

Chapter 1 – Moving to Fever Pitch *

from

1844:

Convergence in Prophecy for Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá'í Faith

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by

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The evangelical and religious revitalization of the First Great Awakening swept Europe and the American colonies—in particular, the Northeast. Peaking in the 1730s and '40s, it gave rise to John Wesley and evangelical Methodism, a reaction to the Episcopal Church. Methodism achieved its name through its emphasis on logic and reason, a spiritual method of living. Methodism negated the need for ceremony and church hierarchy, stressing instead that faith was an intensely personal matter that fostered spiritual conviction and redemption, or salvation *only* through Jesus Christ. Not only was self-study of the Bible paramount, but Methodism called for preaching the gospel outside the confines of any established church. This was a far step beyond Martin Luther.

This new freedom to not only study but to preach, and the evangelical nature of early Methodism, gave rise to the itinerant minister. “Circuit riders ... held a hallowed place in Methodist history and mythology. Missionary work was the hall mark of early Methodism and its first institutionalized form were the circuit riders or itinerant preachers. They were the new St. Pauls in the Methodist pantheon.”¹ Whether ordained ministers or lay preachers with limited education, these circuit riders paved the way for the waves of itinerant Millerite and other preachers of the Second Great Awakening of the nineteenth century.

While Wesley and the Methodists reinforced the belief in the return of Jesus, called the Second Coming, few tried to project a date for the event. Those who did attracted few followers. Many Christians expected the Second Coming to be a literal return of Jesus in the same body He

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had inhabited so many centuries before. They also expected His return to be marked by the occasion of the Last Judgment, when the living and the dead would be sorted toward heaven or hell.

Adventism was inherently part of Christian theology because Jesus said He would return. The Book of Matthew, Chapter 24, verses 1–51, contains a long discourse from Jesus to His disciples about His return. In it, He told them that disasters and turmoil, wars and the rumors of wars, would precede His return, but He disclaimed any knowledge of the timing: “*But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*” (Matt. 24:36)

Jesus did, however, give one hint: “*So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand— ...*” (Matt. 24:15) What was “the abomination that causes desolation”? It would be a long wait to find out, because the words of Daniel were “*rolled up and sealed until the time of the end.*” (Dan. 12:9)

Not even a hundred years after the First Great Awakening commenced, the Second Great Awakening began. Many students of the Bible undertook serious investigation of the return, mostly working alone. They calculated possible dates for the Advent from biblical prophecies. An atmosphere of religious expectancy spread as these students found each other and began to collaborate. By the 1830s, Adventism, the expectation of the Second Coming, roared through English and American Protestantism. Adventist believers expected the *imminent* return of Jesus Christ.

What lit the fire for the Second Great Awakening? Natural phenomena that seemed highly irregular, or even supernatural, for one. In the American Northeast, people experienced the “Dark Day” of 1780 when raging wildfires in Canada produced smoke that totally obscured the sun.

Then 1816, the “year without a summer,” occurred. Europe and North America had a normal spring, but hard frosts hit throughout the normally hot season. Crops failed, causing widespread hunger. Unknown to either Europeans or Americans at the time, the Pacific volcano of Mount Tambora had erupted in massive fashion that April, spewing so much ash that it obscured the sun half a globe away. During that awful summer, a group of writers including Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and Shelley’s future wife, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, challenged each other to write horrid tales inspired by the dark and frosty season—one was Mary Shelley’s classic, *Frankenstein*.

On November 12, 1833, a spectacular meteor shower of previously unseen scale, the Leonids from the Comet Tempel-Tuttle, filled the sky over the eastern United States. An estimated

240,000 “falling stars” rained down for several hours. This spectacular, frightening display seemed to fulfill the words of Isaiah as told by Jesus:

Immediately after the distress of those days

‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light;

the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’

(Matt. 24:29, quoting Isaiah 13:20 and 34:4)

The Second Great Awakening reached fever pitch in the United States in the early 1840s. It was a turning away from Deism, which was the belief that God was impersonal and that man should rely on rational thinking. It was also a repudiation of church liturgy and structure—and an embrace of evangelical Christianity. Church membership increased dramatically. All Protestant denominations of the time, except perhaps the Quaker and Universalist, believed in the physical return of Christ to earth for the final judgment of the living and the dead and the establishment of a reign of righteousness. But now, there was a growing emphasis on *when* Jesus would make his return, although He had said that only the Father knew:

Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. (Matt. 24:42–43)

Enter William Miller (1782–1849), a farmer and Baptist lay preacher in Low Hampton, New York, just across the border from Vermont. The oldest of sixteen children, he had a conventional childhood. He was raised in a devout Baptist farm household with a grandfather and several other relatives who were ministers and preachers. Miller’s mother taught him to read, but his formal education was limited to three months each winter during his school years. He was an avid reader of the few books belonging to the family and those that he could borrow. His early, burning desire to learn and his wide reading of various subjects helped form his eloquent, thoughtful writing as an adult.

Surprisingly, considering his Baptist origins and his later pioneering effort in Adventism, Miller spent fourteen years of his early adulthood practicing Deism, an outgrowth of the Age of

Enlightenment that rejected the Bible as the standard of religious truth. Miller questioned the Christian doctrines taught to him in childhood and, for a time, rejected the idea of divine revelation. Instead, he studied the writings of Voltaire, Thomas Paine, Ethan Allen, Benjamin Franklin, and other Deist thinkers who held the belief that God had created the world and then let His creation evolve on its own. Human observation and reasoning were sufficient for a rational life, they suggested. Deist attitudes about life after death ran the gamut from a belief in an afterlife as a natural part of human creation, with suitable rewards and punishments for conduct in this life, to a certainty that the grave was the end of one's existence. Even though Miller identified with the intellectuals who favored Deism, he faithfully accompanied his wife and children to the local Baptist church services. His livelihood was farming. His social life revolved around the Masonic Order, in which he attained the highest degree available in his area. His passions were reading and studying.

Miller was also a patriot. His father served as a captain in the Revolutionary War and the younger Miller joined the Vermont militia as a lieutenant in 1810. By 1813, he was promoted to the rank of captain in the United States Army. During the War of 1812, he fought at the pivotal battle of Plattsburgh—a small town in New York on the western shore of Lake Champlain, just south of the Canadian border.

As the years passed, Miller found less and less comfort in Deism. He seemed to have long embraced the annihilistic belief that life ended at the grave. However, the wartime death of a close friend named Spencer brought forth nagging doubts about his beliefs and prompted him to write the following anguished words in a letter to his wife:

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.²

Of that time, Miller wrote in his memoirs:

Annihilism was a cold and chilling thought, and accountability was a 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*. I knew that there was a wrong, but knew not how or where to find the right. I mourned, but without hope.³

Epiphany came for Miller in 1816, while he was delivering a talk in church. It came as a startling mystical experience, an intense inner vision that he described as follows:

Suddenly the character of a Saviour 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. But the question arose, How can it be proved that such a Being does exist? Aside from the Bible, I found that I could get no evidence of the existence of such a Saviour, or even of a future state ... I was constrained to admit that the Scriptures must be a revelation from God ... 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 lost all taste for other reading, and applied my heart to get wisdom from God.⁴

Miller embarked on an intensive, disciplined study of the Bible, starting with Genesis and comparing verse with verse as he went along. For the rest of his life, Miller studied only the Bible, aided by *Cruden's Concordance*.⁵ He became convinced that the Bible was its own interpreter and that parables and metaphors were either understandable within their immediate connection or elsewhere in the Bible, in which cases the explanations showed them to be literally true—unless the explanations were symbolic, such as the term “day.” For Miller, the Bible was a system of revealed truths, simply and clearly given, to be understood with common sense, at least with what he construed to be common sense. As Methodism sought methodical order, Millerism would pursue a rational approach.

Miller was especially interested in biblical prophecies and came to believe that all of them had been or would be literally fulfilled. Along with many other biblical scholars of his day, Miller took the prophecies of Daniel to heart, especially Daniel 8:14: “*He [a holy one] said to me, ‘It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated.’*”

By 1822, Miller believed that he understood the various prophecies about the return of Jesus Christ. He wrote: “With the solemn conviction that such momentous events were predicted in the Scriptures, to be fulfilled in so short a space of time, the question came home to me with mighty power regarding my duty to the world. If the end was so near, it was important that the world should know it.”⁶

That year, Miller wrote a partial summary of his articles of faith, which was later found among his papers, although it was not published during his lifetime. Article XV states, “I believe that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is near, even at the door, even within twenty-one years—on or before 1843.”⁷ He also wrote, “When I was about my business, it was continually ringing in my ears, ‘Go and tell the world of their danger.’”⁸ For nine years, he battled with this voice.

Miller’s life as a farmer, biblical scholar, Sunday school teacher, and community leader was full. He only began to share his views in 1831, and then only with reluctance, after much procrastination, hesitation, and inner struggling with God. For years, he had heard the message and he could finally no longer ignore the summons:

I did all I could to avoid the conviction that anything was required of me; and I thought that by freely speaking of it to all, I would freely perform my duty, and that God would raise up the necessary instrumentality for the accomplishment of the work. I prayed that some minister might see the truth, and devote himself to its promulgation; but still it was impressed on me, “Go and tell it to the world: their blood will I require at thy hand.” I tried to excuse myself to the Lord 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 to gain the attention of an audience; that I was very diffident, and feared to go before the world; that they would “not believe me or hearken to my voice;” that I was “slow of speech and of a slow tongue.” But I could get no relief.⁹

Finally, Miller gave an ultimatum to God: He would not go and speak unless he was invited. What a relief he felt! Surely no one would invite him to speak in public. But his relief was very short-lived. Within half an hour, Miller’s nephew from Dresden, a town sixteen miles away, arrived and said that the minister would be away that Sunday. Would Miller speak in Dresden on the Second Coming? To feel more comfortable, he could even speak in his sister’s home instead of the church. So that was that. In August 1831, the Baptists in Dresden turned out to hear Miller speak. The Millerite movement took off from there. By 1833, Miller was granted a license to preach by the Baptist Church, although he was never ordained. By 1835 he had turned the farm

over to his sons and started devoting himself to preaching his message of the Second Coming fulltime.

By the accounts of the day, Miller was not a charismatic preacher. Often lasting two hours, his sermons and lectures were not of a tone to create hysteria. On the contrary, he was homely in appearance and plodding in ungrammatical speech, although he was also very rational, thorough, and compelling in his presentations. Sylvester Bliss (1814–1863), one of Miller’s colleagues and a Millerite minister and editor in his own right, described Miller as “a good citizen, a kind neighbor, an affectionate husband and parent, and a devoted Christian; good to the poor and benevolent . . . very exemplary in his life and conversation, [who] endeavoured 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.”¹⁰ By all accounts, Miller was a humble, self-effacing man. He had no drive to promote himself. However, he was so well received in Dresden that invitations poured in for him to speak in churches and at gatherings throughout eastern New York, Vermont, and bordering areas of Canada—and in a few years, throughout lower Canada, southern Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Pennsylvania. At the peak of the Millerite movement, he also spoke in western New York and Ohio.

Listeners always accorded Miller respectful, even excited, attention. His efforts at administration, however, earned less acclaim. Fortunately, in 1839 he attracted to the Adventist cause the ultimate helper, administrator, and organizer, the Rev. Joshua Himes of the Chardon Street Chapel in Boston, which he founded. Himes was active in the abolitionist and temperance movements. He heard Miller speak and quickly swung into action as his right hand. Their complementary skills Himes and Miller a superb team.

Himes’s efforts generated a flurry of activity and then a frenzy. He started the first Millerite newspaper *The Signs of the Times* in Boston in 1840, first published twice-weekly and then weekly. Within seven months he had one thousand subscribers.¹¹ In 1842, with an associate, Nathaniel Southard, Himes started *The Midnight Cry* in New York City. Himes distributed two hundred forty thousand copies within two weeks of its founding, and within five months, half a million copies had been distributed.¹² Other Adventist newspapers and newsletters were also founded, including *The Trumpet of Alarm* in Philadelphia, *Second Advent of Christ* in Cleveland, *Voice of Elijah* in Montreal, and *The Western Midnight Cry* in Cincinnati. More than forty such periodicals were in circulation by October 1844. Historians estimate that five million pieces of Millerite Adventist literature were disseminated by May 1844—one piece for every four men, women, and children in the United States.

Miller and at least two hundred other preachers spoke in churches of many denominations, in lecture halls, and at camp meetings, which were often held in large tents. Sometimes thousands of people attended a camp meeting over several days to hear from many ministers. In fact, the

largest tent ever built at the time, the “big tent,” was constructed in 1842 to hold four thousand people, then enlarged to accommodate six thousand people. A streamer bearing the words “Thy Kingdom Come” flew from the towering staff. The Millerite Adventists held at least 125 of these meetings throughout the Northeast, welcoming an estimated half million people. The population of the United States was about 17 million at that time, with perhaps half in the Northeast, meaning that as many as one in fifteen Northeasterners attended an Adventist camp meeting.

The date Miller gave for the return conformed to the calculations of other Adventist scholars. Of interest to the masses, however, the Adventist movement that Miller reluctantly came to lead held a *premillennial* view of the timing. That is, adherents believed that the return of Jesus would *inaugurate* the thousand years of peace and justice on earth noted in prophecies. This perspective marked a split from the *postmillennial* Protestant belief that Jesus would return at the *end* of a millennium of peace and justice, when Christians had reformed and prepared the earth for Him.

The 1830s and '40s were a heyday for reform movements such as women's rights and abolitionism. Millerism was foremost among them because it offered the hope that Jesus would revitalize the earth and banish evil when He returned. This prospect increased the yearning of the Millerites for the Second Coming as the following hymn expresses:

How long, O Lord our Savior,
Wilt thou remain away?
Our hearts are growing weary,
Of thy so long delay.¹³

