

Adventism and its Impact on the Cults

[Jon Taylor](#) February 22, 2018

The History of Adventism

I have, for many years, had an interest in reaching out with the gospel to those in other faiths, cults or groups with cult-like tendencies. It has always been a curious matter for me to explain why certain cults arose within a relatively short space of time (a matter of decades). Further, why several of those originated and located not far from each other in a particular geographical region within the United States. The answer seems to lie in that Adventism preceded the cults with an emphasis on a specific date when the Lord was expected to return.

Phil Johnson, Elder at Grace Community Church, preaching on whether Seventh Day Adventism is a cult, observed:

One of the classic works on quasi-Christian cult studies is a book titled [The Four Major Cults](#), by Anthony Hoekema. The four cults he deals with are [Christian Science](#), [Jehovah's Witnesses](#), [Mormonism](#), and [Seventh-day Adventism](#). It intrigues me that all four groups started in America. All of them began in the nineteenth century, in the wake of the religious fervor and perfectionist teaching that followed Charles Finney from New England across Pennsylvania to Oberlin Ohio. It was an era of significant religious confusion, homebrew doctrines, unchecked error. (Much like the evangelical movement today.) In the words of Scripture, "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" so you had both men and women starting their own religions. Most of them had deep roots in the superstitions of freemasonry, spiritism, and other occult beliefs. They blended their superstitions with biblical language. They claimed they had some new light received directly from heaven and people followed them in droves. The four major cults [Christian Science](#), [Jehovah's Witnesses](#), [Mormonism](#), and [Seventh-day Adventism](#) all were born within a 250 mile radius of each other.' [i](#)

The root of Seventh Day Adventism is found in a document written by William Miller in 1822 in upstate New York. Mormonism started in 1830, in Western New York, the first Seventh Day Adventist Church began in 1863, the Jehovah's Witnesses started in 1870 in Pittsburgh, the Christian Scientists began in Boston in 1879 and each group grew rapidly. [ii](#)

Similarly, John Thomas the original leader of the [Christadelphians](#) was a keen student of Bible prophecy and sailed to the USA. He lived in New York and had an interest in the Adventist movement. It is notable that they are another [non-Trinitarian cult that arose in the 1800's](#) from that locality.

Some have suggested that counterfeit movements crept in unnoticed on the bandwagon of genuine gospel proclamation and revival. It was a period of great religious fervour and excitement about the Lord's return and individuals starting new movements could quickly gain a following. Others may comment that there was room for individuals to express their religious freedom with a lesser degree of resistance than in other parts of the world. I am convinced that whilst those are important factors, there is more to it than that when we look at the history and the similarities of the movements stemming from Adventists in comparison with the cults.

[William Miller seems to have started a chain reaction with Adventism](#) and then many cults

developed rapidly. Coupled with this, there is a need to be aware of the incalculable damage that cult-like teaching inevitably causes within mainstream Christianity today. We must be careful not to be susceptible to the same resurfaced teachings and be fully equipped to reach others caught up with these doctrines so that we can reach them positively and lovingly with the true gospel once delivered to the saints.

Many doctrines of the cults are simply rebranded, renamed and repackaged forms of numerous heresies. They are easy to identify if you know what you are looking for and were refuted soundly and thoroughly in the early church. For example Arius rejected the equality of the Son and the Father as Jehovah's Witnesses do today. Oneness Pentecostalism is similar to that of Modalism in relation to their non-affirmation of the Trinity. Augustine alone refuted numerous heresies, as did Irenaeus before him. That is not to say that the author agrees on all secondary matters with either Augustine or Irenaeus. It is the primary doctrines that we are concerned with here. Furthermore it is so often characteristic of the cults or those who espouse cult-like teachings that secondary matters become elevated to such an extent that they becomes primary. This way a systematic theology becomes skewed resulting in a different gospel.

To ensure that I referred to some primary sources rather than relying entirely on what authors of my theological convictions have stated, I have made use of www.adventist.org which has been helpful. The fact that it is current is important to being accurate and representative, since views on several aspects have changed over the years.

I have also used a classic text '*The Four Major Cults*' by Anthony Hoekema. Some may argue it is quite dated, but it is actually very useful for the task in hand, namely the history of Adventism in relation to other cults. Hoekema was wisely insistent upon drawing from primary sources and recommended that others also follow that example [iii](#).

Lastly, I used 'A look into Seventh-Day Adventism' which was published twenty years ago by the Reachout Trust. In their efforts to provide a fair evaluation, they were in contact with the then Communication Director of the Seventh Day Adventist Church to obtain their 392 page book 'Seventh Day Adventists Believe' with a Biblical exposition of 27 of their fundamental doctrines [iv](#).

Since the focus of this article is the impact of Adventism on other cults, there are some areas in Seventh Day Adventism that are relatively unique and won't be mentioned in detail here. For instance Sabbath observance, the Investigative Judgement (the teaching that in 1844 Christ entered the heavenly sanctuary to commence the work of investigative judgement) and the doctrine of Satan as the scapegoat.

The Impact of Adventism on the Cults

1. The End of the world

It is probably no surprise if a Jehovah's Witness knocks on your door and, from the outset, asks you about the state of the world opening up a conversation on eschatology. A discerning Christian may well remind them that several predictions about the Second Coming have come and gone. Often a discussion follows about the precise meaning, interpretation and explanation of that. Similarly Adventists predicted the Second Coming and have been forced to offer alternative explanations.

You may well be asking, 'How did the original founders of these movements arrive at these

specific dates, not learn their lesson the first time round, and retain a significant proportion of their followers?’ On the official website of the Seventh Day Adventists, Elizabeth Lechleitner wrote an article entitled ‘Seventh-Day Adventist Church emerged from religious fervour of the 19th Century’. She tries to explain what is referred to as ‘[The Great Disappointment of October 22 1844](#), by mentioning that William Miller was a Baptist Minister, many were expecting the literal return of Christ and they weren’t surprised that he had set a date. [y](#)

It is interesting that Lechleitner recounts the significance of the context of the times, speaks dismissively of the Second Great Awakening, yet affirms that many Millerites left their movement.

But the Millerites’ belief in a literal Second Coming—[along with new understandings of prophecy](#), the seventh-day Sabbath and the state of the dead—would prove pivotal. These core doctrines would anchor the early Advent movement amid a climate of religious turmoil.

The U.S. Northeast in the early 19th Century was a hotbed of revival. The so-called Second Great Awakening ignited movements such as the Shakers, early Mormons, the forerunners of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Millerites and a host of eccentric offshoots. In fact, upstate New York was dubbed the “burned-over district,” referring to the fact that evangelists had exhausted the region’s supply of unconverted people.

In this climate, the Millerites weathered the Great Disappointment, when the group expectantly, but futilely, waited for Christ’s return. With what Adventist historian George Knight calls the “[mathematical certainty of their faith](#)” dashed, many Millerites deserted the movement. [vi](#)

Hoekema notes that Miller never became a Seventh-Day Adventist, though his prophecies are at the root of its history.

Though raised in a Christian home he had become a sceptic, even to the extent of rejecting the Bible as divine revelation. [vii](#) Afterwards, he studied for two years, aided by Cruden’s Concordance and, surprisingly, without the aid of commentaries, [determined in 1818](#) that the affairs of that present state would be wound up within around twenty five years.[viii](#) Though reluctant to publish his apparent findings, and following four years of further study, a friend encouraged him to publicly announce his views. This opened up [frequent requests for him to speak, and he became a Baptist preacher in 1834](#).[ix](#)

Miller performed ‘mathematical gymnastics’ in order to calculate when he thought the Lord would return. He somehow decided to combine the reference in Daniel 8:14 regarding the 2300 evenings and mornings which must elapse before the sanctuary would be cleansed^x (which refers to the Maccabean cleansing of the temple in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes) with the commencement of Daniel’s 70 week prophecy in 9:24-27. He assumed that the 2300 days were years and that Daniel’s prophecy in 8:14 started from Artaxerxes decree to enable Ezra to return to Jerusalem in Ezra 7:11-26^{xi}, not the command given by Artaxerxes to restore and rebuild Jerusalem in Nehemiah 2:1-10.

It becomes apparent that many leaders of these early cults were formerly from mainstream denominations and broke away, starting their own movements. William Miller was once a Baptist Preacher and Ellen White was formerly a Methodist. We should also bear in mind that cults frequently attempt to draw members from various churches.

It is not just the likes of the Jehovah's Witness and Adventists that have fallen prey to this type of end of world date setting. Today though, it is not uncommon to access teaching on some satellite channels where similar calculations are proposed again and again, often making great assumptions in their methods of calculation and interpretation. These supposed teachers usually comment that they are more certain now than people could have been in previous times because of specific events, or instead point towards a number of seemingly incredible occurrences that surely can't be a coincidence. Time and again people are sucked in, failing to take Matthew 24:36 seriously, or to observe how many times others have predicted the end of the world and woken up the next morning and nothing has changed.

2. The Trinity

Though Seventh Day Adventists state that they do uphold the co-equality contained within the Trinity nowadays, there were serious problems amongst some of their advocates from their early Adventist beginnings, remarkably similar to that which Jehovah's Witness teach. To quote Lechleitner again, we read the following.

'Modern Seventh-day Adventists might find early Adventist pioneers peculiar. Some didn't believe in the Trinity or the personhood of the Holy Spirit, and thought Christ was a created being. Many observed Sabbath from 6 p.m. Friday to 6 p.m. Saturday, regardless of actual sunset times. They also had no qualms over eating unclean meats. All this, however, would change in the coming decades'. [xii](#)

Some evangelicals state that the Seventh Day Adventists are a cult whilst others that it contains an element of cult-like teaching. Most cults will in some way attempt to undermine the Trinity or the Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. What is astounding from the above quote is that belief in the Trinity, personhood of the Holy Spirit, Sabbath observance and eating unclean meats are contained in the same paragraph, apparently as if of equal importance!

Similarly, Jehovah's Witness deny that the Holy Spirit is a person and the New World Translation, (see paragraph below) substitutes 'Spirit' for 'active force' in Genesis 1:2. This despite the fact that there are numerous references to personal characteristics of the Holy Spirit such as Ephesians 4:30 which remind us not to grieve the Holy Spirit. Clearly you cannot grieve a 'force.'

'Now the earth was formless and desolate, and there was darkness upon the surface of the watery deep, and God's active force was moving about over the surface of the waters.' (NWT) [xiii](#)

Another similarity is that while some of the Adventist pioneers, according to the official SDA website, thought Christ was a created being, the Jehovah's Witnesses maintain that Jesus isn't equal with the Father and have altered John 1:1 to uphold that, by changing 'was God' to 'was a God':

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god.' (NWT)

3. Michael the Archangel and the Clear Word Bible

Adventism preceded the Jehovah's Witnesses and other cults, although Jehovah's Witness either tend not to mention their links and similarities with Adventism, or to downplay them, it is

noticeable that they both state that Michael the Archangel is Jesus. Confusingly however, this doesn't mean that Seventh Day Adventists believe that Jesus is a created being and therefore not divine. Rather, they believe that when Michael was manifested in the Old Testament, that was the pre-incarnate Christ who wasn't created. [xiv](#)

In a peculiar reversal of scripture twisting the SDA's brought out the Clear Word Bible in 1994 as a devotional paraphrase which leans heavily towards supporting Adventist teaching. In the same way that Jehovah's Witness have had their version, the New World Translation, to justify their doctrines, the SDA's paraphrase affirms SDA teaching. In Revelation 12:7 of the Clear Word Bible, we now discover, from the text itself, that Michael is God's Son.

'This controversy between God and the dragon began years ago in heaven. God's Son Michael and the loyal angels fought against the dragon and his angels.' (CWB) [xv](#)

Matt Slick from Christian Research Apologetics Ministry also notes that, while SDA's affirm the Deity of Christ, the Clear Word Bible offers problematic citations more aligned to that of the Jehovah's Witness rather than what the Bible actually affirms. Note how John 8:58 and John 10:30 are weakened respectively, removing the essential 'I AM' statement and adding the 'so close, we're one' basing the statement on closeness as opposed to nature...

'Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.' (John 8:58)

'Jesus answered, "Because I existed before Abraham was born.' (CWB, John 8:58)

'I and the Father are one.' (John 10:30)

"You see, my Father and I are so close, we're one.' (CWB, John 10:30)

4. Authoritarian Leadership and Extra Biblical Revelation

It is interesting that William Miller was formerly a Baptist preacher though never joined the Seventh Day Adventists, although Charles Taze Russell who founded the Jehovah's Witness movement started out as a Seventh Day Adventist. [xvi](#) In 1840 and 1842, Miller lectured in Portland on the Second Advent and the Harmon family (Ellen White was formerly Ellen Gould Harmon) took on those teachings and were disfellowshipped from the Methodist Church. [xvii](#) The Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Scientists and Seventh Day Adventists all depend upon extra biblical revelation supplied by their founders. The Mormons have the Pearl of Great Price, Doctrines and Covenants and the Book of Mormon that they hold on the same level as the Bible and Joseph Smith claimed to have special revelation. Jehovah's Witnesses have the New World Translation developed from the teachings Charles Taze Russell which alters the meaning of several texts, particularly relating to the deity of the Lord. Mary Baker Eddy wrote 'Science and Health With Key to the Scriptures' which is her lens to interpret the Bible.

Some may say that Seventh Day Adventists don't quite fit into this category, though Ellen White's teachings are held in such high esteem it is difficult to even question them. Hoekema notes that although the authors of 'Questions on Doctrine' don't place her with those who wrote Scripture they do compare her with the prophets that lived during the two testaments but whose utterances were never included in the canon of Scripture. [xviii](#)

The Official Seventh Day Adventist site states the following...

'The Scriptures testify that one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and we believe it was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. Her writings speak with prophetic authority and provide comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction to the church. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by

which all teaching and experience must be tested. (Num. 12:6; 2 Chron. 20:20; Amos 3:7; Joel 2:28, 29; Acts 2:14-21; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; Heb. 1:1-3; Rev. 12:17; 19:10; 22:8, 9.) [xix](#)

From a cursory reading this may appear almost reasonable. However the ‘remnant church’ here means exclusively Seventh Day Adventists which is characteristic of other groups that claim they alone have special revelation, or teaching which other groups don’t have. In addition, Hoekema makes the following astute observation.

‘Though Seventh-Day Adventists claim to test Mrs White’s teachings by the Bible, they call her writings “inspired counsels from the Lord” and that “the Holy Spirit opened to her mind important events and called her to give instructions for these last days.” If this is so, however, who may criticize her writings? If they are inspired, they must be true. If her instructions come from the Holy Spirit, they must be true. How then could anyone dare to suggest that any of her instructions might be contrary to Scripture?’ [xx](#)

Though some of what Seventh Day Adventists teach today seems to be much less problematic than what was affirmed from the outset, we would be wise to consider some of the splinter groups that emerged late in the last century with their roots in Seventh Day Adventism. Some of these groups again had extreme authoritarian leaders with delusions of grandeur who were able to obtain a following and cause much harm. Phil Johnson notes that several cults broke away from Seventh Day Adventists including the **Branch Davidians**, the **Worldwide Church of God**, and the **Shepherd’s Rod**. [xxi](#)

Interestingly many of Ellen White’s visions occurred in public meetings and she would swoon and then claim to receive revelation from God; not really that different to some of the more extreme hyper-charismatic cults and cult-like leaders today.

5. Soul sleep and annihilation

Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Christadelphians hold the view that when a person dies, they immediately are no longer conscious until their resurrection. However Scripture affirms otherwise.

Psalms 16:10, 55:15, Isaiah 14:9-10 & Proverbs 23:14 demonstrate that there is life in Sheol after a person has physically died and gone there. [xxii](#) Luke 23:43, 2 Corinthians 5:1-8 and Philippians 1:23 affirm that at death our soul is separated from our body and goes immediately to be with the Lord, and Hebrews 12:23 confirms that the spirits of the dead are already with the Lord.

Again Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Christadelphians state that the wicked will be annihilated, though Scripture clearly teaches otherwise (Matt. 25:46; Rev. 14:11; 20:10).

6. Legalism

Many of the cults persist with legalistic doctrines. So many issues from Colossians 2:16-23, such as being judgemental over what is eaten, or esteeming certain days and intruding into those things which have not actually been seen, are applicable to Seventh Day Adventism. Romans 14 helps us to maintain a balance on secondary issues to enable unity on the essentials and avoid division on secondary matters. Consequently a form of legalism has resulted mainly through Ellen White’s teaching.

Whilst in one sense, avoiding alcohol, tea and coffee and keeping a diet that is similar to a kosher one could certainly be argued to have health benefits, this places a greater restriction than

necessary and is legalistic when enforced. Interestingly the Mormons also abstain from alcohol, tea and coffee too. Jehovah's Witnesses are burdened by the expected amount of hours that they are supposed to spend on the doors or on the street. At the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, the elders determined to place no greater burden than necessary upon the Gentile believers and Peter said 'Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear' (Acts 15:10)?

Conclusion

Adventism and the religious fervour during the 1800's in the United States had a massive impact on the cults which sprang up following the Great Disappointment in 1844. The similarities between some of the resultant cults are striking, not only with regard to the timing of their beginnings and their close locality, but their **obsession on predicting the exact date of the Lord's return**, the **extreme authoritarian styles of leadership**, and **spectacular claims to receiving special revelation**.

This over emphasis on Adventist date setting shattered the hopes of some, though rapidly gained the attention and excitement of others who broke into various divisions. **Their followers were kept interested by feeding an insatiable appetite for continual fresh revelation linked in with predicted dates of the Second Coming**. It also opened the door to all kinds of **errant teachings** such as those that undermine the Deity of the Lord Jesus, the Person of the Holy Spirit, equating Michael with Jesus, soul sleep, annihilationism and legalism.

The lack of discernment resembles in many ways the cult-like teaching that has swept some of the mega churches and the Christian media channels now. Many of the cult leaders were originally from well- established denominations and, worryingly, sought to recruit followers from those churches. The same is happening in our climate today. Those from the cults resent being identified as cults and somehow claim to have a unique revelation though consider themselves as sound in the faith. They claim to affirm the Bible but interpret the Bible from extra-biblical writings or teachings and attempt to prove that they can be reconciled. The ones that are blurred round the edges are in some ways the most dangerous since they are the hardest to identify, though a lack of clarity is a tell-tale sign of unorthodox doctrine. The lesson for today is not to deviate from Scripture, to hold to the gospel and to learn from the past.

[i](#)Phil Johnson (Grace Life Elder) [Is Seventh Day Adventism a Cult?](#)

[ii](#)Ibid

[iii](#)Anthony A. Hoekema The Four Major Cults (William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids; 1986), pxii

[iv](#)A Look into...Seventh-Day Adventism A Biblical Investigation (Reachout Trust; 1997), p3

[v](#) [Elizabeth Lechleitner February 4th 2013](#)

[vi](#)Ibid

[vii](#)Hoekema, p89

[viii](#)Ibid, 89

[ix](#)Ibid, 90

[xIbid, 90](#)

[xiIbid, 90](#)

[xii Elizabeth Lechleitner February 4th 2013](#)

[xiii Genesis 1:2 NWT](#)

[xivMatt Slick The Clear Word Bible, Jesus and Michael the Archangel](#)

[xvIbid,](#)

[xviJohnson, Is Seventh Day Adventism a Cult?](#)

[xviiHoekema, p97](#)

[xviiiIbid, 102](#)

[xix The Gift of Prophecy](#)

[xxHoekema, p103](#)

[xxiJohnson](#)

[xxiiReachout Trust, p12](#)

XX

8

[This page](#) provides a brief history of early days of restorationist starting in the 15th century. As we get close to the mid 1800's certain names of persons who would have some influence and association with Charles Taze Russell are mentioned.

One named George Storrs was a highly respected minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church. After he read a pamphlet penned by Henry Grew, that exposed the teachings of the immortality of the soul and hellfire as unscriptural, Storr began a diligent study of his own that at one point lead him to the teachings of the Adventist preacher William Miller.

It was Miller who:

was expecting the visible return of Christ in 1843. For about two years, Storrs was actively involved in preaching this message throughout the northeastern United States. After 1844, he would no longer go along with setting any date for Christ's return, yet he did not object if others wanted to investigate chronology. Storrs believed that Christ's return was near and that it was important for Christians to keep awake and spiritually alert, ready for the day of inspection. But he parted company with Miller's group because they accepted unscriptural doctrines, such as the immortality of the soul, the burning of the world, and the absence of any hope for everlasting life for those who die in ignorance.

George Storrs died in December 1879, at his home in Brooklyn, New York, just a few blocks from what would later become the focal point of the global preaching campaign that he had so eagerly anticipated.

Storrs it seems is the only person mentioned in the history of Jehovah's Witnesses that had a brief association with Millerite Adventism.

2 things that should be noted:

1. Storrs is not a founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses.
2. Millerite Adventism ([Millerism](#)) is not the same as Seventh Day Adventism.

Storrs was respected by Charles Russell who said of him:

The Lord gave us many helps in the study of His word, among whom stood prominently, our dearly beloved and aged brother, George Storrs, who, both by word and pen gave us much assistance; but we ever sought not to be followers of men, however good and wise, but 'Followers of God as dear children.'"

Yes, sincere Bible students could benefit from the efforts of men like Grew and Storrs, but it still was vital to examine God's Word, the Bible, as the real source of the truth.

Another early restorationist named [Jonas Wendell](#) was a zealous Adventist preacher following in the spirit of William Miller.

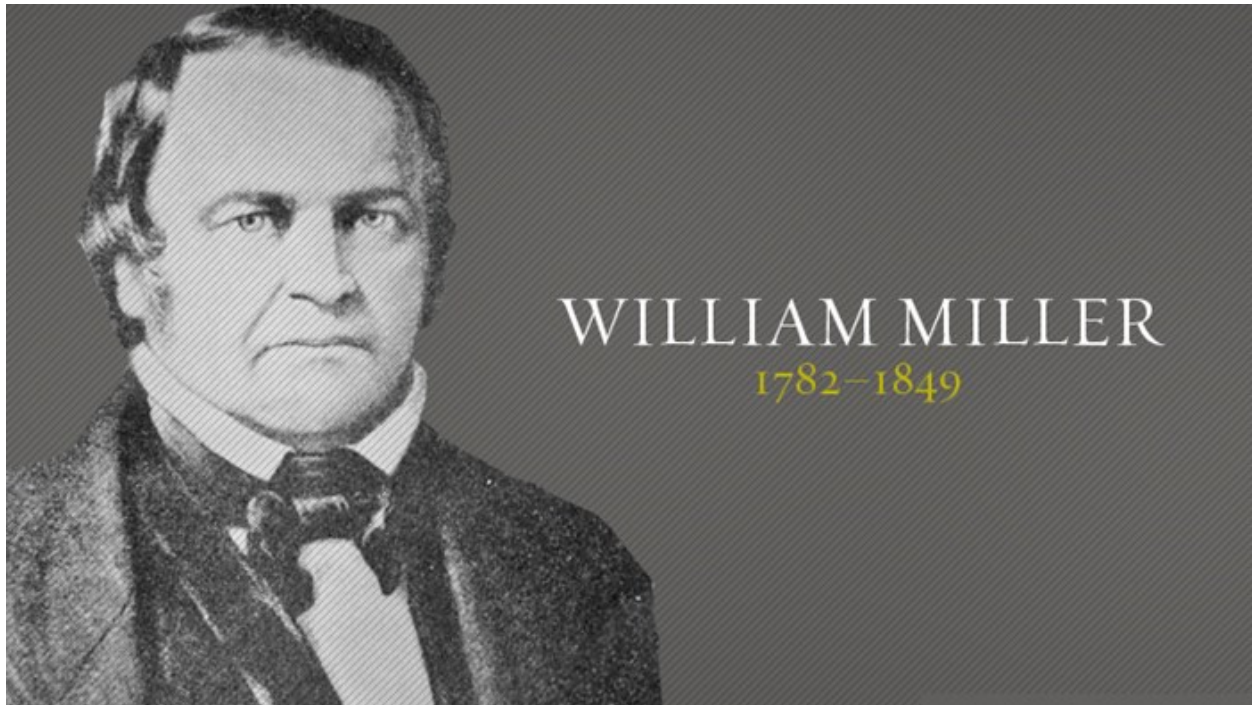
Unknown to him, attendance at one of his presentations restored Charles Taze Russell's faith in the Bible as the true word of God, leading to Russell's ministry.

Still in answer to your question Russell was not at anytime an Adventist himself and in particular not SDA.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

William Miller

Mistaken founder of Adventism



"We have passed what the world calls the last round of 1843 ... Does your heart begin to quail? Or are you waiting for your blessed hope in the glorious appearing of Jesus Christ?"

Current Issue

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In recent years, we have almost come to expect the well-publicized reports from Bible-belt Texas and avant-garde California of a self-proclaimed prophet announcing the end of the world. He attracts a large following or triggers a near panic—and ends up wrong. The most famous case on American soil, however, took place in the northeastern United States just before the Civil War.

The prophet of doom was no bug-eyed fanatic. He was a square-jawed, honest, church-going farmer named William Miller.

A former captain in the War of 1812, Miller converted from Deism in 1816. Excited, he began to "search the Scriptures" for the truth. After two years he was convinced he understood them—especially Daniel 8:14: "Unto 2,300 days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed."

The cleansing of the sanctuary, Miller believed, could only mean the purging of the earth by fire—in short, the end of the world.

By interpreting these prophetic days as years and beginning from the date of the prophecy (placed by James Ussher at 457 B.C.), Miller concluded that the end of the 2,300 "days" would fall in 1843: "I was thus brought to the solemn conclusion that in about 25 years from that time all the affairs of our present state would be wound up."

Marketing Miller

At first Miller was reluctant to reveal his secret. He had grown up in Low Hampton, New York, near the Vermont border. He married in 1803 and moved to Poultney, Vermont, where he farmed and served as a simple sheriff and justice of the peace. But in 1828, he felt an inward "call" to tell the world of his discovery. "I tried to excuse myself," he later wrote, "I told the Lord that I was not used to speaking ... that I was slow of speech and slow of tongue. But I could get no relief."

Timeline	
1754	French & Indian War
1776	United States Declaration of Independence
1780	Robert Raikes begins his Sunday school
1782	William Miller born
1849	William Miller dies
1851	Harriet Beecher Stowe releases <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i>

By 1831 he found the courage to share his discovery with neighbors and friends. When asked to discuss his views in a nearby church, he suddenly discovered that on this one subject he could be eloquent. Invitations multiplied, and Miller gained a bit of local notoriety. Though never ordained, his status was regularized in 1833 with a license to preach.

Then two events combined to give Miller a much larger audience. First, in 1838 he published his *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ, About the Year 1843*. Next he made an excursion to the large cities in New England for a series of lectures. At Exeter, New Hampshire, he met Joshua V. Himes, pastor of the Chardon Street Baptist Chapel in Boston. Himes sensed immediately the power in the message of the quiet, middle-aged farmer, and he joined Miller as his manager and publicity agent. Himes equipped Miller with a great chart displaying the millennial calculations in graphic form, purchased the biggest tent in the country for his meetings, and edited two journals—New York's *Midnight Cry* and Boston's *Signs of the Times*.

Miller the man was transformed overnight into the Millerite Movement. Himes and his associates recruited other evangelists and sent them on speaking tours; organized camp meetings; and published tracts, books, and pamphlets.

As the dreaded year approached, Miller's preaching drew larger crowds. In six months, he delivered more than 300 lectures with the constant theme: Are you ready to meet your Savior?

Mobs of angry citizens tried to break up some of the meetings. Miller himself was pelted with eggs and decaying vegetables. But the crowds grew larger and the number of converts mounted. More than 50,000 believed Miller, and as many as a million others were curious and expectant.

Setting a date

With excitement rising, people began to demand a definite day for the Lord's appearance. Miller was reluctant to be more specific, but in January 1843, he announced that this Hebrew year—March 21, 1843, to March 21, 1844—must see the end of time. But, he pleaded, if the estimate should prove slightly inaccurate, his followers should have faith that their deliverance would come soon, in God's appointed time.

As the year progressed, tension mounted, especially when a comet suddenly appeared in the heavens. There were huge meetings in New York and Philadelphia, but dates for future gatherings were announced with the proviso "if time continues."

Miller was ill through most of 1843, and his lieutenants, many far less cautious than the old soldier, carried on the fight. Their radicalism added to the weary prophet's pain.

The opening days of 1844 found Miller, then 62, at home resting from a strenuous speaking tour—85 lectures in eight weeks. But he believed firmly that the end was near. Aware of the scoffers, he thought it time to write "to second advent believers" a few words of encouragement:

We have passed what the world calls the last round of 1843 ... Does your heart begin to quail? Or are you waiting for your blessed hope in the glorious appearing of Jesus Christ? Let me say to you in the language of the blessed Book of God, 'although it tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not tarry.' Never has my faith been stronger than at this very moment.

Then March 21, 1844, came—and nothing happened. After a month, Miller confessed his error and acknowledged his disappointment. But one of his followers pointed to other verses (Hab. 2:3, Lev. 25:9) and explained there must be a "tarrying time" of seven months and ten days.

So October 22, 1844, became the new day of Christ's return, and people were rallied again with the slogan: "The Tenth Day of the Seventh Month." Miller was finally converted to the new date. "I see a glory in the seventh month," he said. "Thank the Lord, O my soul! ... I am almost home." The excitement revived, and the number living on the edge of eternity seemed to be greater than ever.

When the second date came and went, just as the first one, most of Miller's followers were completely disillusioned. Many became bitter toward Miller, who lived until 1849, and died a discredited, almost forgotten man.

In spite of the "great disappointment," as it came to be called, some adventists remained steadfast. One small group in New England led by James White and his wife, Ellen Gould White, became the Seventh-Day Adventist Church we know today. Other adventists met in Albany in

1845 to form a conference that later splintered into three groups. One of these is today called Second Advent Christians. They believe Miller was wrong on the time, but this was a minor matter. He was right on the essential: Christ is coming soon.

Millennialism in England

Introduction

A Brief History of Prophetic Movements 1788-1832

1. The commentaries on millenarian enthusiasm [\[1\]](#) reproduced in this edition date from two significant periods in the career of a onetime religious and political radical, who was so fascinated by prophecy that he portrayed it in poem after poem. Robert Southey was a friend of prophets and their followers when in 1796 he published the epic *Joan of Arc*, in which the central focus is on the power of Joan's prophetic conviction to inspire both herself and others. He followed it with the Arabian epic *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801), in which the hero is named as one of the Taliban—Muslim fanatics believing themselves to be called by God to stamp out corruption and heresy, even at the cost of their own lives. His next epic *Madoc* (1805), featured a Native American prophet, Neolin, who enthralled his tribe, persuading them he could propitiate the gods and foresee future events. And *The Curse of Kehama* (1810) demanded that readers, if they were to follow its plot with interest, must suspend their disbelief in Hindu 'superstitions'.

2. Given Southey's abiding interest in the nature and culture of prophetic belief, it is not surprising that he should have provided some of the first detailed accounts of the prophetic movements of his time. The first, from [his mock-travelogue *Letters from England by Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella*](#) was written between 1805-07, when Southey, settled in Keswick and remote from the radical acquaintances of his 1790s' years in Bristol, was revising his political and religious views in the wake of Napoleonic aggression in Iberia. The second, [a piece from the *Quarterly Review of 1809*](#), shows him gathering information about religious sects in America and their relationship to millenarianism in Britain. The third, an [extract from his 1820 *Life of Wesley*](#), appeared when he, faced by the revival of radical agitation in the years of the Peterloo Massacre and the trial of Queen Caroline, made it his business to detect threats to the established church and state and to diagnose their underlying causes. Here, he cites examples of popular enthusiasm to demonstrate that even Wesley, though often cautious about such manifestations, sometimes gave them credit. Yet he is still an admirer of Wesley, both for having the charisma to awaken people's spiritual consciences and for directing the movement he began disinterestedly, rather than for self-glorification or political influence (the operative contrast being with Lord George Gordon). The fourth is [an article from the *Quarterly Review of 1822*](#), surveying popular prophetic movements in the past and present in great detail. This piece constitutes one of the most comprehensive studies of millenarian enthusiasm to be published in the Romantic era. In all these commentaries, it is apparent that Southey viewed religious enthusiasm as a quintessential part of the spirit of the age, a social phenomenon with political ramifications, capable of fomenting revolutionary fervour.

3. How perceptive was he? To what extent, looking back from the twenty-first century, does Southey's diagnosis ring true? And how do the details that he put into print for the first time—details, for example, of the Avignon prophets [William Bryan](#) and [John Wright](#), of [Richard Brothers](#) and of [Joanna Southcott](#)—resonate in the wider context of prophetic writing in the period? To answer these questions it is necessary to survey the history of prophecy and of the culture in which it was received.

4. In 1780 most Britons, whether they were Anglicans or dissenters, accepted the conventional Christian teaching that the millennium was a distant event. They believed in the gradual passage of the present, sinful, world into the reign of Christ at some unknown time in the future. After a thousand years of Christ's kingdom on earth, judgment and apocalypse would occur. **By the 1790s, things had changed:** after the unprecedented upheaval of the **French Revolution** many abandoned the conventional view and **expected the millennium to arrive in their own lifetime, preceded by apocalyptic destruction.** **This expectation was shared by poets and political leaders as well as sectarians and self-styled prophets.** It was reflected in the verse of self-taught writers such as Joanna Southcott and William Blake and in the prose of university-educated scholars such as G. S. Faber and S. T. Coleridge. **Social reformers, clerical conservatives and religious revolutionaries all preached versions of the ancient belief, set down in the books of Daniel and Revelation, that the world would be convulsed by apocalyptic destruction only to be renewed in a millennium of peace and plenty.** In the words of historian W. H. Oliver, millenarianism was 'distributed over English society as a whole, and was felt by every group, from landed proprietors to out-of-work factory hands'. [\[2\]](#)

5. The prophetic movements of the French Revolutionary period have been studied by numerous historians, in the wake of the groundbreaking assessment of millenarian and radical politics in E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). Thompson's discussion of the impact on nineteenth-century society of Richard Brothers and Joanna Southcott ensured that popular millenarianism would no longer be dismissed as the fantasy of crackpots. Subsequently, more detailed work by Clarke Garrett and J. F. C. Harrison revealed the sheer extent to which millenarianism—and the interconnected practices of mesmerism, mysticism and popular medicine—shaped British radicalism in the aftermath of the French Revolution. [\[3\]](#) Millenarianism was not an addition to radical politics but one of the principal discourses in which that politics was formulated, and not only for the urban labouring class but also, as Garrett and Oliver reveal, for 'respectable' middle-class dissenters such as Joseph Priestley and Richard Price. Indeed, it was Price who, in a 1789 sermon to the London Revolution Society, imagined that events in France would bring about an era in which the nations 'would beat (as Isaiah prophesies) their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks'. [\[4\]](#) Priestley went further still, abandoning his earlier belief in a gradual progress to a distant millennium and announcing that the violence of the French Revolution was fulfilling Daniel's prophecies that a fifth monarchy, ruled by the Son of Man, would supersede all others. [\[5\]](#)

6. The flavour of this radical conflation of contemporary world events and biblical texts is revealed in the diary of Thomas Holcroft. On 20 February 1799, after Napoleon's defeat in Egypt, Holcroft called on William Sharp, the engraver and radical campaigner, and

paid him for his print of *The Sortie of Gibraltar*; which he said ... was the last on such a subject, meaning the destruction of war, that would ever be published... The wisdom of the Creator had occasioned all our miseries: but the tongue of wisdom was now subdued, meaning Egypt, which was not only a slip of land resembling a tongue, but the place in which the learning of the world originated. Thus, by the help of a pun and a metaphor, he had double proof... Syria, Palestine, and all these countries are soon to be revolutionized; and those who do not take up arms against their fellow men, are to meet at the Grand Millennium. [6]

Horrified at this kind of optimistic interpretation of revolutionary violence, Edmund Burke depicted Price, Priestley, and their fellow millenarians as dangerous subversives, comparing them with the regicide sectarians of Britain's revolution of the 1640s. From then on, millenarianism, real and accused, became a crucial factor in the vituperative war of words that polarized British politics and precipitated the imprisonment of many opponents of the government.

7. Millenarianism became a feature of the urban, artisan culture that produced the political societies that the government feared would bring about revolution. William Sharp was a not untypical example: a member of the London Corresponding Society, he associated with other millenarians and sectarians, including [William Bryan](#). Like many dissenting Londoners, he already had a history of millenarian faith. Followers of Emmanuel Swedenborg (including, for a short time, William Blake) believed that the millennium had already arrived. Faced with dissension in their New Jerusalem church, however, many transferred their allegiance to the most famous and extraordinary millenarian prophet to emerge in the 1790s—[Richard Brothers](#). Brothers, as Morton D. Paley has shown, had begun prophesying in 1792. [7] Then, he had declared that Britain's war with revolutionary France presaged the 'fall of Monarchy in Europe'. [8] By 1795 he was announcing that God had commanded him to bear witness that George III would deliver up his crown to him. London was Babylon; the British monarchy was the Beast of the Book of Revelation: both would be destroyed by an apocalyptic earthquake with only those who followed Brothers to Jerusalem escaping to found a new millennium there. Brothers announced himself to be the prince of the Israelites, sent by God to lead the Hebrews back to the promised land.

8. Brothers scheduled the earthquake for 4 June. Unfortunately for him, he was not by that time on his way to the Holy Land, but confined, by order of the Lord Chancellor, in a private madhouse. Alarmed by Brothers' statements, the ministry had had him arrested, on 4 March, on the charge of 'wickedly writing, publishing, and printing various fantastical prophecies, with intent to cause dissension and other disturbances within the realm'. [9] According to the *Times*, the arrest was justified, for Brothers had 'become the tool of a faction, employed to seduce the people, and to spread fears and alarms'. [10] Visited by known radicals, [11] Brothers, in the ministry's eyes, threatened to bring about revolution and regicide by harnessing religious fervour to democratic politics—and this at a time of millenarian preaching by reformers such as

Coleridge, who viewed the French Revolution as the beginning of the Last Days, heralding apocalypse. James Gillray illustrated the government's fear with a caricature in which Brothers appears as an agent of revolutionary France, against a backdrop of a burning London. [\[12\]](#)

9. Brothers seemed dangerous to the government because the millenarian ideology of reformers such as Price and Priestley, taken into the working classes by charismatic figures such as Brothers, resembled the radical Protestantism of the seventeenth century. Then, groups such as the Muggletonians had supported the overthrow of the monarchy in the name of millenarian religion. Now, dissenters were consciously reviving their ideas and those of men such as the regicide John Milton, who, in his political tracts, *Of Reformation* and *Areopagitica*, had identified the English republic of the 1640s with the prophesied second coming of Christ, the 'shortly-expected king'. This heady brew of prophecy and politics had issued in the execution of Charles I. Now, Pitt and his ministers, after George III was attacked in his carriage on the way to open Parliament, were desperate to prevent a repeat. They had Coleridge, admirer of Priestley and Milton and writer of millenarian poetry that condemned Britain's rulers, spied upon. And as a warning to millenarian radicals, they had Gilbert Wakefield, a retiring classical scholar influenced by Milton's writings, thrown in prison. Wakefield had been typical of many dissenters in adopting the tones of a seer, as this example of his work from 1796 reveals: 'I see that deluge of mighty waters gradually subside into their wonted channel: I see them flow with a majestic tranquility to the ocean, and all the traces of their former ravages obliterated by one extensive and expanding Paradise of verdure, fertility, and beauty'. [\[13\]](#) Wakefield's flood is the deluge of the French Revolution. He welcomes it because it promises, in the pattern of millenarian religious dissent, a paradise of beauty after its awful destructiveness. Wakefield's imprisonment told other millenarian writers that a gentlemanly education and a retiring scholarly life would not save them from prosecution. Prophetic texts, as well as agitation on the streets, could put one's liberty in danger. By 1798 Brothers languished in a madhouse, Wakefield rotted in jail, Priestley fretted in America. Government repression seemed to have stamped out religious radicalism.

10. Millenarianism proved a hardier plant than the ministry expected, although it persisted in different forms, some simply less visible, others less immediately worrying. A less visible form was Mesmerism, a practice based on the belief that humans could learn to channel, for the benefit of others, the universal ether of which the world was created. To orthodox scientists and priests, Mesmerism and millenarianism went together. They were an infectious new plague: the Edinburgh chemist John Robison, for instance, feared the 'almost irresistible' influence of an association dedicated to 'rooting out all the religious establishments, and overturning the existing governments of Europe'. The members of this association were, he diagnosed, 'Magicians-Magnetisers-Exorcists, &c'. [\[14\]](#) And for former radical W. H. Reid, millenarian medicine threatened London itself: a set of 'Infidel mystics', 'made up of Alchymists, Astrologers, Calculators, Mystics, Magnetizers, Prophets, and Projectors', had embraced the politics of France and were spreading democracy among the 'lower orders'. [\[15\]](#) Mesmerism and millenarianism appealed to the 'lower orders' because they gave power to men who were otherwise powerless—excluded by poverty and/or faith from voting or holding office: men like the engraver [William Bryan](#), who after visiting the secret Society of Avignon became a healer

and magnetist in Bristol. The painter Phillipe De Loutherborg also thought himself to be empowered to manipulate divine grace for medicinal purposes. He became a faith healer as well as a kabbalistic hermeneutist and apocalyptic artist.

11. If faith healing was a displaced form of millenarianism (an attempt to realize the prophet's role at the level of the body), then so was the political philosophy of William Godwin, himself a lapsed dissenting minister. Godwin's *Essay Concerning Political Justice* (1793) was ostensibly atheist. Yet, although he rejected the Christianity he had once taught, Godwin retained in his secular vision of historical progress the pattern of millennialist belief. As men became more rational and desires withered, government would also die away because men would act for what they reasoned to be right—the greater good of all. Even sexual desires would be replaced by a recognition of what was reasonable. Godwin attacked marriage as ‘the worst of all laws’ and ‘the worst of all properties’, [16] and envisaged a slow, natural progression to a rational, communal society, to an anarchistic millennium in which people would live without private property or government, in equality and peace. He offered, that is to say, a secularized and politicized version of the Christian belief in a slow transition of this world to the millennial one, without apocalyptic destruction intervening. Because of this long timescale, and because Godwin thought the transition was inevitable, requiring no immediate political action to bring it about, the government did not prosecute him. And his vogue was in any case brief. Nevertheless, Godwin was a continuing influence on Coleridge and Wordsworth, who retained the imprint of his ideas even though they came to reject his exclusive emphasis on rationalism. And Godwin inspired Percy Shelley, helping to shape some of the greatest millenarian poetry of the age in *Prometheus Unbound*.

12. Godwin's philosophical millennialism may have appealed to poets, but it revolted conservative politicians and Christian philosophers. In 1798 the Revd. Thomas Malthus challenged it in a seminal work whose continuing cultural power often obscures the fact that it was the mirror image of the millennialist system it was designed to refute. Malthus charged Godwin with naive prophesying and set out to answer him in statistical and empiricist terms. But Malthus also adopted prophetic tones: he adapted the language of the Bible and of Milton to depict humanity facing a perpetual apocalypse without a millennium to follow it:

The power of population is so superior to the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race. The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction; and often finish the dreadful work themselves. But should they fail in this war of extermination, sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and ten thousands. Should success be still incomplete, gigantic inevitable famine stalks in the rear, and with one mighty blow levels the population with the food of the world. [17]

Malthus's arguments achieved great and lasting power. He had spoken to Britons' fears about increasing population and poverty among the labouring classes and had voiced their anxieties about national immorality and possible defeat in the war with France. Much of the public subscribed to Malthus's apocalyptic vision of a nation deserving war, plague, famine and

pestilence, as Revelation suggested, if it did not mend its ways. So convincing was Malthus's combination of statistical 'proof' and prophetic rhetoric that the government introduced measures designed to discourage the poor from having large families. For many churchmen too, Malthus had proved the habits of rural labourers to be not only immoral but a threat to national prosperity. Malthus's apocalyptic scenario encouraged Evangelical clerics to reform the poor, while his analysis prompted secular economists to apply statistics to the study of society.

13. [Joanna Southcott](#) had plenty of experience of rural poverty and the social tensions it provoked. A former servant in rustic Devon, she had little education or wealth. But she had self-belief, and a gift for prediction that appealed to people (especially women) of her background all over rural England. So when she arrived in London in 1802, she was already a self-proclaimed prophet with an established following. [\[18\]](#) She rapidly attracted many of Brothers' followers, including William Sharp, who tried to make William Blake a Southcottian too. [\[19\]](#) Although Brothers himself disowned her, Southcott continued to win support, hinting that she was the woman mentioned in Genesis 3:15 whose 'seed' would bruise the head of the serpent. She offered visions of the New Jerusalem in which her followers would live after the 'woman clothed with the sun' had given birth to 'a man child, who was to rule all nations'. [\[20\]](#) This event, according to the Book of Revelation, would precipitate the apocalyptic battle in which Satan would be cast down.

14. Southcott gained a remarkable hold on the popular imagination—as many as 100,000 may, by 1808, have accepted the seals of salvation she issued. And the hold was long-lived, for even after she died, in 1814, having announced she was pregnant with the child who would rule in the coming millennium, many of her followers continued to look for the Shiloh she had borne. At least two men tried to fill the role: testament to the continuing need throughout the Romantic period to believe in a divine intervention that would transform living conditions and bring about peace, security and wealth on this earth. To a nation facing economic depression and unprecedented social change, the appeal of Southcott is understandable.

15. Southcott steered deliberately clear of the political radicalism with which Brothers had been associated. Her writing was avowedly loyal to the government and in this it was similar to the millenarian prophecies of a number of well-educated, higher-class, exegetes of scripture. The appeal of millenarianism was not confined to urban artisan radicals and to the labouring poor by any means. Bishops and dons also felt the need to interpret the European war that followed the French Revolution as the fulfilment of Old Testament predictions. They differed, however, from Priestley, Price and Brothers on the question of whether Britain was to be singled out by God as one of the sinful monarchies deserving destruction or whether it would be the nation chosen to restore the Jews to the New Jerusalem. Samuel Horsley was a successful churchman—a bishop and a fellow of the Royal Society—when, responding to the French Revolution, he turned to prophesying. Horsley regarded the 'French Democracy, from its infancy to the present moment', as 'a conspicuous and principal branch at least of the western Antichrist'. [\[21\]](#) The rise of the Antichrist would, as predicted in Daniel, accompany 'a dissolution of the whole fabric of the external world' and then the second coming. [\[22\]](#) Napoleon's appearance was a stage in the rising of the Antichrist too: it was Britain's prophetic destiny to resist him.

16. G. S. Faber, fellow of Lincoln College Oxford and then prebend of Salisbury Cathedral, agreed. Like Horsley, a successful pillar of the established church, Faber was no radical. He too saw the progress of the French Revolution as evidence that the triumph of the Antichrist was at hand, preceding apocalypse and the return of the Jews to the New Jerusalem. The battle of Trafalgar, Faber thought, might be evidence that Britain was the great ‘maritime power’, the messenger nation of Isaiah 18, which would alone be saved like ‘a column in the midst of surrounding ruins [w]hile mighty empires totter to their base, and while Antichrist advances with rapid strides to his predicted sovereignty over the enslaved kings’. [23] James Hatley Frere was still more specific in his identification of Napoleon as the Beast of Revelation who would reign in Rome and Palestine as a false Messiah. In their many books, Horsley, Faber and Frere ranged their millenarianism against the political radicalism that coloured the prophetic interpretations of contemporary history made by men such as Price, Priestley, and, at least in the 1790s, Coleridge too. Britain, they implied, was far from being one of the sinful monarchies to be cast down, as the Bible predicted. Instead, it might be the nation chosen by God to lead people to the New Jerusalem.

17. Faber and Frere were interpreters, men whose prophetic activities were confined to writing. But by the 1820s one of their students had turned to action. Millenarian prophecy often went hand-in-hand with new and ‘alternative’ practices in which the body was viewed as the source of spiritual power. This was the case in the church of the Revd. Edward Irving, a Scots preacher and protégé of Coleridge, whose apocalyptic sermons won him fame in 1820s London. Irving credited Coleridge with helping him to see the ‘error under which the whole of the Church is lying, that the present world is to be converted unto the Lord, and so slide by a natural inclination into the Church—the present reign of Satan hastening, of its own accord, into the millennial reign of Christ’. [24] Influenced by Coleridge’s views, Irving came to believe in the necessity of an apocalypse to convulse the sinful world into a millennial one. But he became a far more literal and dogmatic interpreter of scripture than Coleridge ever was. The French Revolution, he believed, had precipitated the pouring out of the six vials of wrath upon the Beast. Now, after thirty years, the seventh was about to be poured. Destruction and renewal was at hand; the dead would live again on earth with the returned Christ.

18. These views, announced in stirring sermons, made Irving a fashionable sensation and drew to his Regent Square church a devoted following. But **Irving’s views were not in themselves extraordinary**, for he was himself a follower of Frere who interpreted the Napoleonic wars in the light of the Bible and espoused, as a result, anti-democratic politics. Irving had offered himself to Frere ‘as your pupil, to be instructed in prophecy’ in 1824. [25] And his own views revealed Frere’s influence. Coleridge, though by the 1820s sharing their dislike of political radicalism, found them both too literal and blindly subjective: he wrote that they took ‘out of their Bible what they had themselves put in’. [26] Yet Coleridge himself was sure that the predictions of the Bible prophets would come true, if unsure of when or how. In 1830 Thomas Chalmers reported him ‘unfolding his own scheme of the Apocalypse—talking of the mighty contrast between its Christ and the Christ of the Gospel narrative, Mr. Coleridge said that Jesus did not come now as before—meek and gentle, healing the sick and feeding the hungry, and

dispensing blessings all around, but he came on a white horse; and who were his attendants?—famine, and war, and pestilence’ .[\[27\]](#)

19. Still millenarian after all those years, Coleridge admired Irving’s prophetic person if not his actual interpretations. In 1829 he declared that the Scot had ‘more of the Head and Heart, the Life, the Uncion, and the genial power of MARTIN LUTHER than any man now alive’ .[\[28\]](#) Irving seemed to embody the vatic role that Coleridge had previously seen as the prerogative of Wordsworth (whom he likened to a prophet in his ‘Lines to William Wordsworth’). He was a Romantic genius, ‘a mighty wrestler in the cause of Spiritual Religion’, albeit one in need of guidance. [\[29\]](#)

20. Ironically enough, it was Irving’s assumption of spiritual power, his attempt to be a prophet in person rather than just, like Frere and Faber, an interpreter of prophecy, that brought about his downfall. By 1831 he was presiding over church services in which those who came to hear his oratory began to writhe in ecstasy. The London air was thick with unknown languages as his followers found themselves, like the apostles, speaking in tongues, ‘prophesying’, and performing miracles of spiritual healing. Irving believed that the Holy Spirit was making itself manifest in their bodies; the renewal of the human by the spiritual that was promised at the millennium materialized in his congregation’s flesh. It was all too literal and untrammelled for the church authorities. Irving was deprived of his ministry and condemned for heretical doctrine. Although Coleridge bemoaned his treatment and regretted his excesses, Irving was set on his path: he established his own church, in which glossalalia and faith healing still featured, until dissension broke it apart and he fell into obscurity.

21. Irving’s failure was by no means the end of millenarianism. As W. H. Oliver records, exegetes and sect leaders continued, as the nineteenth century wore on, to promise the coming of Christ’s kingdom on earth. But Irving was the last millenarian to make a strong impression on, and to have a strong impression made on him by, Romanticism. By 1832, with the French Revolution and the Napoleonic war long over, millenarianism was no longer a cultural force and religious mode through which young intellectuals defined themselves. The poverty and unrest that helped to fuel it still existed: the year 1831 saw rioting on a countrywide scale as rural labourers suffered hunger. But too many prophets had prophesied, too many days of predicted destruction gone without incident, for most people to view political strife as a sign of the coming apocalypse. If the French Revolution had once seemed a millennial ‘new dawn’ and an apocalyptic ‘blood-dimmed tide’, it had by now become a familiar, compromised affair.

22. Yet the French Revolution was never the sole cause of the intensification of millenarianism that characterized the Romantic period. Movements such as Southcott’s and Irving’s, with their emphasis on miraculous occupation of the body by the Holy Spirit, bespoke the need of many in the period to restore power to the human, in an country where more and more people were subjected to the inhuman discipline of factory, clock and technology and where knowledge was increasingly institutionalized and bureaucratized, taken out of ordinary people’s hands. Southcott and Irving were, that is to say, extreme cases, physically literal versions, of a response that many in contemporary Britain felt compelled to make, turning to the Bible as one of the few authorities with which they could resist the domination of life by

technologies and institutions. Reduced to ‘operatives’, many Britons found their very identity dominated by machines, machines whose concentration of power was such that they, and not the people who worked them, seemed sublime.

Southey’s *Letters from England*

23. The principal importance of the account of prophecy given in *Letters from England* is the detailed portrait of three linked popular millenarian phases—the visit to the Swedenborgian and Masonic prophets of Avignon by John Wright and William Bryan, their and others’ subsequent endorsement of Richard Brothers, and the early mission of Joanna Southcott (she had not yet announced her pregnancy). Southey knew Bryan personally and *Letters from England* benefits from his testimony. Southey was also friendly with several other followers of Brothers—William Sharp, James Crease and Samuel Whitchurch. Sharp transferred his allegiance to Southcott, who also attracted the support of Southey’s longterm correspondent William Owen Pughe, the translator of medieval Welsh texts. These contacts made Southey the one middle-class journalist and author with extensive connections within the prophetic movements. A thorough researcher, Southey bought and borrowed as many pamphlets as he could in order to deepen his knowledge. He had an extensive collection of Southcott’s publications, owned the very rare *Testimony* of Bryan, and was familiar with the Brotherite writings of Nathaniel Brassey Halhed. His 1790s friendships with millenarians, continuing interest in Brothers and his followers, and developing knowledge of Southcott, are evidenced in [his letters](#), in which Bryan and Owen Williams Pughe, especially, figure.

24. In *Letters from England*, however, it is not Bryan or Owen Pughe, but Halhed who emerges as the crucial figure in Southey’s analysis of popular millenarianism, precisely because he was of the same, educated gentlemanly class as Southey himself and his readers, and therefore indicated prophecy’s popular appeal beyond the illiterate and ignorant poor. He appears, in fact, as a doppelganger of Southey himself—a scholar drawn to millenarian radicalism by his reading and his acquaintances but who had, unlike Southey himself, abandoned any remaining sceptical independence. Halhed was a East India Company official during the governorship of Warren Hastings. In India, he became a scholar of ancient Hindu laws, which he began to translate as part of Hastings’ effort to rule the colony by adapting its own traditions. [\[30\]](#) Returning to Britain in 1785, he continued to study Indian scripture, in correspondence with Charles Wilkins, whose translation of the *Bhagavadgita* suggested parallels between ancient Indian and Christian theology. [\[31\]](#) Halhed, therefore, was part of the most advanced Orientalist scholarship of his day. [\[32\]](#) He did not remain solely a scholar. In 1791 he became an MP, using his position to support the cause of Hastings, who was being prosecuted for his conduct as Governor General by the Foxite Whigs. A supporter of Pitt’s ministry, Halhed had an unremarkable record of hostility to the French Revolution and those who admired it until, in early 1795, he staggered all who knew him. On 29 January he announced himself a follower of Brothers.

25. Convinced that Brothers was ‘the Man that will be revealed to the Hebrews as their Prince, to all Nations as their Governor, according to the Covenant to King David, immediately under GOD’, [\[33\]](#) Halhed fired off volleys of speeches and pamphlets against the government. It was this defence by a gentleman, scholar and MP that kept Brothers in the news. The polite

classes were shocked that an educated man should believe in and defend a popular cult. Pamphlets attacking Halhed abounded, [34] but they only confirmed him in his belief. He went so far as to sell his library in anticipation of the forthcoming walk to Jerusalem. He even dated the commencement of the new millennium exactly: it would begin on 19 November. Despite a violent storm on the preceding day, neither the apocalypse nor the millennium materialized to time. With Brothers still in confinement, Halhed went quiet and became a recluse and a supporter of Brothers' successor, Joanna Southcott. Brothers himself carried on prophesying from his asylum, but his support had waned. He was released in 1806, largely forgotten by the public.

26. Southey, however, in the *Letter from England* reproduced in this edition, remembered him. In the fictional persona of a Spaniard visiting England, Southey described Brothers' glory days and Halhed's strange career:

Mr. Halhed was the other of these converts, a member of the House of Commons, and one of the profoundest oriental scholars then living. This gentleman was in the early part of his life an unbeliever, and had attempted to invalidate the truths of holy writ by arguments deduced from Indian chronology. The study of Indian mythology brought him back to Christianity, and by a strange perversion of intellect the Trimourtee of the Hindoos convinced him of the doctrine of the Trinity; and as he recovered his faith he lost his wits. To the astonishment of the world he published a pamphlet avowing his belief that Richard Brothers was the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, and that in him the prophecies were speedily to be fulfilled.

In Southey's opinion, it was the Orientalism of Brothers that made Halhed keen to believe in him. The metempsychosis that formed the basis of Brothers' doctrine was not new but bore 'a general resemblance to that doctrine as held by the Orientals'. Another critic also detected Indian influences. Brothers, he wrote, would pass for a prophet among the Hindus but not by comparison with Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. [35] Halhed himself argued that his faith in Brothers stemmed from the interpretative methods he had honed in decoding 'the old Hindu writings'. Viewing the 'Hindu triad of Energies ... Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva' as allegories of matter, space and time equipped him to detect specific political allegory in the book of Daniel. He could 'read the modern history of Europe in the prophetic records of the Old and New Testament', a reading from which he would confirm the accuracy of Brothers' prophecies. [36]

27. For Southey, what made Halhed's belief in Brothers especially alarming was what it suggested about Britons' susceptibility to revolutionary creeds. Fanaticism, on his reading, had brought about regicide and terror in France: Jacobinism was a mental infection stalking the streets in the mobs of Paris. Brothers had revealed its presence among the common people of London but Halhed brought it to the very centre of imperial power, to the arena in which rational judgment about government at home and abroad was made—the House of Commons. For Halhed had protested there when the ministry had had Brothers confined:

Mr. Halhed made a speech in parliament ... the most extraordinary perhaps that ever was delivered to a legislative assembly. It was a calm and logical remonstrance against the illegality and unreasonableness of their proceedings. They had imprisoned this person as a madman, he

said, because he announced himself as a prophet; but it was incumbent upon them to have fairly examined his pretensions, and ascertained their truth or falsehood, before they had proceeded against him in this manner. Brothers had appealed to the Holy Scriptures, the divine authority of which that house acknowledged; he appealed also to certain of his own predictions as contained in the letters which he had addressed to the king and his ministers; let them be produced, and the question solemnly investigated as its importance deserved. According to the rules of the House of Commons, no motion can be debated or put to the vote, unless it be seconded; Mr. Halhed found no one to second him, and his proposal was thus silently negatived.

This passage shows Halhed to have attempted to infect Parliament with the disease of enthusiasm. Rational and logical research into prophetic and miraculous claims was exactly what had characterized Halhed's research into Hinduism; now that his research had been colonized by belief in the objects of his investigation he had lost his ability to judge where the proper limits of rational enquiry lay. Halhed had asked the Commons to make 'cool and dispassionate investigation of the grounds of [Brothers'] assertion' and to receive his own annotated copy of Brothers' works to save 'much labour of reference'. [\[37\]](#)

28. Worried by Halhed and unable to account for his enthusiasm for Brothers, Southey was still more alarmed by the hold that Southcott exerted over men he respected, such as Williams Pughe (as [his private correspondence](#) reveals). Unable to explain Southcott's mental and spiritual appeal to native Britons, Southey instead identified her as a foul and devilish body, who neither appealed through her beauty nor impressed by her rationality: 'The filth and the abominations of demoniacal witchcraft are emblematical of such delusions; not the golden goblet and bewitching allurements of Circe and Armida'. Southcott's popularity showed much of Britain was also out of rational order: 'where such impious bedlamites as this are allowed to walk abroad, it is not to be wondered at that madness should become epidemic'. By locating Southcott's appeal in a body he had made witchlike and infectious Southey could argue for an immediate answer to the threat she posed his ideal Britain: he recommended the same physical confinement as that imposed on Brothers.

29. Bodily confinement, however, could not extirpate the public's desire to follow apocalyptic preachers any more than identifying Southcott's body as the source of the 'infection' could explain it. Bodily confinement in a different sense proved to be the issue that made and unmade Southcott, for in 1814 she took her previous hints literally. She identified herself as the 'woman clothed with the sun' and claimed to be pregnant with Shiloh, the returning Messiah—thus identifying her body as the seat of her prophetic and holy power in a manner that brought public interest to fever pitch.

30. Sixty-four years old when she announced her pregnancy, Southcott died four months later (probably of the dropsy from which her body had swollen). Although her body was preserved, the Son of God did not emerge. But if this event showed her body to be limited and mortal rather than to be inhabited by the divine, many of her followers did not believe so, and in 1825 Charles Twort and George Turner both claimed to be the Shiloh she had borne. For the Southcottians, her body remained the flesh in which the human and the divine again met, while for Southey it remained the site of an enthusiastic belief that characterized many Britons and that

must, therefore, be kept in check by government in the interests of social order and political stability. Excessive spirituality had become easily stigmatized as the uncertain, diseased flesh of a woman's body—a body foreign either by birth or by virtue of what was thought to be carried within it.

31. Southey's next published commentary on religious enthusiasm, and the second of the texts presented in this edition was [his review of Abdiel Holmes's *American Annals* \(1805\)](#). This text shows him expanding his survey of enthusiasm to include North America: his account of camp meetings as places where mass self-abandonment occurred would reappear in his later work on the influence of Methodism in England, as is revealed in [this extract from his *Life of Wesley* \(1820\)](#). These meetings suggested to him that popular religion was a defining characteristic of every country among the uneducated, who were manipulated by preachers who were either carried away by the excitement of being able to induce excitement in others, or were cynical exploiters of credulity in order to increase the power of the priesthood. Southey returned to this theme in 1822, when [his review of Henri Gregoire's *Histoire des Sectes Religieuses*](#) was published in the *Quarterly Review*. Gregoire's book had been published a decade earlier; the fact that Southey wrote about it when he did suggests the strength of his need to demonstrate the power and prevalence of prophecy both historically and in the present. Indeed, the review was not so much an assessment of the merits of Gregoire's book as a report on enthusiasm, deriving its facts not only from Gregoire but also from many other sources, and investigating recent movements that Gregoire did not discuss. Southey's article was, in fact, perhaps the most comprehensive publication on prophecy and millenarianism to appear in Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century. It was not just a carefully researched report, moreover, but a piece with the pressing purpose of warning the conservative readers of the *Quarterly* about enthusiasm's continuing social and political significance.

32. *Letters from England* and the review of Gregoire are both, in a sense, travel narratives, since Southey uses the review format to cite travellers in many different countries, including Bryan and Wright in France, and lay preachers in the US, who bear firsthand witness to prophetic movements. The effect is deliberately to collapse the typical British binary, in which northern Europeans are portrayed as Protestant, rational and moderate, and southern ones as Catholic, emotional and superstitious. Southey shows the Germans and the Dutch to be historically more likely to generate prophetic movements than the Italians and Spanish, and he details how such movements flourished in enlightenment France and present-day Britain. His insight, then, is to show that belief in prophecy, in millenarianism and in charismatic phenomena is not attributable to doctrinal, ecclesiastical, or national causes (though Protestants, having greater liberty of conscience, looser church authority and a greater emphasis on reading and discussion of the Bible were more likely to form sects). Rather, belief stemmed from social causes—from the unguided self-education of artisans, combined with the arousal of social aspirations by demagogues and power seekers in an age of political revolution.

33. The attention Southey paid to prophetic movements in the pieces collected here amply demonstrates their importance in his own thought. The poet of *Joan of Arc* continued to publish verse centred on the power of spiritual belief to overcome the evidence of the senses. His 1825

poem *A Tale of Paraguay* focused the beliefs of Jesuits and Indians in the South American missions, adopting an attitude alternately critical and admiring towards the colonial religion, which turned baptism into a sort of magical rite. In 1829 *All for Love* and *The Pilgrim to Compostella* dealt with Spanish Catholic stories of miracles and relics, puzzling critics because they demanded admiration as well as derision for the supposedly superstitious characters. Southey remained, that is to say, fascinated by the psychology of enthusiastic belief—his fascination only deepened by his historical research into its social manifestations.

34. Was Southey right in his emphasis on prophecy's social significance in his time? Certainly, his view that its popularity was the product of social factors—of an expanded labouring class with sufficient education to read and discuss, whose political hopes had been frustrated by the repression that followed in the wake of the French Revolution—chimes with that of E. P. Thompson, who drew on Southey as a source in *The Making of the English Working Class*. More recently, books by Iain McCalman, Jon Mee, David Worrall and Robert Rix [\[38\]](#) have uncovered an underworld of prophetic and millenarian activity among radicals that shaped artisanal social and political culture. Morton D. Paley, meanwhile, has revealed the attraction of apocalyptic and millenarian discourse for both poets and painters. [\[39\]](#) Southey may have been, with hindsight, alarmist to fear that prophetic movements would undermine the established state, but he was percipient when he first revealed how prevalent they were, without attributing them to a single international conspiracy as Robison and Reid had done. His analysis does ring true, and is remarkable because it was made so early, when very few had made a thorough study and when the methodology for making such a study was in its infancy. His proposed solution to prophecy was less perceptive: in the materials provided here he mostly calls for prophetic leaders to be locked up, either in prison or asylum. Later, in his social thought, he would argue against democratisation and against the empowerment of the labouring classes, fearing their tendency to follow self-proclaimed leaders. Instead, he advocated a return to local paternalism in which a reformed landowning class, mindful of its duties to protect the poor, preserved social and political stability, resisting the commercial nexus which so disadvantaged the labouring classes. Those arguments, set out in *Sir Thomas More; or, Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society* (1829-31), are beyond the scope of this edition, but nevertheless follow from the texts presented here.

Notes

I adopt the term *millenarianism* to describe the belief that Christ's second coming and/or an apocalypse would precede the coming of a millennium; *millennialism* is used to denote the belief in a gradually approaching millennium without preceding apocalypse. [BACK](#)

W. H. Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists: The Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s* (Auckland and Oxford, 1978), pp. 15-16. [BACK](#)

Clarke Garrett, *Respectable Folly: Millenarians and the French Revolution in France and England* (Baltimore, Md. and London, 1975) and J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism 1780-1850* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1979). [BACK](#)

Quoted in Morton D. Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry* (Oxford, 1999), p. 41. [BACK](#)

Joseph Priestley, *The Present State of Europe Compared with Ancient Prophecies* (1794, facs. rpt. Oxford, 1989). [BACK](#)

Quoted in Erdman, *Prophet Against Empire*, 3rd edn. (Princeton, NJ., 1977), p. 343. William Sharp the engraver (1747-1824), already interested in Mesmerism and Swedenborgianism, became a follower of Brothers and, in 1795, engraved Brothers' image above the title 'Richard Brothers Prince of the Hebrews'. After Brothers' confinement, Sharp became a follower, and subsequently one of the elders, of Southcott. He published *An Answer to the World, for putting in print a book in 1804, called, Copies and parts of Copies of Letters and Communications, written from Joanna Southcott* (London, 1806). [BACK](#)

Morton D. Paley, 'William Blake, The Prince of the Hebrews, and The Woman Clothed with the Sun', in *William Blake: Essays in Honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes*, ed. Morton D. Paley and Michael Phillips (Oxford, 1973), pp. 260-93 (p. 261). On Brothers, see also E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, rev. edn. (Harmondsworth, 1968). [BACK](#)

Richard Brothers, *A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and the Times* (London, 1794), pp. 11, 19. [BACK](#)

The Times, 6 March 1795, quoted in Paley, 'William Blake, The Prince of the Hebrews', p. 261. [BACK](#)

The Times, 5 March 1795. [BACK](#)

As James K. Hopkins reminds us, many of the reformers most feared by the ministry were, even before Brothers' appearance, millenarians. Several, including William Sharp, became followers of Brothers. See *A Woman To Deliver Her People: Joanna Southcott and English Millenarianism in an Era of Revolution* (Austin, Tex., 1982), pp. 152-53. [BACK](#)

James Gillray 'The Prophet of the Hebrews, The Prince of Peace, conducting the Jews to the Promis'd-Land', 5 March 1795. [BACK](#)

Gilbert Wakefield, *A Reply to the Letter of Edmund Burke, Esq., to a Noble Lord* (London, 1796), p. 31. [BACK](#)

J. Robison, *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe* (Dublin, 1798), pp. 11, 6. [BACK](#)

W. H. Reid, *The Rise and Dissolution of the Infidel Societies in this Metropolis* (London, 1800), pp. 91, iii. [BACK](#)

An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, vol. III of *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, ed. Mark Philp (London, 1993), p. 453. [BACK](#)

I quote from the 1798 edition in *The Works of Thomas Robert Malthus*, 8 vols (London, 1986), I: *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), ed. E. A. Wrigley and David Souden, pp. 51-52. [BACK](#)

On Southcott, see James K. Hopkins, *A Woman to Deliver Her People: Joanna Southcott and English Millenarianism in an Era of Revolution* (Austin, TX, 1982). [BACK](#)

As Paley shows ('William Blake, The Prince of the Hebrews', p. 281). [BACK](#)

Revelation 12: 1, 5. See Joanna Southcott, *Song of Moses and the Lamb* (London, 1804) and *A Continuation of Prophecies* (Exeter, 1802). [BACK](#)

Critical Disquisitions on the Eighteenth Chapter of Isaiah (1799), quoted in Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists*, p. 52. [BACK](#)

'Letters to the Author of Antichrist in the French Convention', quoted in Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists*, p. 53. [BACK](#)

G. S. Faber, quoted in Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists*, p. 61. [BACK](#)

Quoted in Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists*, p. 106. [BACK](#)

S. T. Coleridge, *Marginalia*, ed. George Whalley and H. J. Jackson, 6 vols (London and Princeton, 1980-2001), vol. II, p. 71n. [BACK](#)

Ibid. [BACK](#)

Chalmers quoted in John Beer, 'Transatlantic and Scottish Connections: Uncollected Records', in *The Coleridge Connection: Essays for Thomas McFarland*, ed. Richard Gravil and Molly Lefebure (London, 1990), pp. 308-43 (p. 327). [BACK](#)

Coleridge quoted in Beer, 'Transatlantic and Scottish Connections', p. 326. [BACK](#)

Coleridge quoted in Beer, 'Transatlantic and Scottish Connections', p. 326. [BACK](#)

In 1774 Hastings commissioned from Halhed a translation of the compendium of Hindu law that had already been translated from Sanskrit to Persian. Halhed also composed a grammar of Bengali and several works interpreting Hindu scripture which he left unpublished. See *A Code of Gentoo Laws, or, Ordinations of the Pandits. From a Persian Translation, Made from the Original, Written in the Sanskrit Language* (London, 1776), and *A Grammar of the Bengal Language* (Hooghly, 1778). These, and other details about Halhed, are from Rosane Rocher, *Orientalism, Poetry, and the Millennium: The Checkered Life of Nathaniel Brassey Halhed 1751-1830* (Delhi, Varanasi, Patna, 1983). [BACK](#)

Wilkins, *The Bhagvat-Geeta* (London, 1785). [BACK](#)

This antiquarian scholarship, begun under Hastings' governorship and continued by Sir William Jones, culminated in Jones's discovery of the Indo-European language family. It also constituted part of an attempt to govern India more firmly by manipulating Hindu law and scripture rather than imposing overtly British systems. On the significance of this scholarship in Romanticism,

see Javed Majeed, *Ungoverned Imaginings: James Mill's 'History of British India' and Orientalism* (Oxford, 1992). [BACK](#)

Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, *Testimony of the Authenticity of the Prophecies of R. Brothers and of his Mission to Recall the Jews*, 2nd edn (London, 1795), p. iv. [BACK](#)

See, for example, Thomas Williams, *The Age of Credulity: A Letter to Nathaniel Brassey Halhed in Answer to his Testimony in Favour of Richard Brothers* (Philadelphia, 1796). [BACK](#)

Williams, *The Age of Credulity*, p. 11. [BACK](#)

Halhed, *Testimony*, p. 10. [BACK](#)

The speech is printed in Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, *A Calculation on the Commencement of the Millennium*, 4th edn (London, 1795), p. 144. [BACK](#)

Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge, 1988), Jon Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s* (Oxford, 1992) and *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period* (Oxford, 2003), David Worrall, *Radical Culture: Discourse, Resistance and Surveillance, 1790-1820* (Hemel Hempstead, 1992), Robert Rix, *William Blake and the Cultures of Radical Christianity* (Aldershot and Burlington VT, 2007). [BACK](#)

Paley, *The Apocalyptic Sublime* (New Haven, 1986) and *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry* (Oxford, 1999). [BACK](#)