson, a minister in Auburn, PA; took to the Bible in his own preaching: “He would take a text, and after making a few remarks upon it, or perhaps none at all, some other text would be suggested to him, upon which he would make some very pertinent and striking remarks, and then another text; and thus his sermons were made up of pithy and striking remarks on a great number of texts as the arose in his mind.”¹⁸¹ Millerite literature also frequently used this methodology. Lorenzo Dow Fleming’s 1844 book *First Principles of the Second Advent Faith With Scripture Proofs* consists almost entirely of statements and long lists of “proof-texts” that “prove” each statement given. For example, Fleming’s first statement, that “the Lord Jesus Christ will come to this earth a second time,” is “proven” by over twenty Bible texts quoted in full.¹⁸²

Connecting all of these points is recognition that Miller’s approach was aimed at a general audience without formal theological training—in other words, people like himself. Even those Millerite leaders with some form of theological training approached the scriptures using Miller’s proof-text methodology.¹⁸³

Miller’s hermeneutical approach is clearly outlined in his Fourteen Rules. These Rules themselves reflect the dominant historicist approach to Bible interpretation—with its emphasis on the year/day principle, symbolism and typology, and synchronization; then present in nineteenth-

¹⁷⁸ William Miller to Truman Hendryx, October 26, 1837. Original emphasis.

¹⁷⁹ Szalos-Farkas, “The Rise and Development of SDA Spirituality”, 106-107.

¹⁸⁰ Peter T. Weiler, “‘Iconic Readers’- Daniel 7-12 in a Community of Pentecostal Interpreters.” *Australian Religious Studies Review* 11, no. 1 (2000): 31-32.

¹⁸¹ Charles G. Finney, *Memoirs of the Rev. Charles G. Finney* (New York: A. S. Barnes [AMS Press], 1876 [1973]), 252.

¹⁸² Fleming, *First Principles of the Second Advent Faith With Scripture Proofs*, 2-6.

¹⁸³ Szalos-Farkas, *The Rise and Development of SDA Spirituality*, 108.

century American Christianity. Miller's Rules were expressions of the underlying biblicism present in Miller's thought. This practice of answering questions or defending propositional statements by simply citing passages of Scripture is at the heart of Miller's methodology and the belief that the Bible is perspicacious and to be tread "literally" and with common sense. Miller's biblicism in turn led to a proof-texting methodology where the background to the text was essentially irrelevant—as was a knowledge of the the original language in which the text was written.

CHAPTER 3 – The Influence of Miller’s Culture and Philosophy

As Clyde E. Hewitt has aptly pointed out, “Millerism as a movement cannot be fully understood or appreciated apart from its social environment.”¹ Miller spent the first four years of his life in Massachusetts. Apart from twelve years in western Vermont, Miller spent most of his life in eastern New York State, close to the Vermont border. Western Vermont and eastern New York State were culturally very similar and generally speaking, what is said about one applies to the other. Certainly, an area like Low Hampton in New York State had much more in common with the small town of Poultney in Vermont, than it did with an urban area such as New York City—despite being across a state line.

Vermont, in the 1770s and 1780s, was an area of rapid growth. The first census of the region was taken in 1771 with Vermont counted as part of New York. Only 4,669 individuals were found—with over 51% under sixteen years of age. Nine years later—in 1780—the population of Vermont had risen more than tenfold to 47,620.²

Vermont—as a frontier state—attracted a broad cross-section of people. Jedidiah Morse wrote in his 1796 *American Universal Geography*, that the inhabitants of Vermont,

are an assemblage of people from various places, of different sentiments, manners, and habits. They have not lived long enough to assimilate and form a general character. Assemble together, in imagination, a number of different nations—consider them as living together amicably; yet vigorously opposed in particular political and religious tenets; jealous of their rulers, and tenacious of their liberties... and you have a pretty just idea of the character of the people of Vermont.³

Christian Revivalism

Early on, Vermont was not known for its piety. While in 1790 there were at least 58 Congregational groups meeting in Vermont; and two years later, a Baptist historian noted that there were 34 Baptist churches; none of these groups were large—few exceeded 25 members—nor were they particularly influential within the community.⁴

According to Ludlum, “for the first four decades of Vermont’s existence, until 1800, radicals in politics and religion were in the ascendancy.”⁵ Prior to Miller, radical examples include Nathaniel Wood and the Pilgrims. Based on his reading of the book of Revelation, Wood predicted

¹ Hewitt, *Midnight and Morning*, 46.

² Samuel A. McReynolds, “Frontiers, to Farms, to Factories: The Economic and Social Development of Vermont from 1791 to 1991,” *Vermont History: The Proceedings of the Vermont Historical Society* 71, Winter/Spring (2003): 89.

³ Quoted in Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*, 18-19.

⁴ Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*, 23.

⁵ Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*, 5-6.

that the end of the world would occur on January 14, 1801; when God would cause a great earthquake that would destroy sinners and their possessions.⁶ Another radical group entered Vermont in 1817 from Canada, led by a self-proclaimed prophet called Bullard. Known as Pilgrims, and taking up residence in South Woodstock, the group clothed themselves in furs and leather. “Finding no Scriptural command to wash, they never bathed, but delighted in rolling around in the thick dust which covers Vermont by-roads in summertime.”⁷

In 1812 one Christian lamented: “The state of religion is low and unpromising [in Vermont]. Stupidity with regard to the concerns of a future state generally prevails.”⁸ Revivals were uncommon during the war of 1812, and converts were few—in fact, the political upheavals of the time actually resulted in the destruction of the Fairhaven Baptist Church, which split due to the “high excitement of political feeling” present at the time.⁹ As Ludlum points out, “it was not until the cessation of warfare... that the way was prepared for a widespread renewal of religious fervour.”¹⁰

The situation changed following the 1815 signing of the Treaty of Ghent, which ushered in an age of prosperity in Vermont. It also marked the beginning of a twenty-year period of religious enthusiasm. Randolph Roth points out that by the mid-1830s, Vermonters were “the most churchgoing people in the Protestant world. Eighty percent attended church regularly.... Vermont was thus a peculiarly spiritual place.”¹¹ This was particularly true of the border area where Miller spent his life—“Religious ferment [was] rampant in the area around Low Hampton and Poultney.”¹²

A number of evangelists impacted Vermont in the first half of the nineteenth century. These included Jedidiah Burchard who in 1834 and 1835 “raised a great fire of religious fervor” as he passed through central and northern Vermont.¹³ Typical of many evangelists of the times Burchard held extended campaigns—one in Woodstock went for 28 days, lengthy meetings, and used anxious seats, inquiry rooms, and repetitive exhortations to make numerous converts.¹⁴

Another crusader, Orson S. Murray, set out to reform Vermont society—including the established churches through his newspaper—the *Vermont Telegraph*: “The mass of the popular

⁶ Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*, 241-242.

⁷ Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*, 242-243.

⁸ Quoted in Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*, 49.

⁹ Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*, 49.

¹⁰ Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*, 49.

¹¹ Roth, “Can Faith Change the World? Religion and Society in Vermont’s Age of Reform,” 7-8.

¹² Ward, “Religious Enthusiasm in Vermont, 1761-1847”, 212.

¹³ Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*, 56.

¹⁴ Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*, 56-57.

clergy have always stood at the threshold against reform.... The popular political and religious systems are in league, and are alike full of mockery and hypocrisy. They are a scourge to humanity, an outrage on Christianity, and an impiousness before God.”¹⁵

For whatever reason, the Vermont/New York area seemed predisposed to religious extremism. One prominent example of religious extremism is John Humphrey Noyes. Best known for his establishment of a utopian community in Oneida, New York, Noyes began his work in Vermont. Seeking to establish a new societal order, Noyes developed a complex set of religious, perfectionist principles and then wandered throughout New York and New England for twelve years spreading his ideas. Unsuccessful in his evangelism, Noyes returned to his home in Putney, Vermont in 1836; starting first a Bible School, then a Society of Inquiry and finally the utopian Putney Community in 1844. Following his attempts to introduce complex marriage to the community, Noyes was indicted for adultery in 1847 and fled Vermont for Oneida.¹⁶

A second example of religious extremism is the geographical phenomenon known as the “burned-over district.” The phrase was coined by the nineteenth-century revivalist Charles Grandison Finney who observed, “I found that region of the country what, in the western phrase, would be called, ‘a burnt district.’”¹⁷ It referred to an area of upper New York State defined by the route of the Erie Canal, and extended, “from just east of Utica to just west of Buffalo, north to the foothills of the Adirondacks and the shores of Lake Ontario, and south to the tip of the Finger Lakes.”¹⁸ The area was named because of the large number of revivals that had occurred; beginning with the Great Revival of 1799-1800, a lesser peak in 1807-1808, and a massive series of revivals in the years following the War of 1812—particularly the years 1815-1821. Another peak occurred in 1824-1826.¹⁹

Some interest in Miller’s views in the Burned-over district had begun as early as 1833, when a clergyman—apparently having read Miller’s ideas in the *Vermont Telegraph*—began preaching the Second Advent message in Chautauqua County. Circulation of Miller’s book—*Lectures on the*

¹⁵ Quoted in Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*, 60.

¹⁶ Lawrence Foster, “Free Love and Feminism: John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 1, no. 2 (1981): 170-171. See also Tyler, *Freedom’s Ferment*, 184-195. Complex marriage “meant that each woman in the group was the wife of every man and that every man was the husband of each woman.” Tyler, *Freedom’s Ferment*, 188.

¹⁷ Quoted in Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium*, 3.

¹⁸ Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium*, 3.

¹⁹ Cross, *The Burned-over District*, 9-13.

Second Coming was reported from Madison County in 1838, and from Attica in 1839.²⁰ Miller himself preached in the area for five successive years—1840-1844.²¹

“Although Millerism began in Eastern New York and enjoyed its early success there and in New England, the center of gravity of the movement shifted westward to the Burned-over District. At least as many individuals seem to have accepted Miller’s teachings in the District as in New England.”²² Evangelistic efforts in the area reached a peak in 1843 and 1844. At least twenty-five Millerite evangelists travelled the area. “They criss-crossed the entire area on single tours and in teams, meeting at their route junctions for larger sessions.”²³

This region then provided Miller with a receptive and enthusiastic audience who were religiously inclined and biblically orientated. Furthermore, the religiosity of this community provided an atmosphere that ensured Miller—despite his earlier deistic leanings—was very familiar with the Bible, with Christian doctrine—including eschatology, and form of Christianity centred on a certain urgency toward revival and change.

Rationalist Thought—Deism

In a sermon published in 1750, the Rev. Samuel Quincy stated:

The Doctrines of Christianity are founded in Truth and Reason, and capable of being supported by clear and rational Arguments....the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the Doctrines of his Apostles... commend themselves to the Reason and Consciences of Men, by fair and undeniable Arguments....Christianity is then a rational religion, and those who deny that it can, or ought to be maintained upon rational Principles, do in Effect give it up.”²⁴

While there is no direct evidence that Miller was influenced by Quincy’s views, he would have agreed whole-heartedly with these sentiments. Miller’s years as a Deist influenced his later Christian views profoundly, leaving him with a belief system that placed rationalism, reason, and common-sense, above all else. As Nathan O. Hatch points out, “When Miller returned to the Christian fold in 1816, he did so as an unrelenting Rationalist.”²⁵

Miller developed his system of interpretation to answer specific questions that arose out of his spiritual/philosophical journey. While raised a Baptist, under the influence of Rationalist friends

²⁰ Cross, *The Burned-over District*, 294.

²¹ Cross, *The Burned-over District*, 300, 304.

²² Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium*, 42.

²³ Cross, *The Burned-over District*, 295.

²⁴ Samuel Quincy, *Twenty Sermons* (Boston, 1750), quoted in Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 408, 411.

²⁵ Nathan O. Hatch, “Millennialism and Popular Religion in the Early Republic,” in *The Evangelical Tradition in America*, ed. Leonard I. Sweet (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1984), 119.

Miller turned to Deism in his early twenties. In 1816, after some years of increasing discomfort with his deistic beliefs, he converted to Christianity.²⁶ Miller records his conversion to Deism in a published letter dated February 25, 1840; as follows:

My Dear Brother, You ask me to give you some account of the manner in which my mind was lead into the doctrine which has drawn down upon me so much virulence from the several sects of the present day.... I answer:- When I was young my mind was lead into the doctrine of Deism, from the fact, that the advocates of the Bible, did, almost all acknowledge that God had revealed himself in a mysterious and dark manner; especially in all those passages which relate to the future, to establish faith or support hope. I then argued, that as God required faith in his word, and denounced sore and heavy judgments on those who believed not, without a distinction of any particular part of his revealed [sic] will, he could neither be wise, good, nor a God of love, to demand impossibilities of his creatures, and then punish them for disobedience. And to have faith in what we could not understand, would be a blind faith, and the very height of folly.²⁷

Whitney R. Cross sees Miller's deistic beliefs as having been "rather a fashionable, youthful adventure than a firm-rooted conviction."²⁸ This simplistic viewpoint does not do justice to the difficulty in reconciling Miller's deistic beliefs with philosophical issues and current events that his writings reveal; nor to the fact that it was the taunts of his Deist friends following his conversion to Christianity that prompted Miller's close and particular examination of the biblical text. Miller appears not only to have been a Deist, but also an active apologist for deistical views. Miller reflected that as a Deist, he "was associated with others in the defence of deistical sentiments, for about twelve years."²⁹

Deism was not American in origin, but had its origins in seventeenth century Europe. Lord Herbert of Cherbury—the "father of deism"—proposed five principles in his 1624 tract *De Veritate*: "God exists; it is our duty to worship him; the proper way to do so is to practise virtue; men ought to repent their sins; rewards and punishments will follow death."³⁰ While not all later Deists adopted these principles—there being particular disagreement over the reality of an existence after death—all Deists believed in a Supreme Being, in nature as the only revelation of this Supreme Being, and the need to live a virtuous life.³¹

²⁶ Knight, *Search for Identity*, 39.

²⁷ William Miller, "Letter From Mr Miller--No. I," *Signs of the Times*, March 20, 1840, 8.

²⁸ Cross, *The Burned-over District*, 290.

²⁹ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 3.

³⁰ Gerald R. Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason 1648-1789* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1962), 77, James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

³¹ Rasmussen, "Roots of the Prophetic Hermeneutic of William Miller", 11.

Deism was not a new influence in America; however, until the late eighteenth century it had generally been confined to an aristocratic elite.³² As Morais points out, “Up to the time of [Thomas] Paine, deism was an aristocratic cult confined almost solely to the ‘well-to-do classes.’ With the publication of Paine’s *The Age of Reason*, the axis about which deistic thought in America rotated, the new ideology reached the rural and urban masses.”³³ This transformation of deism into a popular movement—though a somewhat sporadic and ephemeral one, saw deism attract a great deal of attention from the orthodox Christian churches.

Influenced by the Enlightenment’s championship of reason and science, the American deists rejected the supernaturalist worldview of conventional Christianity. They denied the possibility of revelation or miracles, refused to acknowledge that Jesus was divine or the Godhead Trinitarian, and in many instances they even insisted that the moral precepts spelled out in the New Testament were unworthy of either God or man. In place of the Christian faith, they defended a religion based upon the dictates of reason and conscience, and argued that God revealed himself not through the moldering pages of Scripture as much through the panorama of natural law.³⁴

“From 1789 to 1805, deism assailed more vigorously than ever before the supernatural revelation of Christianity....The deistic tendency was distinguished not only by its greater aggressiveness but also by its greater appeal.”³⁵

The spread of deism was seen as such a danger that in its 1798 General Assembly, the Presbyterian Church issued a warning to the American people. They predicted that unless Americans turned away from deism, the wrath of God would be visited on them. The Assembly suggested that a day of humiliation, prayer, and fasting be set aside to avert the coming doom.³⁶

On October 16, 1802, the deistic magazine *Temple of Reason* asserted that there were more Deists than Christians in America. Two years later, another deistic magazine *Prospect, or View of the Moral World* declared on June 16, 1804 that there were “thousands and tens of thousands of Deists in the United States and Europe.”³⁷ Of these two claims, it is the second that is by far the more credible.

As E. Brooks Holifield points out,

³² Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life* (New York, NY: MacMillan, 1987), 127.

³³ Herbert M. Morais, *Deism in Eighteenth Century America* (New York, NY: Russell and Russell, 1960), 120.

³⁴ Kerry S. Walters, *Rational Infidels: The American Deists* (Durango, CO: Longwood Academic, 1992), 214.

³⁵ Morais, *Deism in Eighteenth Century America*, 120.

³⁶ Morais, *Deism in Eighteenth Century America*, 154.

³⁷ Quoted in Morais, *Deism in Eighteenth Century America*, 156. Both magazines were founded and edited by Elihu Palmer.

[Deists] had an influence on Christian thought in America far out of proportion to their numbers, for their criticisms of Christianity, particularly their attacks on belief in biblical revelation, produced, by way of reaction, a renewal of interest in the Christian evidences. Their claim of superior rationality and practicality produced corresponding Christian counter-assertions. And their defense of a natural religion, independent of any particular revelation or tradition, prompted a Christian defense of a natural theology linked to the biblical revelation.³⁸

According to Ludlum, “The cult of Deism flourished in Vermont in the years lying roughly between 1780 and 1800.”³⁹ Evidence of this is given in an account of a 1789, evangelistic tour that Congregationalist Nathan Perkins made to Vermont. He recorded that,

About one quarter of ye inhabitants, and almost all ye men of learning, are deists in ye State. People pay little regard to ye Sabbath, hunt and fish on that day frequently. Not more than one sixth of ye families attend prayer in the whole State. About one half would be glad to have ye Gospel & support ye public worship & ye Gospel ministry. The rest would chuse [*sic*] to have no Sabbath—no ministers—no religion—no heaven—no hell—no morality.⁴⁰

Miller apparently became a Deist in 1804—about a year after his move to Poultney and his newly acquired access to the local library.⁴¹ Regarding Miller’s conversion to deism, Bliss writes:

It could be shown, from sentiments embodied in some of his essays, in addresses delivered before societies existing at the time, and in his poetic effusions, that his moral and religious views were of a type that would pass with the world as philosophical, pure, and sublime. But the men with whom he associated from the time of his removal to Poultney, and to whom he was considerably indebted for his worldly favors, were deeply affected with sceptical principles and deistical theories...they rejected the Bible as the standard of religious truth, and endeavored to make its rejection plausible by such aid as could be obtained from the writings of Voltaire, Hume, Volney, Paine, Ethan Allen, and others. Mr. Miller studied these works closely, and at length avowed himself a deist.⁴²

Miller is also likely to have been influenced by the *Farmer’s Library*—a weekly newspaper published by Mathew Lyon and widely distributed in western Vermont and adjacent areas.⁴³ The newspaper began publication on April 1, 1793 and was also known as the *Vermont Political and Historical Register*; and carried the subtitle “A Political and Historical paper”⁴⁴

³⁸ Holifield, *Theology in America*, 159.

³⁹ Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*, 26.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*, 28.

⁴¹ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 25.

⁴² Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 24-25.

⁴³ Officially the newspaper was published by Lyon’s son James. However, Matthew Lyon provided the finances, selected editors, and “played a decisive role in determining the contents of the paper.” Aleine Austin, *Matthew Lyon “New Man” of the Democratic Revolution 1749-1822* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981), 76.

⁴⁴ Smith and Rann, eds., *History of Rutland County*, 214.

Aleine Austin points out that “these issues of the *Farmer’s Library* document the vitality with which the rationalist ideas of the Enlightenment served as practical guides to action for men [such as Miller] far removed from the accustomed centers of cultivation and political power.”⁴⁵ Importantly, “deism helped to popularize a heightened historical consciousness toward ancient religious texts.”⁴⁶

Rutland County appears to have been an area of particularly irreligious sentiment. After moving to Clarendon in Rutland County in the 1780’s, John Clark recorded that he found, “vice predominant and irreligion almost epidemical, Sabbath disregarded, profanity, debauchery, drunkenness, quareling [*sic*].”⁴⁷ Local libraries were often centres for rationalist ideas. This is particularly true of Miller’s local library in Poultney, which was apparently well-known for its collection of Deist writings. In fact, two ministers who had joined the local social library became so exercised over the quantity of “infidel” books in the collection that they were successful in promoting the sale of the entire stock so that more orthodox volumes could be purchased. The ministers themselves bought the “infidel” titles and righteously burned them.⁴⁸

James Witherell—whose library Miller accessed—served as president of the Rutland county Democratic Society.⁴⁹ While the Society was not anti-religious in purpose, it did provide an “arena in which anticlerical and Deist ideas were free to develop.”⁵⁰ Thus, while a record of the contents of Witherell’s library is unavailable, the library of a man with such leanings was likely to contain a large proportion of books of a similar nature. A study of the private libraries of thirteen lawyers in Windsor County, Vermont for the years 1780-1835, found that most holdings were sizeable—averaging 117 volumes. Two contained more than 400 volumes. These libraries were heavily secular—four libraries did not contain a Bible and “only six included any sermons, theology, or church history.”⁵¹ Witherell’s library—the library of a wealthy judge—was likely to be similar—relatively large, and generally secular in nature.

Miller himself recorded his familiarity with deistical writers, stating, “I became acquainted with the principal men in that village [Poultney, NY], who were professedly Deists; but they were good citizens, and of a moral and serious deportment. They put into my [hands] the works of

⁴⁵ Austin, *Matthew Lyon*, 81.

⁴⁶ Robert E. Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 14.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*, 20.

⁴⁸ Joseph Joslin, Barnes Frisbie, and Frederick Ruggles, *History of the Town of Poultney, Vermont From its Settlement to the Year 1875 With Family and Biographical Sketches and Incidents* (Poultney, VT: Journal Printing Office, 1875), 46-49.

⁴⁹ Ward, “Religious Enthusiasm in Vermont, 1761-1847”, 213.

⁵⁰ Ward, “Religious Enthusiasm in Vermont, 1761-1847”, 213.

⁵¹ Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life*, 281.

Voltaire, Hume, Paine, Ethan Allen, and other deistical writers.”⁵² Sylvester Bliss—Miller's biographer, gives a slightly different list, stating that Miller studied closely “the writings of Voltaire, Hume, Volney, Paine, Ethan Allen, and others.”⁵³ Based on the popularity and influence of their writings in America, the “other” Deist writers are likely to have included Thomas Jefferson; and Elihu Palmer. In an aside in a letter to Joshua V. Himes, Miller wrote in 1842: “I am truly astonished to read from the pen of the Professor such scepticism. If Voltaire, or Tom Paine, had written thus, it would have been called blasphemous by the Christian world.”⁵⁴ Such an aside does not prove that Miller read either Voltaire or Paine, but indicates at the very least, that he was familiar with the nature and content of their writings.

Voltaire

Francois-Marie Arouet (21 November, 1694 – 30 May, 1778) is better known by the pen name Voltaire. He was French Enlightenment writer, who was very influential in the United States; the American historian Preserved Smith reflected that: “The Enlightenment resembled a new religion, of which Reason was the God, Newton’s Principia the Bible, and Voltaire the Prophet.”⁵⁵

While Voltaire insisted upon the existence of God, his God was an impersonal one who’s primary function was to maintain order.⁵⁶ His basic premise was that “God the General in the Universe gives different orders to different bodies.”⁵⁷ Voltaire held the established churches in contempt, and for most of his life, did not subscribe to any alternative. Late in his life however, Voltaire was initiated into a Masonic lodge.⁵⁸

Voltaire’s works were widely available in America, a number—including his influential *Philosophical Dictionary*—were published there prior to 1800.⁵⁹ Voltaire’s historical works—including his *General History of Europe*—are said to have been the most read of any foreign books in Maryland colonial libraries.⁶⁰ Undoubtedly, the writings of Voltaire would have formed a key part of the library of any Deist. Following a fire that destroyed his house in 1813, John Randolph of

⁵² Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 3.

⁵³ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 24.

⁵⁴ Miller, *Miller’s Reply to Stuart*, 67.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Paul M. Spurlin, “Voltaire and the Enlightenment,” in *The World of Voltaire*, ed. Charles H. Sawyer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1969), 7.

⁵⁶ Margaret C. Jacobs, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), 102.

⁵⁷ Voltaire, *The Elements of Sir Isaac Newton’s Philosophy* (London: Stephen Austin, 1783), 236.

⁵⁸ Jacobs, *The Radical Enlightenment*, 106.

⁵⁹ Paul M. Spurlin, *The French Enlightenment in America* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 76.

⁶⁰ J. T. Wheeler, “Books Owned by Marylanders, 1700-1776,” *Maryland Historical Magazine* 35 (1940). Quoted in Spurlin, *The French Enlightenment in America*, 100-101.

Roanoke, Virginia wrote, “I lost a valuable collection of books. In it was a whole body of infidelity, the Encyclopedia of Diderot and D’Alembert. Voltaire’s works in seventy volumes, Rousseau... Hume.”⁶¹

David Hume

The Scottish philosopher David Hume (April 26, 1711 – August 25, 1776) was raised in the Church of Scotland though he lost his faith while studying at the University of Edinburgh. According to a contemporary—James Boswell—Hume stated that he “never entertained any belief in religion since he began to read [John] Locke and [Samuel] Clarke” while attending university.⁶²

Hume’s best known works are: *A Treatise of Human Nature* (3 volumes, 1739-1740); *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary* (a collection of approx. 40 essays, first published 1741-1752); *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748); *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751); *The Natural History of Religion* (1757); *A History of England* (6 volumes, 1754-1762); and *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1778). The latter work has been termed “the single most important and influential book of philosophy on the subject of religion.”⁶³ While covering a wide range of topics, Hume’s works are unified by “their author’s commitment to the experimental method, or to a form of empiricism that sees both the advantages and the necessity of relying on experience and observation to provide the answers to intellectual questions of all kinds.”⁶⁴ J. C. A. Gaskin illustrated Hume’s importance when he points out that “Hume’s critique of religion and religious belief is, as a whole, subtle, profound, and damaging to religion in ways which have no philosophical antecedents and few successors.”⁶⁵

Volney

Constantin Francois de Chassebœuf, comte de Volney (3 February 1757 – 25 April 1820) was a French historian, travel-writer, and philosopher who assumed the name Volney. His principal work, *Les Ruines; ou, Méditation sur les révolutions des empires* (1791), was translated into English in 1795 as *The Ruins, or a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires*. It was popularly known as *The Ruins*. The book popularized religious scepticism and was influential not only in France but also in England and the United States—especially among rationalists, Deists and other freethinkers. *The Ruins* was the only French “over-all best seller” in eighteenth-century America, selling at least

⁶¹ Quoted in Spurlin, *The French Enlightenment in America*, 99.

⁶² Quoted in David O’Connor, *Hume on Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), 2.

⁶³ O’Connor, *Hume on Religion*, ix.

⁶⁴ David F. Norton, “An Introduction to Hume’s Thought,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David F. Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 3.

⁶⁵ J. C. A. Gaskin, “Hume on Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David F. Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 313.

40,000 copies.⁶⁶ After Paine's *Age of Reason*, Volney's *The Ruins* was "probably the most read of deistic works."⁶⁷ It was published in at least three American editions—the first in Philadelphia in 1795.⁶⁸ As well, 1,200 copies of an English translation by Thomas Jefferson and Joel Barlow was published in Paris in 1802; while numerous copies were imported of the six British editions published prior to 1808.⁶⁹

Thomas Paine

Thomas Paine (February 9, 1737 – June 8, 1809) was born in England but emigrated to the America in 1774 in time to participate in the American Revolution. His most influential work, *Age of Reason* was written in three parts: Part I appeared in 1794, Part II in 1796, while Part III did not appear till after his death in 1809.⁷⁰ Part I was written just prior to Paine's imprisonment in the French Luxembourg prison for ten months, and is devoted to criticism of Christian doctrine as well as presenting his vision of a rational religion.⁷¹ Parts II and III are an analysis of the Old and New Testaments and were written in answer to critics who claimed that Paine had distorted Scripture in Part I. Paine's core beliefs are expressed in the opening credo of the *Age of Reason*—his "voluntary and individual profession of faith:"⁷² "I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for

⁶⁶ Mott, *Golden Multitudes*, 305. Mott defines "over-all best seller" as a book with a total sale equal to one percent of the population of the continental United States for the decade in which it was published.

⁶⁷ James D. Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 37.

⁶⁸ Spurlin, *The French Enlightenment in America*, 133.

⁶⁹ Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste*, 37, and Spurlin, *The French Enlightenment in America*, 133.

⁷⁰ According to Richard H. Popkin, "The Age of Reason versus The Age of Revelation Two Critics of Tom Paine: Davis Levi and Elias Boudinet," in *Deism, Masonry, and the Enlightenment*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1987), 158; the first publication of Part I was in French in 1793 or 1794, and the first publication in English in London in 1795. However, Paine's preface is addressed to "My fellow citizens of the United States of America" and is dated January 27, 1794. Foner, ed., *The Complete Works of Thomas Paine*, 3. H. Shelton Smith, Robert T. Handy, and Lefferts A. Loetscher, *American Christianity: An Historical Interpretation With Representative Documents*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1960), 508-509, state that in 1794 "five editions of Part I were printed in Paris and three in America. The combined work was first published in London in the fall of 1795." According to Richard Gimbel, Paine's *Age of Reason* is "a bibliographical enigma." Richard Gimbel, "The First Appearance of Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*," *Yale University Library Gazette* 31 (1956): 87. For a discussion of the issues involved, see Edward H. Davidson and William J. Scheick, *Paine, Scripture, and Authority* (London: Associated University Press, 1994), 105-107.

⁷¹ Popkin, "The Age of Reason versus The Age of Revelation Two Critics of Tom Paine: Davis Levi and Elias Boudinet," 158 states that Part I was written "just before being arrested by the French authorities." Likewise Smith, Handy, and Loetscher, *American Christianity*, 508. However, Walters, *Rational Infidels*, 124 states that the work was written during his imprisonment. Paine's reliance solely upon his memory—rather than upon any written sources, seems to indicate that he was not a free man. "I recollect not the prose, and where I write this I have not the opportunity of seeing it," 42. "I recollect not enough of the passages in Job to insert them correctly," 43. "I know not how the printers have pointed this passage, for I keep no Bible," 43. Foner, ed., *The Complete Works of Thomas Paine*.

⁷² Thomas Paine, *Age of Reason* (New York, NY: Willey Book Company, 1942), 6.

happiness beyond this life. I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy.⁷³

In his *Age of Reason*, Paine's strategy was to reveal the faults and weaknesses of orthodox religion—particularly Christianity. In doing so, he focused on the mystical and supernatural elements of Christianity, that have—in his eyes, obscured the real values of Christianity and therefore should be eliminated completely. Paine believed that in a sceptical and rational age, religion could survive only when it was made consistent with reason. He focused particularly on the deistic concept of God as a First Cause acting for the benefit of mankind through the laws of nature. Accordingly, Paine attacked the notion that the Bible was the word of God. He proceeded carefully—and somewhat pedantically—to dissect the Bible and point out all the inconsistencies, contradictions, and statements based upon miracles, superstition, or unreasoned proof. He stated:

Did the book called the Bible excel in purity of ideas and expression all the books that are now extant in the world, I would not take it for my rule of faith, as being the word of God, because the possibility would nevertheless exist of my being imposed upon. *But when I see throughout the greater part of this book scarcely anything but a history of the grossest vices and a collection of the most paltry and contemptible tales, I cannot dishonor my Creator by calling it by his name.*⁷⁴

Later, Paine's words would become even stronger. In the final paragraph of *Age of Reason*, he says,

I have shown in all the foregoing parts of this work, that *the Bible and Testament are impositions and forgeries*; and I leave the evidence I have produced in proof of it, to be refuted, if anyone can do it.⁷⁵

Paine's definition of a Deist was simple: "The true Deist has but one Deity, and his religion consists in contemplating the power, wisdom, and benignity of the Deity in his works, and in endeavouring to imitate him in everything moral, scientific, and mechanical."⁷⁶

The popularity of Paine's early pamphlets and his earnestness in attacking dogmas common to all denominations were considered revolutionary.⁷⁷ "No longer was deism confined to people of education and social prominence; it was now spread to the masses. It was said that the *Age Of Reason* could be found in practically every village in America and that it was tending to 'unchristianize' nominal believers."⁷⁸ *Age of Reason* gained attention through numerous newspaper

⁷³ Paine, *Age of Reason*, 6.

⁷⁴ Paine, *Age of Reason*, 29. Emphasis added.

⁷⁵ Paine, *Age of Reason*, 256. Emphasis added.

⁷⁶ Paine, *Age of Reason*, 66.

⁷⁷ Morais, *Deism in Eighteenth Century America*, 121.

⁷⁸ Morais, *Deism in Eighteenth Century America*, 121.

advertisements and was also distributed free of charge by deistic organisations.⁷⁹ Vermonter Thomas Robbins recorded that the *Age of Reason* was “greedily received” in the 1790’s.⁸⁰ Eight different printings of *Age of Reason* were issued in 1794, seven more in 1795, and two in 1796. According to James D. Hart, “It was among the most widely read books at the end of the century and certainly the most popular of all deistic texts.”⁸¹

Ethan Allen

Ethan Allen (January 21, 1738 – February 12, 1789) was together with Thomas Young, the author of a work published in 1785 as *Reason: the Only Oracle of Man*.⁸² The work was “the first systematic defense of natural religion written by an American”⁸³ and specifically targeted Christianity—a relentless attack against the Bible, established churches, and the powers of the priesthood. As Darlene Shapiro states, Allen’s book set out to demolish “the doctrines of divine revelation, miracles, the Trinity, and the divinity of Christ”.⁸⁴ Allen’s view of God was a quintessentially Deist one: “For as certain as there is a God, he is eternally and infinitely perfect, and if so, his creation and porovidence is also infinitely perfect and compleat.”⁸⁵

As Allen’s *Reason: the Only Oracle of Man* was the first widely known published American Deist work, was widely available and read, and received wide coverage in the newspapers of the day; it is highly likely that Miller would have been familiar with it.

Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson’s rational approach to religion is revealed in a 1787 letter to Peter Carr:

Your reason is now mature enough to examine this subject....shake off all the fears and servile prejudices under which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because if there be one, He must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear....Read the Bible, then, as you would read Livy or Tacitus....Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven, and you are answerable, not for the rightness, but for the uprightness of the

⁷⁹ Morais, *Deism in Eighteenth Century America*, 123.

⁸⁰ Diary of Thomas Robbins, 1:17 quoted in Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*, 29.

⁸¹ Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America’s Literary Taste*, 37.

⁸² See the discussion in George Pomeroy Anderson, “Who Wrote ‘Ethan Allen’s Bible’?”, *The New England Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (1937): 685-696.

⁸³ Kerry S. Walters, *Revolutionary Deists: Early America’s Rational Infidels*. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2011), 94.

⁸⁴ Darlene Shapiro, “Ethan Allen Philosopher-Theologian to a Generation of American Revolutionaries” *William and Mary Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1964):251-252.

⁸⁵ Ethan Allen, *Reason, the Only Oracle of Man: Or, A Compendious System of Natural Religion* (New York: G. W. & A. J. Matsell, 1836),

decision.⁸⁶

Similar thoughts are expressed in Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*, "Reason and free inquiry are the only effectual agents against error. Give a loose to them, they will support the true religion by bringing every false one to their tribunal, to the test of their investigation. They are the natural enemies of error, and of error only."⁸⁷ Such a quote fits perfectly with Miller's "rational" approach to the Scriptures.

According to Sydney E. Ahlstrom, Thomas Jefferson was "unquestionably the most significant of the American rationalists."⁸⁸ Furthermore, in April 1794, the Rutland Democratic Society was formed. Such Democratic Societies formed with the purpose of spreading Jeffersonian principles. By 1795, they were active in many areas of Vermont including Bennington, Middletown, Castleton, Middlebury, and Burlington—as well as the aforementioned Rutland.⁸⁹ Miller himself was a product of this environment. Tyler points out that, "He [Miller] was a Jeffersonian Democrat in politics," while Knight states that while living in Poultney "Miller...became a locally active Jeffersonian Democrat."⁹⁰ It would seem highly likely then, that Miller was familiar with Jefferson's writings.

Elihu Palmer

Another important influence at the time was Elihu Palmer, an ex-Baptist minister who left his calling to devote his life to attacking religious supernaturalism. "Almost single-handedly, Palmer militantly transformed natural religion from a rather bookish philosophical perspective into a popular movement that inflamed the United States for a decade."⁹¹ His widely read *Principles of Nature*—first published in 1801—has been termed "the bible of American Deism."⁹² Palmer also penned hundreds of newspaper and journal articles. He recognized the importance of the spoken word as well as the written, travelling widely throughout the United States, "lecturing extensively in city, town, and countryside to any crowd or gathering that would give him a podium."⁹³ Like Paine, Palmer attacked the supernatural elements of the Bible, viewing them as dangerous fabrications which destroy humanity's comprehension of the true beauty and harmony of the universe.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Philip S. Foner, ed., *Thomas Jefferson: Selections From His Writings* (New York: International Publishers, 1943), 75-76.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Foner, ed., *Thomas Jefferson: Selections From His Writings*, 76.

⁸⁸ Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 367.

⁸⁹ Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*, 29.

⁹⁰ Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment*, 70; Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 30.

⁹¹ Walters, *Rational Infidels*, 192.

⁹² Walters, *Rational Infidels*, 192.

⁹³ Walters, *Rational Infidels*, 200.

Around the time of Palmer's death in 1806, the influence of deism began to diminish. Walter states that the cessation of publication of the *Theophilanthropist*—a national newspaper devoted to rational religion and published by the New York Deistical Society of Theophilanthropy—in 1811, “signalled the end of deism.”⁹⁴ This is an overstatement—deism was not finished, though it was certainly lessened. “Caught between the crossfire of both liberals and evangelicals, deism wilted early in the nineteenth century.”⁹⁵ “During the nineteenth century... [the] deistic army, though eventually defeated, was far from routed.”⁹⁶ What had changed was deism's loss of influence as an “integrated, influential and militantly outspoken movement.”⁹⁷

The ideal of rational religion had lost currency in the eyes of many. It no longer spoke to those dissatisfied with conventional Christianity, no longer offered an alternative to supernaturalism that was deemed viable. There was an out-of-step, antiquarian air to its optimistic endorsement of eighteenth-century rationalism that somehow didn't quite suit the mentality of the nineteenth-century infidel.⁹⁸

Coupled with these changes was the growth of what Nathan Hatch describes as “popular religion.”⁹⁹ During the period 1780 to 1830, a wave of religious revivalism swept America—an event often termed the Second Great Awakening. Targeting liberal Christianity, deism, and radical republicanism in particular, the Second Great Awakening was remarkably successful as a revivalist movement.¹⁰⁰

Deism's Influence

As a self-described Deist and an avid reader, it is inconceivable that Miller was unfamiliar with Paine's *Age of Reason*, given the book's popularity. Indeed, it has been said that Paine's *Age of Reason* “was read more widely in this country, [the United States] and called forth more rejoinders from orthodox churchmen, than did any other Deistpublication.”¹⁰¹ Likewise, it seems highly likely that he would also be familiar with the work of Palmer—particularly since Palmer was an ex-Baptist minister, and Miller an ex-Baptist.

⁹⁴ Walters, *Rational Infidels*, 270.

⁹⁵ Smith, Handy, and Loetscher, *American Christianity*, 488.

⁹⁶ Morais, *Deism in Eighteenth Century America*, 176.

⁹⁷ Walters, *Rational Infidels*, 269.

⁹⁸ Walters, *Rational Infidels*, 271.

⁹⁹ Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 12.

¹⁰⁰ Walters, *Rational Infidels*, 272. See also Hudson, *Religion in America*, 129-138.

¹⁰¹ Smith, Handy, and Loetscher, *American Christianity*, 486.

As Rasmussen pointed out in 1983, Miller's biographers barely mentioned his Deism.¹⁰² Bliss views Deism as "the darkest feature of his [Miller's] character."¹⁰³ He also emphasises that while Miller "took the position of an unbeliever.... [He] was not a deist of the rank type."¹⁰⁴ Bliss's apologetic remarks are reproduced without comment by James White in his *Sketches of the Christian Life and Public Labors of William Miller: Gathered From His Memoir by the Late Sylvester Bliss, and From Other Sources*.¹⁰⁵ Rowe's recent biography of Miller, *God's Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World* is an exception, and Rowe spends most of one chapter discussing Deism. He points out that Miller Deism "flowed, first, from practical needs rather than intellectual conclusions. ...[Miller sought] assurance, understanding, predictability, and a measure of control over himself and the world around him."¹⁰⁶ Secondly, Deism provided Miller with an outlet for "his frustration with revealed religion."¹⁰⁷ Miller never seems to doubt the existence of a God; his problem is with the Bible and with organized religion:

While I was a Deist, I believed in a God, but I could not, as I thought, believe the Bible was the word of God. The many contradictions, and inconsistencies, which I thought could be shown, made me suppose it to be a work of designing men, whose object was to enslave the mind of man; operate on their hopes and fears, with a view to aggrandize themselves.... Besides, the advocates of Christianity admitted that the Bible was so dark and intricate that no man could understand it. This always was to me an inconsistent idea of God; and even made the Bible appear more like the oracles of the heathen gods, than like the wisdom of the just and righteous God: To give us the Scriptures to teach us the way of eternal life, and at the same time clothe them in a mantle of mysticism, so that no man could understand them! Reveal his will, which we cannot understand, and then punish us for disobedience! How can such a being be called either wise or good? These, and the like, were my arguments against the Bible.

Miller himself does not dwell on his Deism at length, though he does briefly describe his beliefs: "I... believed in a Supreme Being as brought to view by the works of nature and Providence; and believed that there was to be a hereafter, in which our happiness would be proportioned to the virtue of our lives in the present state."¹⁰⁸ Consequently, little is known about the reasons behind Miller's move away from Deism; though this move certainly reflects the changes

¹⁰² Rasmussen, "Roots of the Prophetic Hermeneutic of William Miller", 18.

¹⁰³ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 29.

¹⁰⁴ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 30.

¹⁰⁵ White, *Sketches of the Christian Life and Public Labors of William Miller*, 32-33.

¹⁰⁶ Rowe, *God's Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World*, 40.

¹⁰⁷ Rowe, *God's Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World*, 41.

¹⁰⁸ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 3.

occurring in American society at the time—as previously stated, Deism was losing popularity and was by 1830, in Miller’s own words, only the view of “aging relics and shrill outcasts.”¹⁰⁹

The earliest expression of doubt in Miller’s writings occurs during his service in the army during the War of 1812. Following the Battle of Plattsburg, Miller wrote:

Many occurrences served to weaken my confidence in the correctness of Deistical principles. I was lead frequently to compare this country to that of the children of Israel, before whom God drove out the inhabitants of their land. It seemed to me that the Supreme being must have watched over the interests of this country in an especial manner, and delivered us from the hands of our enemies. I was particularly impressed with this view when I was in the battle of Plattsburgh, when, with 1500 regulars, and about 4000 volunteers, we defeated the British, who were 15,000 strong; we being also successful, at the same time, in an engagement with the British fleet on the lake. At the commencement of the battle, we looked upon our own defeat as almost certain, and yet we were victorious. So surprising a result against such odds, did seem to me like the work of a mightier power than man.¹¹⁰

Miller also began to question the doctrine of annihilation after the death of Spencer—a sergeant in his company who was also from Poultney. He expressed his dissatisfaction with this belief in a letter to his wife dated October 28, 1814:

But a short time, and, like Spencer, I shall be no more. It is a solemn thought. Yet, could I be sure of one other life, there would be nothing terrific; but to go out like an extinguished taper is insupportable—the thought is doleful. No! rather let me cling to that hope which warrants a never-ending existence; a future spring, where troubles shall cease, and tears find no conveyance; where never-ending spring shall flourish, and love, pure as the driven snow, rest in every breast.¹¹¹

He closed his letter saying, “Good evening. *I am troubled.*”¹¹²

Miller’s reference to an extinguished taper appears to date to a conversation held some time before with a fellow Deist:

In the fall of 1812, as I was returning to Poultney from the court at Rutland, in company with Judge Stanley, I asked him his opinion respecting our condition in another state. He replied by comparing it to that of a tree, which flourishes for a time, and turns again to earth; and to that of a candle, which burns to nothing. I was then satisfied that deism was inseparably connected with, and did tend to, the denial of a future existence. And I thought to myself that rather than embrace such a view, I should prefer the heaven and hell of the Scriptures, and take my chance respecting them.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America*, 101.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 55.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 55.

¹¹² Quoted in Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 55. Emphasis added.

¹¹³ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 55-56.

Despite this, Miller concludes his account by reiterating his doubt about the Bible: “Still I could not regard the Bible as inspired.”¹¹⁴

Not all Deists however, took the same view as Judge Stanley. According to Walters, this view that troubled Miller so much, was in fact that of a minority of Deists: “Most deists accepted the immortality of the soul, but a few denied the possibility.”¹¹⁵ Walters also points out that “American deism is better understood as a general philosophical orientation that allowed a certain amount of flexibility in individual belief than a set-in-stone catechism of infallibility and obligatory doctrine.”¹¹⁶ It seems clear, however that Miller viewed deism—at least in retrospect—as generally denying the immortality of the soul. He prefaced the account of his conversation with Judge Stanley by writing “I began to suspect that deism tended to a belief of annihilation, which was always very abhorrent to my feelings.”¹¹⁷

On November 11, 1814, Miller wrote a somewhat tongue-in-cheek letter to his children, not having received the promised weekly letter from his wife. It expresses well his religious beliefs at the time:

Dear children, you have lost your mother, and but a little while, and your father must follow; perhaps when you receive this, he will be no more....Your present time ought to be devoted to your studies. Remember the lives of your parents were short, and you know not the hour you will be called for....Your first study ought to lead you to look upon the Supreme Being as the Author of all things. When you learn his attributes, or as much as a man is to know, you will ever keep in mind that he sees every action of your life, knows every thought, and hears every word. If you follow this rule, you cannot go far astray....Put not too much dependence on human favor; for there are but few who walk the narrow path....I hope, William, that you will set so good an example to your brothers and sisters, as that, if they follow it, shall ensure them peace, love, and friendship here, and happiness in the world to come.¹¹⁸

Miller’s use of the Deist terms “Supreme Being” and “Author of all things” are typical deistical expression for the period. In this letter Miller also shows his belief in the immortality of the soul—he clearly believes in the existence of heaven—the “world to come.”

As a Deist, Miller rejected the Bible as the revealed word of God because of its perceived contradictions, inconsistencies, and obscurity. He wrote in a letter to Himes that was later published in the Millerite periodical *The Midnight Cry*:

While I was a Deist, I believed in a God, but I could not, as I thought, believe the

¹¹⁴ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 56.

¹¹⁵ Kerry S. Walters, *The American Deists: Voices of Reason and Dissent in the Early Republic* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 51.

¹¹⁶ Walters, *The American Deists*, 51.

¹¹⁷ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 55.

¹¹⁸ William Miller to Lucy Miller, November 11, 1814.

Bible was the word of God. The many contradictions and inconsistencies, which I thought could be shown, made me suppose it to be the work of designing men, whose object was to enslave the mind of man—operate on their hopes and fears, with a view to aggrandize themselves. The history of religion as it has been presented to the world, and particularly by the historians of the eighteenth century, was but a history of blood, tyranny, and oppression, in which the common people were the greatest sufferers. I viewed it as a system of craft rather than of truth. Besides the advocates of Christianity admitted that the Bible was so dark and intricate that no man could understand it. This always was to me an inconsistent idea of God, and even made the Bible appear more like the oracles of the heathen gods, than like the wisdom of the just and righteous God. To give us the Scriptures to teach us the way of eternal life, and at the same time clothe them in a mantle of mysticism, so that no man could understand them! Reveal his will, which we cannot understand, and then punish us for disobedience! How can such a being be called either wise or good? These and the like, were my arguments against the Bible.¹¹⁹

Following his discharge from the army, Miller returned home, his questions concerning Deism and the afterlife apparently unanswered. He began attending his local Baptist church and was regularly asked to read the Sunday sermon during the minister's frequent absences. During one reading in 1816, he underwent a conversion experience. Notably, Miller's conversion was initially based not on a change in his view of the Scriptures as inconsistent and impenetrable, but occurred rather on an intense emotional experience. Miller did however recognise the inconsistency between his belief in a Saviour and his rejection of the Bible. He commented later, "Aside from the Bible, I found that I could get no evidence of the existence of such a Savior, or even of a future state."¹²⁰ Following his conversion—apparently feeling the need to answer the taunts of his Deist friends and their accusations about blind faith—Miller turned to the Bible, and he turned to the Bible using a particular method.

The central theme of the Deists—particularly the radical Deists like Paine and Allen was the attention they gave to "the critical debunking of special revelation, particularly the Bible."¹²¹ Paine had written in the concluding paragraph to his *Age of Reason*, "I have shown in all the foregoing parts of this work, that the Bible and the Testament are impositions and forgeries; and I leave the evidence I have produced in proof of it, to be refuted, if any one can do it."¹²² It was this and similar challenges to which Miller was responding throughout his post-conversion life.

¹¹⁹ Miller, "Memoir," 1. Original emphasis.

¹²⁰ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 5.

¹²¹ Holifield, *Theology in America*, 166.

¹²² Paine, *Age of Reason*, 256.

Common Sense Philosophy

Many historians have recognised the centrality of Common Sense Philosophy to nineteenth-century American society. According to George M. Marsden, “The prevailing intellectual opinion in nineteenth-century America was enamoured of the ‘Common Sense’ ideals of the Scottish Enlightenment, which provided an intellectual base for an unshakeable faith in the inductive scientific method associated with the seventeenth-century philosopher Francis Bacon.”¹²³ Similarly, Theodore Dwight Bozeman points out that “the Baconian ideal exerted a highly significant impact upon religious thought in [the nineteenth century].”¹²⁴ E. Brooks Holifield goes so far as to state that, “No other single philosophical movement has ever exerted as much influence on theology in America as Scottish Realism exerted on the antebellum theologians.”¹²⁵ According to Mark A. Noll, the period 1763-1815, “witnessed the triumph of Common Sense in American intellectual life.”¹²⁶ More specifically, Bozeman states that:

American intellectual life after 1800 came increasingly under the broad influence of a strenuous, dogmatic, and science-orientated empiricism. Philosophically grounded in the Lockean account of knowledge, as modified and reinforced by the empiricist school of Scottish Realism—itsself heavily influenced by science—the popular inductive epistemology of the day discouraged theory and stressed the restraining role of hard facts in the formulation of concepts in any field.¹²⁷

Common Sense Philosophy—whether termed Scottish Philosophy, Scottish Realism, or Baconianism—must be viewed as a highly influential and dominant intellectual paradigm in nineteenth-century America. It influenced all aspects of American intellectual life—including theology. C. Leonard Allen states that American Protestant theologians found Baconianism to be a “deft and flexible tool that could be employed in the services of numerous antebellum theologies.”¹²⁸ It is not possible to know for certain if Miller ever read any of the Common Sense philosophers or their interpreters—however, as Tommy L. Faris notes, it “is not beyond the realm of possibility” that he did.¹²⁹ What is clear, is that there is evidence in Miller’s writings, of his being

¹²³ George M. Marsden, “Everyone One’s Own Interpreter? The Bible, Science, and Authority in Mid-Nineteenth Century America,” in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 82.

¹²⁴ Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science*, 146.

¹²⁵ Holifield, *Theology in America*, 175.

¹²⁶ Mark A. Noll, “Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought,” *American Quarterly* 37 (1985): 218.

¹²⁷ Theodore Dwight Bozeman, “Inductive and Deductive Politics: Science and Society in Antebellum Presbyterian Thought,” *Journal of American History* 64, no. 3 (1977): 714.

¹²⁸ C. Leonard Allen, “Baconianism and the Bible in the Disciples of Christ: James S. Lamar and ‘The Organon of Scripture.’,” *Church History* 55, no. 1 (1986): 66.

¹²⁹ Faris, “William Miller: A Common Sense Life”, 11.

influenced in a broad way by the dominant Common Sense Philosophy of nineteenth-century American culture.

The archetypical philosopher of Common Sense was Thomas Reid, whose 1764 work *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* was foundational to the movement. Reid's Philosophy of Common Sense arose in "answer" to Hume's scepticism.¹³⁰ Hume believed that it was rationally impossible to "demonstrate any identity between the ideas in our minds and external reality."¹³¹

Reid agreed that there was much that could not be proved by reasoning, but argued that "our minds can know actual objects, and not mere images or ideas of them."¹³² Specifically, Reid's work was an effort to "trace Hume's 'skepticism' back to the errors of 'representationalism'...and to put in its stead a realistic theory of perception."¹³³ Reid put it simply: "Wise men now agree, or ought to agree in this, that there is but one way to the knowledge of nature's works; the way of observation and experiment."¹³⁴ However, it was Dugald Stewart—a student of Reid—whose "rhetorical gifts and great erudition" popularized Reid's work and gained him an international audience.¹³⁵ The Common Sense Philosophy was particularly popular in France and America. In 1790's America, both Reid and Stewart appeared on booksellers' lists "in great numbers" and "were repeatedly published."¹³⁶

In addition to an appeal to intuited first principles, the Scottish Philosophers often appealed to Francis Bacon and the inductive scientific method.¹³⁷ Theodore Dwight Bozeman argues that "both Reid and Stewart considered their entire philosophical program to be an enactment of the inductive plan of research set forth in Bacon's *Novum Organum*."¹³⁸ Thus, as Holifield points out, "Americans encountered Bacon largely through the writings of the philosophers of the Scottish enlightenment—the Scottish Common Sense Realists—and so, for the most part, they knew the Bacon who fit the philosophical aims of the Scots."¹³⁹

¹³⁰ S. A. Grave, *The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 4.

¹³¹ Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 344.

¹³² May, *The Enlightenment in America*, 344.

¹³³ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology," *Church History* 24, no. 3 (1955): 260.

¹³⁴ Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (a critical edition, edited by Derek R. Brookes) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 11.

¹³⁵ Ahlstrom, "The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology," 261.

¹³⁶ May, *The Enlightenment in America*, 346.

¹³⁷ Allen, "Baconianism and the Bible in the Disciples of Christ: James S. Lamar and 'The Organon of Scripture'," 66.

¹³⁸ Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science*, 7.

¹³⁹ E. Brooks Holifield, *The Odd Couple: Theology and Science in the American Tradition: The Ninth Distinguished Faculty Lecture* (Emory University, 2004), 3-4.

Put simply, Common Sense Philosophy said that “the human mind was so constructed that we can know the real world directly.”¹⁴⁰ Moreover, “The ability to know such things was as natural as the ability to breathe air. If philosophers questioned such truths, so much the worse for philosophers. The common sense of mankind, whether of the man behind the plow or the man behind the desk, was the surest guide to truth.”¹⁴¹ Thus as Bull and Lockhart point out, it was believed that if a systematic study of these known facts, these “truths”, was undertaken “by a mind unprejudiced by theory....knowledge of a limited certainty would be obtained.”¹⁴²

Common Sense Philosophy’s appeal to the “facts” became “an immensely popular polemical device.”¹⁴³ In 1823, Edward Everett declared, “At the present day, as is well known, the *Baconian* philosophy has become synonymous with the true philosophy.”¹⁴⁴ As George H. Daniels has pointed out:

Everett’s choice of the adjective “true” was not a matter of accident—it was not merely that Francis Bacon’s philosophy was the most adequate or the most useful, but that it was thought to be true, and any other philosophy was correspondingly false....The Baconian philosophy so dominated that whole generation of American scientists that it was difficult to find any writer during the early part of the nineteenth-century who did not assume, with Everett, that his readers knew all about it.¹⁴⁵

Americans in the first half of the nineteenth century glorified their own version of Baconian induction.

Francis Bacon had asserted that the surest path to knowledge was not deductive... but rather inductive—proceeding from the accumulation of specific facts to the generalizations that could be built up from them.... The individualistic and egalitarian thrust of the experience and ideology of the Revolution left people open to theories of knowledge that made truth accessible to all....¹⁴⁶

Bruce Kuklick sees the basis of Common Sense Philosophy as being a “strict and limited empiricism... [that] learned about the world from careful observation.”¹⁴⁷ The five senses of its adherents conveyed the way the world was.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁰ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, Second ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 14.

¹⁴¹ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 15.

¹⁴² Bull and Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, 26.

¹⁴³ Bozeman, “Inductive and Deductive Politics: Science and Society in Antebellum Presbyterian Thought,” 715.

¹⁴⁴ In Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science*, 3. Original emphasis.

¹⁴⁵ George H. Daniels, “The Process of Professionalization in American Science: The Emergent Period, 1820-1860,” in *Science in America Since 1820*, ed. Nathan Reingold (New York: Science History Publications, 1976), 66.

¹⁴⁶ Doan, “Millerism and Evangelical Culture,” 98-99.

¹⁴⁷ Bruce Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America 1720-2000* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 62.

After systematic accumulation of facts, natural scientists induced laws of nature. But these laws did not go beyond the observed. Judiciously collecting data, the scientist found uniformities in nature and, on the basis of the uniformities, extrapolated the principles governing regularities. These ‘laws’ perspicaciously digested the facts, and although the induction was never spelled out, it was not at odds with the taxonomic naturalism that defined much of the science of the day. A descriptive endeavor, the discovery of scientific law correlated various sorts of phenomena. Science codified ordinary experience, and more clearly revealed what nature presented to the senses. In inducing generalizations the mind was active, but the principles organizing sense perception were simply a shorthand for expressing the way things interacted.¹⁴⁹

American theologians quickly and widely appropriated Common Sense Philosophy as a means of advancing theology—“their overriding concerns were for the examination of evidence, a ruthless focus on the “facts,” and the systematic classification of those facts.”¹⁵⁰ For these individuals, all knowledge—including theological—could therefore be quantified. Ruth Alden Doan notes that,

Nineteenth-century American Christians followed the empiricist method of Bacon, but applied it in new directions. Most important for the present discussion, they applied the method, as they understood it, to the Bible. At a time when a few began to question the Bible because it contradicted the facts of nature and history, others took the stories and doctrines that they found in the Bible and called them facts. The truth attributed to the Bible became a surprisingly concrete and literal truth, and the various aspects of that truth were considered to be facts as clear to perceptions as physical facts.¹⁵¹

In 1832, James W. Alexander wrote: “the theologian should proceed in his investigation precisely as the chemist or botanist proceeds.... [This] is method which bears the name of Bacon.”¹⁵² Likewise, Charles Hodge wrote in his *Systematic Theology* that, “The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science. It is his storehouse of facts; and his method of ascertaining what the Bible teaches is the same as that which the natural philosopher adopts to ascertain what nature teaches.”¹⁵³ In short, learning from the Bible was seen as an empirical process—first receiving the data, then analyzing and organizing it, then finally, drawing valid conclusions.¹⁵⁴ As Herbert Hovencamp states:

¹⁴⁸ Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America 1720-2000*, 62.

¹⁴⁹ Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America 1720-2000*, 62.

¹⁵⁰ Allen, “Baconianism and the Bible in the Disciples of Christ: James S. Lamar and ‘The Organon of Scripture.’,” 66.

¹⁵¹ Doan, “Millerism and Evangelical Culture,” 98-99.

¹⁵² Quoted in Noll, “Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought,” 223.

¹⁵³ Quoted in Noll, “Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought,” 223.

¹⁵⁴ Herbert Hovencamp, *Science and Religion in America: 1800-1860* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 11.

In nineteenth-century America, Baconianism meant simply looking at the evidence, determining what were “the facts,” and carefully classifying these facts....The interpretation of Scripture, accordingly, involved careful determination of what the facts were—what the words meant. Once this was settled the facts revealed in Scripture could be known as surely as the facts discovered by the natural scientist.¹⁵⁵

Doan points out that,

The fundamental assertion of Common Sense thinkers was that all men had the faculty of “understanding” necessary to confront and comprehend “facts” in the world. Since all shared that fundamental capacity, all had equal access, in a sense, to knowledge. Moreover, the right use of that common faculty would lead men, ultimately, to similar conclusions, for the understanding could allow the facts to speak for themselves, and the facts always told the same story....Antebellum Americans confronted the “facts” of the Bible with that fundamental, shared capacity for understanding.¹⁵⁶

In 1849, John D. Morell wrote in his book, *The Philosophy of Religion* that,

It has been an extended notion, since the prevalence of the Baconian method in scientific research, that just as the facts of nature lie before us in the universe, and have to be generalized and systematized by the process of induction, so also the facts of theology lying before us in the Bible, have simply to be moulded into a logical series, in order to create a Christian theology.¹⁵⁷

Though written in contempt, these words point to the extent to which “the Baconian ideal had been appropriated by traditional theologians as a technique of biblical interpretation.”¹⁵⁸

Common Sense Philosophy was a winning combination for American theologians. It was “free enough from subtlety to be communicable in sermons and tracts. It came to exist in America, therefore, as a vast subterranean influence, a sort of water-table nourishing dogmatics in an age of doubt.”¹⁵⁹ Most Christians who were influenced by Common Sense Philosophy, did not devote much time to consulting the carefully constructed arguments of Thomas Reid—the “most articulate proponent of the philosophy.”¹⁶⁰ Rather, it was the “broader habits of mind or reassuring conventions of thought” that Common Sense Philosophy provided.¹⁶¹ Similarly, according to Holifield, “Bacon was more a symbol than a carefully studied resource for theologians. What he

¹⁵⁵ Marsden, “Everyone One’s Own Interpreter? The Bible, Science, and Authority in Mid-Nineteenth Century America,” 82.

¹⁵⁶ Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture*, 94.

¹⁵⁷ Quoted in Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science*, 144.

¹⁵⁸ Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science*, 144.

¹⁵⁹ Ahlstrom, “The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology,” 268.

¹⁶⁰ Noll, “Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought,” 220.

¹⁶¹ Noll, “Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought,” 220.

symbolized for them was the conviction that theology should be a science grounded in the same inductive methods that marked other sciences.”¹⁶² Such statements are equally true for Miller.

William J. Gilmore points out that the Enlightenment was a key theme in reading matter of the time—particularly amongst what he classifies as “Self-sufficient farmstead families” such as Miller:

Scottish Common Sense philosophy was widely assimilated through Robinson, Raynal (rather than Buffon), and Sanders; Blair and Walker in their rhetoric texts; and Bigland, Williams, Rollin, and Isaac Eddy among more conservative historians. These works stressed Christian nationalism, environmentalism, and the triumph of reason and civilization over savagism.¹⁶³

American Baconians distinguished between internal and external evidential arguments for the divine nature of the biblical revelation. “The internal arguments included a wide range of proofs that could be summarized under the theme of consistency: the Bible was internally consistent as well as consistent with reason, with the deepest desires of the heart, with the highest human morality, with the needs of human nature, and with the requisites for social order and justice.”¹⁶⁴ External arguments included appeals to prophecy and miracles. For Baconians, appeals “to prophecy and miracle seemed to present facts—observable, public, verifiable.”¹⁶⁵ As John W. Nevin stated in 1846: “[Christianity’s] revelations are not theorems but facts; not facts in the form of mere tradition, but actually subsisting, always enduring facts; not disjointed, fragmentary facts, but a glorious system of facts, organically bound together and growing out of each other as a single supernatural whole.”¹⁶⁶

The Common Sense tradition impacted biblical interpretation in two key areas. Firstly, it influenced the way in which the Bible’s veracity is viewed. When Charles Hodge states that the Bible is to be taken as a “storehouse of facts,” he is undoubtedly operating out of the Common Sense tradition.¹⁶⁷ This tradition assumed that the Bible was “best studied by dividing it into its constituent facts.”¹⁶⁸ Secondly, the Common Sense tradition influenced the way in which theology was constructed—the “facts” of Scripture were joined together in what was viewed as a “scientific”

¹⁶² Holifield, *Theology in America*, 174.

¹⁶³ Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life*, 308.

¹⁶⁴ Holifield, *Theology in America*, 187.

¹⁶⁵ Holifield, *Theology in America*, 188.

¹⁶⁶ John W. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence. A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (Philadelphia [New York]: J. B. Lippincott & Co. [Garland Publishing], 1846 [1987]), 244.

¹⁶⁷ Noll, “Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought,” 229.

¹⁶⁸ Noll, “Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought,” 230.

manner.¹⁶⁹ Such a system is typified by the words of James H. Brookes: “Select some word, and with the aid of a good Concordance, mark down...the references to the subject under discussion...thus presenting all the Holy Ghost has been pleased to reveal on the topic.”¹⁷⁰ Leonard Woods wrote in 1822 that the method used to investigate the Bible must be the same as “that which is pursued in the science of physics.”¹⁷¹ Furthermore, this method was to be regulated “by the maxims of Bacon and Newton.”¹⁷²

The insistence of those American interpreters influenced by Common Sense Philosophy, that theology was a collection of “facts” often led to a one-dimensional interpretation of Scripture. Metaphorical, mystical and symbolic meanings were downplayed in favour of the “plain” meaning of the text.

Generally unrecognised has been the intense influence of this Common Sense tradition on the approach that Miller took to biblical interpretation. One exception has been Douglas Morgan, who points to the direct and profound influence of these ideas on Miller:

In the tradition of the Common Sense Realism so influential in America, Miller believed that the human mind could directly apprehend the message of the Bible, undistorted by the interposition of subjective structures of the mind itself or cultural variables. One of the most crucial ramifications of this point for understanding Seventh-day Adventist thought is that apocalyptic imagery, no matter how cryptic it may appear, could be understood if one worked at it hard enough.¹⁷³

In their recently revised work, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American dream*, Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart note that Miller’s approach to Bible study is best understood “in the context of the Common-Sense philosophy that was becoming popular in nineteenth-century New England.”¹⁷⁴ Similarly, while he does not name it as such, Paul Boyer alludes to the influence of Common Sense Philosophy when he states that “Miller stressed the systematic nature of his method and the rationality of his conclusions. Prophecy study, he insisted, was precisely analogous to science’s probing of nature’s secrets.”¹⁷⁵

One dissenting voice is that of C. Mervyn Maxwell who completely rejects the idea that Miller was influenced in any way by Common Sense Philosophy. Maxwell states that because a belief in Common Sense Philosophy is not essential to a premillennial approach to prophecy and to

¹⁶⁹ Noll, “Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought,” 231.

¹⁷⁰ Quoted in Timothy P. Weber, “The Two-edged Sword: The Fundamentalist Use of the Bible,” in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 110.

¹⁷¹ Quoted in Hovenkamp, *Science and Religion in America: 1800-1860*, 61.

¹⁷² Quoted in Hovenkamp, *Science and Religion in America: 1800-1860*, 61.

¹⁷³ Douglas Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 21.

¹⁷⁴ Bull and Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, 26.

¹⁷⁵ Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 83.

the choice of 1843/44 for the close of the 2300 days; it was not an influence on Miller.¹⁷⁶ Maxwell's reasoning is superficial and unconvincing. It is certainly true that many interpreters were premillennialists before Miller, and it is also true that a number of interpreters prior to Miller came to similar conclusions concerning the 2300 day prophecy.¹⁷⁷ However, even if Miller was familiar with the conclusions of such authors—and Maxwell offers no evidence to show that he was—it does not remove the inevitability that Miller's culture—including the pervasive presence of Common Sense Philosophy—exerted a significant influence.

As David Rowe states, “[Miller] searched for an empirical verification for faith, and he found it through hermeneutics.... Miller decided that the scriptures themselves held the key to their validity and that by studying the Bible in a scientific way, he could provide evidence of its divine origin.”¹⁷⁸ Miller treated Biblical texts as a collection of facts which spoke for themselves—he “joined in the popular assumption that Bible facts, accessible to all, opened the way to Bible truths.”¹⁷⁹

Miller's hermeneutics were not new, nor were they unique. Miller utilized the methods he did because they offered the best answers to his questions. According to Anne Freed, “Miller defended his Biblical interpretations by appealing to the rationality of his listeners. His method of prophetic interpretation shared the language and categories of the scientific method during a time when this method seemed to offer direct access to ‘facts’ or ‘truth.’”¹⁸⁰

While there is no direct evidence that Miller read the work of philosophers of Common Sense Philosophy such as Reid or Stewart, it is certainly possible that he did so. Common Sense Philosophy was a pervasive influence in American society at this time; and this popularity coupled with Miller's omnivorous reading habits and his access to libraries certainly leaves open this possibility. Regardless of whether he did or did not read such authors, Miller was certainly influenced by their ideas; and this influence is quite clear when Miller's writings are examined.

The influence of Common Sense Philosophy is also evident in Miller's systematic approach to Bible study:

I determined to lay aside all my prepossessions, to thoroughly compare Scripture with Scripture, and to pursue its study in a regular and methodical manner. I commenced with Genesis, and read verse by verse, proceeding no faster than the

¹⁷⁶ Maxwell, “A Brief History of Adventist Hermeneutics,” 219.

¹⁷⁷ Examples include Johann Philipp Petri, who in 1774 calculated Christ's coming as taking place in 1847. See Le Roy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* Volume II, 4 vols. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1948), 714-719.

¹⁷⁸ Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets*, 10.

¹⁷⁹ Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture*, 99.

¹⁸⁰ Freed, “‘A Feast of Reason’ The Appeal of William Miller's Way of Reading the Bible,” 14.

meaning of the several passages should be so unfolded, as to leave me free from embarrassment respecting and mysticism or contradictions.¹⁸¹

As Bull and Lockhart have pointed out, with such an approach, Miller was following closely the Baconian injunction to “proceed regularly and gradually from one axiom to another.”¹⁸²

Bibliolatry

Miller was raised a Baptist—in fact, both his maternal grandfather, Elnathan Phelps and his paternal uncle, Elisha Miller, were Baptist ministers.¹⁸³ In the absence of a local Baptist Church, Miller’s father—while a “professing but unenthusiastic Christian,” had opened his home as the location for occasional Sunday church services run by Phelps.¹⁸⁴ Following Phelps’ efforts, a church congregation was organized as a branch of his home congregation at Orwell. Some years later, in 1812, Elisha Miller came to minister in Low Hampton and a small meeting-house was established.¹⁸⁵ Both men are said to have taken an active role in young Miller’s spiritual growth, being “frequently present to exhort him.”¹⁸⁶ Furthermore, Miller’s mother Paulina was a “woman of deep spiritual conviction and piety”¹⁸⁷ and undoubtedly of great influence in his life.

It can be seen then, that Miller’s early upbringing was undoubtedly religious, and heavily influenced by his family relationships.¹⁸⁸ In fact, Miller himself recorded, “In my youth, between the ages of seven and ten, I was often concerned about the welfare of my soul, particularly in relation to its future destiny. I spent much time in trying to invent some plan, whereby I might please God, when brought into his immediate presence.”¹⁸⁹ As Steen R. Rasmussen points out, to Miller, God was a “severe judge who had to be pleased, who punished and rewarded according to his own wish.”¹⁹⁰

Miller’s acquaintance with the Bible began early and the Bible was to remain a central subject throughout his life. In 1845 he reflected on his early perceptions of the Bible:

I was early educated to reverence the Scriptures as a revelation from God to man;

¹⁸¹ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 6.

¹⁸² Quoted in Bull and Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, 27.

¹⁸³ Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets*, 3. Dick, *William Miller and the Advent Crisis*, 4, names Miller’s uncle as Elihu, though this is apparently an error.

¹⁸⁴ Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets*, 3-4.

¹⁸⁵ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 64.

¹⁸⁶ Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets*, 3.

¹⁸⁷ Ward, “Religious Enthusiasm in Vermont, 1761-1847”, 211.

¹⁸⁸ Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets*, 3.

¹⁸⁹ Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies*, 9.

¹⁹⁰ Rasmussen, “Roots of the Prophetic Hermeneutic of William Miller”, 16.

and I was more or less a reader of the Word, without being savingly affected by it. I was, however, always perplexed with what I then deemed inconsistencies [*sic*] and contradictions in the Bible, which I was unable to harmonize; and yet I knew that if the Bible was what it purports to be, it must in some way all be harmonized.¹⁹¹

While Miller clearly viewed the Bible as authentic, stating, that he had no “serious doubts of its authenticity,”¹⁹² he had some serious problems with its content—even before he became a Deist.

I was exceedingly anxious to reconcile all its various parts, and unsuccessfully resorted to all means within my reach. I was particularly anxious to have them harmonized by the preachers of the word; and accordingly embraced every opportunity, to present for their removal, the difficulties under which I labored. But I obtained from them no satisfaction; they usually adduced the opinions of various commentators, which were as contradictory as their own, or told me they did not understand them, and that I could not, because God had hidden their meaning under a mystical veil. This served more to perplex my mind than to shed light on the questions at issue.¹⁹³

Miller took with him such unresolved questions when he moved to Poultney. There he found suitable answers in Deism:

There I became acquainted with the principal men in that village, who were profoundly Deists.... They put into my hands the works of Voltaire, Hume, Paine, Ethan Allen, and other deistical writers, in which *the difficulties that had perplexed my own mind were discussed in so plausible a manner, that I concluded the Bible was only the work of designing men; and I discarded it accordingly.*¹⁹⁴

Later, following his conversion, Miller realized that he must again tackle these difficulties and contradictions—both for his own peace-of-mind and to answer the criticisms of his Deist friends.

Miller’s conversion had marked a turning-point in his attitudes toward the Bible. He had undergone an intense conversion experience, years later he reflected:

At length, when brought almost to despair, God by his Holy Spirit opened my eyes. I saw Jesus as a friend, and my only help, and the word of God as the perfect rule of duty. Jesus Christ 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. I found the Lord God to be a Rock in the midst of the ocean of life.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 2.

¹⁹² Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 2.

¹⁹³ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 3.

¹⁹⁴ Himes, ed., *Evidence from Scripture*, 3. Emphasis added.

¹⁹⁵ Miller, “Memoir,” 1.

Miller's emotional experience affected him greatly, but as Lee Swafford Burchfield points out, he needed "some way to validate this feeling."¹⁹⁶ For Miller, evidence was needed.

I felt that to believe in such a Savior without evidence, would be visionary in the extreme. I saw that the Bible did bring to view just such a Savior 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.¹⁹⁷

In 1822, Miller recorded a brief statement of faith consisting of twenty articles, stating, "I made it a subject of prayer and meditation, and, therefore, leave the following as my faith,—reserving the privilege of correction."¹⁹⁸ Article I states, "I believe the Bible is given by God to man, as a rule for our practice, and a guide to or faith,—that it is a revelation of God to Man."¹⁹⁹ This statement of faith was not finished—article XX is incomplete; and was not published until Sylvester Bliss included it in his *Memoirs of William Miller* published in 1853, four years after Miller's death. Nevertheless, it illustrates the central place that the Bible held in Miller's worldview. Earlier, following his conversion, Miller wrote of the Bible in fervent terms:

The Bible now became my chief study; and I can truly say I searched it with great delight. I found the half was never told me. I wondered why I had not seen its beauty and glory before, and marvelled that I could ever have rejected it. I found everything revealed that my heart could desire, and a remedy for every disease of the soul. I lost all taste for other reading and applied my heart to get wisdom from God.²⁰⁰

Miller's correspondence to his friend Truman Hendryx provides insight into his attitude—an attitude that approaches what Philip L. Barlow refers to as the "glorification"²⁰¹ of the Bible and what has been referred to as "Scripture idolatry"²⁰² or "bibliolatry"²⁰³. "I am more and more astonished at the harmony and strength of the word of God and the more I read, the more I see the

¹⁹⁶ Lee Swafford Burchfield, "Adventist Religious Experience, 1816-1868: A Comparison of William Miller and Ellen White" (PhD, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1996), 39.

¹⁹⁷ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 5.

¹⁹⁸ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 77.

¹⁹⁹ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 77.

²⁰⁰ Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies*, 11.

²⁰¹ Philip L. Barlow, "Before Mormonism: Joseph Smith's Use of the Bible, 1820-1829." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57, no. 4 (1989): 744.

²⁰² Said to have been first used in 1850 by clergyman T. Wentworth Higginson. Joss Marsh, *Word Crimes: blasphemy, culture, and literature in nineteenth-century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 172.

²⁰³ In this sense of "Bible worship", the word was first used by T. H. Huxley. Joss Marsh, *Word Crimes: blasphemy, culture, and literature in nineteenth-century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 172.

folly of the infidel in rejecting this [*sic*] words.”²⁰⁴ In 1832, Miller wrote to Hendryx about a visit from a Brother Day who had “come on purpose to learn these strange notions of ‘crazy Millers,’”:

[H]e was a stranger to me but after he introduced himself we went to work, night and day and he has just left me, Monday 3 O’Clock P.M. [H]e has got his load, and as he says, he was never so loaded before. You may say this is boasting. No, No, Br Hendryx. You know better. *I only made him read Bible*. And I held the concordance, no praise to me, Give God the glory.²⁰⁵

Again to Hendryx, Miller wrote in 1834,

but you know my manner of proving things. By Bible, and I think I prove these several points as easy & as strong as you can Baptism by immersion, and the more I study my bible, the more I can see & admire the general connection from Genesis to Revelation. I am every day more convinced that the whole word of God is given for our instruction, reproof, and correction, and that the prophecies contain the strongest evidences of the Divinity & truth of the bible....”²⁰⁶

Millerism was a Bible-centred religion. Miller exhorted his friend Truman Hendryx: “You must preach *Bible* you must prove all things by *Bible* you must talk *bible*, you must exhort *bible*, you must pray *Bible*, and Love *Bible*, and do all in your power to make others Love *Bible* too.”²⁰⁷ In the preface to his book, *First Principles of the Second Advent Faith With Scripture Proofs*, Millerite author Lorenzo Dow Fleming wrote:

“To the law and the testimony” is our motto. “If they speak not according to these, it is because there is no light in them.” The following little manual is a collection of the Scriptures on several important points, with but few explanatory notes or remarks. *The chief object has been, in getting up this little work, to let the Scriptures speak for themselves*, and thus put into the hands of Adventists, and indeed into the hands of all who are in search of Bible truth, on the subjects of which it treats, a collection of Scriptural references, designed to aid them in the pursuit of knowledge.”²⁰⁸

In 1845 Apollos Hale reflected that “It was the Bible alone which produced the Advent movement. Those who embraced the Advent doctrine were distinguished, from the first, by their strict regard for the Bible. This was exclusively peculiar to them. Every question was decided by that.”²⁰⁹

Miller’s focus on the Bible apparently had considerable influence on his audiences; in 1840, Lorenzo Dow Fleming wrote from Portland, Maine that: “One of the principal booksellers informed

²⁰⁴ William Miller to Truman Hendryx, January 25, 1832.

²⁰⁵ William Miller to Truman Hendryx, March 26, 1832. Emphasis added.

²⁰⁶ William Miller to Truman Hendryx, October 23, 1834. Original emphasis

²⁰⁷ Miller, “Memoir.” Original emphasis. Original capitalization of Bible/bible and Love.

²⁰⁸ Lorenzo Dow Fleming, *First Principles of the Second Advent Faith With Scripture Proofs*, 2nd ed. (Boston: J. V. Himes, 1844), 2. Emphasis added.

²⁰⁹ Hale, Apollos. “Has the Bridegroom Come? Part 1.” *The Advent Herald*, February 26, 1845. Reprinted in Apollos Hale, “Brother Hale’s Article,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 16, 1851, 1.

me that he had sold more Bibles in one month, since Bro. Miller came here, than he had in any four months previous.”²¹⁰ Whether the Bibles were purchased in order to refute or follow Miller is unknown—they were however, purchased. Similarly James White reflected with a sense of pride that “a course of [Advent] lectures in a village would open a door for the sale of more Bibles in a week than would have been sold before for years”.²¹¹

Miller’s emphasis on the Bible was not surprising given both his past difficulties with the scriptures and the culture of the time. Mason Weems (1759-1825)—a travelling Bible salesman in Virginia stated:

This is the very season and age of the Bible. Bible dictionaries, Bible tales, Bible stories—Bibles plain or paraphrased, Carey’s Bibles, Collins Bibles, Clarke’s Bibles, Kimptor’s Bibles, no matter what or whose, all, all will go down—so wide is the crater of public appetite at this time. God be thanked for it.²¹²

Later Weems wrote: “Thank God, the Bible still goes well...I am *agreeably surprised* to find among the multitude such a spirit of veneration for the Bible. Good old Book! I hope we shall live by you in this world and in the world to come!!”²¹³ Frank Luther Mott states that “It is probable that there was never a year in American history in which the Bible did not excel the next-best seller.”²¹⁴ A survey of family libraries in the Windsor district of Vermont for the years 1787-1830 found that the Bible was by far the most widespread book—66% of families possessed a complete Bible, while 7.6% had a New Testament.²¹⁵ Ludlum points out that in Vermont, “the revivals of 1800-1837 had restored the Bible to a high place; to many it was the sole guide for the conduct of life.”²¹⁶

A strong emphasis on the Bible was also found in many other religious movements of the time—including the Christian ‘movement’ of the 1820s who vowed to “do away with all human creeds and systematic treatises, and to study the Bible only.”²¹⁷ Likewise Simeon Howard, a Boston minister, advised his fellow ministers to, “lay aside all attachments to human systems, all partiality

²¹⁰ Fleming, “Miller’s Influence Upon the People,” 14.

²¹¹ White, *Life Incidents*, 149.

²¹² Quoted in Gary Wills, “Mason Weems, Biblioplist,” *American Heritage*, February/March 1981, 68.

²¹³ Quoted in Wills, “Mason Weems, Biblioplist,” 66. Original emphasis.

²¹⁴ Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York: MacMillan, 1947), 297.

²¹⁵ William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 64.

²¹⁶ David M. Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850* (New York: AMS Press, 1966), 238.

²¹⁷ Leroy J. Halsey, “Address to the Alumni Society of the University of Nashville, on the Study of Theology as a Part of Science, Literature and Religion, 1841,” Nashville, TN; 19. Quoted in Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 149.

to names, councils, and churches, and honestly inquire, ‘what saith the scriptures’.”²¹⁸ In 1850, Charles Beecher denounced “creed-power” and argued for “the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible” as the “the perfect and thorough furniture of the Christian minister.”²¹⁹ While coming to completely different conclusions to Miller, Universalist minister Aaron Burt Grosh took a similar position regarding the role of the Bible, stating, “the Bible, *the Bible*, is our only acknowledged creed-book.”²²⁰

Biblical Democratization

The election of Andrew Jackson to the presidency of the United States of America in 1828 ushered in what became known as “the era of the common man.”²²¹ Jackson had rallied support amongst those “who, for one reason or another, felt aggrieved.”²²² His victory was “rooted in a pervading discontent, born of hope not despair, among common people everywhere.”²²³ As Hudson points out, it is important to note that “the line that set apart the ‘common people’ was not defined by wealth but by parentage, education, and social rootage. The term included upwardly mobile entrepreneurs, thrusting themselves forward and the wellborn aside, as well as mechanics, tradesmen and other ordinary folk.”²²⁴

Calvin Colton wrote in 1844:

Ours is a country, where men start from a humble origin, and from small beginnings rise gradually in the world, as a reward of merit and industry, and where they attain to the most elevated positions, or acquire a large amount of wealth, according to the pursuits they elect for themselves. No exclusive privileges of birth, no entailment of estates, no civil or political disqualifications, stand in their path; but one has as good a chance as another, according to his talents, prudence, and personal exertions. This is a country of *self-made men*, than which nothing better could be said of any state of society.²²⁵

²¹⁸ Quoted in Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 181.

²¹⁹ Charles Beecher, “The Protestant Ministry,” *Herald of the Kingdom and Age to Come*, July, 1856. Online at: <http://www.bereanecclisialnews.com/bca/1856-07.pdf>

²²⁰ John L. Winebrenner, *History of All the Religious Denominations in the United States* (Harrisburg, PA: 1853), 595. Original emphasis.

²²¹ Hudson, *Religion in America*, 1.

²²² Hudson, *Religion in America*, 4.

²²³ Hudson, *Religion in America*, 5.

²²⁴ Hudson, *Religion in America*, 4.

²²⁵ Calvin Colton, *Junius Tracts*, no. vii (New York, 1844), 15. Quoted in Edwin C. Rozwenc, ed., *The Meaning of Jacksonian Democracy* (Boston, MA: D. C. Heath, 1963), xi. Original emphasis.

William G. McLoughlin points out that “There is no denying, of course, that there was a strong tinge of rationalism, free thought, and anticlericalism in the Jacksonian spirit.”²²⁶

In this climate it was not long before some began to “reexamine the social function of the clergy and to question the right of any order of men to claim authority to interpret God’s Word....could not anyone and everyone begin to think for themselves in matters of religion?”²²⁷ This was a religious environment that “brought into question traditional authorities and exalted the right of the people to think for themselves.”²²⁸ As Doan states, “it was an age of democracy and at the same time an age of religious fervour.”²²⁹

Hatch points out that “Miller argued that his millennial scheme sprang naturally from the Holy Writ and was clear and plain in the New Testament for all to see; and *the clarion call of his Adventist Movement was that people acknowledge their right to interpret Scripture for themselves.*”²³⁰ This approach—one of popularist hermeneutics—appealed greatly to citizens of Jacksonian America. “Common people, Bibles in hand, relished the right to shape their own faith”.²³¹

According to Rowe, Miller’s appeal lay in the fact that,

Instead of claiming to be a prophet or to have received a new revelation, he explained how each person could discover the “truth” he had found, thus making the secrets of revelation accessible to any believer. In this regard his views were the religious counterpart of the political antinomianism and popular democracy of the age of the common American.²³²

Similarly, Knight sees Miller’s beliefs as fitting in perfectly “with the restorationist imperative to get back to the New Testament by bypassing human interpretations. It also linked up with the Jacksonian faith in the ability of the common man to understand the Bible without the aid of experts.”²³³ As Reinder Bruinsma points out, “The idea that the layperson and the theologian are

²²⁶ William G. McLoughlin, “Introduction to Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*,” in *Essays on Jacksonian America*, ed. Frank Otto Gatell (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 255.

²²⁷ Hatch, “The Christian Movement and the Demand for a Theology of the People,” 563.

²²⁸ Hatch, “The Christian Movement and the Demand for a Theology of the People,” 566.

²²⁹ Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture*, 94.

²³⁰ Nathan O. Hatch, “Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum,” in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 75. Emphasis added.

²³¹ Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 183.

²³² Rowe, “Millerites: A Shadow Portrait,” 13.

²³³ Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 40-41.

equally qualified to understand and interpret that Bible goes a long way toward explaining the hearing that uneducated people like William Miller...received from so many people."²³⁴

A vital part of Miller's methodology was his "do it yourself" approach. He did not rely on external non-biblical evidence to support his ideas, but rather challenged his audience to participate in the discovery themselves:

Miller had traveled about lecturing on the Bible, asking people to demonstrate for themselves that the mathematical calculations would repeatedly produce the promised result. A prospective follower would examine the evidence, analyze the historical and prophetic data, and determine with a comfortable level of certainty whether Miller's teachings withstood investigation or not.²³⁵

Miller...insisted that anyone could interpret the prophecies. Indeed, he urged others to check his system against their own calculations. Just as the Jacksonians claimed that any (white male) citizen could perform the duties of government, so the Millerites insisted that untutored believers could unravel the apocalyptic mysteries. Millerism heralded the full democratization of prophetic belief in the United States.²³⁶

Not only was this technique part of Miller's appeal; but it was part of Miller's personal hermeneutical approach. As previously noted, Miller states that he specifically, "laid by all commentaries, former views and prepossessions, and determined to read and try to understand for [himself]."²³⁷ Essentially, he put away—in his mind at least—the experts, and relied on his own intelligence and common sense as an ordinary person. James White recounts Miller as saying, "The Bible, if it is what it purports to be, will explain itself."²³⁸

For Miller, these approaches led to the "inherent right to individual interpretation of the Bible."²³⁹

The divinity taught in our schools is always founded on some sectarian creed. It may do to take a blank mind and impress it with this kind, but it will always end in bigotry. *A free mind will never be satisfied with the views of others.* Were I a teacher of youth in divinity, I would first learn their capacity, and mind. If these were good, I would make them study the Bible for themselves, and send them out free to do the

²³⁴ Reinder Bruinsma, "Culture and Adventism: Europe and the United States as a Case Study," *Spectrum* 33, no. 3 (2005): 41-42.

²³⁵ Burchfield, "Adventist Religious Experience, 1816-1868", 130.

²³⁶ Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 83.

²³⁷ William Miller, *The Midnight Cry*, April 11, 1844, 88. See also Miller's 1845 statement, "I determined to lay aside all my prepossessions, to thoroughly compare scripture with scripture, and to pursue its study in a regular and methodical manner." Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 6. Bliss also emphasised this point, noting that Miller "laid aside all commentaries, and used the marginal references and his Concordance as his only helps." Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 69.

²³⁸ White, *Life Incidents*, 27.

²³⁹ Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic*, 21.

world good. But if they had no mind, I would stamp them with another's mind, write bigot on their forehead, and send them out as slaves.²⁴⁰

As Hatch points out, this approach to the Bible was closely linked to the culture of the time:

Democratic values and patterns of biblical interpretation were moving in the same direction, mutually reinforcing ideas of volitional allegiance, self reliance, and private judgment. Both cultural values and hermeneutics balked at vested interests, symbols of hierarchy and timeless authorities. Both addressed the common man without condescension and dismissed, out of hand, theories that would not square with common sense. Both reinforced the importance of the individual as beholden to no one and master of one's own fate. At one level, then, the Enlightenment in America was not repudiated but popularized. Revivalists of the Second Great Awakening championed a Bible unencumbered by theological systems and authoritative interpreters. The rhetoric of rights which the Enlightenment had nurtured came to resonate as powerfully within American popular religion as it did within the democratic politics of the young republic.²⁴¹

Miller's approach then, reduced a text with thousands of years of history behind it to a simple, plain and easily understood book. This was one of the strongest appeals of his system. His literalist method gave power to the ordinary person—a key theme in Jacksonian America. James E. Miller refers to this literalist approach as “a populist protest against the power of oligarchies seeking to control our lives, and against the traditions that warp the plain meaning of foundation documents. The literalist ideal is direct access to the text. The Bible is not to be interpreted only by church prelates and theologians, but by every layman.”²⁴²

Doan points out that,

In the aftermath of the American Revolution, religion became more and more a matter for private judgement....In the absence of an established church and out of the antiauthoritarian implications of Revolutionary ideology grew a reliance on individual conscience as the only proper place of judgment for religious matters....Bible and conscience played off one another. The Bible became the standard by which one could judge the inclinations of private judgment. But individual judgment also became the standard by which one could understand the Bible.”²⁴³

Hiram Munger—a Millerite convert—records the centrality of this popular approach to his conversion:

I was astonished, when I read the Bible for myself, without a Papal comment upon it. I was convinced that they had got the truth on the *nature of the events*, saying nothing of the *time*, and many things I learned that I never knew were in the Bible

²⁴⁰ Miller, “Mr Miller's Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter,” 26. Emphasis added.

²⁴¹ Hatch, “Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum,” 74.

²⁴² James E. Miller, “Review of Vincent Capanzano, *Serving the Word? Literalism in America From the Pulpit to the Bench*,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 40, no. 1 (2002): 139-140.

²⁴³ Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture*, 93.

before. It was a new book indeed....In fact I had never read expecting to understand for myself, and thousands are in the same situation...²⁴⁴

Miller's experience parallels that of another Baptist, Elias Smith. In 1800, Smith, pastor of a Woburn, Massachusetts Baptist church, "underwent a personal crisis of authority, a conversion to Jeffersonian politics, and a wholesale rejection of teachings such as election, [and] the Trinity."²⁴⁵ Resigning from his church, Smith set about translating the "sovereignty of the people to the sphere of religion."²⁴⁶ Unable to resolve the conflicting doctrines of Universalism and Calvinism to his satisfaction, Smith had a life-altering experience:

While meditating upon these doctrines and my own situation, and saying, what shall I do? there was a gentle whisper to my understanding in these words: "Drop them both, and search the scriptures." This command was immediately consented to; and instantly my mind was freed from the entanglement before experienced.²⁴⁷

Thus enlightened, Smith began preaching his popularist hermeneutic throughout New England. He demanded the "unalienable" right of all people to interpret the Bible for themselves; even though such interpretations may "be contrary to what the Reverend D D's call Orthodoxy."²⁴⁸ Smith's aim was to "prove every particular from plain declarations recorded in the Bible."²⁴⁹ Smith regarded the majority of Christians at the time as having been deluded and were thus ignorant of biblical truth: "So long as people believe that the plain declarations of Scripture do not mean as they say, so long will they remain ignorant of the real beauty and excellency of the sure word of Prophecy...whatever things this light discovers we ought to believe and consider true."²⁵⁰

Like Miller, Smith was able to resolve his questions only by putting all aside all other authorities, and interpreting the Bible for himself: "I threw divinity books out of my bookcase, and began to think of the extent of the love and grace of God to man."²⁵¹

²⁴⁴ Munger, *The Life and Experience of Hiram A. Munger*, 53. Original emphasis.

²⁴⁵ Hatch, "Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum," 66.

²⁴⁶ Hatch, "Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum," 66.

²⁴⁷ Smith, *The Life, Conversion, Preaching, Travels and Sufferings of Elias Smith*, 292-293.

²⁴⁸ Quoted in Hatch, "The Christian Movement and the Demand for a Theology of the People," 554. D D stands for Doctor of Divinity.

²⁴⁹ Smith, *The Life, Conversion, Preaching, Travels and Sufferings of Elias Smith*, 334.

²⁵⁰ Quoted in Alan Eyre, *The Protesters* (Birmingham: The Christadelphian, 1975), 154.

²⁵¹ Quoted in Eyre, *The Protesters*, 150-151.

I endeavored to attend closely to the plain declarations of the Scriptures of Truth, without any regard to the opinion of any man. *My Bible and Concordance are almost the whole of my books.* In my search after Truth in the Scriptures, I have been led to reject many things which others hold, and to embrace many things which some reject, because they do not search after what God has said in his word.²⁵²

Smith was not interested in being viewed as an authority—it was not his conclusions which he asked people to believe, but rather the acceptance of his hermeneutical method which would necessarily lead to those conclusions. As Smith stated, “I have one request to make, that is, not to believe or disbelieve what is stated in this book on my testimony barely, but to search the Scriptures whether these things are so.”²⁵³ William Miller took exactly the same approach.

Similarly, in 1781, another Baptist preacher, Elhanan Winchester suffered a crisis of faith over Calvinism. He was unable to resolve his dilemma until he:

Shut myself up chiefly in my chamber, read the Scriptures, and prayed to God to lead me into all truth, and not suffer me to embrace any error; and I think with an upright mind, I laid myself open to believe whatsoever the Lord had revealed. It would be too long to tell all the Teaching I had on this head; let it suffice, in short, to say, that I became so well persuaded of the truth of Universal Restoration, that I determined never to deny it.²⁵⁴

Such experiences illustrate the “pervasive crisis of authority within popular religion in America, 1780-1820.” Hatch terms this movement, “the individualization of conscience,” and later states, “What strikes one in studying the use of the Bible in the early years of the American Republic, is how much weight becomes placed on private judgment and how little on the role of history, theology, and the collective will of the church.”²⁵⁵

Individualistic approaches like these were not limited to Baptists. The Presbyterian evangelist Charles G. Finney underwent a similar experience following his ordination. He found himself in conflict with Mr Gale—the pastor he studied under—because of his own inability to “accept doctrine on the ground of authority [alone].”²⁵⁶ Finney’s *Memoirs* record his habitual response:

Often when I left Mr. Gale, I would go to my room and spend a long time on my knees over my Bible. Indeed I read my Bible on my knees a great deal during these days of conflict, beseeching the Lord to teach me his own mind on these points. *I had nowhere to go but directly to the Bible, and to the philosophy or workings of my own mind....* [I] then gradually formed a view of my own...which appeared to me to

²⁵² Quoted in Eyre, *The Protesters*, 151. Emphasis added.

²⁵³ Quoted in Eyre, *The Protesters*, 156.

²⁵⁴ Quoted in Hatch, “Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum,” 68.

²⁵⁵ Hatch, “Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum,” 74.

²⁵⁶ Finney, *Memoirs*, 54.

be unequivocally taught in the Bible.”²⁵⁷

Referring to a pastor he disagreed with on the subject of the atonement, Finney later wrote: “I was but a novice in religion and in Biblical Learning; but I thought he did not sustain his views from the Bible, and told him so. I had read nothing on the subject except my Bible; and what I had found there upon the subject, I had interpreted as I would have understood the same or like passages in a law book.”²⁵⁸

Charles Chauncy, pastor of the first Church in Boston for sixty years (1727-1787), also made an exclusive appeal to Biblical authority. Chauncy was persuaded to emphasize Bible study by reading the works of English divines, such as Samuel Clarke’s *The Scripture-Doctrine of the Trinity* (London, 1712) and John Taylor’s *The Scripture-Doctrine of Original Sin* (London, 1740). Both authors used a “free, impartial and diligent” method of examining Scripture to discard, respectively, the doctrines of the Trinity and of Original Sin.²⁵⁹ During the 1750s, after the Great Awakening, Chauncy spent seven years engaged in the approach to Bible study expounded by these authors. In the spring of 1754 he wrote to a friend, “I have made the Scriptures my sole study for about two years; and I think I have attained to a clearer understanding of them than I ever had before.”²⁶⁰ Following this period of study Chauncy compiled a long manuscript in which he rejected the idea of eternal punishment replacing it with universalism. It was not however published until 1784 as *The Mystery Hid from Ages and Generations...or, the Salvation of All Men*. To justify his controversial conclusions, Chauncy relied on the biblical force of his argument: “a long and diligent comparing of Scripture with Scripture.” He explained to Ezra Stiles, “The whole is written from the Scripture account of the thing and not from any human scheme.”²⁶¹ One minister who found the book’s arguments convincing, wrote: “He has placed many texts and passages of Scripture in a light altogether new to me, and I cannot help thinking his system not only rational, but Scriptural.”²⁶²

Others went to greater extremes to distance themselves from established church authorities. In 1809, William Smythe Babcock and his congregation of Free-Will Baptists severed all ties with

²⁵⁷ Finney, *Memoirs*, 54. Emphasis added.

²⁵⁸ Finney, *Memoirs*, 42. Miller and Finney actually came into contact when Finney attended some of Miller’s “Bible classes” and afterwards “invited him to my room and tried to convince him he was in error.” This apparently occurred on more than one occasion. Following Finney’s final meeting with Miller he records “But it was vain to reason with him, and his followers, at that time. Believing as they most certainly did, that the advent of Christ was at hand, it was no wonder that they were too wild with excitement, to be reasoned with to any purpose.” Finney, *Memoirs*, 370.

²⁵⁹ Edward M. Griffin, *Old Brick: Charles Chauncy of Boston, 1705-1787* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 109-125.

²⁶⁰ Quoted in Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 181.

²⁶¹ Quoted in Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 181.

²⁶² Quoted in Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1979), 176.

their denomination. Babcock told the monthly meeting of Free-Will Baptists that he “now stood alone, unconnected to or with any one.”²⁶³ His congregation followed and set up a church that was “independent in itself, free from control or of domination of any other churches whatever.”²⁶⁴ Their only authority was to be “the rule and guide of the Scriptures.”²⁶⁵ Hatch points out that Babcock’s fundamental motivation for this separation, was his inability to “abide anyone having the right to suggest to him the parameters of biblical teaching.”²⁶⁶

In the first half of the nineteenth century the Bible had become for many—as Miller’s contemporary John W. Nevin complained—“a book dropped from the skies for all sorts of men to use in their own way.”²⁶⁷ Nevin explained further his understanding of the prevailing “biblical theology” of the time:

A theology that builds all its doctrines upon mere abstract texts, may abrogate to itself the character of *biblical*, in the most eminent sense; but it can never have any good claim to be considered so in reality. It belongs to the very genus of *sect*, to magnify itself in this way. It always affects to be biblical, in the highest degree. It will stand upon the bible, and upon nothing but the bible. In the end however, its biblicity is found to resolve itself invariably into such a poor, circumscribed conception of revealed truth, as is now described. Isolated texts, viewed through the medium of some particular sect hobby, are made to exhaust the whole proof, whether for or against the position on which they are made to bear. But no use of the scriptures can be more unbiblical than this.²⁶⁸

Similarly, Alexander Campbell outlined the foundation of his approach to the Scriptures: “I have endeavoured to read the scriptures as though no one had read them before me, and I am as much on my guard against reading them to-day, through the medium of my own views yesterday, or a week ago, as I am against being influenced by any foreign name, authority, or system whatever.”²⁶⁹

This fresh hermeneutic had considerable appeal because it spoke to three pressing issues. First, it proclaimed a new ground of certainty for a generation perplexed that it could no longer hear the voice of God above the din of sectarian confusion. If people would only abandon the husks of theological abstraction, the truth would be plain for all to see. Second, this approach to Scripture dared the common man to open the Bible and think for himself. All theological abstractions—such as the trinity, foreordination, and original sin—were abandoned, and all that was necessary

²⁶³ Quoted in Hatch, “Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum,” 69.

²⁶⁴ Quoted in Hatch, “Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum,” 69.

²⁶⁵ Quoted in Hatch, “Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum,” 69.

²⁶⁶ Hatch, “Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum,” 69.

²⁶⁷ Quoted in Hatch, “Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum,” 74.

²⁶⁸ Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 244. Original emphasis.

²⁶⁹ Quoted in Hatch, “The Christian Movement and the Demand for a Theology of the People,” 559.

to establish a given point was to string together texts from the King James Bible.²⁷⁰

Miller's popularist hermeneutics must be understood as a product of his particular nineteenth-century social environment. His method appealed to his followers—a group aptly described as “self-educated... with a thirst for knowledge”²⁷¹—because it empowered each of them to make their own discoveries of the “truth.” Miller used and encouraged a “do-it-yourself interpretation of scripture.”²⁷²

Miller was especially critical of other clergymen, particularly those with a formal theological education. In 1835, he wrote to Hendryx, “If our present ministry, were confined to their Bibles and concordance, with a common English education, so that they could talk in a known tongue, they would feed more sheep... tell more truth, and learn more their dependence on God.”²⁷³ Miller then relates the criticism he experienced from a minister who criticized Miller's conclusions and methodology, noting that these erroneous ideas were due to Miller's “want of a classical knowledge”, and his inability to understand “Hebrew and Greek”.²⁷⁴

In the preface to the first publication of Miller's fourteen “Rules of Interpretation”, the editor of the *Signs of the Times*, Joshua V. Himes noted that,

The question may arise, from the following rules of interpretation, whether the common people have the *right* to interpret the Bible for themselves. It is well known that this *right is not* acknowledged by the Catholic church. Some Protestant churches grant the right to *read*, but do not acknowledge the right of the people to *interpret* it for themselves....We would cite all such for their encouragement to one command, John v. 39. “Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.”²⁷⁵

Himes clearly views Miller's democratization of the Bible as of great importance and promotes the Millerite's democratic approach to the scriptures as being not only a great selling point—but as a foundational human right.

Miller's democratization of the Bible was avidly accepted and promoted by his followers—and used as a rhetorical strategy against their opponents. Lewis Hersey, in a letter to a Millerite opponent, N. Colver, takes offence to Colver's argument that a knowledge of biblical interpretive methods is necessary to interpret the Bible: “In your preliminaries is seen the cloven foot of popery, viz., that we, unlearned, cannot understand the Bible; but must depend upon ‘the correct knowledge

²⁷⁰ Hatch, “The Christian Movement and the Demand for a Theology of the People,” 560.

²⁷¹ Harrison, *The Second Coming*, 202.

²⁷² Harrison, *The Second Coming*, 200.

²⁷³ William Miller to Truman Hendryx, February 11, 1835.

²⁷⁴ William Miller to Truman Hendryx, February 11, 1835.

²⁷⁵ Joshua V. Himes, “Mr Miller's Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter,” *Signs of the Times*, May 15, 1840, 25.

of biblical interpretation,' which you say must be 'intelligible to the intelligent'".²⁷⁶ Hersey then points out that many educated scholars disagreed amongst themselves on particular points of interpretation, and finishes by stating, "Why all this disagreement amongst the 'intelligent,' if a 'knowledge of correct biblical interpretation' is the one thing needed to understand the Bible?"²⁷⁷

Freemasonry

"It was here [Poultney, Vermont] that Mr Miller became a member of the Masonic fraternity, in which his perseverance, if nothing else, was manifested; for he advanced to the highest degree which the lodges then in the country, or in that region, could confer."²⁷⁸ Little is known of Miller's Masonic ties other than this statement by his biographer Sylvester Bliss. The majority of subsequent authors either ignore this statement or list it without comment.²⁷⁹ Whitney R. Cross specifies that Miller was a "Royal Arch Mason" but gives no further details or sources.²⁸⁰ Interestingly, James White's work: *Sketches of the Christian Life and Public Labors of William Miller*—though almost a reprint of Bliss's work—has some significant omissions; including the absence of any mention of Miller's Masonic ties.²⁸¹ Similarly, Ellen G. White's work *The Great Controversy* contains a chapter on Miller that quotes extensively from Bliss's work. Like her husband however, she omits any mention of Miller's Masonic membership.²⁸² Likewise, *The Urgent Voice*—the 1975 popular biography by Seventh-day Adventist author Robert Gale—makes no mention of Miller's Masonic membership.²⁸³ Rowe's recent biography is an exception with Rowe addressing this issue in greater depth than any other source.²⁸⁴

Freemasonry began in Vermont in 1781 when the first lodge was founded at Springfield. The next four lodges were founded in Manchester, Vergennes, Bennington, and Middlebury.²⁸⁵ This

²⁷⁶ Lewis Hersey, "Letter to N. Colver," *The Western Midnight Cry*, December 9, 1843, 3.

²⁷⁷ Hersey, "Letter to N. Colver," 3.

²⁷⁸ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 21-22.

²⁷⁹ See Le Roy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* Volume III, 4 vols. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946), 456; Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 30; and Hewitt, *Midnight and Morning*, 11.

²⁸⁰ Cross, *The Burned-over District*, 288.

²⁸¹ White, *Sketches of the Christian Life and Public Labors of William Miller*.

²⁸² Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan During the Christian Dispensation* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1888), 317-342.

²⁸³ Gale, *The Urgent Voice*.

²⁸⁴ Rowe, *God's Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World*, 27, 91-94.

²⁸⁵ John Spargo, *The Rise and Progress of Freemasonry in Vermont the Green Mountain State 1765-1944* (Burlington, VT: The Grand Lodge of Vermont, 1944), 16.

lead to the establishment of a Grand Lodge in 1794.²⁸⁶ Freemasonry grew rapidly from this point, with twenty lodges organized by 1800, and seventy-three by 1828.²⁸⁷

H. Y. Smith and W. S. Rann, editors of the 1886 book *History of Rutland County Vermont with Illustrations & Biographical Sketches of Some of Its Prominent Men & Pioneers* show “Rev. William Miller” as one of fifty-one individuals listed by a Mr Clarke as “those who have been prominent in the Order in this county [Rutland].”²⁸⁸ Miller—listed as Captain William Miller—is later given as one of the early masters of Morning Star Lodge, No. 27. This lodge is said to have been “organized in Poultney prior to 1800, though the exact date is not known.”²⁸⁹ Miller moved to Poultney soon after his marriage on June 29, 1803, and his membership of this lodge is most likely to have occurred between this date and his entry into the military. Miller did not join the regular army until June 13, 1813, when he was commissioned a lieutenant. He was not made a captain until February 1, 1814.²⁹⁰ However, as previously mentioned, Miller had served as a captain in the Vermont militia from November 7, 1812. Thus his appointment as Master Mason must have occurred after this date—and most likely after his discharge from the army on June 18, 1815.²⁹¹ Little is known of Miller’s Masonic ties. However, Matthew Lyon, whose library Miller accessed, was a Mason, being “Crafted in North Star Lodge on June 30, 1786” and he may have been influential in Miller’s decision to join.²⁹²

Another lodge is also known to have held meetings in Poultney around this time; the Aurora Mark Lodge, No. 2. According to Smith and Rann, this lodge was “instituted at Poultney under a warrant from Aurora Lodge, No. 25, in 1797.”²⁹³ The first officers were installed at a meeting held at Peter B. French’s hotel, in Hampton, in April, 1797, and meetings were held part of the time in Poultney and part in Hampton. A new dispensation was obtained in January, 1800, and the number changed to 16. The last meeting was held in May, 1805.²⁹⁴ As Rowe points out, it is probably this

²⁸⁶ Spargo, *The Rise and Progress of Freemasonry in Vermont the Green Mountain State 1765-1944*, 43-44.

²⁸⁷ Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*, 90.

²⁸⁸ Smith and Rann, eds., *History of Rutland County*, 287. Online copy: <http://maozi.middlebury.edu/SharingVTHistory/BooksPamphlets/HRC/DirectoryHRC.htm>

²⁸⁹ Smith and Rann, eds., *History of Rutland County*, 297. Online copy: <http://maozi.middlebury.edu/SharingVTHistory/BooksPamphlets/HRC/DirectoryHRC.htm>

²⁹⁰ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 35, 40-41.

²⁹¹ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 59.

²⁹² Spargo, *The Rise and Progress of Freemasonry in Vermont the Green Mountain State 1765-1944*, 24-25.

²⁹³ Smith and Rann, eds., *History of Rutland County*, 296. Online copy: <http://maozi.middlebury.edu/SharingVTHistory/BooksPamphlets/HRC/DirectoryHRC.htm>

²⁹⁴ Smith and Rann, eds., *History of Rutland County*, 296. Online copy: <http://maozi.middlebury.edu/SharingVTHistory/BooksPamphlets/HRC/DirectoryHRC.htm>

lodge that Miller visited as a youth—Miller’s diary seems to make mention of a visit on Friday March 4, 1798, stating “[at]tended Mason”.²⁹⁵

In 1936, A. S. Harriman—Grand Secretary of the Masonic Temple in Burlington Vermont replied to an inquiry about William Miller by Stanley L. Horka:

I am sorry to say that we have no records of Masonic membership which run back to the time of William Miller. Our records of membership were started after the reorganization of 1846-47 and are sketchy even then for twenty years or more.²⁹⁶

In a postscript however, Harriman wrote:

In an old book of Early Records, I find that a William Miller attended the sessions of Grand Lodge as follows: as 1809 as proxy for W.M. [Worshipful Master], S.W. [Senior warden] and J.W. [Junior Warden]; in 1810 as S.W. and proxy for J.W. In 1811, the Lodge was not represented and in 1812 Noah Wells, S.W. was proxy for the W.M. In 1813 a new W.M. was present. Miller may have been W.M. in either 1811 or 1812 or both....The Lodge was then Morning Star, No. 27, of Poultney, Vt.²⁹⁷

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Freemasonry was a common and well-accepted part of American society.

On September 18, 1793, President George Washington dedicated the United States Capitol. Dressed in Masonic apron, the president placed a silver plate upon the cornerstone and covered it with the Masonic symbols of corn, oil, and wine. After a prayer, the brethren performed “chanting honors.”...The fraternity’s position on Capitol Hill, one of the many such consecration ceremonies over the next generation, provided a powerful symbol of Masonry’s new place in post-Revolutionary America. No longer an expression of the honor and solidarity of a particular social class, the fraternity increasingly identified itself with the ideals of the nation as a whole.²⁹⁸

[Masonry] attracted large numbers of Americans eager to associate themselves with these cosmopolitan ideals. Fraternal membership and ideology helped bring high standing to a broad range of Americans, breaking down the artificial boundaries of birth and wealth. To men engaged in learned and artistic occupations, rural men with cosmopolitan aspirations, and even Boston’s women and blacks, Masonry offered participation in both the great classical tradition of civilization and the task of building a new nation. Just as importantly, the fraternity also seemed to provide the leaders for these enterprises.²⁹⁹

The rise of Ancient Masonry and the resolution of wartime troubles launched the fraternity into a period of unparalleled growth. Within a generation after the

²⁹⁵ Miller, “The Diary of William Miller. Rowe, God’s Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World, 27.

²⁹⁶ A. S. Harriman to Stanley L. Horka, July 8, 1936.

²⁹⁷ A. S. Harriman to Stanley L. Horka, July 8, 1936.

²⁹⁸ Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 137.

²⁹⁹ Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 138.

Revolution, American Masonry grew from a few scattered groups of brothers to a well-organized and pervasive organization gathering in nearly every location in America.³⁰⁰

Freemasonry was one of the most extraordinary phenomena of that ‘rationalist’ age, and its rise is directly linked to the triumph of a new scientific culture, to the Newtonian version of enlightenment....the Newtonians used it [Freemasonry] to give expression to their new faith in the wondrous powers of the Grand Architect.³⁰¹

Masonic membership provided a recognized measure of moral respectability, and joining a local lodge served as an excellent introduction to the community when settling in to a new location. “For many, Masonic membership became a means of gaining practical (even perhaps selfish) benefits, not only charity but political and economic advantage.”³⁰² This was particularly important for new members of a community as Masonic membership reassured the community that the newcomer possessed moral character and trustworthiness:

Fraternal practices and teaching first reinforced a brother’s reputation and facilitated their economic activities. These benefits were particularly significant for newcomers, providing screening and moral training that reassured potential trading partners and provided a means of resolving disputes.³⁰³

Masonic membership was for some a means of increasing their personal status in the community—a way of establishing ties, not just with the community in general, but with the most influential and wealthy men of the region—the merchants, professionals (i.e. doctors and lawyers), and government officials. For a young farmer like William Miller—recently married and new to the community—Masonic membership provided the key to community acceptance and integration.

Young men establishing an independent economic identity, professionals, merchants, and artisans who needed support and connections, and ambitious men all entered the fraternity in large numbers because it spoke directly to central economic issues in their lives.³⁰⁴

As Jacob states, Freemasonry’s “essentially social nature, reinforced by the trappings of secrecy, gave an extraordinary sense of community to men who were disaffected from church or chapel.”³⁰⁵

Examination of the lodge records of the Ark Lodge in Geneva, New York—a heavily agricultural area of upstate New York—shows that “men who primarily farmed made up only about

³⁰⁰ Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 138.

³⁰¹ Jacobs, *The Radical Enlightenment*, 106.

³⁰² Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 138.

³⁰³ Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 138.

³⁰⁴ Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 138.

³⁰⁵ Jacobs, *The Radical Enlightenment*, 109.

one-tenth of the Geneva lodge (11.8 percent).³⁰⁶ In comparison, there were 27.5% Merchant, 19.6% Professional, and 35.2% Artisan.³⁰⁷ In some ways then, as a farmer, Miller's Masonic membership—particularly his rise to the position of Master of his local lodge was somewhat unusual. Interestingly, Cross points out that “about a fourth of all the Protestant ministers had probably been Masons, whereas not more than a twentieth of church laymen had been invited to join.”³⁰⁸ These figures add weight to the idea that Masonry was primarily linked with the more influential and wealthy portion of society.

Initially, “Americans identified their order with the values of virtue, learning, and religion.”³⁰⁹

The new view of Masonic history made the search for learning an important theme within American lodges....[De Witt] Clinton's 1793 address also suggested that “mental improvement” was “an essential requisite, an indispensable duty” for current Masons....The new stress on learning encouraged some lodges to support educational activities for a broader audience. The lodge in Danville, Virginia, like many other southern and frontier bodies, opened its lodge hall to a fledgling school; the Marietta, Ohio, group helped finance the local public school building; and the Try, New York, lodge aided the town's lending library when it experienced financial difficulties.³¹⁰

One minister wrote in 1795, that Masons were “the Sons of REASON, the DISCIPLES of WISDOM, and the BRETHREN of Humanity.”³¹¹

A broad spectrum of Post-Revolutionary American believers embraced religious attitudes that made Masonry's nonsectarianism and promotion of active benevolence outside the church an integral part of their religious outlook. At the same time, brothers began to invest Masonry with explicitly Christian values and beliefs. These claims would be validated and strengthened by the growing numbers of ministers and church members who joined the order.³¹²

Not all Christians were comfortable with such a close relationship. In 1798, the Shaftesbury Association of Baptists located in western Vermont and eastern New York, voted to require association members to desist from Masonic activities.³¹³ Baptists who “continue obstinately in such

³⁰⁶ Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 138.

³⁰⁷ See Table 12 in Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 210.

³⁰⁸ Cross, *The Burned-over District*, 123.

³⁰⁹ Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 138.

³¹⁰ Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 147.

³¹¹ Quoted in Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 153. Original emphasis.

³¹² Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 164.

³¹³ Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 165.

practice ought to be rejected from fellowship.”³¹⁴ Given the sometimes prickly relationship between Miller and a number of his immediate family who were staunch Baptists, it is possible that the opposition of these local Baptists to Freemasonry actually provided added impetus for Miller’s Masonic membership.

In a letter written to his friend Truman Hendryx—dated March 26, 1832—Miller expresses his unhappiness with the current anti-Masonic sentiments:

Br. [J.] Sawyer has almost become sick of Anti-masonry. And you would not wonder if you should see how inconsistent [*sic*] they act. They came together in our ch[urch] a few weeks since, and being a majority in the ch[urch] they voted Brs. Aborrs & the two Whitlocks letters of recommendations to other churches, when these brethren, said at the same time they could not and would not walk with the ch[urch]. Br Sawyer sees the inconsistency [*sic*] of their conduct, and so does some of them, and how it will end the Lord only knows. But we have a meeting next Saturday to recall the letters[. H]ow much we need of the spirit of Jesus to keep us right.³¹⁵

In a second letter—also to Hendryx—dated November 17, 1832, Miller rejoiced when Antimasonry died in his locality.³¹⁶ Such feelings are perhaps no surprise—Miller’s lodge in Poultney is said to have had to give up its charter about 1832, on account of the strong anti-Masonic sentiment of the time.³¹⁷ Miller hints at similar sentiments two years later in a February 25 letter—again to Hendryx—that denounces abolitionism as “worse if possible than Anti-Masonry.”³¹⁸ Such statements seem to indicate that Miller—at the very least—still had sympathy for the group as late as 1834, though he had written a somewhat grudging letter of resignation to his local lodge on September 10, 1831. He apparently did so, not because he believed that freemasonry was wrong, but because of pressure from anti-Masonic Christians, stating that he resigned in order to “consilliate [*sic*] the feelings of my brethren in Christ” thereby avoiding “fellowship with any practice that may be incompatible with the Word of God”.³¹⁹ Miller’s lodge in Poultney—Morning Star Lodge, No. 27—was reopened in 1857—eight years after his death—as the Morning Star Lodge, No. 37 after anti-Masonic sentiments had somewhat subsided in the area.³²⁰

³¹⁴ Quoted in Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 165.

³¹⁵ William Miller to Truman Hendryx, March 26, 1832.

³¹⁶ William Miller to Truman Hendryx, November 17, 1832. See also William Miller to Truman Hendryx, November 28, 1834.

³¹⁷ Smith and Rann, eds., *History of Rutland County*, 296. Online copy: <http://maozi.middlebury.edu/SharingVTHistory/BooksPamphlets/HRC/DirectoryHRC.htm> The lodge apparently reformed in 1857 as no. 37. It was still active in December 2010.

³¹⁸ William Miller to Truman Hendryx, February 25, 1834.

³¹⁹ Miller, William. Letter to Joseph Attwood and others, May 31, 1831.

³²⁰ Joslin, Frisbie, and Ruggles, *History of the Town of Poultney, Vermont*, 158.

Organised and popular anti-Masonry began in upstate New York in 1826 when William Morgan—who had threatened to expose Masonic secrets—disappeared. Popularly thought to have been murdered by Masons, Morgan’s disappearance sparked a mass anti-Masonic popular crusade. As Rowe notes, “Fueled by antagonism to Masons’ elite status and the power they seemed to wield over courts, legislatures, and governors to prevent justice to Morgan, an anti-Masonic movement and political party organized to “recapture” government for the people.”³²¹

The anti-Masonic movement found widespread support in Vermont. Ludlum points out that: “During 1833 and 1834 practically every lodge, which had not already suspended, surrendered its charter to the Grand Lodge and ceased operations.”³²² In the national election of 1832, Vermont alone of all the states, cast its electoral votes for the anti-Masonic presidential candidate William Wirt.³²³ By 1834 the public frenzy had subsided, however, it remained a latent force in many Vermont communities. Despite this, Freemasonry was never to regain its formal levels of popularity and influence. Vermont’s Grand Lodge curtailed its activities in 1834—existing only in a state of “suspended animation” till 1845. As Ludlum states, “Masonry as a going concern ceased to exist in Vermont.”³²⁴

Miller’s statements concerning Antimasonry are dated well after his conversion in 1816, and seem to indicate that Miller saw no contradiction between his Baptist religiosity and his Masonic beliefs. While Smith and Rann list “Rev. William Miller” as a prominent Mason in Rutland County, it doesn’t seem likely that Miller was an active Mason following his licentiation as a Baptist minister by the Low Hampton Baptist Church on September 12, 1833; as previously noted, Miller had in fact resigned his Masonic membership in September 1831. Furthermore, the Poultney lodge had closed the previous year in the midst of anti-Masonic fervour.³²⁵ However, as shown previously, evidence suggests that he—at the very least—retained sympathy for the Masonic movement until 1834, and possibly later.

Rowe suggests that Miller’s Masonic activity actually delayed his licentiation as a Baptist minister and given the enthusiasm with which Antimasonry was embraced in the area, this seems entirely possible.³²⁶ However, Miller’s licentiation does not actually seem to have been delayed long—if at all. Miller preached his first public sermon in August 1831 and received his licence on

³²¹ Rowe, *God’s Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World*, 93

³²² Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*, 128.

³²³ Ward, “Religious Enthusiasm in Vermont, 1761-1847”, 147.

³²⁴ Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*, 128.

³²⁵ Smith and Rann, eds., *History of Rutland County*, 296. Online copy: <http://maozi.middlebury.edu/SharingVTHistory/BooksPamphlets/HRC/DirectoryHRC.htm>

³²⁶ Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets*, 20.

September 14, 1833—a little over two years later. Miller does not seem to have actively sought such a licence, writing on February 8, 1833 that, “Our people [Low Hampton Baptist Church] are about to give me a license to lecture. I hardly know what to do. I am too old, too wicked, and too proud.”³²⁷ There is a period of seven months between this letter and Miller’s receiving the licence—which may indicate some small delay.³²⁸

Given the limited information available, it is difficult to determine exactly what Bliss means when he speaks of Miller’s advancement “to the highest degree which the lodges then in the country, or in that region, could confer.”³²⁹ Smith and Rann list Miller as one of the early masters of Morning Star Lodge, No. 27, though they do not give the date of his election nor the period of his service in this position.³³⁰ To hold such a position would have meant that Miller was inducted into at least the Third degree of Masonry—the position of Master Mason. This position followed that of levels one—Entered Apprentice, and two—Fellow Craft.³³¹

Miller’s participation at such a level would have required considerable commitment in many areas—particularly financial. “Steep fees and expenses surely kept any poorer brothers from the higher-degree bodies.”³³² In 1802, Thomas Smith Webb’s Knights Templar charged initiates twenty-five dollars; while in 1805 a new body formed over Rhode Island and Massachusetts charged thirty dollars—“more than half a month’s wages for a skilled labourer.”³³³ Such charges created a strong barrier that guarded against the entry of the merely curious.

The roots of Freemasonry were undoubtedly influenced by the Christian faith. However, as early as 1738 one Masonic charge stated:

In ancient Times the Christian Masons were charged to comply with the Christian usages of each country where they travelled, or worked. But Masonry being found in all nations, even of divers religions, they are now generally charged to adhere to the religion to which all men agree (leaving each brother to his own particular opinion) that is, to be good men and true men of honour and honesty by what ever names, religions, or persuasions they may be distinguished.³³⁴

³²⁷ William Miller to Truman Hendryx, February 8, 1833.

³²⁸ A copy of the ministerial license issued to Miller may be found in Judd, “William Miller: Disappointed Prophet,” 25.

³²⁹ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 21-22.

³³⁰ Smith and Rann, eds., *History of Rutland County*, 297. Online copy: <http://maozi.middlebury.edu/SharingVTHistory/BooksPamphlets/HRC/DirectoryHRC.htm>

³³¹ William Preston Campbell-Everden, *Freemasonry and its Etiquette* (New York: Weathervane Books, 1978), 408. For an account of an initiation ritual into the degree of Master Mason around the time of Miller, see William Morgan, *Illustrations of Masonry by one of the Fraternity Who has Devoted Thirty Years to the Subject* (1827), 69-90.

³³² Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 165.

³³³ Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 165.

³³⁴ James Anderson, *The New Book of Constitutions of the Ancient and Honorable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons* (London: Ward & Chandler, 1738), 143.

Within Freemasonry, individuals are encouraged to be true to themselves and to their personal belief system (as long as that belief system includes belief in the existence of a higher power of some sort). In 19th century American Freemasonry however, Christians were dominant—and hence American Freemasonry of this time was essentially a Christian institution—with members being taught to believe in the Bible and the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Historically, the Bible played an important role in Masonic ritual of the time. Indeed, in 1938, one Christian Mason wrote: “It is futile trying to shirk the position—either our volume of the Sacred law, the Bible is to be treated as the great light of English Freemasonry or it must be relegated to our museum of symbols.”³³⁵ In discussing the relationship between the Bible and Freemasonry, J. W. S. Mitchell stated in 1858, “Masonry worships only through its inspired pages.”³³⁶ An open Bible lays on the Master’s Pedestal during many Masonic Lodge meetings.³³⁷ The “Volume of the Sacred Law” is one of the three items comprising the “furniture” of the Lodge—the other items are the compass and the square.³³⁸ According to Freemason William Preston Campbell-Everden, the Bible is seen as the “greatest of the three great... lights in Freemasonry....The Sacred Writings are given as the rule and guide of our Faith. The Sacred Volume will guide us to all Truth, direct our steps in the paths of Happiness, and point out to us the whole Duty of man.”³³⁹ Similarly, W. Kirk McNulty points out that,

The Three Great Lights in masonry are the volume of Sacred Law, the Square and the Compass, and the sacred writings are understood to be those revered by the individual Mason. Although there are local variations in Freemasonry’s symbolic structure, the Three Great Lights are universal. Taken together they form the most essential, as well as the most widely known of the Masonic symbols. No Masonic lodge can meet unless they are present and displayed.³⁴⁰

William Morgan’s *Illustrations of Masonry by one of the Fraternity Who has Devoted Thirty Years to the Subject* published in 1827, contains the following dialogue:

“What did you first discover after being brought to light?”

Ans. “Three great lights in Masonry, by the assistance of three lesser.”

“What were those three great lights in Masonry?”

Ans. “The Holy Bible, Square and Compass.”

“How are they explained?”

Ans. “The Holy Bible is given to us as a guide for our faith and practice; the Square

³³⁵ H. J. Whympier, *The Religion of Freemasonry* (London: George Kenning, 1938), 12.

³³⁶ J. W. S. Mitchell, *History of Freemasonry and Masonic Digest Part 2* (1858), 211.

³³⁷ Campbell-Everden, *Freemasonry and its Etiquette*, 276.

³³⁸ Campbell-Everden, *Freemasonry and its Etiquette*, 135.

³³⁹ Campbell-Everden, *Freemasonry and its Etiquette*, 276-277.

³⁴⁰ W. Kirk. MacNulty, *Freemasonry: A Journey Through Ritual and Symbol* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 4.

to square our actions; and the Compass to keep us in due bounds with all mankind, but more especially with the brethren may know another in the dark as well as the light.”³⁴¹

In a lecture given in 1860 by W.T. Wilkinson the candidate was addressed with the following words:

Your very position is designed by Masonry to remind you that in a state of nature you are poor and ignorant, and blind and naked. *You are tonight to look upon the Holy Bible as the only source of the true riches—wisdom—enlightenment and happiness.* The Author of this Holy work is Almighty God. The design is to be a light unto your feet and a lamp to your path. To Guide your feet into the way of peace—the end is to make you wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus—to teach you that true wisdom, which is in the fear of the Lord, and the understanding which is to depart from evil.³⁴²

Despite the aforementioned Masonic attitude to the Bible, the movement was an important vehicle for the diffusion of Deist ideas.³⁴³ As E. Brooks Holifield points out, the Masonic movement popularized a language about God that had an affinity with Deist theology. The God of Masonic ritual was the Grand Architect, the Cosmic Orderer, and even Christian Masons learned to blur the distinctions between traditional and rationalist language about God. The Masonic movement came closer to any other to being the deist church.³⁴⁴

Campbell-Everden emphasises this when he notes that “A belief in T. G. A. O. T. U. [The Grand Architect Of The Universe] is the first and most important of the Antient [*sic*] Landmarks. The relation of this Landmark to Freemasonry is as unalterable and undebatable as the relationship of the earth to the sun.”³⁴⁵

In the years following the American Revolution, the idea that the higher Masonic degrees contained hidden wisdom became increasingly popular. “Numbers as well as words held deep significance in the higher degrees.”³⁴⁶ For example, the Royal Arch ritual was seventh in one sequence. Only three men could be initiated at once, and each began with a rope tied around his body seven times. At the ritual’s conclusion, the initiates passed through three veils to face three overseers. In the sixth-level Webb ritual, initiates wore a rope wrapped six times around their body,

³⁴¹ Morgan, *Illustrations of Masonry*, 36.

³⁴² Whymper, *The Religion of Freemasonry*, 80. Emphasis added.

³⁴³ Holifield, *Theology in America*, 169.

³⁴⁴ Holifield, *Theology in America*, 169.

³⁴⁵ Campbell-Everden, *Freemasonry and its Etiquette*, 65.

³⁴⁶ Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 165.

entered the hall after six knocks, were led around the lodge six times, and kissed the Bible six times.³⁴⁷

Freemasonry has a great many symbols of various sorts. Miller's contemporary, William Morgan's book *Illustrations of Masonry by one of the Fraternity Who has Devoted Thirty Years to the Subject* contains the following dialogue:

Ans. "The Worshipful Master a second time approaching me from the east, who presented me with a lambskin or white apron, which he said was an emblem of innocence, and the badge of a Mason...."

"What were you next presented with?"

Ans. "The working tools of an Entered Apprentice Mason."

"What were they?"

Ans. "A twenty-four inch gauge and common gavel."

"How were they explained?"

Ans. "The twenty-four inch gauge is an instrument made use of by operative masons to measure and lay out their work, but we as Free and Accepted Masons are taught to make use of it for the more noble and glorious purpose of dividing our time; the twenty-four inches on the gauge are emblematical of the twenty-four hours in the day, which we are taught to divide into three equal parts, whereby we find eight hours for the service of God and a worthy distressed brother, eight hours for our usual vocation, and eight hours for refreshment and sleep. The common gavel is an instrument made use of by operative masons to break off the corners of rough stones, the better to fit them for the builder's use, but we, as Free and Accepted Masons, are taught to make use of it for the more noble and glorious purpose of divesting our hearts and consciences of all the vices and superfluities of life, thereby fitting our minds as lively and living stones for that spiritual building, that House not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

"What were you next presented with?"

Ans. "A new name."

"What was that?"

Ans. "Caution."

"What does it teach?"

Ans. "It teaches me as I was barely instructed in the rudiments of Masonry, that I should be cautious over all my words and actions, especially when before its enemies."

"What were you next presented with?"

Ans. "Three precious jewels."

"What are they?"

Ans. "A listening ear, a silent tongue, and a faithful heart."³⁴⁸

Other Masonic symbols included: "The pot of incense, the bee-hive, the book of constitutions, guarded by the Tyler's sword, the sword pointing to a naked heart, the all-seeing eye, the anchor and ark, the forty-seventh problem of Euclid, the hour-glass, the scythe, and the three steps usually delineated on the Master's carpet....The spade, coffin, death-head, marrow-bones, and sprig of

³⁴⁷ Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 165.

³⁴⁸ Morgan, *Illustrations of Masonry*, 37-38.

cassia.”³⁴⁹ As Rowe points out, even after his resignation, “Masonic imagery continued to suffuse Miller’s writing”.³⁵⁰

Miller would have gained a number of significant benefits from his Masonic membership. Certainly he enjoyed business advantage and increased social standing as a result of his contact with other members who were prominent in local society. Freemasonry would have also gone some way to fulfil Miller’s intense and life-long desire for learning. It seems likely also, that Freemasonry’s extensive use of symbolism would have influenced Miller’s particular approach to biblical hermeneutics—particularly his reading of prophetic symbols.

It is clear the Miller’s intellectual world was filled with powerful and influential ideas and philosophies. Christian Revivalism was pervasive in his local area and certainly—despite his period as a Deist—shaped his later Christian experience. Miller’s time as a Deist was very influential and coloured his whole approach to hermeneutics. It was after all, the challenges of his Deist friends that started him on his quest to read the Bible from beginning to end and attempt to understand and harmonize every passage he read. Similarly, the pervasive presence of Common Sense Philosophy was foundational in

³⁴⁹ Morgan, *Illustrations of Masonry*, 99, 102.

³⁵⁰ Rowe, *God’s Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World*, 94.

CHAPTER 4 – Miller’s Written Sources: Libraries & Books

This chapter examines the books and other reading material that Miller is known to have, or is likely to have read during his lifetime.

Miller’s formal education was limited. Joshua Himes records that until the age of 9, he was taught at home by his mother—there being no local school in existence.¹ When he was sent to the newly established East Poultney District School he was said to have been able to read in the Bible, Psalter, and an old Hymn Book, “which at that time constituted the whole of his father’s library.”² Bliss goes so far as to state that Miller “had enjoyed the limited advantages of the district school but a few years, before it was generally admitted that his attainments exceeded those of the teachers usually employed.”³ While Miller was undoubtedly an intelligent man, this comment approaches hagiography. Miller’s biographers emphasize his limited formal schooling. In addition to Himes and Bliss, James White wrote that Miller, “had not the benefits of an early classical education.”⁴

Knight specifies that Miller attended school “between his ninth and fourteenth years”—a period also alluded to by Himes.⁵ However, Miller’s own diary has number of entries pointing to erratic attendance for the years 1798 to 1801. On December 3, 1798—when he was sixteen—Miller wrote “I went to school.” Similar entries are found for December 4, 5, 10-12, 17-21, 24-26, 31. In 1799, Miller apparently attended school on January 1, 3, 7, 8, 14-16, 21-24, 28, 31; and February 1, 4-9, 11-13, 15, 18. In 1800, Miller attended on January 6-8, 10, 11, 20-24, 27, 28, 30; February 3-6, 11, 17-19; March 4, 7; and December 15, 16. In 1801—the final year of this diary, Miller states that he attended school on January 12-17, and 27-30—just prior to his nineteenth birthday.⁶ Such attendance is an indicator of Miller’s great desire for learning.

Miller’s desire for learning was somewhat out of the ordinary—given the family’s status. As a boy, Miller chopped wood during his “leisure hours” in order to earn money to purchase books of his own. Bliss records that the first two books he purchased in this way were: *The History of Crusoe*

¹ Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies*, 7.

² Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies*, 7.

³ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 13.

⁴ White, *Life Incidents*, 27.

⁵ Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 27. Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies*, 7.

⁶ Miller, “The Diary of William Miller”. The last regular entry in the diary was made on September 20, 1801. Miller does however make a few entries in 1803 that refer to his engagement and marriage to Lucy Smith.

and *The Adventures of Robert Boyle*.⁷ In his teens then, Miller already owned at least two books—at a time when the median family library size in the nearby Windsor District was only four volumes.⁸

Miller is not known to have undertaken any form of formal study after the age of eighteen, though he continued to read widely and voraciously. He deeply desired to further his formal education, but the family finances did not permit this. Sylvester Bliss records the following incident:

There was a medical gentleman in the vicinity of his residence, by the name of Smith, who possessed an ample fortune, and was known to be very liberal. In the plans which had passed through the mind of William, to secure the means of maturing his education, he had thought of Dr. Smith. At any rate it could do no harm to apply to him. The plan was carried so far as to write a letter, setting forth to that gentleman his intense desires, his want of means to gratify them, his hopes and prospects, if successful.⁹

The letter was never posted. Miller was discovered in the act of finishing by his father, who, while apparently moved by his son's position, had the letter destroyed. The exact reason for Bliss's statement that "the plan was impossible" is unknown—perhaps as the eldest child Miller's labour was needed on the family farm; or possibly his father feared some form of social criticism if the plan was allowed to proceed. Himes records that after the age of fourteen, Miller "became still more anxious to obtain books, especially histories and journals of travelers....From this time till he was twenty-one years of age, *he was a most devoted student of ancient and modern history.*"¹⁰

Libraries

Whilst living in Low Hampton, Miller was given access to the private libraries of Judge James Witherell,¹¹ and Congressman Matthew Lyon¹²—both of Fairhaven, Vermont, and Alexander

⁷ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 12-13. *The History of Crusoe* was apparently a locally published (Albany, NY: C. R. & G. Webster, 1790) abridgement or retelling of Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Strange and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*—first published in 1719. It may have included the first of Defoe's sequels *The Further Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719). According to Lilia Melani, *Daniel Defoe* (accessed August 4, 2005); available from http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_18c/defoe/index.html. "Through the remainder of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century, *Robinson Crusoe* was printed with both the first and second parts. The modern practice of publishing only the first part of *Robinson Crusoe* began around 1860." Rufus Chetwood's *Adventures of Robert Boyle* was first published in 1726.

⁸ Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life*, 272. Data is for 1792-1796.

⁹ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 15.

¹⁰ Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies*, 7-8.

¹¹ Dr. James Witherell (also spelled Witherill) arrived in Fairhaven in 1789. He was a practicing physician, served as a Representative in the State Assembly, Chief Judge of the Rutland County Court (1802-1806) and also as a Member of Congress. He moved to Detroit, Michigan, about 1810, where he served as a judge. Smith and Rann, eds., *History of Rutland County*, 597-598. Online copy located at: <http://maozi.middlebury.edu/SharingVTHistory/BooksPamphlets/HRC/DirectoryHRC.htm>

Cruikshanks of Whitehall, New York.¹³ As Himes records, “A number of gentlemen in the vicinity of his father’s residence, on being made acquainted with his love of reading, kindly offered him the privilege of their private libraries, which he accepted with much gratitude.”¹⁴ From notes that the “young Miller was an omnivorous reader, particularly between the ages of fourteen and twenty-one.”¹⁵ Such access was not particularly uncommon during this time-period. In 1850, referring to the large private “scholarly” libraries of the time, Charles C. Jewett stated, “In one sense they are public libraries. Almost without exception, access to them is freely allowed to all persons who wish to use them for research.”¹⁶ According to Himes, such access enabled Miller to

store his mind with a vast collection of historical facts, which have since been of so much service to him in the illustration of the prophecies. Possessing a strong mind and a retentive memory, he appropriated the contents of those gentlemen’s libraries to his own use; and even now, after a lapse of more than thirty years, it is astonishing to observe the correctness of his frequent references to these historical facts and dates in his extemporaneous lectures.¹⁷

Social libraries were essentially public libraries open to any patron willing to pay for the services required.¹⁸ These libraries took two principal forms: the proprietary library and the subscription library. Proprietary libraries were like “common-law partnerships[s], in which only the proprietors, or shareholders, had the privileges of the library. Shares were used to buy books, erect buildings, and pay salaries.”¹⁹ Such a restricted membership often did not provide enough financial backing to ensure the survival of the majority of these libraries. Subscription libraries—also known as association libraries, or library companies—were similar, resembling “a corporation in legal structure and extended privileges to all those paid a set fee at periodic intervals.”²⁰ As Elizabeth W. Stone points out, “Many libraries developed as a combination of the two forms, starting with proprietary stockholders and later turning to the additional support gained from new members who

¹² Matthew Lyon arrived in Fairhaven in 1783. He funded the erection of the first saw and grist-mills; and in 1785 commencing the building of the forge and iron works, and a short time afterwards of a paper-mill. In 1786 he was one of the assistant judges of the Rutland County Court, and in 1788, 1790 and 1791, selectman. After being repeatedly defeated, he was eventually elected to Congress in 1796. Smith and Rann, eds., *History of Rutland County*, 591-616. Online copy located at: <http://maozi.middlebury.edu/SharingVTHistory/BooksPamphlets/HRC/DirectoryHRC.htm>

¹³ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 13. Whitehall is approximately 9 miles west of Poultney, while Fairhaven is approximately 6 miles north.

¹⁴ Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies*, 7.

¹⁵ From, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* Volume IV, 455.

¹⁶ Quoted in Haynes McMullen, *American Libraries Before 1876* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), 155.

¹⁷ Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies*, 8.

¹⁸ Jesse H. Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library: the Origins of the Public Library Movement in New England, 1629-1855* (Hamden: Shoe String Press, 1965), 75.

¹⁹ Elizabeth W. Stone, *American Library Development, 1600-1899* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1977), vii-viii.

²⁰ Stone, *American Library Development, 1600-1899*, viii.

paid regular fees.”²¹ Circulating libraries offered new opportunities for extensive reading. Usually a customer “paid a fixed sum per year or per week for the privilege of taking out one book at a time.”²²

The nearby town of Fairhaven gained a library in 1794 that was the brainchild of Matthew Lyon who was “instrumental in founding the Fairhaven Library Society”.²³ Fairhaven is approximately 9.5 km (6 miles) from Poultney, and it is almost certain that Miller accessed this library through his father who was a member and attended meetings and borrowed books.²⁴ A library society formed in Hampton in 1796 and Rowe states that it was this library that Miller “undoubtedly belonged”.²⁵ Miller’s diary records in an entry for August 30, that he “went to Library Meeting”, thus pointing to his membership in a library society by mid-1800 at the age of eighteen.²⁶ While Rowe is likely correct in his assertion, Miller himself does not specify which library society he is referring to.

Other libraries in surrounding towns existed also; social libraries formed in Brookfield in 1791, and in Pittsford in 1796; a library existed in Pawlet in 1799, and a circulating library was created in the town of Woodstock from 1821.²⁷ While some of these towns are relatively distant from Poultney—Brookfield is approximately 117 km (73 miles); Pittsford is approximately 43 km (27 miles); and Woodstock is approximately 80 km (50 miles)—members did not have to personally attend such libraries to borrow books. Books were often available to more distant members as long as such members paid for the transportation of the volumes.²⁸ Pawlet is closer to Poultney—approximately 27 km (17 miles) away.

Following Miller’s marriage he moved to Poultney, Vermont. Bliss records that one of the first objects of Miller’s interest following his move, was the village library:

His constant use of its volumes brought him into the society of a superior class of men. His wife took a deep interest in his improvement and promotion; and made it her pleasure and business to relieve him as much as possible from all the family cares which might call him away from his books....Still, the time he could devote to books, on the best possible arrangement, was not so much as he desired; for he had

²¹ Stone, *American Library Development, 1600-1899*, viii.

²² Ross W. Beales and James N. Green, “Practices of Reading: Libraries and Their Users,” in *A History of the Book in America: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, ed. Hugh Amory and David D. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 402.

²³ Austin, *Matthew Lyon*, 81.

²⁴ Rowe, *God’s Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World*, 17.

²⁵ Rowe, *God’s Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World*, 17.

²⁶ Miller, “The Diary of William Miller”.

²⁷ Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library*, 103, 147.

²⁸ Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library*, 135-136.

been trained to the farming business, and he made that his employment, for some years, in Poultney.²⁹

Poultney's library was established in 1790, and is been said to have been the first public library established in Vermont.³⁰

“POULTNEY LIBRARY, to which allusion has been made, was established about 1790. It became a large and flourishing institution and contributed largely to enlighten the minds and improve the morals of its numerous patrons. It flourished until the country became flooded with those light and trashy publications, usually styled modern literature; and for this cause it was neglected, and finally broken up in 1836.”³¹

Popular Seventh-day Adventist perception focuses on Miller's claim that he laid aside “all commentaries, former views and prepossessions, and determined to read and try to understand [the Bible] for [himself].”³² Miller later expanded his statement to say that apart from Cruden's Concordance and the Bible, he “read nothing else except the newspapers a little.”³³ Nichol writes, “He [Miller] came to his conclusions quite exclusively through a study of the Bible and reference to a concordance.”³⁴ Similarly C. Mervyn Maxwell states that Miller, “laid aside all commentaries, letting the Bible speak for itself.”³⁵ Maxwell's position is somewhat contradictory however, as he does however recognise that Miller also used “margin and concordance,” as well as “history books to help him compare history with prophecy.”³⁶ P. Gerard Damsteegt takes a similar position: “Although Miller had been exposed to Bible commentaries he seems to have arrived at his major interpretations by using mainly the Bible with its marginal references and Cruden's

²⁹ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 18-19.

³⁰ Walter E. Johnson, *East Poultney, Vermont's Cradle of Culture in the Wilderness* (Poultney: Poultney Historical Society, 1951.) Quoted in Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* Volume IV, 456, footnote #2. Janice B. Edwards, *East Poultney, Vermont* (accessed June 6, 2005); available from <http://www.rootsweb.com/%7Evtphs/EastPou.html>. However, McMullen, *American Libraries Before 1876*, 17 lists Vermont as having a library before 1786, though he does not specify a location.

³¹ Abby Maria Hemenway, *The History of Rutland County Vermont: civil, ecclesiastical, biographical and military* (White River Junction, VT: White River Paper Co, 1882), 967.

³² Miller, 88. In Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 40. C. Mervyn Maxwell, “Preacher of the Advent 1,” *Adventist Review*, February 11 1982, 5, paraphrases Miller without comment.

³³ “The Rise and Progress of Adventism,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 24, 1856, 9.

³⁴ Nichol, *The Midnight Cry: A Defense of William Miller and the Millerites*, 150, footnote.

³⁵ Maxwell, “A Brief History of Adventist Hermeneutics,” 210.

³⁶ Maxwell, “A Brief History of Adventist Hermeneutics,” 210-211.

Concordance.”³⁷ Perhaps not surprisingly, Ellen G. White views Miller’s experience in almost mystical terms:

God sent His angel to move upon the heart of a farmer who had not believed the Bible, to lead him to search the prophecies. Angels of God repeatedly visited that chosen one, to guide his mind and open to his understanding prophecies which had ever been dark to God's people. The commencement of the chain of truth was given to him, and he was led on to search for link after link, until he looked with wonder and admiration upon the Word of God. He saw there a perfect chain of truth. That Word which he had regarded as uninspired now opened before his vision in its beauty and glory. He saw that one portion of Scripture explains another, and when one passage was closed to his understanding, he found in another part of the Word that which explained it. He regarded the sacred Word of God with joy and with the deepest respect and awe.³⁸

What has been generally unrecognised by most Seventh-day Adventist commentators however, is that implicit in Miller’s statement that he laid aside “all commentaries, former views and prepossessions,”³⁹ is the idea that he had at one time, done at least some reading in this area—otherwise he would have nothing to lay aside. Hugh Dunton points out that Seventh-day Adventists have “been caught in the contradictory pressures of seeking to prove the originality of their thought, while [simultaneously] trying to demonstrate its ancient roots.” This is typified by Seventh-day Adventist apologist Le Roy Froom’s monumental four volume work, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* in which he “stressed the independence of William Miller from earlier and contemporary writings, yet researched to show that there was little original in his thought.”⁴⁰ Similarly Ernest R. Sandeen points to the tension found in most Seventh-day Adventist writings on the subject:

Adventist historians have been overly defensive and possessive about William Miller. They seem afraid that they might discover that Miller drew extensively upon British sources in formulating his views. They seem determined to champion him as an independent thinker. Of course Miller was independent, self-educated, and relatively untrained in formal theology. That Miller independently formulated and proclaimed views similar to those accepted by British millenarians does not increase the credibility of those views, however. And it seems ironic to argue for Miller’s independence of mind only to demonstrate that he came independently to conclusions virtually identical to the British.⁴¹

³⁷ Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission*, 18 fn 84. Damsteegt apparently takes this statement from Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 69: “[Miller] laid aside all commentaries, and used the marginal references and his Concordance as his only helps.” The statement is also reproduced in Wellcome, *History of the Second Advent Message*, 44.

³⁸ White, *Early Writings of Ellen G. White*, 229.

³⁹ Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies*, 11.

⁴⁰ Dunton, “The Millerite Adventists and Other Millenarian Groups in Great Britain, 1830-1860”, 67.

⁴¹ Sandeen, “Millennialism,” 112.

A few Seventh-day Adventist authors have recognized Miller's omnivorous reading habits; including George Knight who states, "In a world in which much of the published literature was theological and biblical, it seems quite reasonable to assume that he had examined various religious and biblical works before he began his intense study of the Bible in 1816."⁴² Similarly, Seventh-day Adventist apologist Froom also recognises the likelihood that Miller undertook extensive study, stating that he was, "rather widely read in theological and Bible lore,"⁴³ though he insists that Miller, "reached his own conclusions independently."⁴⁴ Ellen White adds a slight twist to her portrayal of Miller when she states in *The Great Controversy* that Miller was "endeavoring to lay aside all preconceived opinions, and dispensing with commentaries."⁴⁵ This statement does not however seem to represent a genuine grappling with the issue on White's part, but rather seems to be a simple turn of phrase. Scholars from outside the Seventh-day Adventist tradition have more readily recognized the likely influence of Miller's reading material. David L. Rowe makes this point in his *Thunder and Trumpets: Millerites and Dissenting Religion in Upstate New York, 1800-1850* (1985).

Unfortunately no record of the personal library of William Miller exists, nor of any of those he accessed—either private or public. However, David T. Arthur, Curator Emeritus (now deceased), Jenks Memorial Collection of Adventual Materials, Aurora University; has stated:

We do have in the Jenks Collection a small collection (nine volumes) of mostly 17th and 18th century rare volumes that were reputedly used by the Millerite/Early Adventist leaders. These include James Ussher's *Annals* (1658), Isaac Newton's *Chronology of Antient [sic] Kingdoms Amended* (1728), Thomas Goodwin's *Works* (1683), Joseph Perry's *The Glory of Christ's Kingdom in this World* (1721), John Blair's *Chronology and History of the World From Creation to the Year of Christ 1753* (1754), Joseph Mede's *Works*, 4th ed, (1677), Charles Baunuz, *A Perpetual Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (1720), Henry Isaacson, *Saturni Ephemerides: A Chronology* (1633), and Robert Robinson's *The History of Baptism* (1817). We have no proof of their use by anybody, but the word that they were used by the early Millerites, including Miller, has been passed on from curator to curator here.⁴⁶

Further evidence of Miller's study comes from a contemporary, N. Southard, who wrote in 1843 that Miller "never had a commentary in his house, and did not remember reading any work

⁴² Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 40.

⁴³ Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* Volume IV, 468.

⁴⁴ Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* Volume IV, 518.

⁴⁵ White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan During the Christian Dispensation*, 321. Emphasis added.

⁴⁶ David T. Arthur, (Curator Emeritus) Jenks Memorial Collection of Adventual Materials, Aurora University; in a personal communication to the author dated September 2, 2004.

upon the prophecies *except* Newton and Faber, about thirty years ago.”⁴⁷ Knight refers to a statement by one of Miller’s daughters who is said to have remarked in 1843, “two authors on the prophecies that he [Miller] distinctly remembered having read prior to 1816 were Newton and Faber.”⁴⁸

Miller’s own writings also point to extensive research. In his *Apology and Defense*, when referring to his two-year period of intensive study 1816-1818, in reference to his usage of the year-day principle, Miller wrote, “I could only regard the time as symbolical, and as standing each day for a year, in accordance with the opinions of all *the standard Protestant commentators*.”⁴⁹ In a similar statement published in the *Midnight Cry* Miller reflected following the Great Disappointment that, “I had not a distant thought of disturbing our churches, ministers, religious editors, or departing from the *best biblical commentaries or rules* which had been recommended for the study of the scriptures. And even to this day, my opposers have not been able to show where I have departed from any rule, laid down by *our old standard writers of the Protestant faith*.”⁵⁰ Similarly, when discussing his calculation of the dates of various prophetic periods, Miller refers three times to “the best chronologers” and once to “the best historians I could consult.”⁵¹ While still a Deist living in Poultney, Miller commented “In the meantime, I continued my studies, storing my mind with historical knowledge.”⁵² Similarly, in a public lecture, Miller stated that, “During the twelve years I was a deist, I read all the histories I could find.”⁵³

Following the Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844, Miller defends his calculations in a letter to Joshua V. Himes, saying, “And even to this day, my opposers have not been able to show wherein I have departed from any rule laid down by *our old standard Protestant writers*.”⁵⁴ As Kenneth G. C. Newport has commented, the implications of this statement are clear: “Miller had read the ‘standard Protestant’ works, which, given those that were available to him and taking into

⁴⁷ Quoted in Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 246. Emphasis added.

⁴⁸ Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 40. Knight does not however, provide a reference for this comment and it seems likely that this is a misreading of the Southard document quoted previously.

⁴⁹ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 11. Italics added.

⁵⁰ William Miller to Joshua Himes, November 10, 1844. Quoted in White, *Sketches of the Christian Life and Public Labors of William Miller*, 301. Emphasis added. In reference to this quote, Robert Brinsmead quite rightly asks, “How could Miller say this unless he was well acquainted with the standard works of his day?” He further states, “This must modify the legend of his laying aside the use of all commentaries and using nothing but the Bible and a concordance.” Robert D. Brinsmead, *1844 Re-Examined*, Revised ed. (Fallbrook: I. H. I., 1979), 21.

⁵¹ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 11. Unfortunately Miller does not further identify his sources.

⁵² Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 23.

⁵³ Himes, “The Rise and Progress of Adventism Part I,” 9. James White refers to Miller as a “historian” and of having “a love of history.” White, *Sketches of the Christian Life and Public Labors of William Miller*, 26.

⁵⁴ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 277-278. Italics added.

account the context in which he wrote, must have included the historicism of Mede, Newton, Gill, Priestly et al.”⁵⁵

Many of Miller’s contemporaries recognised his use of such authorities. In *The Advent Herald and Signs of the Times Reporter* of February 21, 1844, the statement is made, “Since Mr Miller has shown that, according to principles of interpretation adopted by all the standard protestant commentators, we must be near the end of the present dispensation”⁵⁶ Similarly, the same Millerite paper in its April 24, 1844 issue states, “...unless some error can be shown in our standard chronologers....We believe, as ever, that the visions of Daniel and John, as interpreted by *all the standard Protestant commentators...*”⁵⁷

Apart from his father’s refusal to allow Miller to ask for financial support for advanced schooling, Miller’s desire for learning and love of books was encouraged and supported by his friends and family. As David D. Hall and Elizabeth Carroll Reilly point out, “In eighteenth-century America the practice of reading was always socially and culturally mediated.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, formative contexts that influenced readers were sociocultural, and included: “a family that cherished pious books, the evangelical awakenings of mid-century, and the social respect accorded learnedness.”⁵⁹

Miller’s Bible

One of Miller’s Bibles is found in the William Miller Collection, Center for Adventist Research at Andrews University. It is listed as: *The Holy Bible* (Oxford: Samuel Collingwood and Co. At the University Press, 1838).⁶⁰ It is said to have been Miller’s preaching Bible, and given its publication date, was not the Bible that Miller would have studied from during the formation of his theories. Unfortunately, little data on the Bibles that Miller owned or accessed is available. N. Southard wrote that in 1843 he visited Miller and saw his “old family Bible, which cost \$18.50.”⁶¹ \$18.50 was a considerable sum and indicates that this particular Bible was large and of a high quality. In

⁵⁵ Kenneth G. C. Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium: Studies in Biblical Eisegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 157.

⁵⁶ [Joshua V. Himes], “Our Position,” 20.

⁵⁷ [Joshua V. Himes], “Our Position,” 92. Original emphasis.

⁵⁸ David D. Hall and Elizabeth Carroll Reilly, “Practices of Reading: Introduction,” in *A History of the Book in America: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, ed. Hugh Amory and David D. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 379.

⁵⁹ Hall and Reilly, “Practices of Reading: Introduction,” 379.

⁶⁰ Register of the William Miller Collection—Collection 25 Center for Adventist Research at Andrews University, MI, USA.

⁶¹ Nathaniel Southard, “The Home of William Miller,” *The Midnight Cry*, October 26, 1843, 33.

1816, Matthew Carey advertised a Bible “with Apocrypha, a Concordance, 100 plates and other additions bound in Morocco gilt with gilt edges, for \$20.”⁶²

Interestingly, Southard also records Miller as able to—with the aid of reading glasses—read “the small Polyglot Bible with the greatest ease.”⁶³ Bliss records that “on the occasion of his first visit to Boston, he [Miller] was presented with a small Polyglot Bible,” apparently the one mentioned by Southard.⁶⁴ In addition, during a lecture on the seventy weeks of Daniel 9:24, first published in 1842, Miller supports a point by encouraging the listener to “see large edition of Polyglot Bible,”⁶⁵ thereby illustrating some familiarity with such an edition. A true Polyglot Bible contained the biblical text laid out in parallel columns—each column containing a different language—usually English, Latin, Hebrew and Greek. However, rather than such a complete Bible—which would run to many volumes—it is likely that the Polyglot Bibles referred to here were instead single volumes containing the English text alone. In 1825, Thomas Wardle published the first American edition, another version was published in Philadelphia by Key and Meilke in 1831. It used the English text from Samuel Bagster’s Polyglot Bible, first printed in London in 1822 with the text in eight languages, four to a page.⁶⁶ Such editions were not true polyglots at all: “The polyglot Bible ‘all in English’... is a myth.”⁶⁷ Thus, Miller’s possession and use of a so-called Polyglot Bible should not be taken as evidence of fluency in any languages other than English.

In 1782, Robert Aitken completed the first English Bible to be printed in America. It was of poor quality and did not sell well.⁶⁸ Later Bibles were of better quality and various printers had produced nearly a dozen complete Bibles or New Testaments in 1791/1792.⁶⁹ These included Isaiah Thomas’ printing in 1791 of the first folio and quarto Bibles from an American Press. The quarto contains a large number of marginal notes and cross references, indexes and tables, as well as John

⁶² David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 628.

⁶³ Southard, “The Home of William Miller,” 33. A one-volume Polyglot Bible often contained very small text—and is known to have been used on other occasions as a measure of the keenness of an individual’s eyesight. James Braid gives examples of individuals who are able to read a Polyglot Bible following treatment by hypnosis, including a Miss Stowe, who “can now read the small Polyglot Bible” and Mrs Alice Roiley who “with the aid of her glasses, [can now] read the Polyglot Bible with ease and correctness, which she said, had been a sealed book to her for years before I operated on her.” James Braid, *Neurohypnology or the Rationale of Nervous Sleep Considered in Relation With Animal Magnetism* (London: J. Churchill, 1843), 171, 167-168.

⁶⁴ Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 89. Miller’s first visit to Boston took place in December 1839 at the invitation of Joshua V. Himes. Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 139.

⁶⁵ Himes, ed., *Evidence from Scripture*, 68.

⁶⁶ Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*, 640.

⁶⁷ Margaret T. Hills, *The English Bible in America: A Bibliography of Editions of the Bible & the New Testament Published in America 1777-1957* (New York: American Bible Society, 1961), 122.

⁶⁸ Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*, 587-589.

⁶⁹ Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*, 600.

Brown's concordance.⁷⁰ This was—as David Daniell points out—“the American Bible embellished for home study.”⁷¹ Paul C. Gutjahr points out that scholars have traditionally treated the Bible as

a volume containing a kind of mythic core text, entirely overlooking the reality that the different English translations, commentaries, illustrations and bindings significantly complicate an understanding of the Bible's influence in American society....different editors and publishers appropriated it to meet a wide variety of changing ideologic and economic demands.⁷²

Embellished Bibles were universally popular in America. Popular examples include two reprinted British Bibles: John Wesley's 1755 annotated version and John Brown's 1778 Self-Interpreting Bible. Brown's Bible contained marginal notes, summaries, paraphrases on various passages—obscure as well as important; analyses and reflections.⁷³ Similarly, Gilmore points out the most popular Bible in Windsor County, Vermont, at this time, was “a full one-volume edition whose 1,000 to 1,100 pages included Old and New Testaments and much else besides....This is not a Gideon's Bible—simply Old and New Testaments. The rural New England Bible was usually so elaborate as to be best understood as, in the words of contemporaries, a ‘sacred encyclopedia.’”⁷⁴ It is reasonable to suggest then, that the Bible that Miller used in the formation of his ideas following his conversion was similarly a large encyclopaedic volume.

It would most likely have been an Authorized or King James Version—by far the most popular version in America—as Daniell points out, by 1850, “nearly fifteen hundred separate editions of KJV had been published in America.”⁷⁵ Examples of such Bibles include the locally printed Windsor and Brattleboro Bibles which were popular in the area. Such Bibles contained fourteen or fifteen parts:

The brief opening section, “To the reader,” explained the process of translation. The heart of the text remained the Old and New Testaments. Also included was the Apocrypha—the fourteen books of the Septuagint, almost always included in these Protestant editions. And while the plain text of the Holy Word formed the core of Protestant Christianity, the rural one-volume Bible added all of the apparatus necessary to follow a sacred path to salvation: guidance in family continuity of several sorts; Christian principles, admonitions, and guidelines; devotional materials; church history; and aids to eschatology....Biblical admonitions, Christian principles guiding human behavior, and general wisdom readily could be extracted from the

⁷⁰ Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*, 594-596.

⁷¹ Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*, 599.

⁷² Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1779-1889* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 3.

⁷³ Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*, 601.

⁷⁴ Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life*, 257, 259. Windsor County was adjacent to Rutland County where Miller lived.

⁷⁵ Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*, 653.

Bible and organized in rich lists of examples, using John Brown's fifty-six page "Brief Concordance."... In many editions yet another part appeared, "Practical observations on the Old and New Testaments," arranged as an outline with excerpts from some chapters and summaries of others, and with key arguments highlighted for ready use in discussions....One of the central features of the rural Bible was to provide a complete explanation for human history....The final section of extra assistance contained a "Chronological Index of Years and Times," a fascinating aid to future sacred history. This calendar of key Biblical years, for use in eschatological calculations, was the capstone of this system of sacred history, facilitating... forecasts of the end of things earthly." Anyone could calculate the timing of the last stage(s) without an exhaustive reading of the text.⁷⁶

Brattleboro Bibles were published by John Holbrook's Brattleboro Bible Company of Brattleboro, Vermont. "The firm in various forms... produced over a dozen Bible editions of various kinds (including five 'Polyglots')." ⁷⁷ Between 1816 and 1852 "forty-two editions of Bibles came from eight different firms which were in some way connected to John Holbrook."⁷⁸

It is certainly possible that Miller's Bible was a locally produced one—however, if sheer volume is a guide, then Miller's Bible has a good chance of being one of Matthew Carey's. Gutjahr points out that, "By 1807, Carey's books had perhaps the widest circulation of any Bibles produced in America."⁷⁹

With this understanding, Miller's claim of focusing exclusively on the Bible during his time of extensive study must be seen in a different light—for it is likely that his Bible contained far more than simply the biblical text itself.

Cruden's Concordance

Alexander Cruden's *Complete Concordance to the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament* was first published in 1737.⁸⁰ This monumental work was the first complete concordance in English; containing every word from the Authorized King James Version of the Bible except 'a', 'of', 'to', 'the' and 'with'; and restricting other common words such as 'and', 'from' and 'but' to a small selection of references.⁸¹ It was very popular—at least 97 editions and countless reprints have

⁷⁶ Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life*, 259-260.

⁷⁷ Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*, 655.

⁷⁸ Gutjahr, *An American Bible*, 60.

⁷⁹ Gutjahr, *An American Bible*, 29.

⁸⁰ Julia Keay, *Alexander the Corrector: The Tormented Genius Who Unwrote the Bible* (London: HarperCollins, 2004), 85.

⁸¹ Keay, *Alexander the Corrector*, 29.

been published.⁸² According to Julia Keahy, the work has “never, in more than 250 years, been out of print.”⁸³

It is not known which edition of *Cruden’s* Miller possessed. The first American edition of *Cruden’s Concordance* was published in Philadelphia in 1806 and from then on local editions as well as imported British ones were readily available. Southard wrote following a visit to Miller’s house in 1843, that “We were interested in seeing his old family Bible, which cost \$18.50, and his quarto copy of *Cruden’s Concordance*, which was originally purchased, in 1798, for \$8.”⁸⁴ Given this date, Miller’s copy of *Cruden’s* must have been an imported copy published in England.

For Miller, *Cruden’s Concordance* was an essential tool for Bible study—and one which he promoted to others. Miller called *Cruden’s Concordance*, “the best in the world.”⁸⁵ According to him, if ministers had “their Bibles & concordance, with a common English education...they would feed more sheep...tell more truth and learn their dependence on God.”⁸⁶ In an 1833 letter, Miller recorded that “We have no preacher as yet, except [referring to himself] the old man with his Concordance.”⁸⁷ The use of a concordance, was for Miller, a guaranteed guide to truth.

One example of Miller’s use of the concordance is recorded in the *Second Advent Manual* edited by Apollos Hale. Referring to his search to decipher the meaning of “the daily” in Daniel 8:11,⁸⁸ Miller records that he

could find no other case in which it [the daily] was found, but in Daniel. I then [by the aid of a concordance] took those words which stood in connection with it, ‘take away;’ ‘he shall take away’, ‘the daily’; ‘from the time the daily shall be taken away, &c. I read on, and thought I should find no light on the text; finally, I came to 2 Thess. 2:7, 8. ‘For the mystery of iniquity doth already work; only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way, and then shall that wicked be revealed,’ &c. And when I had come to that text, oh! how clear and glorious the truth appeared! There it is! That is ‘the daily!’ Well now, what does Paul mean by ‘he who now letteth,’ or hindereth? By ‘the man of sin,’ and the ‘wicked,’ popery is meant. Well, what is it which hinders popery from being revealed? Why, it is paganism; well, then, ‘the daily’ must mean paganism.⁸⁹

⁸² Keay, *Alexander the Corrector*, 248.

⁸³ Keay, *Alexander the Corrector*, 248.

⁸⁴ Southard, “The Home of William Miller,” 33.

⁸⁵ “The Rise and Progress of Adventism,” 9.

⁸⁶ William Miller to Truman Hendryx, July 27, 1838. Original emphasis.

⁸⁷ William Miller to Truman Hendryx, April 10, 1833. Original emphasis.

⁸⁸ “Yea, he magnified *himself* even to the prince of the host, and by him the daily *sacrifice* was taken away, and the place of his sanctuary was cast down.” Daniel 8:11 KJV.

⁸⁹ Hale, ed., *The Second Advent Manual*, 66. Square brackets [] are original to the text.

Miller's technique then—when confronted with a difficult word—is to use his concordance to find all other occurrences of the word in question, and then to read through these until he finds one that explains the passage he had difficulties with. In another, earlier example, Miller uses an identical process:

To understand the literal meaning of figures used in prophecy, I have pursued the following method:—I find the word “beast” used in a figurative sense; I take my concordance, trace the word, and in Daniel 7:17, it is explained to mean “kings or kingdoms.” Again, I come across the words “bird or fowl,” and in Isa. 46:2, it is used, meaning a conqueror or warrior,—Cyrus. Also, in Ezekiel 39:4-9, denotes armies or conquerors. Again, the words “air or wind.” as used in Rev. 9:2, and 16, 17, to understand which I turn to Eph 2:2, and 4-14, and there learn that is used as a figure to denote the theories of worldly men or vain philosophy. Again, “water or rivers” are used as figures in Rev. 17:13, it is explained to mean “peoples or nations.” “Rivers” of course mean the nation or people living on the river mentioned, as in Rev. 16: 12. “Fire” is often used in a figurative sense; explained in Num. 21:27, 28, Deut. 32:22, Psal. 78:21, Heb. 12:29, to mean justice and judgment.⁹⁰

Miller's approach is eerily similar to an approach which arose out of the Holiness and Bible Conference movements and was known as a “Bible Reading”.⁹¹ In 1879, one proponent, James H. Brookes, explained his favoured approach to the Bible: “Select some word, and with the aid of a good concordance, mark down... the references to the subject under discussion... thus presenting all the Holy Ghost has been pleased to reveal on the topic.”⁹²

A similar reliance on a concordance was common amongst Miller's followers. Referring to Joseph Bates, J. N. Loughborough records: “He said that while in prayer before God, he decided to write the book, [*The Seventh-day Sabbath*] and felt assured that the way would open to publish it. He therefore seated himself at his desk, with Bible and concordance, to begin his work.”⁹³ Similarly, following the death of James White, Uriah Smith wrote concerning the publication of the periodical *The Present Truth*: “The copy was prepared in a humble chamber, a Bible, a concordance, and a dictionary being the only text books at hand.”⁹⁴

On the surface, Miller's reading of the biblical text was continuous—he “commenced with Genesis, and read verse by verse, proceeding no faster than the meaning of the several passages

⁹⁰ Himes, ed., *Evidence from Scripture*, 4.

⁹¹ Weber, “The Two-edged Sword: The Fundamentalist Use of the Bible,” 110.

⁹² Quoted in Weber, “The Two-edged Sword: The Fundamentalist Use of the Bible,” 110.

⁹³ J. N. Loughborough, *The Great Second Advent Movement, Its Rise and Progress* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1909), 251. The book's full title was: *The Seventh-day Sabbath: A Perpetual Sign, From the Beginning to the Entering into the Gates of the Holy City According to the Commandment*.

⁹⁴ Uriah Smith, “In Memoriam: A Sketch of the Last Sickness and Death of Elder James White Who Died at Battle Creek, Michigan, August 6, 1881 Together With the Discourse Preached at His Funeral, 1881,” p. 26, Battle Creek.

should be so unfolded.”⁹⁵ His use of *Cruden’s Concordance* however transformed his reading radically:

Whenever I found anything obscure, my practice was to compare it with all collateral passages; and by the help of Cruden[’s Concordance], I examined all the texts of Scripture in which were found any of the prominent words contained in any obscure portion. Then by letting every word have its proper bearing on the subject of the text, if my view of it harmonized with every collateral passage in the Bible, it ceased to be a difficulty.⁹⁶

Thus Miller’s reading must actually be seen as discontinuous—when faced with a word or concept that he did not understand, Miller did not rely on the immediate context of the item in question to give meaning. Rather he looked for meaning in every other instance of the word’s occurrence. Thus a difficult concept in Daniel might be illuminated by a verse in Genesis or Revelation.

Other Millerites followed Miller’s approach. In 1845, Ransom Hicks reflected that “I remembered one rule in studying the scriptures, that I had always strictly adhered to; and that was, when I could not make the scriptures harmonize, I always set it down for certain that I was in error.”⁹⁷ Hicks also comments on a Brother Lonsdale—a Millerite preacher—who at a meeting, “arose and commenced citing and harmonizing the scriptures as you know Millerites are accustomed to do.”⁹⁸

The Historicists

Until the sixteenth century, the interpretation of biblical prophecy has been described as involving “fluid, free association.”⁹⁹ Starting with Joseph Mede however, biblical prophecy became increasingly systematized and methodical.

Joseph Mede

It is clear that Miller was very interested in history and in theology—particularly biblical prophecy. Given these interests, and the importance of Joseph Mede—often termed “the father of

⁹⁵ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 6. In a public lecture Miller put it more colloquially: “Now, I thought, I must *put on spurs and breeching*; I will not go faster than the Bible, and I will not fall behind it. Whatever the Bible teaches I will hold [sic] on to it.” [Joshua V. Himes], “The Rise and Progress of Adventism,” *The Advent Shield and Review*, May, 1844, 50.

⁹⁶ Miller, *Apology and Defence*, 6.

⁹⁷ Ransom Hicks, *Hear Ye, All People, Millerite’s Confession, Embraced in a Letter to Joshua V. Himes, Originally Designed For the Advent Herald, to which is Added A summary Review of Presumption’s Vindication and Apollyon’s Schemes in the Last Days Considered*. (Providence: 1845), 13.

⁹⁸ Hicks, *Hear Ye, All People*, 55.

⁹⁹ Frank E. Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 91.

prophetic interpretation”¹⁰⁰ to the historicists of the time, it is almost certain that Miller would have read Mede and been influenced by his ideas.

The work of Joseph Mede—a British pioneer of historicism, whose works, though written in the seventeenth century, remained in print and widely available through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His best known work was *Clavis Apocalypticae*—first published in 1627 and reprinted in 1632 and 1642. This work was first translated into English by Richard More, and published as *The Key of Revelation* in 1643.¹⁰¹ Mede’s other works include *The Apostasy of Latter Times*—first issued in 1641, and reprinted numerous times including as late as 1836 and 1845; and *Daniel's Weekes*—first published in 1641.¹⁰² Mede’s methodology includes three key elements that can be traced through the works of Isaac & Thomas Newton, and Faber, to Miller himself:

1. The consistent and comprehensive relation of historical events to biblical prophecy [historicism].
2. The synchronization of different prophecies into a coherent system.
3. The use of the year-day principle to interpret prophecy.¹⁰³

As Stephen Orchard points out,

Mede took and systematized the interpretation of prophecy. There was no lack of people to hazard a guess at particular applications of prophecy, but Mede worked out a scheme for interpreting the Apocalypse, and sought a consistency in its images and their application to particular historical events.¹⁰⁴

Mede himself states:

As for my interpretation of the Seals and Trumpets, where I leave others, and take a way of my own, I do it to maintain a uniformity of notion in the propheticall Scheme and Allegories throughout the Scripture; which I am persuaded were once no less familiar and usuall to the Nations of the Orient, than our poeticall Schemes and Pictures are to us.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ George Stanley Faber, *A Dissertation on the Prophecies That Have Been Fulfileld, Are Now Fulfilling or Will Hereafter be Fulfilled Relative to the Great Period of 1260 Years; the Papal and Mohammedan Apostacies; the Tyrannical Reign of the AntiChrist, or the Infidel Power and the Restoration of the Jews to Which is Added, an Appendix*, Volume. 1 (Boston, MT: Andrews and Cummings, 1808), 131.

¹⁰¹ Robert Clouse, “The Apocalyptic Interpretation of Thomas Brightman and Joseph Mede,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 11, no. 4 (1968): 186 note 13.

¹⁰² Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* Volume II, 542.

¹⁰³ Freed, “‘A Feast of Reason’ The Appeal of William Miller's Way of Reading the Bible,” 16.

¹⁰⁴ Stephen Orchard, “Evangelical Eschatology and the Missionary Awakening,” *Journal of Religious History* 22, no. 2 (1998): 133.

¹⁰⁵ Joseph Mede, *Diatribae* (London: 1652), 675.

Mede set out to “establish the chronological relationships between the different visions of Revelation, often confused in the book itself,...excluding preconceived, subjective opinions from the exposition.”¹⁰⁶ Essentially, he “rearranged the visions of John in order that they should make what he considered a more logical and coherent whole.”¹⁰⁷

The most important synchronism Mede made concerned a number of time prophecies in Revelation: the “time, times, and half a time” of Revelation 12:14; the 1260 days of Revelation 12:6; the forty-two months of Revelation 11:2, and 13:5; and the “a time and times and the dividing of time” of Daniel 7:25. Mede saw these prophecies as parallel time periods and used the year-day principle¹⁰⁸ to give a 1260 year period beginning with “the wound, the fall, the ruine, the rending in pieces or rooting up of the imperial Sovereignty of the City of Rome.”¹⁰⁹ At the end of this 1260 year period Christ would return and usher in the millennium. Thus, as Rasmussen points out, Mede was “the first Englishman known to become a premillennialist.”¹¹⁰

In his “General Preface” to Mede’s *Works*, John Worthington points out four principles of biblical interpretation that Mede relied on:

1. A comparison of “Scripture with Scripture” in order that the “proper and genuine use of the like Words and Phrases in several passages of scripture” could be found.
2. An extensive knowledge of the history and customs of biblical cultures,
3. A knowledge of “Oriental Figurative Expressions and Prophetick Schemes” employed in Scripture
4. Synchronism—his ability to arrange and harmonize biblical passages in a logical manner.¹¹¹

The work of Isaac Newton in particular, was heavily influenced by Joseph Mede. Frank E. Manuel states that “Newton was heir to Mede’s method,”¹¹² while Newton himself stated, “And as Mr Mede layed [*sic*] the foundation and I have built upon it: so I hope others will proceed higher until the work is done.”¹¹³ Similarly, Faber praised the “mathematical principle of arrangement laid

¹⁰⁶ Rasmussen, “Roots of the Prophetic Hermeneutic of William Miller”, 75.

¹⁰⁷ Orchard, “Evangelical Eschatology and the Missionary Awakening,” 133. For an analysis of Mede’s method of synchronization, see Jeffrey K. Jue, *Heaven Upon Earth: Joseph Mede (1586-1638) and the Legacy of Millenarianism* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2006), 100-107.

¹⁰⁸ See Chapter Two of this thesis, [p53-54](#).

¹⁰⁹ Joseph Mede, *The Apostasy of the Latter Times*, III ed. (London: Samuel Man, 1655), 73.

¹¹⁰ Rasmussen, “Roots of the Prophetic Hermeneutic of William Miller”, 77.

¹¹¹ John Worthington, “General Preface,” in *The Works of the Pious and Profoundly-learned Joseph Mede* (London: Richard Royston, 1664). Manuscript is unpaginated.

¹¹² Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton*, 92.

¹¹³ Isaac Newton: Yahuda MS. 1, fol. 15^f in Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton*, Appendix A, 121.

down so judiciously by Mr Mede,” the book of Revelation being a “mere chaos” without Mede’s method.¹¹⁴ Hugh Trevor-Roper notes that “Mede had worked out his ‘synchronisms’, as he called them, by rigorous intellectual method, uninfluenced by external events”.¹¹⁵ The same can be said for Miller’s initial approach to interpreting the Bible which did not attempt to match contemporary events with prophecy.

According to David T. Arthur (now deceased), at the time, Curator Emeritus, Jenks Memorial Collection of Adventual Materials at Aurora University; the Jenks Collection contains a copy of the fourth edition (1677) of Mede’s *Works* that is said to have been used by Miller; however, neither its possession or use by Miller has been substantiated.¹¹⁶

Isaac Newton

In addition to his numerous scientific works, Isaac Newton also wrote quite voluminously on the Bible—focusing on “the Bible as an historical document... the accuracy of Biblical chronology, and... the message of the Bible.”¹¹⁷ Indeed, his contemporary John Locke is recorded as having said “Mr Newton is a very valuable man, not only for his wonderful skill in mathematics, but in divinity too, and his great knowledge of the Scriptures, wherein I know few his equals.”¹¹⁸ Similarly, a friend, John Craig, wrote soon after Newton’s death,

I shall not tell you what great improvements he made in geometry and algebra, but it is proper to acquaint you that his great application in his enquiries into nature did not make him unmindful of the Great Author of nature....And this I know, that he was much more solicitous in his enquiries into religion than into natural philosophy....Sir Isaac Newton was as good a Christian as he was a mathematician and philosopher.¹¹⁹

None of Newton’s writings on the Bible were however, published during his lifetime. Following his death, four items on biblical topics appeared in print: *The Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended* (1728), *Observations upon the Prophecies of Daniel, and the Apocalypse of St. John* (1733), an essay entitled “A Dissertation upon the Sacred Cubit of the Jews and the Cubits of the Several Nations; in which from the Dimensions of the Greatest Pyramid, as taken by Mr John Greaves, the Ancient Cubit of Memphis is Determined,” in *Miscellaneous Works of John Greaves*

¹¹⁴ Faber, *A Dissertation on the Prophecies*, xi-xiii.

¹¹⁵ Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Religion, the Reformation and Social Change*. (London: Macmillan, 1967), 247.

¹¹⁶ David T. Arthur, (Curator Emeritus) Jenks Memorial Collection of Adventual Materials, Aurora University; in a personal communication to the author dated September 2, 2004.

¹¹⁷ Richard H. Popkin, “Newton as a Bible Scholar,” in *Essays on the Context, Nature, and Influence of Isaac Newton’s Theology*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), 103.

¹¹⁸ Quoted in H. D. Anthony, *Sir Isaac Newton* (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1960), 156.

¹¹⁹ Quoted in David Brewster, *Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Discoveries of Sir Isaac Newton*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (New York, NY: Johnson Reprint, 1965), 315-316.

Vol. II (1737), and two letters written to John Locke on the doctrine of the trinity: *Two Letters of Sir Isaac Newton to Mr Le Clerc* (1754).¹²⁰ The most widely circulated and influential of these was his *Observations upon the Prophecies of Daniel, and the Apocalypse of St. John*, which was translated into both Latin and German, and reprinted many times—as recently as 1922.¹²¹

Newton was an historicist—his focus was on relating historical events to biblical prophecy. “The ability to attribute an historic event to an unclear prophecy was perceived by Newton as one of the apexes of the work of exegesis, since the basis for this activity required theological understanding.”¹²² “Like many of his contemporaries, Newton believed that prophecy concealed direct revelations of hidden truths that would reveal to men—very special men—the future course of history as set forth by the Creator from the beginning of time.”¹²³

Kochavi broadly outlines Isaac Newton’s principles of interpretation as follows:

1. The prophetic text must be treated as an homogenous structure where each individual part plays an important role.
2. All parts of the text must be interpreted meaningfully; nothing is to be left undeciphered.
3. The interpretation must be simple, “truth is ever to be found in simplicity and not in multiplicity and confusion of things.”¹²⁴
4. A reliance on matching historical events with biblical prophecy.¹²⁵

As Popkin points out,

Newton did a great deal of historical research to discern the events in world history which constituted the fulfilment of the prophecies....Newton studied the history of the Roman Empire, the European Middle ages, and the rise of Islam in the Middle East in order to identify what actually happened in history with what was predicted in prophecy.¹²⁶

For Newton the study of history served to confirm the authority of the Apocalypse:

He [God] gave this [the Apocalypse] and the Prophecies of the Old Testament, not to

¹²⁰ Popkin, “Newton as a Bible Scholar,” 103. A third letter to Locke on the same subject was not published until 1961 in H. W. Turnbull, ed., *The Correspondence of Isaac Newton*, 7 vols., vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 405-433.

¹²¹ A. Rupert Hall, *Isaac Newton: Adventurer in Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 372.

¹²² Matania Z. Kochavi, “One Prophet Interprets Another: Sir Isaac Newton and Daniel,” in *The Books of Nature and Scripture: Recent Essays on Natural Philosophy, Theology, and Biblical Criticism in the Netherlands of Spinoza’s Time and the British Isles of Newton’s Time*, ed. James E Force and Richard H Popkin (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), 109.

¹²³ Gale E. Christianson, *In the Presence of the Creator: Isaac Newton and His Times* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1984), 259.

¹²⁴ Isaac Newton: Yahuda MS. 1, fol. 14^f in Kochavi, “One Prophet Interprets Another: Sir Isaac Newton and Daniel,” 109.

¹²⁵ Kochavi, “One Prophet Interprets Another: Sir Isaac Newton and Daniel,” 109.

¹²⁶ Popkin, “Newton as a Bible Scholar,” 113.

satisfy men's curiosities by enabling them to foreknow things, but that after they were fulfilled they might be interpreted by the event, and his own Providence, not the Interpreters, be then manifested thereby to the world.¹²⁷

Prophecy was not to be viewed through the lens of history, but rather history was viewed through the lens of prophecy. Unlike Mede, followers of Newton were not seeking to confirm history by referring to Scripture, but were testing the authority of Scripture against their reasoned assessment of history.¹²⁸

Newton gave fifteen “rules for interpreting the words and language in Scripture” in his treatise on Revelation.¹²⁹ Notably, he clearly states that his work was built on that of Mede, “who first made way into these interpretations.”¹³⁰ Newton's rules may be summarized as follows:

1. The whole of scriptural writing on a subject must be considered—particularly when interpreting prophetic symbols.
2. Generally a text only has one meaning.
3. There must be consistency in an interpretation—an interpreter must “keep as close as may be to the same sense of words, especially in the same vision... and to prefer those interpretations where this is best observed.”¹³¹
4. The literal meaning of a text is to be followed, “unless where the tenor and circumstances of the place plainly require an Allegory.”¹³²
5. The interpretation that makes the most sense according to the context must be followed. “To acquiesce in that sense of any portion of Scripture as the true one which results most freely and naturally from the use and propriety of the Language and tenor of the context in that and all other places of Scripture to that sense.”¹³³
6. There must be a focus on important issues in world history—“the most considerable things”.¹³⁴
7. Follow the given order in both a particular vision and in the biblical narrative as a whole.
8. Choose interpretations which bring both simplicity and harmony to the text.
9. In a correct interpretation, both history and prophecy will be harmonized without straining.

¹²⁷ Newton, *Observations upon the prophecies of Daniel and St. John*, 251.

¹²⁸ Orchard, “Evangelical Eschatology and the Missionary Awakening,” 135.

¹²⁹ Isaac Newton, “Fragments From a Treatise on Revelation” quoted in Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton*, 116.

¹³⁰ Isaac Newton, “Fragments From a Treatise on Revelation” quoted in Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton*, 114.

¹³¹ Isaac Newton, “Fragments From a Treatise on Revelation” quoted in Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton*, 117.

¹³² Isaac Newton, “Fragments From a Treatise on Revelation” quoted in Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton*, 118.

¹³³ Isaac Newton, “Fragments From a Treatise on Revelation” quoted in Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton*, 119.

¹³⁴ Isaac Newton, “Fragments From a Treatise on Revelation” quoted in Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton*, 119. This rule is actually listed as Rule 5B in Newton's list, thus technically giving 16 rules.

10. Choose interpretations which “respect the church and argue the greatest wisdom and providence of God for preserving her in the truth.”¹³⁵

It is clear that many of Newton’s rules are reflected in Miller’s “Rules of Interpretation”:

Newton: 1. To observe diligently the consent of Scriptures & analogy of the prophetic stile, and to reject those interpretations where this is not duly observed. Thus if any man interpret a Beast to signify some great vice, this is to be rejected as his private imagination because according to the stile and tenour of the Apocalyps & of all other Prophetic scriptures a Beast signifies a body politique & sometimes a single person which heads that body, & there is no ground in scripture for any other interpretation.

3. To keep as close as may be to the same sense of words especially in the same Vision to prefer those interpretations where this is most observed unless any circumstance plainly require a different signification. Thus if a man interpret the Beast to signify a kingdom in one sentence & a vice in another when there is nothing in the text that does argue any change of sense, this is to be rejected as no genuine interpretation.

Miller: 6. God has revealed things to come by visions, in figures and parables, and in this way the same things are often-time revealed again and again, by different visions, or in different figures, and parables. If you wish to understand them, you must combine them all in one.

8. Figures always have a figurative meaning, and are used much in prophecy, to represent future things, times and events, such as *mountains* meaning *governments*, *beasts* meaning *kingdoms*.¹³⁶

Newton: 4. To choose those interpretations which are most according to the literal meaning of the scriptures unless where the tenour & circumstances of the place plainly require an Allegory.

Miller: 11. How to know when a word is used figuratively. If it makes good sense as it stands, and does no violence to the simple laws of nature, then it must be understood literally, if not, figuratively.

Both Newton and Miller are foremostly concerned with a literal reading of the Bible text. An allegorical/figurative method is only to be used when the literal reading does not make sense.

Newton: 5. To acquiesce in that sense of any portion of Scripture as the true one which results most freely & naturally from the use & propriety of the Language & tenor of the context in that & all other places of Scripture to that

¹³⁵ Isaac Newton, “Fragments From a Treatise on Revelation” quoted in Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton*, 123.

¹³⁶ Miller does diverge from Newton with his tenth rule: “10. Figures sometimes have two or more different significations, as day is used in a figurative sense to represent three different periods of time. 1. Indefinite; 2. Definite, a day for a year; 3. Day for a thousand years. If you put on the right construction it will harmonize with the Bible and make good sense, otherwise it will not.” This rule is necessary for Miller to follow the Year/Day principle which forms the foundation for his prophetic calculations and Miller appears to limit it to this specific example.

sense. For if this be not the true sense, then is the true sense uncertain, & no man can attain to any certainty in the knowledge of it. Which is to make the scriptures no certain rule of faith, & so to reflect upon the spirit of God who dictated it.

Rob Iliffe sees Newton's attitude to the language of the Bible as betraying "a constant drive toward the literal."¹³⁷ Iliffe states that

Newton is not just keen to elaborate an exact schema of when the things predicted will occur or have occurred. But page after page he tries to decipher the meaning of the words and phrases commonly used in prophecy. His manuscript notes bespeak an obsession with what the words of prophecy mean.¹³⁸

Newton continually exhorts biblical interpreters to follow the literal meaning of scripture:

He that without better grounds then [*sic*] his private opinion or the opinion of any human authority whatsoever shall turn Scripture from the plain meaning to an Allegory or to any other less natural sense declares thereby that he reposes more trust in his own imaginations or in that human authority then [*sic*] in the Scripture.¹³⁹

Newton's chronological writings are inextricably linked to his interpretation of biblical prophecy—"these were but two aspects of a unified world view."¹⁴⁰ He showed that the books of Daniel and Revelation were "prophetic historical statements which had proved to be factually true down to the minutest detail; they had predicted, described in advance, the early history of Christianity and the history of the post-Biblical monarchies."¹⁴¹ For Newton, world history could—and should—be lined up with biblical prophecy. Lining-up historical events with specific biblical prophecies helped prove that a particular interpretation was correct:

In the end of the time times & half a time (when many shall run to and fro) these things will be better understood and still better at the return of the Jews from their long captivity predicted by Moses and the Prophets....And if there shall then go forth a commandment to restore Jerusalem to its old inhabitants this will make the interpretation still more plausible and worth considering.¹⁴²

¹³⁷ Rob Iliffe, "Making a Shew': Apocalyptic Hermeneutics and the Sociology of Christian Idolatry in the Work of Isaac Newton and Henry More," in *The Books of Nature and Scripture: Recent Essays on Natural Philosophy, Theology, and Biblical Criticism in the Netherlands of Spinoza's Time and the British Isles of Newton's Time*, ed. James E. Force and Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), 46.

¹³⁸ Iliffe, "Making a Shew': Apocalyptic Hermeneutics and the Sociology of Christian Idolatry in the Work of Isaac Newton and Henry More," 42.

¹³⁹ Isaac Newton: Yahuda MS. 1, fol. 12^r in James E. Force, "The God of Abraham and Isaac (Newton)," in *The Books of Nature and Scripture: Recent Essays on Natural Philosophy, Theology, and Biblical Criticism in the Netherlands of Spinoza's Time and the British Isles of Newton's Time*, ed. James E. Force and Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), 181.

¹⁴⁰ Frank E. Manuel, *Isaac Newton, Historian* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 13.

¹⁴¹ Manuel, *Isaac Newton, Historian*, 144.

¹⁴² Isaac, Newton New College MSS, III, fol. 89 v. Quoted in Manuel, *Isaac Newton, Historian*, 165.

Newton saw the book of Daniel as the key to understanding Christian eschatology, stating, “In those things which relate to the last times, he [Daniel] must be made the key to the rest.”¹⁴³

Like Newton, Miller maintained a keen interest in chronology and history—producing a lengthy “Bible Chronology from Adam to Christ.” About this chronology, Miller stated, “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. At any rate, I shall rest satisfied here, and wait the event time will determine.”¹⁴⁴ In a March 25, 1844 letter to Joshua V. Himes, Miller outlined his task: “I will, I. PROVE BY SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY THAT TIME IS FULFILLED. II. SHOW THE SIGNS ALL COMPLETED. III. THE DUTY OF WATCHING, FOR WE KNOW NOT WHAT HOUR THE LORD MAY COME.”¹⁴⁵

Similarly, the focus of Miller’s approach to biblical prophecy was centred on the book of Daniel—like Newton, Miller saw Daniel as the key that unlocked the whole of scripture.

According to Arthur, the Jenks Collection also contains a copy of Newton’s *Chronology of Antient [sic] Kingdoms Amended* (1728) said to have been used by Miller; however, its possession or use by Miller is unsubstantiated.¹⁴⁶

Thomas Newton

Thomas Newton was born in Litchfield England, and educated at Christ’s Church, Cambridge—receiving B.A. (1726-1727) and M.A. (1730) degrees. He was ordained in 1730, becoming curate at St George. In 1745 he took his D.D. degree. He held a number of positions before becoming bishop of Bristol in 1761, and dean of St Paul’s in 1768.¹⁴⁷ His *Dissertations on the Prophecies* was first published in 1754 and was very popular—running through eighteen editions. It was also translated into both German and Danish.¹⁴⁸ In America, it is said to have made a very frequent appearance in the catalogues of both booksellers and libraries.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴³ Isaac Newton, *Daniel and the Apocalypse*, 15.

¹⁴⁴ William Miller, “A Bible Chronology From Adam to Christ,” in *Miller’s Works Volume 1: Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology, Selected From the Manuscripts of William Miller With a Memoir of his Life*, ed. Joshua V. Himes (Boston, MA: Moses A. Dow, 1841), 24.

¹⁴⁵ William Miller to Joshua V. Himes, March 25, 1844. Original emphasis.

¹⁴⁶ David T. Arthur, (Curator Emeritus) Jenks Memorial Collection of Adventual Materials, Aurora University; in a personal communication to the author dated September 2, 2004.

¹⁴⁷ “Newton, Thomas (1704-1782),” in *The Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 403-404. and Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* Volume II, 684.

¹⁴⁸ Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* Volume II, 684.

¹⁴⁹ Elizabeth Carroll Reilly and David D. Hall, “Practices of Reading: Customers and the Market for Books,” in *A History of the Book in America: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, ed. Hugh Amory and David D. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 399.

Newton's fundamental idea was that the Bible presented an harmonious chain of prophecy on Christ's first and second advents.¹⁵⁰ One of the first references that Miller makes to his view of Scripture occurs in an 1831 letter he wrote to Truman Hendryx stating that the "whole Scriptures are in a chain."¹⁵¹ Such a reference seems to indicate Miller's familiarity with the work of Thomas Newton. Miller also apparently took to heart Thomas Newton's idea that, "There is not a stronger or more convincing proof of divine revelation, than the sure word of prophecy."¹⁵² For both Newton and Miller, biblical prophecy was used as proof of the Bible's divinity: "You see or may see with your own eyes the scripture-prophecies accomplished; and if the scripture-prophecies are accomplished, the scripture must be the word of God; and if the scripture is the word of God, the Christian religion must be true."¹⁵³ Kai Arasola sees his influence on Miller as considerable, stating, "It would not be surprising if the 'Newton' Miller had in his library was Thomas Newton's book and that it inspired William Miller to try harmonizing all time prophecies of the Bible."¹⁵⁴

Given just a surname, it is not possible to determine who was the "Newton" that Miller had in mind when he made this statement—whether Isaac or Thomas. Perhaps it was both—in 1739, Isaac T. Hinton, a Baptist pastor defended the great expectation of 1843-44 saying, "We do not think it presumptuous to prefer the scheme adopted by Mede, Sir Isaac and Bishop Newton, and other learned investigators of prophecy."¹⁵⁵ Miller would not have been the first person to have read and have been influenced by the ideas of both Isaac and Thomas Newton.

George Stanley Faber

Amongst Miller's contemporaries, probably the most productive exegete of biblical prophecy was George Stanley Faber. Faber was educated at University College, Oxford, receiving a BA (1793), an MA (1796), and a BD (1803).¹⁵⁶ His first position following graduation was curate for his father at Calverley from 1803-1805. In 1830 he became the Prebendary of Salisbury Cathedral. Faber was the author of forty-two works over a period of fifty-five years—"the most

¹⁵⁰ Arasola, *The End of Historicism*, 38.

¹⁵¹ William Miller to Truman Hendryx, August 9, 1831.

¹⁵² Thomas Newton, *Dissertations on the Prophecies*, III vols., vol. II (London: 1764), 1.

¹⁵³ Thomas Newton, *Dissertations on the Prophecies*, III vols., vol. III (London: 1764), 428.

¹⁵⁴ Arasola, *The End of Historicism*, 38. It should be noted however, that Arasola presents no supporting evidence for this claim that Miller's "Newton" is in fact Thomas Newton, not Isaac Newton.

¹⁵⁵ Isaac T. Hinton, *The Prophecies of Daniel and John* (St Louis, MO: 1843), 231. Quoted in Richard H. Popkin, "Newton and Fundamentalism, II," in *Essays on the Context, Nature, and Influence of Isaac Newton's Theology*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1970), 171. But also in Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* Volume IV, 874.

¹⁵⁶ G. C. Boase and Sinead Agnew, "Faber, George Stanley (1773-1854)," in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 875.

voluminous writer of his generation.”¹⁵⁷ It is not known which of Faber’s many works Miller consulted, though Arasola sees his *A Dissertation on the Prophecies*—distributed in America in 1808 as the most likely.¹⁵⁸ Other works by Faber that are likely to have interested Miller include: *Two Sermons before the University of Oxford, an Attempt to Explain by Most Recent Events Five of the Seven Vials Mentioned in the Revelations* (1799), the two volumes of *A General and Connected View of the Prophecies Relative to the Conversion of Judah and Israel, the Overthrow of the Confederacy in Palestine, and the Diffusion of Christianity* (1808), *Remarks on the Fifth Apocalyptic Vial and the Restoration of the Imperial Government of France* (1815), and *The Sacred Calendar of Prophecy, or a Dissertation on the Prophecies of the Grand Period of Seven Times, and of its Second Moiety, or the Latter Three Times and a Half* in three volumes (1828).¹⁵⁹

Miller undoubtedly agreed with Faber’s view that the interpretation of prophecy was progressive: “[Prophecy is] gradually opened partly by the hand of time and partly by human labour undertaken in humble dependence upon the divine aid.”¹⁶⁰

These authors were held in a high degree of esteem not only by Miller, but by many other Americans. George Bush—professor of Hebrew and Oriental Literature at the University of New York—commented to Miller: “In taking a day as the prophetic time for a year, I believe you are sustained by the soundest exegesis, as well as fortified by the high names of Mede, Sir Isaac Newton, Bishop Newton, Faber, Scott, Keith, and a host of others, who have long since come to substantially your conclusions on this head.”¹⁶¹

Other Commentators

In addition to these well-known historicists, Miller is likely to have been familiar with a number of other authors of prophecy and biblical commentaries. Le Roy Froom overstates his case when he states that, “There were practically no original American commentaries at the dawn of the nineteenth century.”¹⁶² At least two American commentaries on the whole Bible were published in the first half of the nineteenth century. The first of these—albeit one written by an Englishman, Joseph Priestly (1733-1804)—was *Notes on All the Books of Scripture* published 1803-1804.

¹⁵⁷ Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* Volume III, 339.

¹⁵⁸ Arasola, *The End of Historicism*, 40. Unfortunately Arasola does not explain the reasoning behind his statement. The full title of this work is *A dissertation on the prophecies relative to the great period of 1,200 years, the papal and Mahomedan apostasies, the reign of the Antichrist, and the restoration of the Jews*. (First published in two volumes in 1807.)

¹⁵⁹ See Boase and Agnew, “Faber, George Stanley (1773-1854),” 876. for a more comprehensive list of Faber’s works.

¹⁶⁰ Faber, *A Dissertation on the Prophecies*, 4.

¹⁶¹ Quoted in Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 188.

¹⁶² Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* Volume III, 116-117.

According to Froom's survey, Priestly's commentary had limited influence but was periodically cited by other authors.¹⁶³ A second American commentary was that of William Jenks (1778-1866). His multivolume *Comprehensive Commentary on the Holy Bible* was published over the years 1834-1838. Arasola states that Jenks "followed British historicism except in advocating postmillennialism."¹⁶⁴

In addition to these complete commentaries, numerous commentaries on specific books were in existence. Those written on the books of Daniel and Revelation are most likely to have interested Miller. The earliest of these was a systematic exposition of Daniel written by Ephraim Huit and first published in London in 1644.¹⁶⁵ It was titled *The Whole Prophecie of Daniel Explained, by a Paraphrase, Analysis and briefe Comment: wherein the severall visions shewed to the Prophet are clearly Interpreted, and the Application thereof vindicated against dissenting Opinions*. Two years later, Thomas Parker's commentary on Daniel titled *The Visions and prophecies of Daniel expounded: Wherein the Mistakes of Former Interpreters are modestly discovered* was published.¹⁶⁶ Based on his studies in Daniel, Parker presented two chronological schemes that predicted the end of the current age and ushered in the millennium. Varying only in their starting points, one scheme ended in 1620, the other in 1840.¹⁶⁷ In his introduction, "To the Reader," Parker states that in his opinion, two or three more years of study would probably settle the question.¹⁶⁸ In 1787, Benjamin Foster published *A Dissertation on the Seventy Weeks of Daniel* in which he argued that "the mystical time of waiting for the Messiah had been completed and all was in readiness for the Second Coming."¹⁶⁹

It is however, not only locally published works that American readers accessed. As Froom points out:

There were however numerous American reprints of leading British commentaries which had the same force and influence as indigenous American products. Among these favorites were the commentaries of Matthew Henry, Thomas Scott, Adam Clarke, and John Wesley, and theological dictionaries such as that by Charles Buck. In addition, such standard works as Prideaux, Horne, and Faber all exerted their

¹⁶³ Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* Volume III, 118.

¹⁶⁴ Arasola, *The End of Historicism*, 42.

¹⁶⁵ Huit is also spelled as Hewit or Hewett. It is possible that there was a 1643 edition. See Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* Volume III, 61.

¹⁶⁶ Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* Volume III, 68.

¹⁶⁷ Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* Volume III, 76.

¹⁶⁸ Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* Volume III, 69.

¹⁶⁹ Stephen A. Marini, "Uncertain dawn: Millennialism and Political Theology in Revolutionary America," in *Anglo-American Millennialism, From Milton to the Millerites*, ed. Richard Connors and Andrew Colin Gow (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 172.

weight of influence.¹⁷⁰

In addition to works of a more scholarly nature, there were hundreds of more popular works available. Nathan O. Hatch points out that in England for the period 1775 to 1815, at least 274 works on prophecy were published. Not only would many of these have been available in America, but as Hatch states, “a similar outpouring of eschatology, orthodox and sectarian, issued from the American press.”¹⁷¹

One local author was Ethan Smith, who as previously noted, pastored the Congregational Church in Poultney for over five years, from November 21, 1821 to December 1826.¹⁷² Smith stood out among even the generally well educated Congregational clergy as “a distinguished man of letters.”¹⁷³ Prior to moving to Poultney Smith had written two books on prophecy: *A Dissertation on the Prophecies*, published in 1809;¹⁷⁴ and *A Key to the Figurative Language of the Prophecies*,¹⁷⁵ first published in 1814. Two other works on prophecy were published later: *A Key to the Revelation*, in 1833; and his *Prophetic Catechism to Lead to the Study of the Prophetic Scriptures*, in 1839.¹⁷⁶ Smith relied heavily on Faber’s work, stating, “I HAVE believed the signs of the times to be very interesting; and have wished that some able writer might succeed in opening and presenting, in a judicious and connected manner, the sacred Prophecies, which are receiving their fulfilment. Mr. Faber, I think, has succeeded better in this, than any other writer on the subject.”¹⁷⁷ According to David M. Ludlum, Smith’s *Dissertation* in particular was popular in Vermont.¹⁷⁸

Smith, like Miller, used the historicist year/day principle. Smith however, focused on the 1260 days of Revelation 12:6, reading them as 1260 years that had begun in 606 CE. He therefore predicted the Millennial reign of Christ to begin in 1866. While Miller had left Poultney prior to Smith’s residency, it seems very likely that Miller—living only about eight kilometres (five miles) away in Low Hampton—would have been familiar with Smith’s works; particularly since Smith’s

¹⁷⁰ Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* Volume III, 116-117.

¹⁷¹ Hatch, “Millennialism and Popular Religion in the Early Republic,” 115.

¹⁷² Butler, “The Making of a New Order: Millerism and the Origins of Seventh-day Adventism,” Chapman, *Sketches of the Alumni of Dartmouth College*, 57.

¹⁷³ Ward, “Religious Enthusiasm in Vermont, 1761-1847”, 183.

¹⁷⁴ The work’s full title was *A Dissertation on the Prophecies relative to Anti-christ and the Last Times; Exhibiting the Rise, Character, and Overthrow of that Terrible Power: and a Treatise on the Seven Apocalyptic Vials*.

¹⁷⁵ Full title: *A Key to the Figurative Language Found in the Sacred Scriptures in the Form of Questions and Answers*.

¹⁷⁶ William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, vol. II (New York: Robert Carter & Bros., 1866), 299.

¹⁷⁷ Ethan Smith, *A Dissertation on the Prophecies Relative to the Antichrist and the Last Times; Exhibiting the Rise, Character, and Overthrow of That Terrible Power and a Treatise on the Seven Apocalyptic Vials* (Charlestown: Samuel T. Armstrong, 1811), ix.

¹⁷⁸ Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850*, 38.

time in Poultney (1821-1826) coincided with the period of intense Bible study that followed Miller's conversion. Smith himself was certainly aware of Miller's work. When some of Miller's lectures were published in the *Boston Daily Times*, two of his letters were published rebutting some of Miller's conclusions.¹⁷⁹

Both Smith and Miller placed a similar emphasis on a literal reading of the biblical text. Miller stated "If it *makes good sense* as it stands... then it must be understood literally, if not, figuratively;" while Smith wrote "The literal sense is ever to be preferred to a figurative, when the sense would be as good."¹⁸⁰

Like most of his contemporaries, Miller grounded his Bible study in the study of history; biblical authors were almost universally regarded as "informed and conscientious historians."¹⁸¹ Miller would have agreed whole-heartedly with Edward Wells, who wrote in 1809, "We may, and very commendably too, spend some time and thoughts on the Historical part of Scripture; it being reasonable to think, that what the Wisdom of God has judged fit to make part of his word, we may judge fit to make part of our study."¹⁸²

Both theology/religion, and history were major subject areas in most libraries of the time. In 1796, the Pittsford social library in Vermont devoted 18% of its collection to theology/religion; and 31% to history/biography.¹⁸³ Similar figures are found in the social library at Brookfield, Vermont in 1791: 28% and 29% respectively.¹⁸⁴ The Pawlet, Vermont library catalogue for 1799 contained 51 titles divided into three sections: Divinity with 23 titles, Ecclesiastical History with 3 titles, and Profane History with 25 titles. The library catalogue contained a book listed as "Newton on the Prophecies;" this is almost certain to have been Thomas Newton's *Dissertations on the Prophecies*, though it is possible the entry referred to Isaac Newton's *Observations Upon the Prophecies of Daniel and St. John*.¹⁸⁵

As such, it would be reasonable to expect that the libraries Miller accessed had significant holdings of books on both theology/religion and history. It would be furthermore be expected that these holdings would have included the majority of the theologians/Bible commentators discussed above.

¹⁷⁹ Himes, "The Rise and Progress of Adventism Part I," 10.

¹⁸⁰ Smith, *A Key to the Figurative Language*, 100.

¹⁸¹ Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*, xviii.

¹⁸² Edward Wells, *An Historical Geography of the Old and New Testament* (Oxford: 1809), vii.

¹⁸³ Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library*, 103.

¹⁸⁴ Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library*, 103.

¹⁸⁵ "Constitution of the Pawlet Library.

Miller's published writings show evidence of his extensive reading on historical and theological topics. It is likely therefore, not only that Miller had access to the above works, but that he did in fact access them. In a letter sent to Himes that was later published, Miller wrote: "I send to you a few extracts from some ancient authors on the subject of the 'two witnesses.' Please to give them a place in your new work, and you will oblige many."¹⁸⁶ Miller then proceeds to quote from six theological works. Unfortunately the letter is undated, but it is clearly prior to 1844, and after his contact with Himes in 1840.

In the letter Miller first quotes from Thomas Goodwin's *The French Revolution foreseen, in 1639*. Goodwin was born in Norfolk in 1600 and educated at Cambridge, becoming a fellow of St. Catherine's and vicar of Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge. On becoming a Congregationalist in 1634 he resigned and moved to London. In 1639 persecution drove him to Holland, where he was a pastor of a church at Arnheim; he returned to London when the Long Parliament began to sit and formed a gathered church in London. Nominated as a member of the Westminster Assembly, he became the leader of the Dissenting Brethren. In 1649 he was appointed a chaplain to the Council of State, and in 1650 president of Magdalen College, Oxford. After the Restoration he moved from Oxford to London and pastored a gathered church there. Goodwin died in 1680 and the first collection of his works was published in five folio volumes in London from 1681 to 1704.¹⁸⁷

The second work Miller refers to is Dr. H. Moore's *Mystery of Iniquity*. Miller apparently means *A Modest Enquiry Into the Mystery of Iniquity* by Henry More which was first published in 1664. The work is also known as *Synopsis prophetica*. More studied at Cambridge and was elected fellow of Christ's College in 1641. He was the most prolific of the Cambridge Platonists and wrote in a wide variety of genres, including philosophical poetry (*Psychodia Platonica*), to more formal treatises (*An Antidote against Atheisme, The Immortality of the Soul*). More addressed a popular audience in his *Divine Dialogues*, but communicated with a learned international audience through academic Latin treatises including *Enchiridion ethicum*, and *Enchiridion metaphysicum*. In his later years he became preoccupied with millenarianism and the study of the cabbala, publishing a number of works on biblical prophecy including *Apocalypsis apocalypseos*, and *Paralipomena prophetica*—both of which are likely to have interested Miller.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Miller in Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies*, 203.

¹⁸⁷ T. M. Lawrence, "Goodwin, Thomas (1600-1680)," in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁸⁸ Sarah Hutton, "More, Henry (1614-1687)," in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For an overview of More's apocalyptic writings, see Philip C. Almond, "Henry More and the Apocalypse," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 54, no. 2 (1993): 189-200.

The next work Miller mentions is also misquoted—Peter Jurine’s *The Accomplishment of Scripture Prophecies, or the approaching Deliverance of the Church*. The author referred to by Miller is in fact Pierre Jurieu (1637-1713), a French Calvinist theologian. The work Miller quotes from was published in French as *Accomplissement des propheties* in 1686, with an English translation titled as Miller listed, first published in London in 1687.

A passage from John Willison’s *The Balm of Gilead* is briefly quoted by Miller. Willison was a Church of Scotland minister at Dundee from 1716 until his death in 1750. He was a prolific author—particularly of devotional books—a number of which were contemporary best-sellers. These include *Five Sermons Preached Before and After the Lord’s Supper* (1722), *The Mother’s Catechism for the Young Child* (1725), *A Sacramental Directory* (1741), *The Afflicted Man’s Companion* (1743), and *Sacramental Meditations and Advices* (1747).¹⁸⁹ *Balm of Gilead* was a collection of sermons first published in 1742.

Miller quotes a lengthy extract from John Gill in *Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology, Selected From the Manuscripts of William Miller With a Memoir of his Life*, stating: “I will give one more extract on this point, from DR. GILL, taken from a sermon on the answer to the question, ‘Watchman, what of the night?’ published in A.D. 1748, almost one hundred years since.”¹⁹⁰ Miller states that the quotation from Gill was published in 1748 though this appears to be a typographical error or a mistake. Miller does not identify the title of the published work he is quoting, simply stating that it is from a sermon entitled “Watchman, what of the night?” John Gill’s Archive contains a reproduction of Gill’s sermon by this title, however, the sermon itself was not delivered until December 27, 1750.¹⁹¹ The sermon was published separately as *The Watchman’s Answer to the Question, What of the night? A Sermon*. It was also included in a multivolume collection published as *A Collection of Sermons and Tracts*. Miller also refers to Gill in his *Evidence From Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ About the Year 1843; Exhibited in a Course of Lectures*; in his discussion of Revelation 9:17.¹⁹² In his *Address to Believers in Christ of all Denominations* early in 1844, Miller wrote,

Or, are you ready to say that our crime consists in examining the Bible for ourselves? We have inquired ‘Watchman, what of the night?’ we have besought and entreated them to give us any signs of the coming morning, and have waited patiently for an answer; but have waited in vain; have been turned off with some German or French philosophy, or had the book closed in our face, and been insulted for our deep

¹⁸⁹ Michael Jenkins, “Willison, John (1680-1750),” in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁹⁰ Miller in Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies*, 209.

¹⁹¹ *John Gill’s Archive*, (accessed February 3, 2005); available from http://www.pbministries.org/books/gill/gills_archive.htm.

¹⁹² Miller, *Evidence From Scripture and History*, 122.

anxiety. We have, therefore, been obliged to study for ourselves; and if we are to be cut off for honestly believing in the exactness of prophetic time, then *Scott, and Wesley, and the Newtons, and Mede, Gill, and others*, should all be excommunicated for the like offence. We, therefore, once more call upon you to show us our errors; and until this is done, we must continue to believe the Lord will come in this Jewish year.¹⁹³

Appearing serially from 1746, John Gill's ten volume commentary on the whole Bible entitled *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments* was completed in 1766. Robert W. Oliver notes that with this work, "Gill became the first person to complete a verse-by-verse, exegetical commentary on the whole of Scripture in the English language."¹⁹⁴ It was widely read, and in 1881 the American Baptist William Cathcart remarked that Gill's work was, "the most valuable exposition of the Old and New Testaments ever published," and that it was "still in demand at large prices on both sides of the Atlantic."¹⁹⁵ Gill's commentary was followed by a systematic theology entitled *Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* published in 1769—the first by a Baptist.¹⁹⁶ This work "became a standard part of the library of most Baptist ministers of the day."¹⁹⁷ Given that Miller was a Baptist—the grandson of two Baptist ministers, whom he "often entertained,"¹⁹⁸ it seems highly likely that Miller was familiar with these other works in addition to that directly quoted.

Miller quotes one sentence from Robert Fleming's *A discourse on the rise and fall of papacy; wherein the revolution in France, and the abject state of the French King, is distinctly pointed out*.¹⁹⁹ Fleming was born c. 1660, the son of a minister. He pastored Scots churches in both Rotterdam and London. Fleming wrote numerous works, including his two-volume *Christology* (1705 & 1708). His *Discourses on Several Subjects* was first published in 1701 and contains the work Miller quoted from. It was later republished as *Apocalyptical Key*. Fleming died in London in 1716.²⁰⁰

¹⁹³ Quoted in Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 253. Emphasis added.

¹⁹⁴ Robert W. Oliver, "John Gill (1697-1771): His Life and Ministry," in *The Life and Thought of John Gill (1697-1771)*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 38.

¹⁹⁵ William Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopedia* (1881 ed. Rep. Paris, AK: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 1988), 454. In Thomas K. Ascol, "John Gill's Approach to New Testament Exposition," in *The Life and Thought of John Gill (1697-1771)*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 114.

¹⁹⁶ Ascol, "John Gill's Approach to New Testament Exposition," 113.

¹⁹⁷ Michael A. G. Haykin, "Gill, John (1697-1771)," in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁹⁸ Dick, *William Miller and the Advent Crisis*, 4.

¹⁹⁹ Miller in Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies*, 211.

²⁰⁰ M. J. Mercer, "Fleming, Robert (c.1660-1694)," in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Miller also mentions—though does not directly quote from—Christopher Love.²⁰¹ Love was born in 1618 in Cardiff, Wales. He attended New Inn Hall, Oxford, and graduated in 1635. A staunch Presbyterian, Love obtained ordination in the Church of England after much difficulty. Because of his political leanings, he was arrested by Oliver Cromwell's forces for his alleged involvement with a plan to raise money for the restoration of the monarchy, a charge Love denied. While the six other accused ministers were released after six months; Love was beheaded on Tower Hill, London on August 22, 1651.

Love wrote a number of books including: *Grace: Truth, Growth, and Degrees, Penitent Pardoned, The Mortified Christian: A Treatise on the Mortification of Sin*, and *The Effectual Calling and Election*. It is not clear which of Love's works Miller is referring to, however it is likely to be one of the popular collections of Love's writings published in the late eighteenth century that re-invented Love as a prophet of eschatology. These include *The Strange and Wonderful Predictions of Mr Christopher Love* (N. D.), and *Prophecies of the Reverend Christopher Love: and His Last Words* (1794).²⁰²

In another letter to Himes, written in 1842, Miller again refers to an author he has read in depth, stating "I have read the book you sent me, "Hints on the Interpretation of Prophecy, by M. Stuart....I have been pleased, edified, and instructed, by reading this work."²⁰³ Miller here refers to Moses Stuart's book *Hints on the Interpretation of Prophecy* first published in 1842.²⁰⁴ Stuart was Professor of Sacred Literature at Andover Theological Seminary from 1810 to 1848.

While Miller wrote his letters to Himes some years after he first published his "Rules of Interpretation" or formulated his initial ideas on the date of Christ's Second Coming; the letters nevertheless do provide more evidence of Miller's lifelong study habits. He was obviously well-read in many areas and given this fact, it is impossible to view Miller as being uninfluenced by the historians, philosophers, and Bible commentators that he had read—even if he did in fact cease to read authors such as these during the time of his initial study.

The British Millenarian Tradition

Sandeen points out that

By the middle of the nineteenth century British millenarian theology had been imported into the United States and had become the most popular form of American millenarianism. But this triumph occurred only after the luxuriant flourishing of a

²⁰¹ Miller in Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies*, 211.

²⁰² E. C. Vernon, "Love, Christopher (1618-1651)," in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 496.

²⁰³ Miller, *Miller's Reply to Stuart*, 5.

²⁰⁴ Moses Stuart, *Hints on the Interpretation of Prophecy* (Andover, MA: Allen, Morrill & Wardwell, 1842).

native millenarian species that imposed special conditions and traditions upon every other American adaptation. The development of American millenarianism owes most of its character to its British heritage.”²⁰⁵

The precise extent to which William Miller was influenced by British millenarians is difficult to determine. Given Miller’s social standing and background, Michael Barkun is most likely correct in his conclusion that “Miller does not seem to have participated in any known trans-Atlantic millenarian contacts.”²⁰⁶ Certainly, as has been shown above, Miller owed a debt to a number of British authors. As Kai Arasola, states, “In his hermeneutic Miller is obviously knowledgeable of and dependent on the British millenarian tradition. He is familiar with [British millenarians] Mede, Newton, Faber, and Gill.”²⁰⁷ However, Michael Barkun recognises an additional possibility regarding the sources for Miller’s ideas, “Although to all appearances theologically self-taught, the congruence between his Biblical interpretations and older writings of millenarian symbols strongly implies access to an oral if not a written exegetical tradition.”²⁰⁸

Barkun believes that Miller’s ideas bore a “close resemblance to those of British chiliasts both prior and contemporary with him. The ideas of Joanna Southcott (1750-1814) in particular resembled Miller’s.”²⁰⁹ Similarly, Billington notes that the ideas of the Southcottians “intrigued every Millerite preacher who came across them”,²¹⁰ while Sandeen notes that “William Miller taught a doctrine of the last times that differed remarkably little from that proclaimed by the British nineteenth-century millenarians.”²¹¹ One major difference was that the Millerites did not accept the restoration of the Jews to Palestine as part of their prophetic chronology.²¹²

Little work has been carried out to examine the connections between Miller and the British millenarians. An examination of the influence of British millenarian Edward Irving by Ricardo A. Gonzalez shows that many of Irving’s doctrines are similar to those of Miller—the obvious exception being Irving’s termination date of 1868 for the 1260, 1290, and 1335 day, prophetic periods.²¹³ Gonzalez argues for an “even more direct link to Edward Irving” than a shared hermeneutical method, and similar eschatology; however he fails to demonstrate this “direct link” in

²⁰⁵ Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 42.

²⁰⁶ Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium*, 36.

²⁰⁷ Arasola, *The End of Historicism*, 7.

²⁰⁸ Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium*, 36.

²⁰⁹ Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium*, 36.

²¹⁰ Billington, “The Millerite Adventists in Great Britain, 1840-1850,” 203.

²¹¹ Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 50-51.

²¹² Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 52.

²¹³ Ricardo A. Gonzalez, “British Roots in American Millennialism: Edward Irving and the Millerite Movement” *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 10, no. 1, (2007): 51-79.

any detail, and later claims in his conclusion that the extent to which “[Miller] borrowed from Irving’s conclusions is not clear”.²¹⁴

During the nineteenth century, “British observers were commenting with interest on the developing Millerite movement and criticizing its theology and behaviour.”²¹⁵ The Millerites were also actively winning converts in Britain.²¹⁶ Millerite leader Joshua Himes studied the movement in London in 1846. He visited a number of churches and examined their publications, declaring them “pretty good sentiments.” He published a report of his investigations in the *Advent Herald* of September 23, 1846.²¹⁷ Josiah Litch records that attempts at dialogue with British millennialists were unsuccessful: “In 1840, an attempt was made to open an interchange between the Literalists of England and the Adventists in the United States. But it was soon discovered that they had as little fellowship for our Anti-Judaizing notions as we had for the Judaism; and the interchange was broken off.”²¹⁸

There seems little doubt that Miller had read the works of a number of British millennialists at some stage. In 1842 he attacked the erroneous views of the “English literalists” concerning the Millennium; however, there is no evidence of direct contact between the British Millennialists and Miller himself.²¹⁹ In turn, his Millerite followers had limited contact with non-Millerite British millennialists but do not appear to have been influenced greatly by their ideas.

As Michael Barkun states, “the full extent [Miller’s] reading is not known”;²²⁰ however it is clear from the above discussion, that Miller read widely and voraciously throughout his life—particularly in the areas of history, theology, and prophecy. He had access to books on these and similar topics via a number of private and public libraries. Miller’s writings mention some authors by name and some conclusions have been drawn about his likely access to and reading of a number of other specific authors. It is also noted that Miller’s Bible is likely to have contained a great deal of information outside of the biblical text itself; and that this would also have informed and influenced his approach to the Bible and the conclusions he drew.

²¹⁴ Gonzalez, “British Roots in American Millennialism: Edward Irving and the Millerite Movement”, 78-79.

²¹⁵ Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 57.

²¹⁶ Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 57.

²¹⁷ Joshua V. Himes, *The Advent Herald*, September 23, 1846.

²¹⁸ Joshua V. Himes, Sylvester Bliss, and Apollos Hale, “The Rise and Progress of Adventism,” *The Advent Shield and Review*, May 1844, 92.

²¹⁹ William Miller, *A Familiar Exposition of the Twenty-fourth Chapter of Matthew and the Fifth and Sixth Chapters of Hosea to Which are Added an Address to the General Conference on the Advent and a Scene of the Last day* (Boston, MA: Joshua V. Himes, 1842), 83-86.

²²⁰ Michael Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium*, 35.

CHAPTER 5 – Miller’s Influence on Adventist Hermeneutics

The influence of William Miller on Adventist hermeneutics is considerable. The hermeneutic approach taken by mainstream Seventh-day Adventist is little changed from that of Miller, and a clear line of influence from Miller to contemporary Seventh-day Adventism can be traced. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is one of the few denominations to maintain an historicist interpretation of prophecy and still finds significance in the October 22, 1844 date that became such a disappointment for the Millerites.

Sabbatarian Adventism

The Bible continued to occupy a central position in the Sabbatarian Adventist movement. The Adventist doctrine of Christ’s soon return—the Second Advent Message—was seen as being entirely based on the Bible. In 1849, James White reminisced that prior to the Great Disappointment, the Millerites had sung, “My Bible leads to glory.”¹ This became a catchphrase of the early Adventist church; White’s article was reproduced in the January 13, 1852 edition of *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*.² The same sentiment was echoed in 1858 by Lewis Martin who wrote: “I still believe that we have the truth. I also believe that ‘My Bible leads to glory.’”³ In the same year, A. S. Hutchins wrote “we may as properly sing to-day, ‘My Bible leads to glory.’”⁴

Furthermore, this central role of the Bible was key to the group’s self-identity. In 1851 Apollos Hale wrote:

It was the Bible alone which produced the Advent movement. Those who embraced the Advent doctrine were distinguished, from the first, by their strict regard for the Bible. This was exclusively peculiar to them. Every question was decided by that.⁵

For the group, Miller’s biblicism was foundational, best summed up in the following passage written in 1856: “Now when we thank God for the Bible, let us have Bible faith, Bible Sabbath, Bible day for the Sabbath, Bible Commandments and Testimony, Bible gifts, Bible submission to them all, then we shall have Bible religion, Bible hope, and soon Bible salvation and Bible glory forever.”⁶

Miller’s methods of biblical interpretation remained the standard for the Sabbatarian Adventists. In 1853, Uriah Smith reminded readers that there had been no change in their approach to interpreting the Bible:

¹ James White, “Who Has Left the Sure Word?,” *The Present Truth*, December, 1849, 46.

² James White, “Who Has Left the Sure Word?,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 13 January, 1852, 74.

³ Lewis Martin, “From Bro. Martin,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 17, 1858, 38.

⁴ A. S. Hutchins, “But Grow in Grace,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 2, 1858, 125.

⁵ Apollos Hale, “Brother Hale’s Article,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 16, 1851, 25.

⁶ C. W. Sperry, “The Bible,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 15 May, 1856, 37.

We have said that in the past Advent movement, we have not been stepping in the dark; and we now claim, that, in being guided by the same lamp, the unerring Word, adhering still to the same established rules of interpretation, we are not stepping in the dark, while we follow down the track of prophecy as it is further developed.⁷

In April 1854, the following note was published in the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*: “The following we take from a small work entitled *Wm Miller’s Apology and Defense*, published in Boston, 1845. It gives a brief sketch of the experience of this servant of God, and the manner in which he studied the holy Scriptures which will be deeply interesting to many, at least of the readers of the REVIEW.”⁸ Following this was the promised extract which outlined Miller’s life and hermeneutics. Shortly after, in August 1854, in an article refuting the idea of an immortal soul, D. P. Hall notes principles that are “absolutely necessary in the study of the Holy Scriptures”.⁹ While Miller is not mentioned, Hall’s three principles are clearly based on Miller’s ideas:

1. Give the language of the inspired writers, its plain, obvious, and literal import.
2. Bring all classes of figures to harmonize with the literal.
3. Study the Bible by subjects, tracing them through the entire book, and having ascertained the harmonious teachings of all the inspired writers upon any one subject, you must have the truth upon that subject.¹⁰

As George Knight points out,

In regards to principles of interpretation, they [the Sabbatarian Adventists] believed Miller’s ‘Rules of Interpretation’ to be correct. Comparing Scripture with Scripture, letting each word and sentence have its proper significance, and utilizing prophetic parallelism, typology, and the interpretation of symbolic figures as outlined by Miller in his quite conscious approach to Bible study, became a foundational perspective on how the Sabbatarians looked at Scripture.¹¹

The Sabbatarian Adventists continued Miller’s emphasis that the Bible was to be interpreted literally in a way that made “good sense”: “God in his wisdom has given us a Bible that is plain and consistent; and plain teaching will bring out its plain truths.”¹² This common-sense approach was foundational to the evangelistic and apologetic efforts of the Sabbatarian Adventists as they established their doctrines and theological identity. In a typical example, the April 25, 1854, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, republished an article from the *Bible Examiner* that promoted the

⁷ Uriah Smith, “Not Stepping in the Dark,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 4, 1853, 100.

⁸ “William Miller,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 18, 1854, 97.

⁹ D. P. Hall, “The Mortality of Man,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, August 29, 1854, 17.

¹⁰ Hall, “The Mortality of Man,” 17.

¹¹ Knight, *Search for Identity*, 60.

¹² Sperry, “The Bible,” 29.

doctrine of Conditional Immortality.¹³ The anonymous author presents twenty points of support for this doctrine, prefacing each with the question, “Is it reasonable...?”¹⁴ The entire article appeals to reason and common-sense as the foundations of the argument: “Is it not more reasonable, and more in accordance with the wisdom and love of God, to suppose that he would give his creatures such a revelation, *as plain common-sense people could easily understand? He has done so:- if men would but use their reason in reading the Bible, as they would do in reading any other book.*”¹⁵

James White, in an early pamphlet, also argued the case for the doctrine of conditional immortality using reason and common-sense:

Is it reasonable to suppose, in all the vast multitude of passages in which Death is threatened as the punishment of the sinner, that loss of happiness is all that is meant? An unhappy man is as truly alive as the most happy being in existence; and if he be immortal by nature, will continue alive through all eternity. In no plain, common-sense language can any immortal being be said to suffer Death.

Is it reasonable to suppose that infinite wisdom would invariably use language which was only calculated to mislead mankind? or which none but doctors of divinity could unravel? Would God speak in riddles to men in the great matters which concern their salvation?

Is it not more reasonable, and more in accordance with the wisdom and love of God to suppose that he would give his creatures such a revelation, as plain, common-sense people could easily understand? He has done so: if men would use their reason in reading the Bible, as they would do in reading any other book.¹⁶

As early as 1851, Sabbatarian Adventist leaders were also appealing to Miller’s principles in support of their beliefs concerning the seventh-day Sabbath. In an 1851 article, the anonymous author states, “Scripture must explain scripture, then a harmony may be seen throughout the whole”¹⁷ Similarly, in an 1852 letter, J. R. Towle wrote, “There is such a fullness in this truth that it has completely eclipsed my mind from my former course of proclaiming the gospel, for more than fifteen years past that is, I see the sword is not muffled now to me. Naked truth shines out of God’s word plainer than ever it did before. The Bible is its own expositor.”¹⁸

In an 1857 article for *The Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald* titled “The Bible and the Bible Alone”, Sabbatarian Adventist leader Uriah Smith had outlined three basic principles—each supported with numerous texts:

¹³ “An Appeal to Men of Reason and Common Sense,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 25, 1854, 106-107.

¹⁴ The editors of the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* deliberately omitted point sixteen without comment. Slight variations of wording do occur, including, “Is it not more reasonable...?” and “Is it not far more reasonable...?”

¹⁵ “Apology and Defence,” 107. Emphasis added.

¹⁶ James White, *Appeal on Immortality* (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, ND), 2.

¹⁷ “The Sabbath,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 7, 1851, 62.

¹⁸ J. R. Towle, “Letter,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 10, 1852, 24.

“It is our duty to search the Scriptures. ‘Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life; and they are they that testify of me.’ John v,39; Isa.viii,20; Acts xvii,11.

The Scriptures may be understood. ‘The secret things belong unto the Lord our God; but those things which are revealed, belong unto us and to our children for ever.’ Deut.xxix,29; Ps.cxix,105,130; Dan.ix,2; Matt.xxiv,15; Rom.x,17; xv,4; xvi,26; 2Pet.i,19; Rev.i,3.

The whole, and not a part only, of the Scriptures our Guide. ‘All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.’ 2Tim.iii,16,17. Ps.cxix,128; Matt.iv,4.”¹⁹

Smith was one of the most influential writers in the Seventh-day Adventist Church and his writings helped perpetuate and publicize Miller’s approach. He edited the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s flagship journal *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* for over thirty years and his writings on prophecy are still influential amongst Seventh-day Adventists today.

Sabbatarian Adventist leaders strongly endorsed the Bible’s central role in doctrinal formation: “In the midst of conflicting views we must take the Bible alone as a sure detector, as that which will discover unto us the truth.”²⁰ Many Sabbatarian Adventists expressed their biblicism by taking a strongly anti-creedal position. In 1853, influential Sabbatarian Adventist leader James White stated his opposition to creeds very strongly: “We want no human creed: the Bible is sufficient...It is the will of the Lord that his people should be called away from the confusion and bondage of man-made creeds, to enjoy the oneness and freedom of the gospel.”²¹ White continued to state his strong opposition to creeds, a week later he wrote, “And while we reject all human creeds, or platforms...we take the Bible, the perfect rule of faith and practice, given by the inspiration of God. This shall be our platform on which to stand, our creed and discipline.”²²

A 30-page anonymously-authored work *The Bible Student’s Assistant or a Compend of Scripture References*, published in 1857, states under the heading, “The Bible and the Bible Alone” that “the object of this Tract is to assist the reader in the study of the sacred Scriptures....We only state propositions, and cite those texts of Scripture which prove them.”²³ The tract then proceeds to follow the familiar formula of: 1. Propositional statement, 2. Quoted text, and 3. Additional text references. A typical example being: “*It is our duty to search the Scriptures.* “Search the Scriptures;

¹⁹ Uriah Smith, “The Bible, and the Bible Alone,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 19, 1857, 155.

²⁰ J. N Loughborough, *Man’s Present Condition and his Future Reward or Punishment* (Rochester, NY: Advent Review Office, 1855), 4.

²¹ James White, “Gospel Order,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 6, 1853, 173.

²² White, “Gospel Order,” 180.

²³ *The Bible Student’s Assistant or a Compend of Scripture References*, (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1857), 1.

for in them ye think ye have eternal life; and they are they that testify of me.” John v, 39; Isa. Viii, 20; Acts xvii, 11;....”²⁴

Sabbatarian Adventists also followed Miller’s extensive use of a proof-text approach to scripture. In 1857 *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* published the following:

THE BIBLE, AND THE BIBLE ALONE.

It is our duty to search the Scriptures. “Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life; and they are they that testify of me.” John v,39; Isa.viii,20; Acts xvii,11.

The Scriptures may be understood. “The secret things belong unto the Lord our God; but those things which are revealed, belong unto us and to our children for ever.” Deut.xxix,29; Ps.cxix,105,130; Dan.ix,2; Matt.xxiv,15; Rom.x,17; xv,4; xvi,26; 2Pet.i,19; Rev.i,3.

The whole, and not a part only, of the Scriptures our Guide. “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” 2Tim.iii,16,17. Ps.cxix,128; Matt.iv,4.²⁵

Seventh-day Adventism in the Nineteenth-century

The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Encyclopedia is at pains to emphasize that early Adventist leaders were indebted to William Miller’s hermeneutical methods:

The early Seventh-day Adventist leaders, such as James White and Joseph Bates, who had no formal seminary training, brought a natural strength of intellect, deep earnestness, and diligent effort to their study of the Bible. Despite their lack of formal theological training, they discovered and followed sound principles of exegesis. Their expositions of Scripture have, accordingly, at nearly every significant point stood the test of years. They stressed that the Scriptures were to be taken literally unless the context made it obvious that a figure of speech was being used by the sacred writer. In this they followed William Miller....”²⁶

Miller’s “Rules of Interpretation” were reproduced without comment in the March 31, 1868 *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*,²⁷ and again in 1873 as part of an extract from James White’s *Life of William Miller*.²⁸

In an 1865 article, F. Gould clearly argues that Seventh-day Adventist methods of Bible interpretation can be traced to William Miller: “Since the rise of the Advent doctrine, and especially since the proclamation of the third angel’s message, there has been a class of individuals who have

²⁴ *The Bible Student’s Assistant or a Compend of Scripture References*, 1. Original emphasis.

²⁵ “The Bible and the Bible Alone,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 19, 1857, 155.

²⁶ “Bible, Interpretation of.,” in *The Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia A-L*, ed. Don F. Neufeld (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1996), 202. The quotation is taken from F. D. Nichol, *The Midnight Cry*, 32.

²⁷ William Miller, “William Miller: His Rules of Interpretation,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 31, 1868, 244-245.

²⁸ James White, “Life of William Miller,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, February 18, 1873, 72-73

looked away from the great mass of corrupt teaching and false interpretation, and have learned to let the Bible stand as its own expositor”.²⁹ For Gould, Miller’s approach—taking the Bible as its own expositor—is now appropriated as an identifying characteristic of the Seventh-day Adventist Church; furthermore, Miller’s approach is one that will protect the newly formed Seventh-day Adventist from infection with “corrupt teaching and false interpretation” and allow it to maintain its distinctive doctrines.

As Alberto R. Timm points out, William Miller’s hermeneutical framework was largely restricted to the end-time prophecies of Scripture, with Miller unhesitatingly urging his followers to avoid entering “into the discussion of questions foreign to that of the Advent”.³⁰ Both the Sabbatarian Adventists and the Seventh-day Adventists “continued in general, with the basic prophetic hermeneutics of Miller but went further by applying his hermeneutics to Scripture as a whole.”³¹

In January 1887 Joseph Harvey Waggoner published two articles in the *Signs of the Times* on his principles of interpretation.³² These were the first comprehensive presentation of Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutical principles.³³ In his introduction to the first article Waggoner stated:

The *Signs of the Times* was established to present Scripture truth in the simplest and clearest manner possible... we wish to lay down for our readers a few of the principles which we shall invariably follow in our interpretation, and which, if followed, in a prayerful and candid spirit, cannot fail to lead a person to a proper understanding of the sacred word.³⁴

The key principles that Waggoner listed in his two articles included:

1. Scripture must interpret scripture.
2. There is no book of the Bible upon which light is not shed by every other book.
3. Symbols always have the same meaning, provided the same subject is under consideration.

Waggoner’s ideas clearly draw upon Miller’s.

Many early Seventh-day Adventists viewed Miller’s common-sense approach to scripture as an important contribution to biblical interpretation. In 1868, James White went so far as to state that

²⁹ F. Gould, “The Bible Rule of Interpretation,” *The Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald*, November 7, 1865, 183.

³⁰ Miller, “Letter From Mr Miller,” 355.

³¹ Timm, “Historical Background of Adventist Biblical Interpretation,” 6.

³² J. H. Waggoner, “A Few Principles of Interpretation,” *Signs of the Times*, January 6, 1887, 8-9; and J. H. Waggoner, “The Bible Commentaries and Tradition,” *Signs of the Times*, January 13, 1887, 22-23.

³³ The name, “Seventh-day Adventist” was formally adopted in 1860 with the first regional conference formed that same year. However it wasn’t until 1863 that the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists was formed with John Byington as its first president. Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists*, 63-64. As previously mentioned, while Ellen G. White had written earlier on the subject (in 1884) she simply quoted Miller directly without expansion or discussion of his points.

³⁴ Waggoner, “A Few Principles of Interpretation,” 8.

Adventism “has given to the church and world a simple, plain, common-sense system of interpretation of the sacred canon, so that every man, who will take the trouble of reading the Bible and collating the different portions of it, may understand the word of God without the aid of learned commentaries.”³⁵ Similarly, in an anti-Catholic diatribe published in 1888, E. J. Waggoner argued that the Early Church Fathers were, “so imbued with the spirit of heathen philosophy, which consisted simply in a show of learning, to mystify and awe the simple-minded, that they could not come down to the plain, common-sense teaching of the Bible.”³⁶ Thus, the Bible itself is presented as requiring only common-sense to interpret.

Typifying early Seventh-day Adventist thought, Seventh-day Adventist author Uriah Smith emphasized a literal approach. Smith outlined his hermeneutical approach in contrast to the “mystical or spiritualizing system, invented by Origen, to the shame of sound criticism, and the curse of Christendom.”³⁷ According to Smith, under the literal system he espoused, “every declaration is to be taken in its most obvious and literal sense, except where the context and the well-known laws of language show that the terms are figurative, and not literal.”³⁸ Here Smith closely follows Miller’s Rule 11: “How to know when a word is used figuratively. If it makes good sense as it stands, and does no violence to the simple laws of nature, then it must be understood literally, if not, figuratively”.³⁹ Smith further paralleled Miller’s “Rules of interpretation” when he stated that where figures are used in the Bible, “the Scriptures introduce no figure which they do not somewhere furnish literal language to explain.”⁴⁰ This statement is quite similar to Miller’s Rule #12: “To learn the true meaning of figures, trace your figurative word through the Bible, and where you find it explained, put it on your figure, and if it makes good sense you need look no further, if not, look again”.⁴¹ Furthermore, according to Smith, “By the literal method, everything is subject to well-established and clearly defined law; and, viewed from this standpoint, the reader will be surprised to see how simple, easy, and clear many portions of the Scriptures at once become, which, according to any other system, are dark and unsolvable.”⁴² In his writings Smith introduced no new

³⁵ White, *Life Incidents*, 150-151.

³⁶ E. J. Waggoner, *Fathers of the Catholic Church. A Brief Examination of the “Falling Away” of the Church in the First Three Centuries* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1888), 145.

³⁷ Uriah Smith, *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Books of Daniel and Revelation* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1897), v.

³⁸ Smith, *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Books of Daniel and Revelation*, v.

³⁹ Miller, “Mr Miller’s Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter,” 25-26.

⁴⁰ Smith, *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Books of Daniel and Revelation*, v.

⁴¹ Miller, “Mr Miller’s Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter,” 25-26.

⁴² Smith, *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Books of Daniel and Revelation*, vi.

hermeneutical concepts, rather his statements show a clear dependence on Miller's literal, perspicuous approach to the Bible as outlined in his "Rules of Interpretation".

Other influential early Adventist authors also emphasised Miller's common-sense approach. In the preface to his 1884 work *The Atonement: An Examination of a Remedial System in the Light of Nature and Revelation*, J. H. Waggoner stated: "In developing the argument we have tried to follow the Scriptures in their *plain, literal reading, without regard to the positions of others who have written before us*. It would be a pleasure to us to agree with all who are considered evangelical, and we have differed with them only because our regard for the truths of the Bible compelled us to do so."⁴³ In this statement, Waggoner again emphasised the "plain literal reading" that Miller promoted. Statements from the same work that emphasise Waggoner's way of approaching the Bible include his statement that "The Bible is eminently a practical book; its great object is to make the man of God perfect; to thoroughly furnish him unto all good works"⁴⁴, and "the distinction herein advocated and sustained by plain Scripture facts and declarations, removes the errors of 'Universalists' and 'Partialists,' and, if recognized, would bring all together on the harmonious testimony of the word of God."⁴⁵ Waggoner is—like Miller—at pains to point out that his interpretations are not based upon "the positions of others". Like Miller, he sees his hermeneutic as arising from the text itself, as the only natural, obvious, rational method in existence.

Seventh-day Adventists followed Miller's practice in emphasizing the Bible as the sole source of doctrine. Uriah Smith, a prominent Seventh-day Adventist church leader pointed out that "*the Bible, and the Bible alone, is the Protestant rule of faith*."⁴⁶ And again: "Is it necessary that we state our position again? We stand on the great Protestant platform that 'the Bible and the Bible alone' is our rule of faith and practice."⁴⁷ This doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* was a key belief amongst early Seventh-day Adventists. James White, in an 1861 speech declared, "The Bible is our creed. We reject everything in the form of a human creed. We take the Bible and the gifts of the Spirit, embracing the faith that thus the Lord will teach us from time to time."⁴⁸ White also emphasised the central role of the Bible in early Seventh-day Adventist self-identity. In his book *Bible Adventism*, White states: "Why, then, do we believe as we do? It is out of respect for the Bible we love, and the God of the Bible we revere, that we believe what we do, and are what we are. The governing

⁴³ Joseph Harvey Waggoner, *The Atonement: An Examination of a Remedial System in the Light of Nature and Revelation*. (Oakland: Pacific Press, 1884), IV. Emphasis added.

⁴⁴ Waggoner, *The Atonement*, 325.

⁴⁵ Waggoner, *The Atonement*, 334.

⁴⁶ Uriah Smith, *The Marvel of Nations* (Review and Herald, 1887), 74. Emphasis added.

⁴⁷ Uriah Smith, *Replies to Elder Canright's Attacks on Seventh-day Adventists* (Review and Herald, 1895), 75.

⁴⁸ "Doings of the Battle Creek Conference, Oct. 5&6, 1861," *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 8, 1861, 148.

principle of our faith and practice, as Seventh-day Adventists, is our respect for the great God, his living word, and the recompense of the reward.”⁴⁹ He continues:

The reason why we are Adventists is because we take the Bible as meaning just what it says. And why should we not believe that when God speaks to his people his words mean what they say? If he does not mean what he says in his word, then pray tell us what he does mean. If his words do not have their *plain, simple, and obvious meaning*, then the Bible ceases to be a revelation, and God should give us another book to tell us what this one means. But the Bible is its own interpreter.⁵⁰

The doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* is a foundational one in White’s writings:

- “The Bible is a perfect and complete revelation. It is our only rule of faith and practice.”⁵¹
- “‘*The Bible, and the Bible alone, is the book for Protestants.*’ Go then to your Bibles, and see if the God-dishonoring doctrines to which I have directed your attention are found there or not. Excuse me if I tell you, that, however full of these doctrines human books and human sermons may be, God's Bible does not contain them.”⁵²
- “We are happy to meet our opponents on Bible ground. By the light of the ‘sure word of prophecy’ the Sabbath question should be candidly and carefully examined, and from the testimony of that word alone, the decision upon this question should be made. Protestants, especially Advent believers who profess to take the Bible alone in support of their religious sentiments, should be ready to take this position.”⁵³

A closely related issue for early Seventh-day Adventists was their hostility towards the idea of a creed. In 1861 J. N. Loughborough stated:

The first step of apostasy is to get up a creed, telling us what we shall believe. The second is to make that creed a test of fellowship. The third is to try members by that creed. The fourth to denounce as heretics those who do not believe that creed. And fifth, to commence persecution against such.⁵⁴

Similarly James White in the same year:

Making a creed is setting the stakes, and barring up the way to all future advancement....The Bible is our creed. We reject everything in the form of a human

⁴⁹ James White, *Bible Adventism* (Battle Creek: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1877), v.

⁵⁰ White, *Bible Adventism*, v. Emphasis added.

⁵¹ James White, *A Word to the Little Flock* (1847), 13.

⁵² James White, *An Appeal on Immortality* (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, ND).

⁵³ [James White], “The Seventh-day Sabbath Not Abolished - Part I,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 21, 1851, 41.

⁵⁴ “Doings of the Battle Creek Conference, Oct. 5 & 6, 1861,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 8, 1861, 148.

creed. We take the Bible and the gifts of the Spirit; embracing the faith that thus the Lord will teach us from time to time. And in this we take a position against the formation of a creed.⁵⁵

Such attitudes were to be expected, since many of the key leaders of Adventism—including James White—had formerly been members of Restorationist groups such as the Christian Connexion which strongly opposed creeds. A second reason is outlined by Ronald Graybill, who points out that the 1845 Albany Conference had developed a statement of belief that excluded those Millerites who believed in the seventh-day Sabbath and the visions of Ellen G. White; thus excluding the group that became known as Seventh-day Adventists.⁵⁶ In Graybill's eyes, it is the Albany Conference's exclusion that led to Sabbath keeping Adventists acquiring "their original antipathy to creeds, an antipathy which echoes down to the present day [in the Seventh-day Adventist Church]".⁵⁷

For these early Seventh-day Adventists, "creeds" represented rigidity, dogmatism, oppression, and exclusivism. Thus, each of the belief statements that Adventists put forth in the 19th century contained explanatory preambles:

1872: "In presenting to the public this synopsis of our faith, we wish to have it distinctly understood that we have no articles of faith, creed, or discipline, aside from the Bible. We do not put forth this as having any authority with our people; nor is it designed to secure uniformity among them, as a system of faith, but is a brief statement of what is, and has been, with great unanimity, held by them."⁵⁸

1874: "We have no creed but the Bible, but they hold to certain well-defined points of faith, for which they feel prepared to give a reason."⁵⁹

1894: "The Seventh-day Adventist people have no creed or discipline except the Bible but the following are some of the points of their faith upon which there is quite general agreement."⁶⁰

⁵⁵ "Doings of the Battle Creek Conference, Oct. 5 & 6, 1861," 148.

⁵⁶ Ron Graybill, "Adventism's Historic Witness Against Creeds," *Spectrum* 38, no. 3 (2010): 32.

⁵⁷ Graybill, "Adventism's Historic Witness Against Creeds," 32.

⁵⁸ "A Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by Seventh-day Adventists", apparently authored by Uriah Smith though first published as an unsigned pamphlet in 1872. It is quoted in Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission*, 301-304. For more information see Fritz Guy, "Uncovering the Origins of the Twenty-seven Fundamental Beliefs," *Spectrum* 32, no. 3 (2004): 19-34. and Denis Fortin, "Nineteenth-Century Evangelicalism and Early Adventist Statements of Beliefs," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 36, no. 1 (1998): 51-67.

⁵⁹ Various reprints of the above statement were prefaced with these words during the period 1874-1888. Guy, "Uncovering the Origins of the Twenty-seven Fundamental Beliefs," 19-34.

⁶⁰ "Membership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church of Battle Creek, Michigan, As It Stood April 16, 1894", 12. Quoted in Guy, "Uncovering the Origins of the Twenty-seven Fundamental Beliefs," 28.

In fact it was not until 1931, that the first statement which does not have an anti-creedal preamble appeared. The document which was published in the [*Seventh-day Adventist*] *Yearbook* began, “Seventh-day Adventists hold certain fundamental beliefs, the principal features of which...may be summarized as follows.”⁶¹ The document was reprinted each year in the *Yearbook* and from 1932 to 1980, onwards, in the *Church Manual*.⁶²

Stephen N. Haskell—Bible Readings

The development by Stephen N. Haskell of a specific method of Bible study called “Bible readings” had a major impact on the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s approach to scripture. Bible readings were “Topical presentations, usually in question (sometimes in outline) form with the answers read from the Bible—a method of Bible evangelism practised extensively in the SDA Church. From the 1880s, the method was used systematically by ministers and Bible instructors, and also by lay members, in house-to-house visitation.”⁶³

The Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia gives an account of the establishment of this method of evangelism. In May 1883, at a camp meeting held near Lemoore, California, Stephen N. Haskell “gathered a group around him in the center of the tent and began to announce texts of Scripture to be read by various persons in response to questions related to the subject under discussion. This method of communicating Bible teachings and Christian faith was received with enthusiasm and was endorsed by church members and leaders.”⁶⁴

Soon after, “Elds. Briggs and Israel” reported on the success of Haskell’s method:

We have been having a drill on different subjects, and each person has a short form of Bible-reading questions in his Bible, so when the Sabbath question or any other subject comes up, each one makes it a point to have the person or family visited get a Bible, and have the subject cleared up right from the Scriptures. In this way a controversy almost never arises; but the people are in almost every case convinced that the Bible teaches that doctrine....I do not see why very many of our brethren and sisters may not be educated in this way to make efficient workers. By practice they could soon get so they would not have to look at the questions. They could get

⁶¹ Guy, “Uncovering the Origins of the Twenty-seven Fundamental Beliefs,” 28.

⁶² Guy, “Uncovering the Origins of the Twenty-seven Fundamental Beliefs,” 28. At the 1980 General Conference Session of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a completely rewritten statement of beliefs was voted in. It contained a new anti-creedal preamble: “Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. These beliefs, as forth here, constitute the church’s understanding and expression of the teaching of Scripture. Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the of God’s Holy Word.” *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 9. (Note that a 28th Fundamental Belief was voted by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist Session in 2005. This additional belief statement was inserted as number 11, thus bringing the total to 28 and renumbering all statements from 11 onwards as compared with the statement voted in 1980.)

⁶³ “Bible Studies,” in *The Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia A-L*, ed. Don F. Neufeld, Commentary Reference Series (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1996), 204.

⁶⁴ “Bible Studies,” 204.

companies of neighbours together, and have prayer with them, and Bible-readings, and in this way get right into the heart of the Bible-reading people, and get the truth before them in an effectual manner. They are not converted to the man, but to the Bible, and to God. By thus doing they will not only interest the individuals, but learn to study the Bible more and more themselves.⁶⁵

Haskell recommended that every family study the Bible in this way, and thus teach their children and others. In October 1883, he reported the spread and formalization of his method as follows:

The subject of Bible-readings, in connection with colporter [*sic*] work, was introduced and discussed at the Michigan camp meeting. Resolutions were passed at the session of the Conference and Tract society, and the brethren became much interested in the subject. At a meeting of the ministers and leading brethren...the following resolution was presented:—

Whereas, The holding of Bible readings in connection with other colporter [*sic*] work has been recommended to precede and accompany the preaching of the truth; and—

Whereas, Those who think of engaging in this work feel the necessity of special preparation; therefore—

Resolved, That we hold a ten-days institute immediately preceding the General Conference, for improvement in this direction; and that we request Eld. Haskell to conduct this institute....

It was also voted to invite all the delegates to the General Conference to attend the institute, and all others whom the resolution was passed by a rising vote.⁶⁶

In the same article, Haskell pointed out the advantages of his new method: “it avoids all discussion, and simply calls the attention of the people to the word of God.”⁶⁷

Haskell’s methods were discussed at the next General Conference session, and the following resolution passed:

RESOLVED, That we express ourselves as highly gratified with the exercises in Bible readings, conducted by Brother Haskell and others at this Conference, and we recommend that such exercises be encouraged in all parts of the country; and the better to secure this end, we recommend the formation of a Bible reading Bureau to take the oversight of the work, to be organized after the following plan: 1. There shall be a central committee of five who shall have charge of the work of publishing and distributing printed lessons to the members of the organization. 2. The conditions of membership shall be the payment of one dollar a year, and the furnishing of one or more original readings a month, to the committee. Those complying with these conditions shall receive from the committee a printed sheet monthly, containing one or more lessons for each week. 3. Those who do not choose to become members on the foregoing conditions, may secure the printed lessons by

⁶⁵ Stephen N. Haskell, “Our Work,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 31, 1883.

⁶⁶ Stephen N. Haskell, “Bible-Readings,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 16, 1883, 649. Original emphasis.

⁶⁷ Haskell, “Bible-Readings,” 649.

becoming subscribers at \$5 a year.⁶⁸

The printed lessons were distributed as *The Bible-Reading Gazette*, issued monthly through 1884. Afterwards the issues were bound and sold as a book. After many editions, it was replaced by *Bible Readings for the Home Circle* which under the name *Bible Readings* is still published and distributed in 2010 by the Review and Herald, a Seventh-day Adventist publishing house.⁶⁹

In 1919, the Bible Training School in South Lancaster, Massachusetts published the *Bible Handbook* by Haskell. In his “Introduction”, Haskell points out “The Bible Handbook is not an exhaustive Study; but contains suggestive texts on important lines of thought. The ‘cream’ of the Bible studies printed in the Bible Training School during the last seventeen years is presented in this book, with other Bible studies not previously printed....The Bible Handbook contains over 220 Bible studies and groups of texts. We send it forth with the prayer that it may aid many in becoming better acquainted with the Book of all books,—the Bible, thus encouraging them to become soul-winners for their Lord and Master.”⁷⁰

A typical extract from Haskell’s *Bible Handbook* is reproduced as follows:

How to Read and Study the Bible

Neh. 8:8. Whether reading alone or before others, pronounce every word distinctly, giving the sense. T., v. 6, pp. 380-383.

Luke 10:26. Jesus laid as much stress on the reading of the Scriptures as on what they contained. G. C. 598.

2 Tim. 2:7. “Consider what I say; and the Lord give thee all things.” E. 189.

Dan. 10:11. “Understand the words that I speak unto thee.” G. C. 599, 600.

Matt. 28:20. The disciples’ commission was to teach what *Christ had commanded*.

2 Tim. 4:2. Paul charged Timothy to preach the Word. A. A. 506.

Rev. 22:18.; Prov. 30:5, 6. No one is to add to, or take from, the words of God. God has expressed the thoughts He intended to convey, and we are to study the words and get from them the thoughts He designed to convey when He gave the words. E. 227.

Jer. 23:28. Man’s words are but chaff when compared with the words of God.” A. A. 474, 475.⁷¹

Ellen G. White was present at the Lemoore camp meeting—though apparently she was not present when Haskell first introduced his Bible reading method. When told of the meeting the next

⁶⁸ “Record of the Twenty-second Annual Session General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 1883,” Archives of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Silver Spring. Accessible at: <http://www.adventistarchives.org/docs/GCB/GCB1863-88.pdf> (accessed September 6, 2011).

⁶⁹ The book is promoted with the tag-line: “Four thousand questions about Bible topics are all answered with Scripture texts;” and the cover bears a sticker boasting “More than 3 million sold”. See <http://www.reviewandherald.com/index.php/products/profile/9780828017282.rhpa> (accessed September 23, 2010).

⁷⁰ Stephen N. Haskell, *Bible Handbook* (South Lancaster, MA: Bible Training School, 1919), 3.

⁷¹ Haskell, *Bible Handbook*, 7-8. Original emphasis. The lettered abbreviations following each text refer to the writings of Ellen G. White. T = *Testimonies for the Church*; G. C. = *The Great Controversy*; E = *Education*; A. A. = *The Acts of the Apostles*.

day she “at once called for Elder Haskell and others, and told them that what had been done was in harmony with the light received from the Lord.”⁷² White further validated Haskell’s method when she wrote in 1885, that,

The plan of holding Bible-readings was a heaven-born idea. There are many, both men and women, who can engage in this branch of missionary labor. Workers may thus be developed who will become mighty men of God. By this means the word of God has been given to thousands; and the workers are brought into personal contact with people of all nations and tongues. The Bible is brought into families, and its sacred truths come home to the conscience. Men are entreated to read, examine, and judge for themselves, and they must abide the responsibility of receiving or rejecting the divine enlightenment.⁷³

White made a large number of similar statements promoting the method. These include:

- “WE BELIEVE THAT IN MANY CASES THE SISTERS COULD FIND OPENINGS FOR BIBLE-READINGS WHERE MEN COULD NOT. WHY SHOULD THEY NOT IMPROVE THEM?”⁷⁴
- “The great work of opening God’s word to the people by the means of Bible readings from house to house, gives character and importance to the Sabbath-school. It proves that the teachers should be really converted men and women, who understand the Scriptures, and can adapt their teaching to the various grades in the school. The idea of Bible readings is Heaven-born.”⁷⁵
- “The great work of opening the Bible from house to house in Bible-readings gives an added importance to the Sabbath-school work, and makes it evident that the teachers in the schools should be consecrated men and women, who understand the Scriptures, and can rightly divide the word of truth. The idea of holding Bible-readings is a Heaven-born idea, and opens the way to put hundreds of young men and women into the field to do an important work, which otherwise could not have been done.”⁷⁶
- “A house has been hired for the ministers and their wives and those whom they are educating to give Bible readings from house to house. The people are invited to ask their friends and neighbors to these meetings, and opportunity is given for them to ask questions on the lessons given....I have great confidence in this method of labor.”⁷⁷
- “I wish to create a fund for the payment of these devoted women who are the most useful workers in giving Bible readings. I am also led to say that we must educate more workers to give Bible readings.”⁷⁸

⁷² The General Conference Home Missionary Department, *How to Give Bible Readings: A Manual of Instruction for Lay Bible Workers*, Revised ed. (Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1939), 12.

⁷³ Ellen G. White, “A Missionary Appeal,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 15, 1885, 770.

⁷⁴ Ellen G. White, “Good Counsel,” *Signs of the Times*, November 15, 1883, 516. Original capitalization.

⁷⁵ Ellen G. White, “The Sabbath-School as a Missionary Field,” *Sabbath School Worker*, October 1886, 49.

⁷⁶ Ellen G. White, “The Possibilities in Sabbath-School Work.,” *Sabbath School Worker*, January 1889, 1.

⁷⁷ Ellen G. White to Captain Norman, May 4, 1899.

⁷⁸ Ellen G. White to Captain Norman, May 4, 1899.

- “Those who are fitted to enlighten minds will often have opportunity to read from the Bible or from books which teach the truth, and thus bring the evidence to enlighten souls. When canvassers discover those who are interestedly searching for truth, they should hold Bible readings with them. These Bible readings are just what the people need.”⁷⁹
- “Brother and Sister Haskell have rented a house in one of the best parts of the city [Nashville], and have gathered round them a family of helpers, who day by day go out of giving Bible readings, selling our papers, and doing medical missionary work. During the hour of worship, the workers relate their experiences. Bible studies are regularly conducted in the home, and the young men and young women connected with the mission receive a practical, thorough training in holding Bible readings and in selling our publications. The Lord has blessed their labors, a number have embraced the truth, and many others are deeply interested.”⁸⁰
- “Among the members of our churches, there should be more house-to-house labor in giving Bible readings and distributing literature.”⁸¹
- “Many will be called into the field to labor from house to house, giving Bible-readings, and praying with those who are interested.”⁸²
- “Obey the gospel commission; go forth into the highways and hedges. Visit as many places as possible. Conduct simple, spirited Bible readings, which will have a correct influence upon minds.”⁸³
- “By lending or selling books, by distributing papers, and by holding Bible readings, our lay members could do much in their own neighborhoods. Filled with love for souls, they could proclaim the message with such power that many would be converted.”⁸⁴

Given these positive endorsements and noting White’s central leadership role in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, it is not surprising to find that this “Bible Reading”—essentially a form of proof-texting—method of approaching the Bible was widely practiced throughout the denomination’s history; and is in fact still widely promoted and utilized today.

Ellen White

As previously noted, Ellen White is a seminal figure in Seventh-day Adventist history, and despite her death in 1915, her voluminous writings remain very influential within the church. White’s hermeneutics are particularly important to examine, not because of their originality—essentially she follows Miller’s ideas—but because of her prophetic role within the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

⁷⁹ Ellen G. White, “Canvassers as Gospel Evangelists,” *Union Conference Record*, July 1, 1902, 2.

⁸⁰ Ellen G. White, “The Work in Nashville; Its Encouragements and Needs,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 7, 1905, 7.

⁸¹ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church Vol. 9* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 127.

⁸² Ellen G. White, “A Plea for Medical Missionary Evangelists,” *General Conference Bulletin*, June 3, 1909, 292.

⁸³ Ellen G. White, “Manuscript 53, 1910,” 4.

⁸⁴ Ellen G. White, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, August 7, 1913, 16.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church's eighteenth Fundamental Belief reads:

One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. As the Lord's messenger, *her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth* which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested. (Joel 2:28, 29; Acts 2:14-21; Heb. 1:1-3; Rev. 12:17; 19:10.)⁸⁵

In her role as a prophet, by repeating Miller's views, White validated them so that they became authoritative for members of the Seventh-day Adventist church.

A clear example of this validation process may be found when the conference held in Volney, New York, in August, 1848 is examined. The conference began on Friday, August 18. Ellen White later recorded her perspective:

There were about thirty-five present, all that could be collected in that part of the State. There were hardly two agreed. Each was strenuous for his views, declaring that they were according to the Bible. All were anxious for an opportunity to advance their sentiments, or to preach to us. They were told that we had not come so great a distance to hear them, but had come to teach them the truth....*My accompanying angel presented before me some of the errors of those present, and also the truth in contrast with their errors. That these discordant views, which they claimed to be according to the Bible, were only according to their opinion of the Bible, and that their errors must be yielded, and they unite upon the third angel's message.*⁸⁶

Ellen White then summed up the outcome in three sentences: "Our meeting ended victoriously. Truth gained the victory. Those who held the strange diversity of errors there confessed them and united upon the third angel's message of present truth, and God greatly blessed them and added many to their numbers."⁸⁷

As Roy E. Graham points out, when White wrote—particularly during the early years of her ministry—her "method and intent were largely devotional and instructional....Her writings, consequently, are not in the form of an organised and dogmatic scheme. They do not constitute a theology in the accepted sense."⁸⁸ Consequently, unlike Miller, White makes no systematic explanation of her principles of biblical interpretation. In fact, her most complete presentation on the topic is a simple reiteration of Miller's views—some forty-four years after they were first published:

Those who are engaged in proclaiming the third angel's message are searching the

⁸⁵ *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 15. Emphasis added.

⁸⁶ White, *Life Sketches*, 247-248. Emphasis added.

⁸⁷ White, *Life Sketches*, 248-249.

⁸⁸ Roy E. Graham, *Ellen G. White: Co-Founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Frankfurt am Maine: Peter Lang Publishing, 1985), 144.

Scriptures under the same plan that Father Miller adopted. In the little book entitled “Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology,” Father Miller gives the following simple but intelligent and important rules for Bible Study and Interpretation:

- “1. Every word must have its proper bearing on the subject presented in the Bible;
2. All scripture is necessary, and may be understood by diligent application and study;
3. Nothing revealed in scripture can or will be hid from those who ask in faith, not wavering;
4. To understand doctrine, bring all the scriptures together on the subject you wish to know, then let every word have its proper influence; and if you can form your theory without contradiction, you cannot be in error;
5. Scripture must be its own expositor, since it is a rule of itself. If I depend on a teacher to expound it to me, and he should guess at its meaning, or desire to have it so on account of his sectarian creed, or to be thought wise, then his guessing, desire, creed, or wisdom is my rule, and not the Bible.”

The above is a portion of these rules; and *in our study of the Bible we shall all do well to heed the principles set forth.*⁸⁹

The historicist “Chain of Truth” concept was an important hermeneutical foundation for White, best expressed in her statement, “The word of God, as a whole, is a perfect chain, one portion of scripture explaining another.”⁹⁰

Phrases expressing similar thoughts are also frequent:

- *Spiritual Gifts*. Vol. 1, 1858. “The commencement of the chain of truth was given to...[Miller], and he was led on to search for link after link, until he looked with wonder and admiration upon the Word of God. He saw there a perfect chain of truth.”⁹¹

⁸⁹ Ellen G. White, “Notes of Travel,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, November 25, 1884, 4. Emphasis added.

⁹⁰ White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1, 117. The phrase occurs in slightly variant forms at least three other times in her writings: *Early Writings of Ellen G. White* (1882), 221, “the Word of God, as a whole, is a perfect chain, one portion linking into and explaining another”; *Bible Echo* (August 10, 1896), “The word of God, as a whole, is a perfect chain, one portion linking into and explaining another”; *Bible Echo* (December 20, 1897), “The word of God, as a whole, is a perfect chain, one portion linking into and explaining another.”

⁹¹ White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1, 128-129.

- *Letter 8*, 1863. I was shown some things in regard to you. I saw that you have something to do. You believe the truth, but you get fanciful views of Scripture and talk out these ideas which your mind has run upon, which have injured your efforts in the Sabbath school. You must restrain your mind upon this point. *The plain chain of truth has been dug out and presented in publications and from the desk.* In reading and studying the Scriptures you are in danger of getting a fanciful understanding of them--original views of your own which do not harmonize with the faith of the body. In reading and explaining the Scriptures you should be very careful not to depart from the expressed and established views which have been given by those in the faith who have sought for truth as for hid treasure, who have endured any labor and spared no expense, who have in the fear of God presented a harmonious chain of truth.⁹²
- *Testimony 20*, 1871. "Link after link of the precious chain of truth has been searched out, until it stands forth in beautiful harmony, uniting in a perfect chain."⁹³
- *Testimony 20*, 1871. There are in the Scriptures some things which are hard to be understood and which, according to the language of Peter, the unlearned and unstable wrest unto their own destruction. We may not, in this life, be able to explain the meaning of every passage of Scripture; but there are no vital points of practical truth that will be clouded in mystery. When the time shall come, in the providence of God, for the world to be tested upon the truth for that time, minds will be exercised by His Spirit to search the Scriptures, even with fasting and with prayer, *until link after link is searched out and united in a perfect chain.* Every fact which immediately concerns the salvation of souls will be made so clear that none need err or walk in darkness.⁹⁴
- *Testimony 20*, 1871. "As we have followed down *the chain of prophecy*, revealed truth for our time has been clearly seen and explained."⁹⁵
- *Testimony 29*, 1880. "Theoretical discourses are essential, that people may see *the chain of truth, link after link, uniting in a perfect whole*; but no discourse should ever be preached without presenting Christ and Him crucified as the foundation of the gospel."⁹⁶
- *Historical Sketches of the Foreign Missions of the Seventh-day Adventists*, 1886. There are many who are in darkness; and when the truth, which involves a cross, is presented, they draw back, as did Nathanael. If by kindness and love these can be prevailed upon to trace down the chain of prophecy, they will, as they find *link after link uniting in a perfect whole*, see new beauty and harmony in the word of God; and the more they study it, the more precious it will become to them."⁹⁷
- *The Great Controversy*, 1888. "The subject of the sanctuary was the key which unlocked the mystery of the disappointment of 1844. It opened to view *a complete system of truth, connected and harmonious*, showing that God's hand had directed the great Advent

⁹² Ellen G. White to Bro Sawyer, Undated, 1863. Emphasis added.

⁹³ In Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* vol. 2, (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 651.

⁹⁴ In White, *Testimonies for the Church* vol. 2, 692. Emphasis added.

⁹⁵ In White, *Testimonies for the Church* vol. 2, 692. Emphasis added.

⁹⁶ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* vol. 4 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 394. Emphasis added.

⁹⁷ Ellen G. White, *Historical Sketches of the Foreign Missions of the Seventh-day Adventists: with reports of the European Missionary Councils of 1883, 1884, and 1885, and a narrative by Mrs. E. G. White of her visit and labors in these missions.* (Basel: Imprimerie Polyglotte, 1886), 150. Emphasis added.

movement, and revealing present duty as it brought to light the position and work of his people.”⁹⁸

- *Review and Herald*, 1891. “How little has been done by the church as a body professing to believe the Bible, to gather up the scattered jewels of God’s word into *one perfect chain of truth!*”⁹⁹
- *Manuscript 31*, 1896. “The truths that have been unfolding in their order, as we have advanced along the *line of prophecy* revealed in the word of God, are truth, sacred, eternal truth today. Those who passed over the ground step by step in the past history of our experience, seeing *the chain of truth in the prophecies*, were prepared to accept and obey every ray of light.”¹⁰⁰
- *Manuscript 135*, 1903. “Often we remained together until late at night...studying the Word...*A line of truth* extending from that time to the time when we shall enter the city of God, was plainly marked out before me....”¹⁰¹
- *Life Sketches*, 1915. I saw them holding papers and tracts in one hand, and the Bible in the other, while their cheeks were wet with tears; and bowing before God in earnest, humble prayer, to be guided into all truth,—the very thing He was doing for them before they called upon Him. And when the truth was received in their hearts, and *they saw the harmonious chain of truth*, the Bible was to them a new book; they hugged it to their hearts with grateful joy, while their countenances were all aglow with happiness and holy joy.¹⁰²

White’s phrasing in these passages brings to mind Miller’s statement previously mentioned: “[the] whole Scriptures are in a chain.”¹⁰³ In fact, in reference to Miller, White explicitly makes use of such phrasing: “Link after link of the chain of truth rewarded...[Miller’s] efforts; step by step he traced down the great lines of prophecy, until he reached the solemn conclusion that in a few years the Son of God would come the second time, in power and glory, and that the events connected with that coming and the close of human probation would take place about the year 1843.”¹⁰⁴ While it is unlikely that White read George Stanley Faber’s *The Sacred Calendar of Prophecy*, her use of these phrases clearly echoed that of Faber and other early historicists, as well as Miller himself.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁸ White, *The Great Controversy*, 423. Emphasis added.

⁹⁹ Ellen G. White, “The Science of Salvation the First of Sciences,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 1, 1891, 737. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁰ Ellen G. White, “Manuscript 31, 1896,” 4-5. Emphasis added.

¹⁰¹ Ellen G. White, “Manuscript 135, 1903,” 2. Emphasis added.

¹⁰² White, *Life sketches of Ellen G. White*, 215. Emphasis added.

¹⁰³ William Miller to Truman Hendryx, August 9, 1831.

¹⁰⁴ Ellen G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4 (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press, 1884), 206.

¹⁰⁵ George Stanley Faber, *The Sacred Calendar of Prophecy: A Dissertation on the Prophecies*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (London: C & J Rivington, 1828), x. refers to a “chronological *chain of prophecy*”. Many similar statements can be found in other historicist authors who followed Faber’s themes.

At times White appears to recognise that not all Scripture is comprehensible—at least until God reveals the correct interpretation. Furthermore, an individual’s unbelief may prevent them from seeing the “chain of truth”:

A few texts which were not perfectly explainable to the satisfaction of their own minds, have been sufficient to shake the whole structure of truth, and to obscure the plainest facts of the word of God. These men are erring mortals. They have not perfect wisdom and knowledge in all the Scriptures. Some passages are placed beyond the reach of human minds, until such a time as God chooses, in his own wisdom, to open them. Satan has been leading some on a trail which leads to certain infidelity. They have suffered their unbelief to becloud the harmonious, glorious chain of truth, and have acted as though it was their business to solve every difficult passage of Scripture, or our faith was faulty.¹⁰⁶

Such sentiments parallel Miller’s belief that the only way to correctly interpret the Bible is as a believer. As noted previously, Miller’s Rule #14 – his self-proclaimed “most important rule of all” states that the interpreter “must have faith”.¹⁰⁷

A closely related concept to White’s view of the Bible as a “chain of truth” was her view, like Miller himself, that the Bible was self-explanatory and self-contained:

The Bible is its own expositor. One passage will prove to be a key that will unlock other passages, and in this way light will be shed upon the hidden meaning of the word. By comparing different texts treating on the same subject, viewing their bearing on every side, the true meaning of the Scriptures will be made evident.¹⁰⁸

White clearly believed that in “order to understand the meaning of such passages, scripture must be compared with scripture”¹⁰⁹ and she makes numerous similar statements: “Make the Bible its own expositor, bringing together all that is said concerning a subject at different times and under varied circumstances.”¹¹⁰ “The Bible is its own expositor. Scripture is to be compared with scripture.”¹¹¹ “The Bible is its own expositor. Its bright beams are to shine into all parts of the world, that sin may be revealed. The Bible is a chart, pointing out the waymarks of truth. Those who are acquainted with this chart will be enabled to tread with certainty the path of duty, wherever they may be called to go.”¹¹² White specifically challenges those who interpret the Bible “to suit their fancy, with little regard to the testimony of Scripture as its own interpreter”....The whole Bible should be given to the

¹⁰⁶ Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 4B, (Battle Creek: James White, 1864), 123.

¹⁰⁷ Miller, “Mr Miller’s Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter,” 25-26.

¹⁰⁸ White, “The Science of Salvation the First of Sciences,” 737.

¹⁰⁹ Ellen G. White, “‘Able to Make Us wise Unto Salvation’,” *Signs of the Times*, May 1, 1907, 4.

¹¹⁰ Ellen G. White, “Search the Scriptures,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 9, 1883, 625.

¹¹¹ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1903), 190.

¹¹² Ellen G. White to Brethren and Sisters of the Iowa Conference, August 27, 1902.

people just as it reads.”¹¹³ White’s statements here clearly show again her dependence upon Miller’s Rules—in this case his Rule #5, “Scripture must be its own expositor”.¹¹⁴

Ellen White also promoted the importance of the obvious, literal meaning of the biblical text; clearly rejecting any idea of a mystical or secret spiritual meaning.¹¹⁵ She also attacked those with an “active imagination,” who “seize upon the figures and symbols of Holy Writ, interpret them to suit their fancy, with little regard to the testimony of Scripture as its own interpreter, and then they present their vagaries as the teachings of the Bible.”¹¹⁶ Rather than a “spiritualization” of the Bible, White advocated a literal interpretation:

The truths most plainly revealed in the Bible have been involved in doubt and darkness by learned men, who, with a pretense of great wisdom, teach that the Scriptures have a mystical, a secret, spiritual meaning not apparent in the language employed. These men are false teachers....The language of the Bible should be explained according to its obvious meaning, unless a symbol or figure is employed.¹¹⁷

This theme is common in White’s writings. In 1894, White wrote that “There is a great need that all who claim to be Bible Christians should take the Scriptures as they read”.¹¹⁸ Similarly, in a 1904 manuscript titled “Redeem the Time” White wrote, “We must be careful lest we misinterpret the Scriptures. *The plain teachings of the word of God* are not to be so spiritualized, that the reality is lost sight of. Do not overstrain the meaning of sentences in the Bible in an effort to bring forth something odd in order to please the fancy. Take the Scriptures as they read.”¹¹⁹

In an 1894 manuscript White wrote on the dangers of extreme views and emphasized the simplicity of the Bible: “Let *the plain, simple statements* of the Word of God be food for the mind; this speculating upon ideas that are not clearly presented there is dangerous business.”¹²⁰ Four years later she wrote, “My brethren, let the Word of God stand just as it is. Let not human wisdom presume to lessen the force of one statement of the Scriptures.”¹²¹ While in 1906 she stated, “We

¹¹³ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Oakland: Pacific Press, 1911), 521.

¹¹⁴ Miller, “Mr Miller’s Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter,” 25-26.

¹¹⁵ White, *The Great Controversy*, 598-599.

¹¹⁶ White, *The Great Controversy*, 520.

¹¹⁷ White, *The Great Controversy*, 598-599. White also applied the same principle to the interpretation of her own visions. In 1860 she wrote concerning a certain “Sister C. S. Minor” and her followers: “I knew their only object was to mangle the visions, spiritualize away their literal meaning, throw a Satanic influence upon me, and call it the power of God.” White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2, 73.

¹¹⁸ Ellen G. White, “Romanism the Religion of Human Nature,” *Signs of the Times*, February 19, 1894, 243.

¹¹⁹ Ellen G. White, “Manuscript 30: Redeem the Time, 1904,” 6.

¹²⁰ Ellen G. White, “Manuscript 82, 1894.”

¹²¹ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. V (1889), 711.

have a guide-book, the Word of God, and we are inexcusable if we miss the way to heaven, for *plain directions have been given us.*"¹²²

At times however, White does seem to recognise that the situation is not that straight-forward:

It is true that some portions of Scripture are, indeed, too plain to be misunderstood; but there are many portions whose meaning can not be seen at a glance; for the truth does not lie upon the surface. In order to understand the meaning of such passages, scripture must be compared with scripture; there must be careful research and prayerful reflection. Such study will be richly repaid. As the miner discovers precious veins of metal concealed beneath the surface of the earth, so will he who perseveringly searches the word of God as for hid treasure find truths of the greatest value which are concealed from the careless seeker.¹²³

Ultimately however, for White the Bible is accessible to any "genuine" seeker who is prepared to put in the effort required for understanding.

Like Miller, White emphasized that the Bible was able to be read and understood by all. In 1906, in the seventh article of a twenty-part series published in the *Signs of the Times*, entitled "Our Great Treasure-House," White wrote:

In the days of Christ the rabbis put a forced mystical construction upon many portions of the Scriptures. Because the plain teaching of God's Word condemned their practices, they tried to destroy its force. The same thing is done to-day. The Word of God is made to appear mysterious and obscure in order to excuse transgression of His law. Christ rebuked these practices in His day He taught that the Word of God was to be understood by all."¹²⁴

Later in the same series, White devoted an entire article to this question, headlining it, "The Bible to be Understood by All":

The Bible, with its precious gems of truth, was not written for the scholar alone. On the contrary, it was designed for the common people....It is the privilege of every one to understand the Word of God for himself. The great truths necessary for salvation are made as clear as noonday; and none need mistake and lose their way except those who follow their own judgment instead of the plainly revealed will of God....Let every one who has been blessed with reasoning faculties take up the Bible and search its pages, that he may understand the will of God concerning him. In this Book divine instruction is given to all. The Bible is addressed to every one—to every class of society, to those of every clime and age. Every one should read the Bible for himself....Christ has made this Word so plain that in reading it, no one need misunderstand.¹²⁵

¹²² Ellen G. White, "Our Great Treasure-House I: God's Word Our Guide," *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 21, 1906, 9.

¹²³ White, "'Able to Make Us wise Unto Salvation'," 4.

¹²⁴ Ellen G. White, "Our Great Treasure-House VII: A Failure to Study and Teach God's Word," *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 9, 1906, 6.

¹²⁵ Ellen G. White, "Our Great Treasure-House XII The Bible to be Understood by All," *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 11, 1906, 7.

Ellen White frequently emphasized the need for a correct attitude when studying the Bible, stating “a true knowledge of the Bible can be gained only through the aid of that Spirit by whom the word was given.”¹²⁶ She also addressed the issue by saying, “Whenever men are not seeking, in word and deed, to be in harmony with God, then, however learned they may be, they are liable to err in their understanding of Scripture.”¹²⁷

No one is able to explain the Scriptures without the aid of the Holy Spirit. But when you take up the Word of God with a humble, teachable heart, the angels of God will be by your side to impress you with evidences of the truth.... You must have the divine mold before you can discern the sacred claims of the truth.¹²⁸

This particularly applied when reading prophecy: “Men must themselves be under the influence of the Holy Spirit in order to understand the Spirit’s utterances through the prophets.”¹²⁹

White also focussed on the importance of prayer for ensuring a correct understanding of the Bible: “The Bible student must empty himself of every prejudice, lay his own ideas at the door of the investigation, and with humbly subdued heart, with self hid in Christ, with earnest prayer, he should seek wisdom from God.”¹³⁰ Likewise she stated, “Never should the Bible be studied without prayer. Before opening its pages we should ask for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. And it will be given.”¹³¹

White’s views on biblical hermeneutics are interwoven with her views on how her own writings should be treated. In 1886 she wrote:

If the man he [the author] communicates with is not honest, and will not want to see and understand the truth, he will turn his words and language in everything to suit his own purposes. He will misconstrue his words, play upon his imagination, wrest them from their true meaning, and the entrench himself in unbelief, claiming that the sentiments are all wrong.

This is the way my writings are treated by those who wish to misunderstand and pervert them. They turn the truth of God into a lie. In the very same way that they treat the writings in my published articles and in my books, so do skeptics and infidels treat the Bible. They read it according to their desire to pervert, to misapply, to willfully wrest the utterances from their true meaning.¹³²

¹²⁶ White, “The Science of Salvation the First of Sciences,” 737.

¹²⁷ White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. V, 705.

¹²⁸ Ellen G. White, “How to Meet a Controverted Point of Doctrine.,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, February 18, 1890, 98.

¹²⁹ Ellen G. White, “Manuscript 32, 1896,” 19.

¹³⁰ Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students Regarding Christian Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1913), 463.

¹³¹ Ellen G. White, “Our Great Treasure-House XVIII How to Study the Bible,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 3, 1906, 6.

¹³² Ellen G. White, “Manuscript 24, 1886.”

Such ideas closely follow Miller's Rules #3 and #14: "Nothing revealed in the scripture can or will be hid from those who ask in faith, not wavering,"¹³³ and "the most important rule of all is, that you must have faith".¹³⁴

In 1885, Ellen White wrote from Christiana, Norway addressing issues of inspiration and biblical authority:

The Bible, and the Bible alone is to be our creed, the sole bond of union, all who bow to this Holy Word will be in harmony. Our own views and ideas must not control our efforts. Man is fallible, but God's Word is infallible.... Let us lift up the banner on which is inscribed, The Bible our rule of faith and discipline.¹³⁵

This doctrine was one of Ellen White's focal points and numerous statements attest to the centrality of the *sola scriptura* idea in her writings:

- "As Protestants, the Bible, and the Bible alone, is the foundation of our faith."¹³⁶
- "In our time there is a wide departure from their [the Scriptures'] doctrines and precepts, and there is need of a return to the great Protestant principle—the Bible, and the Bible only, as the rule of faith and duty."¹³⁷
- "The words of the Bible and the Bible alone should be echoed from the pulpits of our land."¹³⁸
- "The Bible and the Bible alone, is to be our creed, the sole bond of union, all who bow to this Holy Word will be in harmony.... Let us lift up the banner on which is inscribed, The Bible our rule of faith and discipline."¹³⁹
- "there is need of a return to the great Protestant principle,—the Bible, and the Bible only, as the rule of faith and duty."¹⁴⁰
- But though the attitude of the churches is discouraging, yet there is no need of being disheartened; for God has a people who will preserve their fidelity to his truth, who will make *the Bible, and the Bible alone, their rule of faith and doctrine*, who will elevate the standard, and hold aloft the banner on which is inscribed, "The commandments of God and the faith of Jesus." They will value a pure gospel, *and make the Bible the foundation of their faith and doctrine.*¹⁴¹

¹³³ Miller, "Mr Miller's Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter," 25-26.

¹³⁴ Miller, "Mr Miller's Letters No. 5: The Bible Its Own Interpreter," 25-26.

¹³⁵ White, "A Missionary Appeal," 3.

¹³⁶ Ellen G. White, "The Law in the Christian Age," *Signs of the Times*, August 5, 1886, 466.

¹³⁷ White, *The Great Controversy*, 204.

¹³⁸ White, "Our Great Treasure-House I: God's Word Our Guide," 9.

¹³⁹ White, "A Missionary Appeal," 770.

¹⁴⁰ White, *The Great Controversy*, 204-205.

¹⁴¹ White, "Romanism the Religion of Human Nature," 244. Emphasis added.

Ellen White also parallels Miller with her belief that Bible commentaries are not necessary to find truth; in fact commentaries could make it harder to find the truth:

Many think that they must consult commentaries on the Scripture in order to understand the meaning of the word of God, and we would not take the position that commentaries should not be studied; but it will take much discernment to discover the truth of God under the mass of the words of men....The jewels of truth lie scattered over the field of revelation; but they have been buried beneath human traditions, beneath the sayings and commandments of men, and the wisdom of heaven has been practically ignored.¹⁴²

The continuing influence of White's writings on contemporary Seventh-day Adventism—particularly among church administrators and leaders should not be underestimated. For example, the current president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists – Ted Wilson – made the following recent statement:

“I believe, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church firmly and unashamedly upholds, that the Spirit of Prophecy [Seventh-day Adventist code for the writings of Ellen White] is one of God's greatest gifts to His end-time remnant people. Trust the Word of the Lord, and follow the counsel of His humble messenger, Ellen White. Let no one – local church leader, pastor, teacher, administrator, or anyone – turn you from that complete trust in the Spirit of Prophecy which points to the Bible as God's authoritative Word!”¹⁴³

It can be legitimately said then, that White's statements can be viewed as outlining the position of many—perhaps a majority—of contemporary Seventh-day Adventists.

Seventh-day Adventism in the Twentieth Century and Beyond

Eva Keller's recent examination of Bible study amongst Madagascan Seventh-day Adventists found that for her subjects, “Adventist Bible study is not a matter of the truth being taught by an authority such as the pastor, but of everyone discovering for themselves by way of serious study, reflection, and discussion with others.”¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, it is an egalitarian approach: “Everyone, women and men, young and old, has an equal right to participate and nobody, not even the pastor, is right by virtue of his or her position in the church, or in society at large”.¹⁴⁵ While neither Keller nor the

¹⁴² White, “The Science of Salvation the First of Sciences,” 737. Interestingly, White uses similar imagery to that of Miller in his aforementioned dream: James White, “Brother Miller's Dream,” *The Present Truth*, May 1850. Miller's dream was also published in White, *Early Writings of Ellen G. White*, 81-83.

¹⁴³ Mark A. Kellner, ‘No Turning Back’ is Wilson's New Year's Appeal at GYC Event (accessed January 6, 2011); available from <http://www.adventistreview.org/article.php?id=4042>.

¹⁴⁴ Eva Keller, “Towards Complete Clarity: Bible Study among Seventh-day Adventists in Madagascar,” *Ethnos* 69, no. 1 (2004): 95.

¹⁴⁵ Keller, “Towards Complete Clarity: Bible Study among Seventh-day Adventists in Madagascar,” 95.

participants in her study apparently recognize it, such an approach to Bible study clearly has its roots in William Miller's common-sense, biblically democratic approach, that, as has been previously stated, was centred on an "inherent right to individual interpretation of the Bible."¹⁴⁶

A document titled *Bible Study: Presuppositions, Principles, and Methods* provides the most comprehensive official statement of current Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutical approaches. It was approved and voted by the Executive Committee of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists at their 1986 Annual Council session in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.¹⁴⁷ This statement focuses on opposition to the historical-critical method, noting that:

In recent decades the most prominent method in biblical studies has been known as the historical-critical method. Scholars who use this method, as classically formulated, operate on the basis of presuppositions which, prior to studying the biblical text, reject the reliability of accounts of miracles and other supernatural events narrated in the Bible. Even a modified use of this method that retains the principle of criticism which subordinates the Bible to human reason is unacceptable to Adventists.

The historical-critical method minimizes the need for faith in God and obedience to His commandments. In addition, because such a method de-emphasizes the divine element in the Bible as an inspired book (including its resultant unity) and depreciates or misunderstands apocalyptic prophecy and the eschatological portions of the Bible, we urge Adventist Bible students to avoid relying on the use of the presuppositions and the resultant deductions associated with the historical-critical method.¹⁴⁸

The document then seeks to "set forth the principles of Bible study that are consistent with the teachings of the Scriptures themselves, that preserve their unity, and are based upon the premise that the Bible is the Word of God."¹⁴⁹

These principles include:

- "Scripture cannot be correctly interpreted without the aid of the Holy Spirit."¹⁵⁰
- "Choose a definite plan of study, avoiding haphazard and aimless approaches."¹⁵¹
- "Seek to grasp the simple, most obvious meaning of the biblical passage being studied."¹⁵²

¹⁴⁶ Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic*, 21.

¹⁴⁷ "Methods of Bible Study," in *Statements, Guidelines and Other Documents: A Compilation*, ed. Communication Department (General Conference, Seventh-day Adventist Church, 1996).

¹⁴⁸ "Methods of Bible Study," 109.

¹⁴⁹ "Methods of Bible Study," 109.

¹⁵⁰ "Methods of Bible Study," 111.

¹⁵¹ "Methods of Bible Study," 112.

¹⁵² "Methods of Bible Study," 112.

- “Recognize that the Bible is its own interpreter and that the meaning of words, texts, and passages is best determined by diligently comparing scripture with scripture.”¹⁵³

It is clear that these principles bear close resemblance to those espoused by William Miller.

Such contemporary statements of principles have undergone little change in Seventh-day Adventist history. For example, Alonzo J. Wearner’s 1931 book *Fundamentals of Bible Doctrine*; under the heading “Rules for Learning Divine Truth” gives seven rules:

1. Approach the Bible with reverence, and a sincere desire to know and accept its truths.
2. Receive the Bible as the literal voice of God to you.
3. The Bible is its own best commentary.
4. In the consideration of circumstantial evidence, original language and the purpose of writing are primary; customs and geography are helpful, but tradition is unreliable and often misleading.
5. There must be perseverance in research.
6. No vital truth is left obscure; all that is essential to salvation is made clear.
7. We are not permitted in any wise to add anything to or subtract anything from the Scriptures.¹⁵⁴

Texts are given—though not quoted—after each rule, and generally the only form of commentary given is quotations from the writings of Ellen White. For example, rule two is reproduced below:

Receive the Bible as the literal voice of God to you. John 10:27, 28; 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

“The Bible is God’s voice speaking to us, just as surely as though we could hear it with our ears. If we realized this, with what awe would we open God’s word, and with what earnestness would we search its precepts The reading and contemplation of the Scriptures would be regarded as an audience with the Infinite One.” - 6T 393.

“The language of the Bible should be explained according to its obvious meaning, unless a symbol or figure is employed. Christ has given the promise, ‘If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine.’... One reason why many theologians have no clearer understanding of God’s word is, they close their eyes to truths which they do not wish to practice. An understanding of Bible truth depends not so much on the power of intellect brought to the search as on the singleness of purpose, the earnest longing after righteousness.” -GC 599.¹⁵⁵

It can be seen then, that while connections with Miller’s methods are not usually mentioned explicitly in Seventh-day Adventist literature, there are clear parallels and even a level of dependence.

¹⁵³ “Methods of Bible Study,” 112.

¹⁵⁴ Alonzo J. Wearner, *Fundamentals of Bible Doctrine*, revised ed. (Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1931), 7-9.

¹⁵⁵ Wearner, *Fundamentals of Bible Doctrine*, 8. Note: 6T is an abbreviation for *Testimonies to the Church*, volume 6, and GC is an abbreviation for *The Great Controversy*. Both these books are by Ellen White.

Historicism

The Seventh-day Adventist Church, from its formation to the present day, has relied upon the historicist method of biblical interpretation—particularly in reference to the books of Daniel and Revelation. As Reimar Vetne points out, “Today the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the only major denomination officially using the historicist approach”.¹⁵⁶ While some recent Seventh-day Adventist scholars¹⁵⁷ have questioned the simplistic application of historicist methods of interpretation—particularly to the interpretation of Revelation—the method remains dominant in mainstream Seventh-day Adventism. In 2006, leading Seventh-day Adventist scholar Jon Paulien pointed out that “merely assuming, as many Adventists have done, that the whole book [of Revelation] is to be read as “historical apocalyptic” is not an adequate approach for scholars.”¹⁵⁸ Importantly however, Paulien does not abandon the historicist approach but rather advocates and practices a much more nuanced approach.

One obvious reason for the continued use of historicist methods is that certain central Seventh-day Adventist beliefs cannot be supported from the biblical text if any other approach is used. The most obvious of these is the continuing significance of the October 22, 1844 date within Seventh-day Adventism. Like Miller, contemporary Seventh-day Adventists calculate this date from Daniel 8:14 using the year-day principle.

Miller’s 14 Rules

Even outside of the support found in the writings of Ellen White, Seventh-day Adventists have continued to promote Miller’s methods both explicitly and implicitly. In 1904, the *Australasian Signs of the Times* reproduced Miller’s Rules, noting that “Mr. Miller was, without question, one of the greatest Bible students of the last century, and probably did more in the good work of unfolding the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation than any other man”.¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, his principles “have so much the element of sound sense in them that we give them in toto.”¹⁶⁰ In 1908, and again in 1918, Miller’s Rules were reproduced without comment in the Seventh-day Adventist periodical

¹⁵⁶ Reimar Vetne, “A Definition and Short History of Historicism as a Method for Interpreting Daniel and Revelation,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14, no. 2 (2003): 14.

¹⁵⁷ See, for example, Jon Paulien, “The End of Historicism? Reflections on the Adventist Approach to Biblical Apocalyptic—Part One,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14, no. 2 (2003): 15-43. and Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2002), 9-12. See also Paulien’s reading of Revelation 12 in Jon Paulien, “The End of Historicism? Reflections on the Adventist Approach to Biblical Apocalyptic—Part Two,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17, no. 1 (2006): 182.

¹⁵⁸ Paulien, “The End of Historicism? Reflections on the Adventist Approach to Biblical Apocalyptic—Part Two,” 182.

¹⁵⁹ Editorial comment prefacing William Miller, “Principles of Bible Interpretation,” *Australasian Signs of the Times*, December 12, 1904, 6.

¹⁶⁰ Editorial comment prefacing Miller, “Principles of Bible Interpretation,” 6.

Bible Training School.¹⁶¹ Similarly, in 1944, they were reproduced in *The Church Officer's Gazette*—a periodical aimed at the lay-leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.¹⁶² As late as 1949—over one hundred years after Miller published his Rules of Interpretation—D. E. Rebok reproduced Miller's Rules in the *Review and Herald*, commenting, "Personally, I believe that devout, sincere, earnest, and honest men like William Miller were adhering to safe and reasonable rules in interpreting the Scriptures when they laid down for themselves ... [these] guiding principles in their Bible study".¹⁶³ While such explicit statements are not often found in recent Seventh-day Adventist literature, it is clear that Miller's principles still form the basis for contemporary Seventh-day Adventist approaches to scripture.

One of the most recent discussions of Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutics is that of Richard M. Davidson who authored the article "Biblical Interpretation" in the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* published in 2000.¹⁶⁴ Davidson gives five "Foundational Principles for Biblical Interpretation" that together with their subsections, clearly show continuity with Miller's methods. Davidson's principles are:

- A. "The Bible and the Bible Only": which discusses both the primacy and sufficiency of scripture;
- B. "The Totality of Scripture": all scripture is inspired by God;¹⁶⁵
- C. "The Analogy of Scripture". In this section Davidson discusses three aspects with clear ties to Miller's methods:
 1. "Scripture Is Its Own Interpreter": "Because there is underlying unity among the various parts of Scripture, one portion of Scripture interprets another, becoming the key for understanding related passages."¹⁶⁶
 2. "The Consistency of Scripture": "All the doctrines of the Bible will cohere with each other; interpretations of individual passages will harmonize with the totality of what Scripture teaches on a given subject."¹⁶⁷
 3. "The Clarity of Scripture": "the Bible is perspicuous and does not require any ecclesiological magisterium to clarify its meaning....The meaning of Scripture is

¹⁶¹ William Miller, "William Miller's Rules for Bible Study," *Bible Training School*, January 1908, 121-122, William Miller, "William Miller's Rules for Studying the Bible," *Bible Training School*, March 1918, 202-203.

¹⁶² William Miller, "How William Miller Studied His Bible," *The Church Officer's Gazette*, January 1944, 12.

¹⁶³ Denton E. Rebok, "I Believe the Threefold Message (concluded)," *Review and Herald*, April 21, 1949, 9.

¹⁶⁴ Richard M. Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 58-104.

¹⁶⁵ Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," 61.

¹⁶⁶ Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," 64.

¹⁶⁷ Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," 65.

clear and straight-forward, able to be grasped by the diligent student.... the Scriptures are to be taken in their plain, literal sense, unless a clear and obvious figure is intended.”¹⁶⁸

- D. “Spiritual Things Spiritually Discerned”: This “implies not only the need of the Spirit to aid in understanding, but also that the interpreter be spiritual....At every stage of the interpretive process, the book inspired by the Spirit can be correctly understood only ‘from above,’ by the illumination and transformation of the Spirit.”¹⁶⁹

While Davidson does have a short discussion of Miller’s hermeneutics following his discussion of the above principles, he however makes no explicit connections between the principles he lists and Miller’s methods.¹⁷⁰ Rather, he is at pains to link Seventh-day Adventist methods with those used in the Protestant Reformation: “Seventh-day Adventists are the hermeneutical heirs of the reformation. As did the radical reformers of the sixteenth century they continually seek to go “back to the roots,” and base all their presuppositions, their principles of interpretation, their faith, and their practice upon the absolute authority of God’s infallible Word”.¹⁷¹ Despite Davidson’s omission, it is clear that his principles draw heavily upon the methods of William Miller.

Biblicism

Historically, Seventh-day Adventists have self-identified themselves as “people of the Book” where “Book” is a code word for the Bible; and this is still a popular slogan in the church today. Robert Pierson, in his 1975 book, *We Still Believe* gives the following illustration—typical of the self-perception of many Seventh-day Adventists—under the heading, “People of the Book”:

Some years ago in a country where Bible study was not encouraged, a clergyman of the established church discovered one of his parishioners reading her Bible. “You have become a Seventh-day Adventist!” he remonstrated, accusingly. “No,” was the astonished reply. “I am only reading my Bible.” “You have become a Seventh-day Adventist!” the visitor charged again. “Only Seventh-day Adventists read their Bibles in this country!”¹⁷²

Pierson ends his chapter with an appeal: “‘O give us that Book! At any price, give us that Book of God!’ Let us always be people of the one Book!”¹⁷³

Such a position is still strongly promoted; with the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s official website stating: “Seventh-day Adventist Christians would like to see themselves among those called

¹⁶⁸ Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 66.

¹⁶⁹ Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 66.

¹⁷⁰ Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 96.

¹⁷¹ Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 97.

¹⁷² Robert H. Pierson, *We Still Believe* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1975), 26.

¹⁷³ Pierson, *We Still Believe*, 28.

‘people of the Book.’ It’s simple—we love the Bible!...Seventh-day Adventists are ‘people of the Book.’ They study the Word of God for guidance in their lives.”¹⁷⁴ Similarly, the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* entreats members to devote themselves to “God’s book—the Book of all books, the Book of Life”.¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, there is a belief that the denomination’s identity and its very existence is at stake: “If we cease to be the people of the Book, we are lost, and our mission has failed”.¹⁷⁶

A 2008 article in the denomination’s flagship magazine, *The Advent Review* bemoaned falling biblical literacy in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and asked the question, “Still ‘People of the Book’?”¹⁷⁷ The article noted the adoption of the “Follow the Bible” program designed to “raise the profile” of Bible reading among Adventists worldwide. The program involved a large, multi-language Bible travelling to each world church division, where, “large convocations” would be held with the goal of getting “members to connect with the Bible”.¹⁷⁸ The “Follow the Bible” program’s official website promotes the idea that “historically the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been known as ‘a people of the Book’”; and outlines the goal of the program as aiming to “restore the image of the Church, that Seventh-day Adventists really are people of the Book. We are truly people who Follow the Bible.”¹⁷⁹

Proof-texting

Similarly, Seventh-day Adventist insistence on a “literal approach” to scripture has led to approaches that may be accurately termed “proof-texting” remaining a major part of Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutics. Nichols recognises this in his article, “What’s Wrong With the Proof-Text Method?”, noting,

The proof-text method has been widely used by Seventh-day Adventists. In this method one asks a question or makes a propositional statement and then cites one or more Scripture passages, in the first instance to answer the question, and in the second to support the proposition. The Sabbath school quarterly basically follows the proof-text method. The book *Bible Readings for the Home*, which has been in print for many years and is widely circulated by colporteurs, follows this method. We believe it is a valid method of studying or teaching the Scriptures.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁴ *Bible Study*, (accessed 14 July, 2010); available from <http://www.adventist.org/bible-study/index.html>.

¹⁷⁵ *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 172.

¹⁷⁶ *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 172.

¹⁷⁷ Mark A. Kellner, “Still ‘People of the Book’?,” *Adventist Review*, June 19, 2008, 8.

¹⁷⁸ Kellner, “Still ‘People of the Book’?,” 12.

¹⁷⁹ *Statement*, (accessed 15 July, 2010); available from <http://www.followthebiblesda.com/statement.html>.

¹⁸⁰ Francis D. Nichols, “What’s Wrong With the Proof-Text Method?,” 10.

As noted by Nichols, one such example is the *Adult Sabbath School Lesson Guide* which is studied each Sabbath (Saturday) morning in small-group “Sabbath School” classes by the vast majority of Seventh-day Adventist adults around the world. In his discussion of Seventh-day Adventist Bible study, Alden Thompson pointed out some of the problems associated with this approach: “The *Adult Sabbath School Lessons* do not lead the student into a serious consideration of the text and tend to omit references to “problems” that crop up in the text. Tailored to meet the desires of those who view the Bible as Scripture, the quarterly avoids addressing the issues that arise when one considers the Bible as literature.”¹⁸¹

Edmund Parker points out that the Seventh-day Adventist church still “gives authority to its answers [to questions regarding its theological beliefs] by quoting many scriptural references.”¹⁸² These references are often given without context, in the form of large numbers of isolated texts. Such usage fits the definition of proof-texting: “A proof text is one that is used to convey a concept or teaching without proper regard for the context.”¹⁸³ A proof-text approach to scripture is not unique to Seventh-day Adventism, and may be traced back to the denomination’s roots in the “culture and times” of the Millerite movement.

More recent Seventh-day Adventist approaches tend to follow a similar pattern. Gerhard F. Hasel emphasises the concept of “the Bible as its own interpreter”, stating that this means that “one portion of Scripture interprets another, becoming the key to other, less clear passages. This procedure involves the collection and study from all parts of the Bible of passages dealing with the same subject so that each may aid the interpretation of the other”.¹⁸⁴ Similarly, Richard M. Davidson states that, “Because there is an underlying unity among the various parts of Scripture, one portion of Scripture interprets another, becoming the key for understanding related passages”.¹⁸⁵ Davidson does go on to state that “This does not mean the indiscriminate stringing together of passages in ‘proof-text’ fashion without regard for the context of each text”,¹⁸⁶ however, in practice it often does.

¹⁸¹ Alden Thompson, “Patterns in Adventist Biblical Studies, 1989,” p. 3, Center for Adventist Research, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

¹⁸² Parker, “Islands and Bridges”, 55.

¹⁸³ Parker, “Islands and Bridges”, 57.

¹⁸⁴ Gerhard F. Hasel, *Biblical Interpretation Today* (Washington: Biblical Research Institute, 1985), 103.

¹⁸⁵ Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 64.

¹⁸⁶ Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 64.

CONCLUSIONS

The view espoused by some Seventh-day Adventists that Miller's Bible study was conducted in isolation and that his "Rules of Interpretation" were developed completely independently is unsustainable when the historical evidence is examined. Miller's hermeneutics were in fact, not particularly original, innovative, or new—they bear, for example, a great similarity to the methods used by his contemporary Alexander Campbell. While it is highly unlikely that Miller's methods were based on Campbell's (or vice versa), they both arose in a similar cultural milieu. The hermeneutical methods that Miller used reflected the dominant cultural philosophies in vogue in nineteenth-century America—particularly the emphasis on human reason and individual freedom present in the Common Sense Philosophy then in vogue. Miller's intellectual world was also shaped by his Deist beliefs and the ideas of the Deist authors that he is likely to have read; and by his early contact with Freemasonry and their emphasis on symbolism and numerology.

Furthermore, Miller and his contemporaries clearly viewed his work as following accepted principles, not only of his contemporaries, but also of what was often termed, "the old standard writers of the Protestant faith".¹⁸⁷ There is extensive evidence showing that Miller was an omnivorous reader. With his avowed interest in religion, philosophy, and history; he is certain to have read extensively in these areas prior to his conversion. He is known to have accessed both private and public libraries, and would have bought books for himself. Even if his statement that he relied only on his Bible and his Concordance is accepted at face-value, and he did not read any other authors during his time of intense Bible study, Miller—like every reader who has ever read—brought to the biblical text his past as a reader. Thus Miller's Bible reading was done through the lens of the historicist biblical commentary of Isaac and Thomas Newton, George Stanley Faber, Joseph Mede, and Ethan Smith—to name but a few.

Moreover, it is highly likely that even the text of Miller's Bible itself was extended by a large amount of "extra" information other than the actual biblical text. At the very least it would have contained various marginal references—some quite extensive, Ussher's chronology, and various articles explaining biblical concepts and words. Whether Miller recognised it or not, such items clearly influenced his biblical interpretation and his conclusions.

Miller's influence on the hermeneutical approach of some contemporary Christian denominations has been little recognized in the past. Nevertheless, his influence is pervasive amongst denominations following an historicist approach to the interpretation of Bible prophecy—particularly the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Advent Christian Church, and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

¹⁸⁷ White, *Sketches of the Christian Life and Public Labors of William Miller*, 301.

When the numerically largest of these groups—the Seventh-day Adventist Church—is studied, it is found that the Bible—and a particular way of reading the Bible—is critical to Seventh-day Adventist identity. While certain concerns have been raised about the degree to which Seventh-day Adventist members actually do study the Bible; the self-perception that Seventh-day Adventists are “people of the Book”—the Bible—is a widespread and central belief amongst church members. Furthermore, it is clear that some central Seventh-day Adventist doctrines—such as the doctrine of the investigative judgement which relies on the calculation of the October 22, 1844 date—rely on an historicist approach to biblical hermeneutics, an approach clearly inherited from William Miller.

The dominant approach to biblical hermeneutics within the Seventh-day Adventist Church clearly parallels the approach espoused by William Miller and has undergone little change since Miller first published his principles in 1840. In the twenty-first century, Seventh-day Adventists continue to emphasise Millerite principles like “scripture interprets scripture”; “the Bible is perspicuous”; a literal reading of scripture; the harmonization of Bible passages; and the need for a “spiritual” understanding; though the Millerite origin of these principles is rarely acknowledged.

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