"BRIDEGROOM CRY" OR "BABYLON CALL"?

The Millerites--Mainstreamers or Marginals?

BY CHARLES TEEL, JR.

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"Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him"

(Matthew 25:6).

"Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen.... Come out of her, my people"

(Revelation 18:2, 4).

Just as Adam named and numbered the animals in the Edenic garden at the outset of human history, so 19th-century expositors rushed to name and number those beasts that prowl the Patmos zoo of St. John by way of predicting the end of human history. New England farmer-turned-evangelist William Miller, along with Old England mathematician-cum-numerologist Sir Isaac Newton, were among those who set out to discern among these portents of the Apocalypse a timetable for calculating when the heavenly Bridegroom would return to save His church—if not His world.

The Millerites heralded the Bridegroom's return by sounding two distinct Apocalyptic cries: "Behold, the bridegroom cometh!" and "Come out of her, my people!" This article argues that these dual cries of the Millerites—the inclusive "midnight cry" invitation to the Bridegroom's feast and the exclusive Babylon call for withdrawal and judgment—illuminate the rela-

tion of this movement to the American religious and cultural mainstream. The purpose here is to examine the complexity of this easily stereotyped millennial group by exploring the manner in which the distinct "cry" presents an alternate stance toward the American Republic.

Ranking American historian Henry Steele Commager places the Millerites squarely among the yeasty mix of reformers, enthusiasts, and come-outers that characterized mid-19th-century New England:

For the reformers, at least, Boston was the Hub of the Universe. They could preach pantheism in the pulpit, transcendentalism in the schoolroom, socialism in the marketplace, abolition in Faneuil Hall; they could agitate the most extravagant causes and you would have to listen to them. And they consorted with the worst of men, and of women too. [Wherever] they went they trailed behind them clouds of high flying enthusiasts—spiritualists, phrenologists, Swedenborgians, Millerites, vegetarians, Grahamites, prohibitionists, feminists, non-resisters, Thomsonians, Comeouters of every shape and hue.

What had they in common, these reformers, men and women, rich and poor, educated and illiterate? . . .

What had they in common—what but belief in the perfectibility of man and in the doctrine of progress?[1]

William Miller's version of the perfectibility of humankind and his doctrine of progress was first preached in Boston in the year 1839. Miller held forth twice daily for nine days at the Chardon Street Chapel—a suite claimed as home turf by such reform bodies as unionists, abolitionists, non-resisters, and the temperance crowd. Indeed, when Miller delivered his third series of lectures in Boston in as many months, William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* carried notice of these meetings and hailed Miller as a "thorough" ally of the various reform movements:

Mr. Miller, being a thorough abolitionist, temperance man etc., will no doubt give much truth in the course of his lectures, that will be of a salutary character—aside from his computation of the end of the world.[2]

For the heady reformers, at least, America appeared bathed in a millennial hope. Movements for change had sprouted through New England like mushrooms in the spring rain. God was in His heaven, Jacksonian democracy had emanated from the White House, and all was to be well with the world. Andrew Johnson, one of Jackson's ardent supporters, spoke for many in affirming that "The millennial morning had dawned":

The democratic party proper of the whole world, and especially of the United States, has undertaken the political redemption *of man, and sooner or later the great work will be accomplished. In the political world it corresponds to that of Christianity in the moral. They are going along, not in divergent nor in parallel but in converging lines—the one purifying and elevating man politically, the other religiously.*[3]

The reformers thus proclaimed their belief in the perfectibility of humankind and Jacksonian optimists exuded an assurance that humankind's political and religious redemption inevitably would be accomplished "sooner or later."

For William Miller this great work of redemption would be accomplished sooner rather than later: "around 1843" give or take a few months. Armed only with Bible, concordance, and a wooden literalism that allowed the prophetic and apocalyptic works of Scripture to interpret themselves when compared line upon line and precept upon precept and number upon number as in the numerical calculations of Sir Isaac Newton, Miller developed an eschatological schema that was generally open to discussion and modification on all points but two: Christ would return, and He would return about 1843.

In addition to sharing a commitment to the Advent movement, each Millerite leader had devoted extensive energies to reform movements as well.

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On his own, Miller heralded the bridegroom's return for fully a half dozen years before Methodist minister Josiah Litch and Christian Connexion cleric Joshua V. Himes joined the cause. Of the 200 ministers estimated to have eventually joined the movement, Miller's reflective *Apology* reserves the affectionate "my brother . . ." designation for these two leaders. Himes is credited with having been "more instrumental in the spread of these views than any other ten men who have embarked in the cause" and Litch is cited as one who early on embraced Miller's ideas and then "aided their extension." Charles Fitch, Congregationalist *cum* Presbyterian pastor and an early recruit of Josiah Litch, in turn emerged as one of the movement's most aggressive communicators—by word, pen, and chart. That the Millerite leadership reflected diverse communions illustrated the cross-denominational appeal and inclusive nature of the movement.

"We know no sect, or party as such," wrote Himes in 1840, "while we respect all." Though this respect would be tested in the ensuing years, it would evaporate only when the separatist call was sounded: "Come out of her, my people."

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had devoted extensive energies to reform movements as well. Fitch published his *Slaveholding Weighed in the Balance of Truth and Its Comparative Guilt* in 1837. Litch was constantly in the forefront of early anti-slavery and temperance agitation. And Himes' credentials were well established among the reformist circles in Boston as being "among the most radical of the radicals."

Nor were these leaders exceptional in their zeal for reform. Millerite editor and lecturer Henry Jones carried the cause of temperance throughout the North and had been banned from churches for his abolitionist stance. Millerite convention leader Henry Dana Ward was not only an ardent New York city abolitionist but also a temperance organizer who had cut his reform teeth in the anti-Masonic movement of the 1820s. Baptist Millerite churchman Elon Galusha, son of the governor of Vermont, was chairman of a county anti-slavery society and chaired an interdenominational convention in 1841 that called for resolutions against slave-holding churches. *Midnight Cry* editor Nathaniel Stoddard was deeply involved in the issues of temperance, anti-slavery, and education and served as acting editor of the *Emancipator,* an anti-slavery paper. Methodist minister George Storrs preached his abolitionist activism not only to anti-slavery types but also to resistive Methodist bishops who did not share his enthusiasm for reforming either church or world. And seasoned Millerite preacher and conference organizer Joseph Bates earned the dual distinctions of carrying his abolitionist attitudes into hostile territory and captaining the crew of a "dry" merchant ship that plied the seven seas.

An examination of Himes' involvements demonstrates that he was indisputably the most active of the Millerites, while at the same time championing movements for social reform—right up until the expected year of Jubilee in 1843. Criticized by conservatives in his congregations who claimed that his "benevolent activities" had become "too progressive and radical," Himes countered that such past activities constituted but a "drop in the bucket" to what they would become in the future. The Chardon Street Chapel, which Himes established in 1837 as Boston's Second Christian Church, rocked with such an assortment of reformist activities that in 1842 William Lloyd Garrison hailed it as "a building which is destined to become famous in the City of Boston, and for which we entertain more respect and affection than for any other in the city."

Garrison's respect was deserved. During the years of Himes' ministry, Chardon Street Chapel was up to its steeple in reform activities. Himes hosted annual meetings of the radical Non-Resistance society (which featured, among others, Henry C. Write, Lucretia Mott, Samuel J. May, Edmund Quincy, and Adin Ballou) and as a charter member served repeated terms on its executive committee. Garrison's New England Anti-Slavery Conventions were held at Chardon Street and Himes continued to be re-elected as one of the counselors of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery society—along with such bona fide activists as Wendell Phillips, Ellis Gray Loring, Oliver Johnson, Amasa Walker, Edmund Quincy, and David Lee Child. Further, the Friends of Universal Reform gathered at the chapel and issued a call for a wide-ranging series of Chardon Street Conventions. Ralph Waldo Emerson, writing in *The Dial,* offered the following description of these exchanges:

If the assembly was disorderly, it was picturesque. Madmen, madwomen, men with beards, Dunkers, Muggletonians, Come-outers, Groaners, Agrarians, Seventh-Day Baptists, Quakers, Abolitionists, Calvinists, Unitarians, and Philosophers—all came successively to the top, and seized their moment, if not their hour, wherein to chide, or to pray, or preach, or protest. The faces were a study. The most daring innovators and the champions-until-death of the old cause sat side by side.[4]

Himes' involvement in temperance, Christian unionism, abolition, and non-resistance thus continued through the very years of Millerism's rise to movement status. After bringing Miller to Boston in 1839, Himes functioned as the organization's publicist and organizer. The Chardon Street pastor purchased the "biggest tent in the country" for Miller's meetings and recruited and scheduled other evangelists for speaking tours. He organized camp meetings and convened numerous second advent conferences, He edited two journals—The *Midnight Cry* in New York and the *Signs of the Times* in Boston—and helped found others in Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Rochester, and Montreal.

Never did Himes view his fellow reformers through rose-colored glasses, however. Indeed, he once characterized conference participants hosted by his church as those who were "always pulling down Babylon but knew not how to lay a single brick in building up the walls of Jerusalem." Nor did Himes expect his efforts at reform to supplant the necessity of the Second Coming, or even function in a way to make it possible.

Until 1843—longer than the other Millerite leaders—Himes waited to switch from multiple movement involvements to a single movement focus. Most of his Millerite col-

leagues had already made the decision to give all their time, means, and energies to the proclamation of the imminent Second Advent. And as they did so, the broad-based Millerite movement that had eschewed sectarianism took on the baggage of an organization. The "Ministerial Conferences" and "General Conferences" led by Miller, Himes, et al, came to include such activities as celebrating communion, examining movement preachers, naming an executive committee, authorizing and endorsing newspapers, magazines, and even a hymnal—*The Millennial Harp*. Consolidation—and outsiderness—was effectively guaranteed when Charles Fitch's mid-1843 apocalyptic sermon, "Come Out of Her, My People" was preached, printed, and scattered like the leaves of autumn. Fitch's point was stark: the saved remnant consisted of those who embraced the Advent movement, while Babylon was made up of those who did not—including Catholics and "all sects in Protestant Christendom." Once these two categories were discounted from mainstream American Christianity in the 1840s, the remaining population certainly numbered less than the 144,000 faithful celebrated in St. John's Apocalypse.

Fitch's call to come out was a signal that the moderate middle would not hold against the pressure of the militant left wing—the date setters and the come-outers.

The reflections of Joshua Himes on the issue of Millerism and separatism are instructive in examining the two Millerite cries under consideration, "When we commenced the work of giving the 'Midnight Cry' with *Brother Miller* in 1849," noted Himes,

He made no attempt to convert men to a sect. . . . Believing that the members of the different communions could retain their standings, and at the same time prepare for the advent of their king and labor for the salvation of men in these relations until the consummation of their hope.

While Himes does not go so far as Marsh in hailing the forthcoming Babylon cry as the "true cry," his endorsement of the come-outer cry is emphatic—even enthusiastic:

But when they were ridiculed, oppressed, and in various ways cut off from their former privileges and enjoyment, . . . they were soon weaned from their party predilections, and rose in the majesty of their strength, shook off the yoke, and raised, the cry, "Come out of her my people."[5]

In his study of the Millerites, David Rowe has suggested that the Millerite come-outer movement constituted an exodus by the militant Adventists from the established churches and from the established order in general: "not only the churches, but the governments of the world, too, were a part of Babylon." The call to the faithful was a call to come out of governments, churches, and reform movements alike. An 1844 warning is recorded in the *Midnight Cry* against "being connected with the human governments of this world." Christians should refrain from voting or backing candidates in the coming elections, but should "be united to a man in our glorious candidate, the Son of God, the true heir to David's throne."

What had begun as an inclusive movement assumed an embattled—indeed embittered—position. That beast of Revelation, which most Protestants interpreted as Catholicism had sprouted horns. The wanton Babylonian woman had given birth to daughters. And only the separated Millerite remnant remained to usher in the Coming.

Miller did not wish to support this fracturing. "I have not ordained anyone to separate from the churches to which they may have belonged unless their brethren cast them out," he wrote as late as January of 1844. "I have never designed to make a new sect, or to give you a *nickname*." Only in an uncharacteristic moment did he appear to align himself with the language of the Fitch call. But with this new cry the separatist faction gained a momentum of its own, a momentum that Miller "feared." Shrinking from the brethren giving "another cry, *'Come out of her, my people,'*" Miller confided his anxiety: "I fear the enemy has a hand in this, to direct our attitude from the true issue, the midnight cry, *'Behold, the Bridegroom cometh.'*" The inclusive Bridegroom cry was drowned out by the exclusive Babylon cry.

Were the Millerite Adventists insiders or outsiders? Their hymns portray world-rejecting pilgrims. Their diaries of October 22, 1844, bespeak their aloneness. And the sermon, "Come Out of Her, My People" explicitly affirms that "outsiderness" in this order is a prerequisite to "kingdomness." It is perhaps less than surprising that biographers' reviews are mixed regarding the issue of outsiderness and mainstream. Clara Endicott Sears *(Days of Delusion: A Strange Bit of History)* and Francis D. Nichol (*The Midnight Cry: A Defense of the Character and Conduct of William Miller and the Millerites Who Mistakenly Believed That the Second Coming of Christ Would*

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Take Place in the Year 1844) are rivers apart. Sears, drawing largely on responses to her newspaper notices of the early 1920s that solicited recollections passed down from the Millerite era, places these deluded Millerites in a backwater swamp. Nichol, a self-proclaimed apologist, copiously footnotes the argument that while any broad-based social or religious movement includes "marshy spots along the banks, a backwater or stagnant lagoon here and there," the Millerites generally paddled their canoe down what could be regarded as a main watercourse of the mid-19th century.

On this point, current historians of the Millerite era—notably Whitney Cross, Ernest R. Sandeen, David Arthur, and David Rowe—come down distinctly closer to Nichol than to Sears. Sandeen, for example, notes that the traditional explanations of Millenarianism (disinheritance, crisis, hypocrisy, demagoguery, wild fanaticism) do not apply to either William Miller or his British premillennialist contemporaries. He in turn argues that revisionist history now charts such millenarian themes as biblicism, literalism, catastrophism, perfectionism (hope), and apocalypticism as much more mainstream than earlier historians suggested. Shifting focus from message to method, it is further noted that in contrast to their British cousins, the Millerites were less inhibited, more flamboyant, more given to extremes, and more tending toward sectarianism—"characteristics of the society as a whole at that time." That Miller's appeal was as broad as it was, especially up to the come-outer period, suggests that Miller was scratching where many people itched.

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Thus Miller's initial course is now charted far closer to mainstream waters than earlier histories record. That Miller's "expectancy" would not place him at odds with currents in the 1830s and 1840s is attested by Cross, who dubbs Millerism "the logical absolute of fundamentalist orthodoxy, as perfection was the extreme of revivalism." Those historians who challenge the textbook picture of the age of Jackson as an era of harmonious optimism also construct a more mainstream Miller. For a significant portion of the inhabitants of the Republic, the reformists had panned out small and their chants of optimism and human progress were suspected to be just so much whistling in the dark. Marvin Meyers suggests that these members of the Jacksonian rank and file were desperately anxious for assurance that America's quest to be the promised land amounted to more than wilderness wandering.

When Himes brought Miller to the cities in 1839, the movement fashioned by the Chardon Street pastor appeared to function reasonably within the parameters of "insiderness." Millerite leaders generally moved easily between Millerism and denominationalism. The revivalistic preaching of the Millerites was credited with building up con-

gregations among the various Protestant groups. Further, the experience of Himes—though the exception rather than the rule—demonstrates that the chief architect of the Millerite movement could concurrently direct several reform movements. Former reform leaders all, the movers and shakers of the Millerites would be joined by Himes in focusing exclusively on the imminent Second Coming, that event which would answer the yearnings for certainty, cast down the mighty, elevate the downtrodden, and usher in the utopia sought by Emerson's "Madmen, madwomen, men with beards, Dunkers, Miggletonians, Come-outers, Groaners, Agrarians, Seventh-Day Baptists, Quakers, Abolitionists, Calvinists, Unitarians, and Philosophers." Building on the enthusiasm begun with the Second Awakening heightened by Finney's New Measures, and kindled further by reformists of every hue, Miller promised more: the millennium. Now. About 1843. Miller's early cry, "The Bridegroom Cometh," was an inclusive cry that generally allowed the Millerites to function as insiders. Yet as the movement swept toward the day of Jubilee when "the sanctuary would be cleansed," separatist forces gained control. The pressure for selecting a specific date mounted steadily and the Millerites sounded the call to sever ties with the religious and civil established order. The cry, "Come out of her, my people!" was an exclusive cry that ordered Millerites to become outsiders.

That 50,000 Millerites waited expectantly and perhaps as many as one million onlookers waited anxiously suggests that Miller's followers represented a popular movement of some standing. They were ruggedly individual, woodenly literal, and hopelessly sectarian. They found an issue and they founded a movement. Were they outsiders to the American scene because they moved out? Or were they insiders because they founded a movement?

Is the Millerite experience capable of informing, inspiring, and infusing meaning in a world one and a half centuries removed from the Great Disappointment? To those evangelists still calculating the Coming with Newton's precision and not yet out of the 19th-century woods, the Millerite experience serves as a blunt reminder of what happens when the forest is obscured by the trees. In this state of "wooden literalism" individuals and communities are pushed further and further out on the proverbial limb. And when the end comes, it is an end informed less by Newton's numerical calculations than by his law of gravity.

But might the Millerite experience hold meaning for those who have long since wandered out of the 19th-century woods and who now bask in the enlightenment of the modern—even post-modern—age? The late Ernest R. Sandeen, a student of American and British millenarianism, suggests that 20th-century humankind still experiences some of the basic ambiguities that haunted Millerites and their ilk. The metaphor shifts—not inappropriate for students of the mainstream—from woods to rivers:

Nineteenth-century society was very much like its most famous mechanical invention, the steamboat. Many millenarian newspapers in that day carried a column entitled "Signs of the Times," which contained news of ominous events and portents of the end of the world. One of the most common items in those columns was the notice of the explosion of a steamboat. The steamboat harnessed new power and moved with unprecedented rapidity. It was exciting, but it was also dangerous. The passengers knew that their voyage might possibly end by their being blown to smithereens. In such a world, millenarianism was not out of place, nor will it ever disappear while men still yearn for deliverance from imminent destruction.[6]

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On November 3, 1842, the "Great Tent" was pitched in Newark, New Jersey, for a camp meeting. James Gordon Bennet, publisher of the New York Herald, *sent a staff writer to report the happenings. He illustrated his articles with several sketches. This one of Miller preaching is none too complimentary.*

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This engraving of the Second Coming pictures saints in ascension robes being taken up to heaven while others are being devoured by the fires of hell. It was apparently popular, for it was used in both 1843 and 1844.

elation to the American nation. Research for the article, which appeared in the Spring 1986 issue of Adventist Heritage, *was undertaken at Harvard University as the result of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. It will form the basis for the introductory chapter of an upcoming book tentatively titled* Remnant and Republic.

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