

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# “The Year of Jubilee is Come”: Black Millerites and the Politics of Christian Apocalypticism

Benjamin Baker

University of Maryland at College Park, College Park, Maryland, USA  
E-mail: [bjbaker@umd.edu](mailto:bjbaker@umd.edu)

## Abstract

This article explores the experiences of black people who accepted the teaching of William Miller that Christ would return to the earth in 1843–1844. Heretofore, black Millerites have been almost completely ignored in the substantial historiography of Millerism, millennialism and apocalypticism, and black religion. In this article, I argue that the black experience in Millerism deserves to be studied because it articulates the central concerns of blacks at a critical juncture in antebellum America. I show that enslaved and free blacks embraced Miller’s doctrine because of the failure of America, particularly its politics and churches, to provide them the basic human right of freedom. As they did in the Christian churches they joined during the Awakenings, blacks fashioned Millerism in their image, using it for purpose, empowerment, expression, community, and liberation. This exploration of black Millerites contributes to broader discussions on the motivations of marginalized people who gravitate toward the eschatological and the impact the apocalyptic has on real-world engagement.

**Keywords:** Millerite; Millerism; black religion; slavery; abolition; eschatology

## Introduction

Jabez Pitt Campbell handed the money to the white agent after the man assured him that he could sit wherever he pleased on the train and would “be as well accommodated as any other gentleman” since all were paying the same fare. It was March 26, 1843, and Campbell, a 28-year-old black minister of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church from Boston, had just docked in Manhattan on a steamer and was transferring to a train for Philadelphia, where he was to deliver a series of religious lectures. At boarding time, Campbell chose a secluded car, sat down, and relaxed. All was fine until the train stopped in Trenton and a different conductor took over. The white conductor demanded Campbell move to another seat. Campbell asked why and the conductor replied that it was none of his business. When Campbell refused to move, the conductor grabbed him by the throat and threw him to the floor. He quickly summoned four more men, and they gagged Campbell with a handkerchief and repeatedly beat and caned him, stomping his abdomen until his cries for help ceased. The black minister feared they would kill him. When the train finally arrived in Philadelphia, Campbell

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was hurried to a physician, his injuries so severe that his speaking engagements were cancelled and it took him weeks to recover.

Jabez Campbell wrote about his harrowing ordeal in a letter to William Lloyd Garrison that appeared in *The Liberator* a month later. After relating what happened, Campbell posed the question of what he would do for redress for the assault. He would not sue the train conductor or company, he announced, for one main reason: "I believe there is a just God, who is and will be the avenger of all those that do wrong" and "hath appointed a day, in which he will judge the world in righteousness." Campbell continued, "that day I believe not far distant, and then I expect to meet them [his assailants] at the tribunal of God," and at that time "God himself will award them according to their works . . . with this assurance I have committed myself and all that I have into his hands."<sup>1</sup>

This article discusses Jabez Pitt Campbell and the thousands of other African Americans who accepted the teaching of William Miller that Christ would return to the earth in 1843–1844. Black Millerites have been largely ignored in the substantial historiography of Millerism, apocalypticism and millennialism, and black religion.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I argue that the black experience in Millerism merits examination because, far from being an anomaly, it in fact speaks to the core issues of black people at a crucial juncture in antebellum America.<sup>3</sup> Enslaved and free blacks gravitated to Millerism because America had failed to provide them the basic human right of freedom. Further, I demonstrate that blacks did not simply join a finished movement, but instead transformed Millerism for their purpose, empowerment, expression, community, and liberation. This exploration of black Millerites speaks to broader discussions on the motivations of marginalized people who embrace the eschatological and the impact the apocalyptic has on real-world engagement.

<sup>1</sup>Jabez P. Campbell, "Diabolical Outrage," *The Liberator*, April 28, 1843, 66. Campbell was not the only black Millerite savaged on a train during this period. About half a year before Campbell's incident, Richard Johnson (1780–1853), a wealthy black businessman and abolitionist from New Bedford, Massachusetts, purchased a train ticket from New Bedford to Taunton, 23 miles away where he would attend a Millerite camp meeting. When Johnson and his daughter attempted to board the train, though, they were physically prevented by the white train director George W. Bird, notorious as a "champion of brutality," who told them that to go to the "Jim Crow Car." Johnson remonstrated with Bird, stating that he had purchased tickets just like the other passengers who he had just let board. Bird refused to let the Johnsons board though, "bullying" them and allegedly threatening to "thrust [them] into the loafers' car." Richard Johnson and his daughter retreated, and the train departed without them. See Henry Hurd, "Cruel Still," *The Liberator*, September 23, 1842, 150; Henry Hurd, "New-Bedford and Taunton Rail-Road," *The Liberator*, October 7, 1842, 158; "Second Advent Camp Meeting at Taunton, Mass.," *Signs of the Times*, July 4, 1842, 176. For information about Richard Johnson see Martha S. Putney, "Richard Johnson: An Early Effort in Black Enterprise," *Negro History Bulletin* 45, no. 2, April 1, 1982, 46–47; Lamont D. Thomas, *Rise to Be A People: A Biography of Paul Cuffe* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 94, 107; and Earl F. Mulderink, *New Bedford's Civil War* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 32–52. For an excellent treatment of racial discrimination against black people on trains in this period, see Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor, *Colored Travelers: Mobility and the Fight for Citizenship before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup>This article will use the terms "apocalyptic," "millennial," and "eschatology" and their various forms interchangeably, unless there are adjectives to modify them or other distinctions.

<sup>3</sup>"It is the Apocalypse which is missing from most [scholarly] evaluations of black Christianity" during slavery, Donald G. Mathews remarked in 1977, and this still seems to hold true vis-à-vis the parousia (Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*. Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1977), 231.

This understanding of the black experience in the Millerite movement has several benefits for scholars. First, it expands apocalyptic/millennial/eschatological studies by demonstrating that neglecting black engagement with the apocalyptic misses the possibilities of the apocalyptic to liberate, in the many ways that liberation may manifest. Next, it contributes to the historiography of black religion by showing how eschatology tapped into the unmet needs of blacks by crystallizing and accelerating internalized biblical archetypes. Black appropriation and repurposing of the evanescent Millerite movement serves as a brief and compact example of a much more protracted process by blacks with other churches. Lastly, this article shows Americanists, perhaps for the first time, how thousands of African Americans responded to the critical shortcomings of American churches and the abolitionist movement—and always the American government—in antebellum America.

### I. The Millerite Movement and Era

William Miller (1782–1849) was a farmer and onetime sheriff in a small town on the Vermont–New York border who experienced a spiritual crisis upon returning home from military service in the War of 1812. Concluding that the deism and patriotism that he embraced as an adult were insufficient to explain his world after the war, Miller recommitted to the Christianity of his youth and immersed himself in a period of intense Bible study. An autodidact with no theological training, Miller developed a hermeneutic for the common person: explaining each text with other biblical passages and reasoning. This method yielded him a novel interpretation of Daniel 8:14, “And he said unto me, Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed.” Based on this text, in 1818, Miller concluded that Christ would return to earth in 25 years, “about the year 1843.”

Contrary to the popular theology of the day, Miller held that the parousia<sup>4</sup> would occur *before* the millennium, with Christ gathering the righteous, destroying the wicked, “cleansing” the earth with fire, and then inaugurating the millennium with the righteous on the cleansed new earth.<sup>5</sup> Also, contrary to prevalent theology was Miller’s belief that humanity was inexorably getting morally worse, not better, and that human efforts to create an earthly utopia would utterly fail. Only Christ could save humans from evil, and this alone he would do at the parousia.<sup>6</sup> In 1831, Miller began lecturing on his findings and was mainly a small-town sensation until he spoke at Boston’s Chardon Street Chapel in December 1839. Chapel pastor Joshua Himes (1805–1895), a 34-year-old activist known throughout New England as an

<sup>4</sup>“Parousia,” “second coming,” “second advent,” and “advent” will be used interchangeably, all indicating William Miller’s concept of a literal, premillennial coming of Christ to earth.

<sup>5</sup>Miller’s conception of the parousia fits Catherine Wessinger’s term “catastrophic millennialism”: humans are hopelessly evil, their societies are doomed, and the world will be imminently and violently destroyed to bring about good. See Catherine Wessinger, ed., *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 8–9. Miller’s doctrine also comports with Bernard McGinn’s summary of scholarship on the apocalyptic: first, history is “a divinely predetermined totality”; second, “pessimism about the present and conviction of its imminent crisis”; and third, “belief in the proximate judgment of evil and triumph of good.” Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 10.

<sup>6</sup>The best primary sources on William Miller and his theology are William Miller, *William Miller’s Apology and Defence* (Boston: J. V. Himes, 1845) and Sylvester Bliss’ *Memoirs of William Miller* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1853). The authoritative recent biography on Miller is David L. Rowe, *God’s Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

agitator of abolition and other progressive reforms, was captivated by Miller's lecture that day and used his considerable organizational and promotional talents to spread Millerism.<sup>7</sup>

From his headquarters in Boston, Himes directed a bustling operation that broadcast Miller's doctrine through publications (some four million pieces distributed in four years), lecturers, conferences, and camp meetings. He made William Miller a household name in America. By 1842, the movement had "snowballed to the point where it could no longer be controlled by any group of leaders, let alone by Miller himself."<sup>8</sup> In the spring of 1844, according to Miller's estimate, his doctrine had some 50,000 adherents. Whitney Cross speculates that there were a million more people who were "skeptically expectant."<sup>9</sup> In truth, it is impossible to quantify Millerites because they were not a distinct denomination, instead united around a sole tenet, the imminent return of Christ. Further, one could quietly believe in the sole tenet and never betray any outward signs of it (let alone something traceable by posterity), like worshipping with Millerites or subscribing to their papers. One study surveyed the denominational affiliations of 174 Millerite lecturers—roughly 10 percent of them—and found they mirrored that of the general population. Millerites and their sympathizers were concentrated in the Northeastern United States, but there were modest followings in other regions of the US, as well as in Great Britain, Canada, and the Caribbean. The glue that held Millerites together was the major movement papers, *Signs of the Times* and *Midnight Cry*; the approximately 125 camp meetings that were held from 1842 to 1844; general conferences in which leaders worked out the major issues of the movement; and the myriad gatherings of Millerites in town, city, and country.<sup>10</sup>

The passing of the year 1843 did not bring the expected end of the world, and neither did the final major proposed date of October 22, 1844, the latter causing tens of thousands to experience what is known as the "Great Disappointment." Already maligned in newspapers as monomaniacal, after the 1844 date, the Millerites became a byword for religious madness. Despite movement leaders' attempts to rally followers and sustain an identity in the subsequent years, the movement never regained its former momentum and following. It is a mistake to think that the movement dissolved after 1844 though. Joshua Himes kept it alive into the 1870s with his Advent Christian Association, and other Millerites went on to found several distinct adventist denominations, most notably the Seventh-day Adventists.<sup>11</sup> William Miller himself died five days before Christmas in 1849.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup>For a brief and accessible write up of Himes, see Douglas Morgan, "Himes Joshua Vaughan (1805–1895)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists* (<https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=49HD>). Also see David T. Arthur, "Joshua V. Himes and the Cause of Adventism," in *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler, 36–58 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

<sup>8</sup>Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 104.

<sup>9</sup>Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 327. Whitney Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 287.

<sup>10</sup>Everett N. Dick, *William Miller and the Advent Crisis* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1994), 166.

<sup>11</sup>For the founding of Seventh-day Adventists from the Millerites see Edwin Scott Gaustad, ed., *The Rise of Adventism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); and Gary Land, ed., *Adventism in America: A History*, Revised Edition (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1998).

<sup>12</sup>For important works on the Millerite movement, see Ruth Alden Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1984); David L. Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets: Millerites and Dissenting Religion in Upstate New York, 1800–1850*

To begin to understand the appeal of the Millerite movement for African Americans requires a look at the United States in the Millerite era. The 1830s–1840s were decades of disruption in the nation. The era of so-called Jacksonian Democracy had indeed expanded rights for a greater number of white men; but women still could not vote and had limited civil and social rights, and the ascendance of Manifest Destiny as a guiding political principle and the Jackson administration’s removal or extermination of Native Americans retracted democracy for others. The dizzying transformations of the Market Revolution, and the economic crisis of the Panic of 1837 to the mid-1840s brought on a struggle for survival for the nation’s households and businesses. Americans faced natural disasters in the form of hurricanes, floods, and epidemics, as well as unusual celestial phenomena that are now scientifically explicable but to many then were portentous.<sup>13</sup> The technological innovations of the age, much like the digital revolution of the twenty-first century, disoriented many. These formidable developments may have been miniscule next to the normal stressors in the lives of Americans arising from interpersonal relationships, untreated (or sometimes worse, “treated”) physical and mental illness, high infant mortality rates, and low life expectancies.<sup>14</sup>

The turn to religion—specifically millennialism—by thousands of white Americans to cope with the antebellum world has been well-documented, and indeed has been a causal focus of Millerite studies.<sup>15</sup> But the concern of this article is how blacks in the same period responded to the compounded burdens that they bore. It is true that blacks often shared in the millennialism of whites and that there is overlap in the ways they gravitated to and expressed millennial beliefs. But to conflate their experiences can subsume and even render invisible the black experience. As Gayraud Wilmore put it, African Americans were “another eschatological people,” that is, distinct from any other.<sup>16</sup> Therefore the focus here is on blacks’ response to the *sturm und drang* of their lives. But first, what were the compounded burdens that blacks bore during this period?

It was especially true in antebellum America that when white America caught a cold, black America got pneumonia. What made this era particularly arduous for blacks was

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(Decatur, GA: Scholars Press, 1985); Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler, *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1993); and George R. Knight, *William Miller and the Rise of Adventism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2010).

<sup>13</sup>See Jonathan Todd Hancock’s intriguing work *Convulsed States: Earthquakes, Prophecy, and the Remaking of Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

<sup>14</sup>For works to contextualize the rise of Millerism, see Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Jessica M. Lepler, *The Many Panics of 1837: People, Politics, and the Creation of a Transatlantic Financial Crisis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and John Bicknell, *America 1844: Religious Fervor, Westward Expansion, and the Presidential Election that Transformed the Nation* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014); and Alan Taylor, *American Republics: A Continental History of the United States, 1783–1850* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021).

<sup>15</sup>See M. Darrol Bryant and Donald W. Dayton, *The Coming Kingdom: Essays in American Millennialism & Eschatology* (Barrytown, NY: International Religious Foundation, 1983); Michael Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium: The Burned-Over District of New York in the 1840s* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986); Richard Landes, *Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of the Millennial Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Crawford Gribben, *Evangelical Millennialism in the Trans-Atlantic World, 1500–2000* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); and Amanda Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>16</sup>Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Last Things First* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 70–72.

the chimera of gains in the 1830s—the founding of the American Anti-Slavery Society, the decline of the American Colonization Society, the organization of Colored Conventions, black political mobilization, creation of black schools—juxtaposed with the setbacks—the blowback from the Nat Turner rebellion and the tightening of slave codes, the Gag Rule in Congress, Texas’s recognition of slavery, antagonism toward abolitionists, and the disenfranchisement of black voters in Pennsylvania.<sup>17</sup> Above this all loomed the fundamental, inescapable concern: Would slavery end?

The acute failures of the early 1840s seemed to make blacks even more open to a millennial solution. The battle was pitched for the emancipation of the approximately 2.5 million black slaves, and humane treatment for the 385,000 blacks with a precarious freedom. But the allies who were purportedly fighting for these rights for blacks appeared to have turned on themselves. At the annual meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society in New York City in June 1840, the abolitionists finalized a bitter fracture years in the making over leadership, methods, and ideology. William Miller, a staunch abolitionist and acquaintance of a main actor in the kerfuffle William Lloyd Garrison, was present at the meeting and remarked that the abolitionists were “in trouble, divided, split in two, scattered, and weakened by their uneasy designing and master spirits.” Miller concluded, “God can and will release the captive. And to him alone we must look for redress.”<sup>18</sup>

Another major blow to the cause of black freedom in the 1840s was the bifurcation of America’s two largest churches—and the ones with the highest black memberships—over what blacks universally considered the clearest cut of moral issues: slavery. The largest church, the Methodists, finally split at the church’s General Conference in the spring of 1844 after six decades of continual capitulation to slave interests since its establishment in America. At the session, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, was formed, an entire church in support of the bondage of black people.<sup>19</sup> A year later, the Baptists split over slavery with the organization of the Southern Baptist Convention, also sympathetic with the practice and perpetuation of slavery.<sup>20</sup> Although these developments occurred just before and after the Millerite Great Disappointment, African Americans were well aware of their churches’ long compromises with slavery that the schisms only formalized. If Nathan Hatch’s assertion is correct that in this era “most ordinary Americans expected almost nothing from government institutions and almost everything from religious ones,” then “ordinary” blacks were in a bad way.<sup>21</sup> Blacks were also cognizant of what Donald G. Mathews points out about the Methodists, that “the story of the slavery controversies within the Methodist Episcopal Church is a story of American morality.”<sup>22</sup> The failure of the Methodists and Baptists to unite against slavery was an American failure, blacks recognized, and could join with Frederick Douglass in his sentiment made in the midst of the church splits that “I therefore hate the corrupt,

<sup>17</sup>See Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016); Benjamin Fagan, *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2016); and P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson, eds., *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century* (Charlotte: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

<sup>18</sup>William Miller to William S. Miller, May 16, 1840, 1.

<sup>19</sup>Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780–1845* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965).

<sup>20</sup>See Thomas S. Kidd and Barry Hankins, *Baptists in America: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 98–148.

<sup>21</sup>Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (Yale University Press, 1989), 14.

<sup>22</sup>Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism*, 283.



slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land” and “look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels.”<sup>23</sup> What hope was there for slavery’s end?<sup>24</sup>

For many blacks, captive and free, these failures from organizations that they had allied with and depended on to unite against an evil so glaring as slavery caused them to abandon their confidence that human instruments could deliver them from oppression, even with God using those instruments. The oppression of blacks—and many free and unfree blacks elided their oppression, viewing slavery in the South and racial injustice in the North as one oppression—was so formidable and obdurate that Miller’s conviction that only the miraculous and supernatural could defeat it was by no means his alone. The context for blacks’ gravitation to Miller’s soon coming then was America’s failure to deliver basic human rights and democracy to them, as well as the apparent collapse of the organizations and institutions that were helping them obtain these rights.

## II. Motivations

Apocalyptic scholar Richard Landes observes that historians have such a “distaste for both apocalyptic movements and millennial ideologies” that they minimize the impact the movements have had on history.<sup>25</sup> One such scholar with distaste is Elmer T. Clark, who wrote tersely several years after the Second World War that “Adventism [Millerism] is the typical cult of the disinherited and suffering poor” and is “profoundly pessimistic,” looking to a divine apocalypse to elevate them “to the position they could not attain through social processes.”<sup>26</sup> In his recent work, John Howard Smith concurs that Millerites were pessimists, calling their belief “a heretofore invisible, gloomy eschatology that had long occupied the unlit margins of American Protestantism [that] stepped out into the limelight.”<sup>27</sup> These analyses of Millerism may have some merit, but to call Millerism “pessimistic” and “gloomy” does not factor in the primary sources of black Millerite voices explored below; nor does it seem reasonable to critique what blacks failed to accomplish through the political process in antebellum America.

<sup>23</sup>Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 118–119. The following works contain good treatments of Douglass’ views of American Christianity: D. H. Dilbeck, *Frederick Douglass: America’s Prophet* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press); Reginald F. Davis, *Frederick Douglass: A Precursor of Liberation Theology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005); and David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass’ Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991).

<sup>24</sup>Like the 1840 American Anti-Slavery Society split, contemporaries and later scholars would debate if the Methodist and Baptist churches’ schisms over slavery were ultimately advantageous to the cause of abolition. However, at the time many regarded the fractures as a setback for the cause of freedom of the slaves. See C.C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the American Civil War* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985); and John R. McKivigan, *The War Against Proslavery Religion: Abolitionism and the Northern Churches, 1830–1865* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 74–92.

<sup>25</sup>Richard Landes, “Apocalyptic Millennialism: The Most Powerful, Volatile, Imaginary Force in Human History” in Hans-Christian Lehner, ed., *The End(s) of Time(s): Apocalypticism, Messianism, and Utopianism through the Ages* (London, Brill, 2021), 362. Kevin Pelletier affirms this by stating, “most critics . . . tend to ignore the apocalyptic altogether.” Kevin Pelletier, *Apocalyptic Sentimentalism: Love and Fear in U.S. Antebellum Literature* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2015), 7.

<sup>26</sup>Elmer T. Clark, *The Small Sects in America* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1949), 25–26.

<sup>27</sup>John Howard Smith, *A Dream of the Judgment Day: American Millennialism and Apocalypticism, 1620–1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 213.

Vittorio Lanternari took apocalyptic religions seriously and, unlike Clark, studied people of color. In his classic *The Religion of the Oppressed*, Lanternari sees in the gravitation of oppressed peoples to apocalyptic cults “a cry for freedom” that is “powerful because of the cultural dignity it seeks to express,” to wit, a desire for freedom and justice. At its essence this religious expression of a “belief in the regeneration of the world” is an “indictment of Western civilization” for its injustice.<sup>28</sup> Drawing from the work of Earl Creps, Stephen O’Leary avers that apocalypse “offers a temporal or teleological framework for understanding evil” and “develops symbolic resources that enable societies to define and address the problem of evil.”<sup>29</sup> The key hermeneutic for apocalyptic studies, especially for African Americans, seems to be Landes’s suggestion of an empathetic reading that resists the “retrospective perfect” and tries to “understand the beliefs before they failed” and “think as they [the adherents] thought.”<sup>30</sup>

Motivations, admittedly, are complex phenomenon, and cannot be reduced to one thing. However, examining the reports of blacks’ reception of Miller’s 1843–1844 advent suggests that the doctrine deeply resonated with their notions of God and divine purposes for them, and offered a complete solution to the oppression they faced in America. This is especially evident among the most oppressed group among African Americans, the enslaved.

Sources indicate that black captives in America expressed belief in the imminent parousia as early as 1709.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps the most well-known account of an enslaved black’s expression of faith in the second coming is Frederick Douglass’s reaction in *My Bondage and My Freedom* to the Tempel-Tuttle meteor shower of 1833 as “the harbinger of the coming of the Son of Man” whom he was “prepared to hail . . . as my friend and deliverer.”<sup>32</sup> Besides natural phenomenon, slaves often expressed their belief in the parousia in symbols and stories. Eddie Glaude, Jr., and Herbert Robinson Marbury, for instance, show that the Exodus myth—God miraculously liberating the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage—is the most enduring and potent religious archetype among African Americans, one that provided a purpose for their suffering and assurance of its surcease.<sup>33</sup> In many slave accounts, the Exodus is conflated with the parousia, and vice versa, as blacks’ conception of the emancipation event was often apocalyptic.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Messianic Cults* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1963), vii, 249, x. Lanternari extends the work of Norman Cohn’s *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1957).

<sup>29</sup>O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*, 6.

<sup>30</sup>Lehner, *The End(s) of Time(s)*, 361, 373.

<sup>31</sup>Frank J. Klingberg, ed., *The Carolina Chronicle of Dr. Francis Le Jau, 1706–1717* (Berkeley: University of California, 1956). See Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 66–68.

<sup>32</sup>Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), 186.

<sup>33</sup>Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and Herbert Robinson Marbury, *Pillars of Cloud and Fire: The Politics of Exodus in African American Biblical Interpretation* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

<sup>34</sup>See John Jea, *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher* (Portsea, England: John Jea, 1811), 86–87; John B. Meachum, *An Address to All the Colored Citizens of the United States* (Philadelphia: King and Baird, 1846); Louisa Picquet and Hiram Mattison, *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: or Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life* (New York: Hiram Mattison, 1861), 52; James L. Smith, *Autobiography of James L. Smith, Including, Also, Reminiscences of Slave Life, Recollections of the War, Education of Freedmen, Causes of the Exodus* (Norwich, CT: Press of the Bulletin Company,



Black captives appropriated the Torah's concept of Jubilee too, which is not necessarily exclusive from the parousia either, appearing frequently in Spirituals lyrics as an expression of God's miraculous deliverance.<sup>35</sup>

Eschatology in symbol and song indicates that it was more than notional: it had become a part of the worldview of many black captives. In the early 1840s, Millerite ministers reported encountering black slaves for whom the parousia was old news. One such minister relays a discussion he had with a black man from Virginia who, "when asked if the slaves knew any thing about the coming of Christ, replied, that the pious slaves do, and they have been praying about it these ten years, but the whites knew nothing about it."<sup>36</sup> Miller's doctrine drew on these existing beliefs among black captives about God emancipating blacks at the parousia and presented an accelerated component to them—it is almost here! The primary motivation for embracing the doctrine for black slaves was hastening liberation.

Several contemporary accounts illustrate this. Josiah Litch, a white Millerite minister, lectured on the near parousia in Washington, DC, in February 1843.<sup>37</sup> "The glad tidings of the coming of the Lord, is received with the greatest joy by the poor colored people, as being the only hope they have of deliverance," Litch reports. "Whenever the subject of the Lord's coming is named to them their eyes sparkle with joy." He then contrasts their reception with that of their white masters: "It is, you may be assured, a far more welcome sound to them, than to their rich lords." He continues, "O what an hour of interest to them, when the trump of Jubilee shall sound, and the servant be free from his master." Litch next discloses a key component of Millerite theology, encapsulated in Miller's reaction to the 1840 American Anti-Slavery Society meeting, that humanity was hopelessly depraved and could not bring about justice for black slaves: "All efforts at emancipation before that hour [the second coming] are perfectly vain and futile. As long as human nature is what it is, and love of power which is now inherent in the human breast, exists, slavery will exist." In conclusion, Litch invokes for the second time the Jubilee: "*The year of Jubilee is come*' . . . is the only comfort I can give the slave" (emphasis his). Litch's editorializing here is important because it intimates the theology that he and other Millerites conveyed to enslaved blacks.<sup>38</sup>

In nearby Baltimore, Millerite minister F. G. Brown reported that the "pious slaves" heard his preaching on the parousia and "caught the sound of the Bridegroom's approach, and as the result, powerful and extensive revivals were enjoyed all through

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1881); and Octavia Victoria Rogers Albert, *The House of Bondage, or, Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves, Original and Life Like* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1890).

<sup>35</sup>David Roediger explores the notion of "Jubilee" at length in *Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All* (New York: Verso, 2014). For explorations on the meaning and function of Negro Spirituals, see Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977; Margaret Washington Creel, *A Peculiar People: Slaves, Religion, and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs* (New York: New York University Press, 1989); Jon Cruz, *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Sandra Jean Graham, *Spirituals and the Birth of a Black Entertainment Industry* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2018); and Eric Sean Crawford with Bessie Foster Crawford, *Gullah Spirituals: The Sound of Freedom and Protest in the South Carolina Sea Islands* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2021).

<sup>36</sup>"Priests and Rulers," *Signs of the Times*, April 5, 1843, 35.

<sup>37</sup>From here on, Millerite ministers should assumed to be white unless it is stated that they are black.

<sup>38</sup>Josiah Litch, "Brother Litch at Washington," *Signs of the Times*, March 15, 1843, 13.

the black population.”<sup>39</sup> In Louisville, Kentucky, Millerite evangelist Enoch Jacobs held large tent meetings in September–October 1844, a time of peak excitement, as by then the advent was expected by most Millerites on October 22. Jacobs reports that his meetings drew people of all classes, church affiliations, and colors, among them hundreds of black slaves who, “with one consent, received [the advent] as a welcome message.” In particular, “the poor slaves heard us gladly,” Jacobs writes, “and scores of them are rejoicing in prospect of seeing their Lord.” He remarks that most of the slaves could read and were “about as intelligent as the whites” and enthusiastically sang, “Our deliverer *he will come*” (italics his). The whites and black slaves “shouted aloud for joy, and embraced each other with . . . affection.”<sup>40</sup>

Joseph Bates, later a cofounder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, ventured to the South in early 1844, cognizant that, as an abolitionist, his life may be in danger and that slaveholders were known to be hostile to Millerites. On Maryland’s Eastern Shore, he lectured in halls where black slaves stood in the rear, a remove from seated whites. Bates waited until after the meetings to converse with the blacks, who were “much affected” by the teaching. When he asked if they believed in the near advent, they replied, “Yes, massa, ebery word . . . Yes massa, believe it all.” In another place on the Eastern Shore, Bates spoke to a gallery “crowded with colored people,” most enslaved, who listened attentively because “any thing that would work deliverance from perpetual bondage was good news to them.”<sup>41</sup> There are numerous reports of free blacks evangelizing enslaved blacks. In 1843, a free black woman named Mary J. Lewis converted to Millerism in a tent meeting while visiting Cincinnati and returned to her hometown of Natchez, Mississippi, to share the teaching with slaves and whites. Lewis, described by Joshua Himes as a “very intelligent colored sister,” reports in a Millerite paper that she failed to interest whites, but “our colored brethren have seen added to the church daily,” despite persecution.<sup>42</sup> These were enslaved blacks.

Abolitionists of the time sought to humanize black slaves to skeptical white audiences in their rhetoric by depicting the expressions and emotions of blacks.<sup>43</sup> Millerite ministers, many of whom were abolitionists and presumably all antislavery, used this same technique to depict enslaved blacks’ positive reception of the advent doctrine. Litch’s quote above observing that their “eyes sparkle with joy” is one instance of this.<sup>44</sup> Enoch Jacobs relates that he “discovered an aged man of color” in Kentucky

<sup>39</sup>F. G. Brown, “Letter from F. G. Brown,” *Signs of the Times*, November 1, 1843, 95/7.

<sup>40</sup>“Decidedly Rich,” *The Louisville Daily Courier*, October 23, 1844, 2.

<sup>41</sup>“A Good One,” *New York Daily Tribune*, March 2, 1844, 7; *The Baltimore Sun*, March 1, 1844, 1; and Joseph Bates, *The Autobiography of Joseph Bates* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press, 1868), 281–291.

<sup>42</sup>*Western Midnight Cry*, December 9, 1843, 5; “Letter from Sister Lewis,” *The Day-Star*, March 4, 1845, 12.

<sup>43</sup>See Robert Fanuzzi, *Abolition’s Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); and Matthew Fox-Amato, *Exposing Slavery: Photography, Human Bondage, and the Birth of Modern Visual Politics in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 103–159.

<sup>44</sup>In the first history of Millerism, Isaac Wellcome claimed, “But little access was gained to the churches of the Southern States, because all the ministers of the Second Advent faith were either well-known ‘anti-slavery’ men or opposed to the system.” Isaac C. Wellcome, *History of the Second Advent Message and Mission, Doctrine and People* (Yarmouth, ME: I. C. Wellcome, 1874), 573. For treatments of Millerites and their connection with abolition and other reforms, see Ronald D. Graybill, “The Abolitionist-Millerite Connection,” in Numbers and Butler, eds., *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*, 139–152; and Jonathan Butler, “Adventism in the American Experience,” in Edwin Scott Gaustad, ed., *The Rise of Adventism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 175–177.

whose “countenance had a worn and lonely appearance.” The man was a member of a black Baptist church with more than 400 members, “nearly all *slaves*” (emphasis his). Jacobs inevitably wound the conversation toward the parousia; the man had heard of it, but “only by way of derision, and was anxious that [Jacobs] should tell him about it.” While Jacobs explained Miller’s doctrine to him, the black man’s “countenance seemed to kindle with joy as he said, ‘Oh how glad I shall be to have it true.’”<sup>45</sup> In Western Pennsylvania, Millerite minister I. R. Gates preached to slaves (probably technically indentured servants), in the summer of 1844, estimating that between one and two hundred attended his meetings, some of them travelling twelve miles to get there. “How happy they got,” he writes, “to hear that Christ was coming so soon.”<sup>46</sup> Millerite Charles Greene lectured in Roanoke County, Virginia, where “the poor slave rejoices to hear that deliverance is so nigh” and “tears of joy fall in streams down the furrowed cheeks of the poor captive, when told that master Jesus is coming so soon to proclaim liberty.”<sup>47</sup>

Millerites commonly featured former black captives as speakers at their meetings, and their testimonies clearly conveyed what the parousia meant to them and why they had embraced it. One such meeting, the Second Advent Conference in Rochester, New York, in February 1844, featured “a negro of the deepest ebony, fresh from Slaveland” whose “words burned with expression; his gestures were those [with] deep emotion, native sensibility, and a soul filled with heavenly visions.” His speech was “the gushings of his pent-up soul.” The extraordinary speaker’s message was, “The slave people are waiting for Jesus to set them free. We know he will not tarry long, for he has heard our cry, and he will deliver us.”<sup>48</sup> Notably, the black man framed the parousia as a liberatory event instigated by enslaved blacks.

Millerism comported with black slaves’ preconceived beliefs of Christ as liberator and confidence that their liberation would one day materialize. Black captives accepted Miller’s doctrine because in it they recognized a supernatural deliverance from their oppression, something that America—its government, churches, kind white people—would not bring about. Millerism was different from their previous notions of God’s deliverance that were unsure of a date or envisioned it as far in the future.<sup>49</sup> Miller’s deliverance would happen speedily. It would also be complete: the soon-arriving almighty God would liberate blacks, destroy slavery, and judge their enslavers.

Believing in Miller’s doctrine did a number of things for enslaved blacks. First, it gave them hope that their suffering and oppression would soon be over.<sup>50</sup> In this way, it not only made sense of their earthly plight but delineated its limits. This

<sup>45</sup>E. Jacobs, “Editorial Correspondence, *The Western Midnight Cry*, April 6, 1844, 26/2.

<sup>46</sup>I. R. Gates, “St. George’s Camp-Meeting,” *The Midnight Cry!*, September 26, 1844, 303.

<sup>47</sup>C. Greene, “Letter from Bro. Chas. Greene,” *The Midnight Cry!*, April 4, 1844, 303.

<sup>48</sup>“One Half-Hour at Talman Hall,” *The Voice of Truth*, February 15, 1844, 11.

<sup>49</sup>Iain MacRobery suggests that the imminency of the adventism of evangelical revivalism was “an inaugurated eschatology that was congruent with an African sense of the future which is so close that it has almost arrived.” Larry G. Murphy, ed. *Down by the Riverside: Readings in African American Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 206.

<sup>50</sup>Yolanda Pierce remarks that a major motif of antebellum spiritual slave narratives was “to detail the struggle to maintain a sense of hope for daily life as [slaves] tried to understand and transform the fireless hell of slavery.” *Hell Without Fires: Slavery, Christianity, and the Antebellum Spiritual Narrative* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005), 6. Adela Yarbro Collins describes the psychic possibilities of this belief: “By projecting the tension and the feelings experienced by the hearers into cosmic categories, the Apocalypse made it possible for the hearers to gain some distance from their experience. It

produced joy and, sometimes, elation. It could also impart a type of dignity that those degraded by society merited God's attention and rescue in a glorious interruption that would terminate the present age. The near parousia and the slaves' part in it afforded them cosmic significance.<sup>51</sup>

There was an empowering agency in believing Miller's doctrine, as not a few slaves like the black conference speaker held that their prayers were what would compel Christ to return. Moreover, the prospects of the approaching demise of their oppressors cut their taskmasters down to size, in a manner of speaking. It enlivened the drudgery of menial work and gave purpose to unending tasks. Albert J. Raboteau's observation that black slaves "delighted in imagining the future happiness in heaven" and by doing so "they expanded the horizons of their present" is apposite here.<sup>52</sup> Gayraud Wilmore concurs, positing that "what we have too glibly called the 'otherworldliness' of slave religion was the eschatological vision that made it possible not only to experience the world ecstatically in the present but to make it visible and tangible in materialistic terms in the daily realities of the believer's life."<sup>53</sup> Millerism afforded a new way of viewing the world that projected the future onto the present, the narrow now wide and the permanent now transient, that transcended the dismal earthly realities. Finally, the removal of racial barriers that often accompanied Millerism was a foreshadowing of the new age and indicated that racial inequality was not ineradicable.

Free blacks in the North had similar motivations for becoming Millerites as their enslaved counterparts. But there was a component of Millerism available to free blacks that was largely withheld from blacks in bonds: community. Robert Orsi insists that religions are primarily about relationships between human and the divine, which in turn shape the relationship between human and human.<sup>54</sup> This theory offers a lens to view blacks as Millerites. The Millerite concept of God—as hurrying to free blacks by destroying the world and judging their oppressors—was held by people in a religious community that blacks wanted to be around, and this community could be as much of an attraction as the doctrine itself.

By the standards of the antebellum era, the Millerites were notably abolitionist, egalitarian, enthusiastic, and participatory. At the height of the movement (1842–1844) in their gatherings throughout the United States, newspapers reported black people at Millerite meetings preaching, socializing, singing, prophesying, baptizing and being

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provided a feeling of detachment and thus greater control." *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 161.

<sup>51</sup>See Matthew Harper, *The End of Days: African American Religion and Politics in the Age of Emancipation* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 5.

<sup>52</sup>Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, Updated Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 263–264. Black captives' notions of heaven is beyond the scope of this article, but useful treatments are David R. Roediger, "And Die in Dixie: Funerals, Death, & Heaven in the Slave Community 1700–1865," *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 22, no. 1, Spring 1981, 163–183; Lewis V. Baldwin, "A Home in Dat Rock?: Afro-American Folk Sources and Slave Visions of Heaven and Hell," *Journal of Religious Thought*, vol. 41, no. 1, 1984, 38–57; Kathryn Gin, "'The Heavenization of Earth': African American Visions and Uses of the Afterlife, 1863–1901," *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 31, no. 2, June 2010, 207–231; and Gary Scott Smith, *Heaven in the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 87–108.

<sup>53</sup>Wilmore, *Last Things First*, 83.

<sup>54</sup>Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

baptized.<sup>55</sup> One Millerite meeting in Salem, Massachusetts, had 20,000 people from all demographics in attendance and featured a large procession “led on by some half dozen black gentlemen, singing at the top of their voices: ‘You will see your Lord a coming,’” followed by an abolitionist speech by a former slave, and closing with a sermon by a black minister.<sup>56</sup> Often Millerites left their established churches and organized Millerite churches; these were frequently racially mixed and, when not, were open for blacks to worship at. Dozens of black Millerites formed churches in northern cities, and these also had interracial worship services and permitted abolitionists to use their buildings for meetings and as Underground Railroad stations. In all, black adherents seemed well integrated into the movement, operating as leaders, participating in conferences and camp meetings, donating considerable funds to the cause, and proselytizing through preaching, literature distribution, and personal contacts.

Such “racial mixing” caused Millerites to be as notorious in the media of the day for the large numbers of blacks in their gatherings as for their purported religious extremism. One representative report of this is from the *New York Herald* on a Millerite meeting in Bridgeport, Connecticut: “the house is crowded to suffocation every evening with both white and black, lame, halt, and blind, all mingled up together in one dense mass.” At the sermon’s appeal, “the penitent sinners or fanatics move forward to the altar by the scores, momentarily expecting the second coming of Christ; black and white, no distinction of color.”<sup>57</sup> In time, the media increasingly portrayed Millerites in black coon caricature, conveying variously the marginalization of Millerites from wider society, the notion that Millerism was a doctrine for the gullible, a disgust for the interracial ethos of Millerism, and the large number of blacks that were Millerites.<sup>58</sup>

Miller’s doctrine and community had appeal outside of the United States to Africans throughout the diaspora. There were black Millerite groups in Toronto, Canada, the neighboring city of Hamilton, Quebec, and black Millerites as far afield as the historic settlement of Africville in Halifax, Nova Scotia.<sup>59</sup> Reports indicate that Millerism had a following in Jamaica prior to the Great Disappointment.<sup>60</sup> In 1846, the West Indies Mission was established and funded by Millerite donations, with the object that “the 800,000 emancipated slaves in those islands hear of that infinitely more glorious day than the first of August [1834], on which they ceased to be slaves.”<sup>61</sup> In Antigua, St. Lucia, Montserrat, and St. Kitts, Millerite ministers held months-long evangelistic meetings and distributed Millerite literature, winning some blacks.<sup>62</sup> Although it is not known if Zilpha Elaw was ever a Millerite, in her *Memoirs* she records preaching the “midnight cry” and the “Bridegroom cometh” (two telltale Millerite catchwords

<sup>55</sup>One non-Millerite abolitionist who visited several Millerite meetings told William Lloyd Garrison that black people were treated better at Millerite meetings than any antislavery convention he had attended. William Allen, “A Friendly Remonstrance,” *The Liberator*, June 16, 1843, 94/2.

<sup>56</sup>“A Millerite Camp Meeting,” *New Bedford Mercury*, October 28, 1842, 4.

<sup>57</sup>A. B. C. “Bridgeport,” *New York Herald*, January 22, 1843, 3.

<sup>58</sup>See “Millerites,” *The Democratic Standard* (Georgetown, Ohio), December 13, 1841, 1; *The Times Picayune*, April 1, 1843, 2; *Vermont Gazette*, August 15, 1843, 2.

<sup>59</sup>James S. Wetenhall, “Letter from Canada West,” *The Midnight Cry!*, April 4, 1844, 303; and “Bro. Lenfest,” *Advent Herald*, December 18, 1847, 160.

<sup>60</sup>E.g., *Brother Johnson*, April 29, 1843, 489.

<sup>61</sup>L. Delos Mansfield, “Letter from Bro. Mansfield,” *Advent Herald*, September 2, 1846, 31.

<sup>62</sup>See “Conference at Boston,” *Advent Herald*, June 17, 1848, 158.

for the second coming) to the people of Britain.<sup>63</sup> These international Millerites suggest that blacks throughout the African diaspora valued the Millerite doctrine for its divine solution to racial oppression shared by their American counterparts as well as the community that developed around the doctrine.

Sojourner Truth (c. 1797–1883) is an individual who seemed to primarily associate with Millerism for community. She devotes a tenth of her 1850 *Narrative* to her association with Millerites, even though by the time she began dictating her story to collaborator Olive Gilbert six years after the Great Disappointment, Truth would have wanted to distance herself from the disgraced movement.<sup>64</sup> In this vein, Truth claims that when she first heard William Miller lecture in New York City in the winter of 1842–1843, she could not understand the “enigmatic pictures” (Miller’s prophecy charts and accompanying illustrations) he used. Like Miller, Truth was a peripatetic Christian preacher who taught Christ’s second advent; but she might not have been convinced of Miller’s calculation of its date. Notwithstanding, after she heard Miller, Truth lived with Millerites for about a year. At the time, she was obscure, illiterate, and poor; she was also black and female. But the Millerites did not seem to have any misgivings about Truth, embracing her as a prophet and preacher.

Catherine Brekus points out that women have thrived in millennial movements because belief that the world was about to end “suspended the normal restrictions” on gender and “sects invested female preaching with transcendent significance.” Millennial movements “did not allow women to preach in spite of their ‘femininity,’ but *because* of it” (emphasis hers).<sup>65</sup> It was proof to them that they were on the right track and the end was near. This seems the case with Truth and Millerites, as indicated by a letter of introduction for Truth written by the white male Millerite leader of the group that Truth lodged with for several months. He wrote that Truth fulfilled the apocalyptic Psalm, “Ethiopia is stretching forth her hands unto God,” and so “please receive her, and she will tell you some new things” for “she has got the lever of truth, that God helps her to pry where but few can.”<sup>66</sup> At the Millerite camp meetings she attended, Truth wrote that she was a “great favorite,” and Millerites listened in awe at her preaching and singing. Truth gravitated to Millerites because they treated her well.<sup>67</sup>

But there were other elements of Millerism that attracted blacks. An underappreciated aspect of black religion in the antebellum period is what may be termed intellectual integrity, that is, blacks who gravitated to certain religions because they satisfied them cerebrally and comported with their sophisticated understanding of the Bible and theology. Drawing from Curtis J. Evans’s probe of conceptions of black religion, it seems that the white notions of black intellectual inferiority, yet innate religiosity, prevailed to the point that black religion was considered exclusive from the intellectual. Whites considered it emotionally driven.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>63</sup>Zilpha Elaw, *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, An American Female of Colour* (London, Zilpha Elaw, 1846), 74, 146.

<sup>64</sup>Sojourner Truth, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth, A Northern Slave* (Boston: Sojourner Truth, 1850), 106–120.

<sup>65</sup>Catherine Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 78, 160.

<sup>66</sup>See Psalm 68:31. Truth, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 106.

<sup>67</sup>See Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton Company & Inc., 1996), 79–87; and Margaret Washington, *Sojourner Truth’s America* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 152–154.

<sup>68</sup>Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 17–63.



Another impediment to appreciating, or even recognizing, the intellectual aspect of black religion is over-politicizing the religion of blacks—that is, making every impulse of blacks in the realm of religion to be about subverting the political oppression of whites and/or advancing black societal mobility. Milton Sernett calls this approach “instrumentalist,” one which evaluates black religion strictly by political standards. Instrumentalism gained traction after World War I and during the Great Migration and has maintained an inordinate influence on scholarly analysis of black religion.<sup>69</sup> Bemoaning the “obsessive and exaggerated interest in issues of docility versus resistance, particularly in slave religion,” because they “obscure other salient aspects of black experience,” Theophus Smith recommends jettisoning these “in an effort to treat [black] apocalyptic perspectives and sensibilities on their own terms.”<sup>70</sup> One of these terms is the intellectual.

Frederick Douglass, the shrewd critic of American Christianity, touched on the intellectual appeal of Miller’s doctrine in an 1883 speech commemorating the twenty-first anniversary of emancipation:

When father Miller proved by the Bible, from whose pages so many things have been proved, that the world would come to an end in 1843, and proved it so clearly that many began to make their robes in which they were to soar aloft above this burning world, he was asked by a doubting Thomas, ‘But father Miller, what if it does not come?’ ‘Well,’ said the good old man, ‘then we shall wait till it does come.’ The colored people of the United States should imitate the wisdom of father Miller, and, wait.<sup>71</sup>

Miller’s cerebral approach to dating the second coming was compelling to William Still (1821–1902). His father had tragically died on Christmas Eve of 1842, and Still turned to religion to make sense of his life. Deep in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey, a tract of Miller’s lecture “fell into [the] hands” of the twenty-two year-old Still, and, as they were for Sojourner Truth, Miller’s time calculations for the parousia were novel to him.<sup>72</sup> Assuming an intellectual agency characteristic of blacks encountering the new doctrine, Still read all the literature he could find on the parousia, scrutinizing Miller’s time calculations. Apart from any preacher, he eventually became persuaded of a near advent, while reserving a healthy skepticism vis-à-vis the precise date. “I never got so far to believe that any man was infallible,” Still wrote, “nor that any one understood all there was in the Scriptures.” Still’s independent thinking meant that “when 1843–4 passed,” the dates when Millerites predicted Christ would return, “my faith and hope remained unchanged in the All-Supreme.” Still penned this recollection in the biography section of *Underground Rail Road Records* some 43 years after his first encounter with Millerism.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>69</sup>Milton C. Sernett, *Bound for the Promise Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 4–5, 242–243.

<sup>70</sup>Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 222–223.

<sup>71</sup>“Address By Hon. Frederick Douglass, Delivered in The Congregational Church, Washington, DC, April 16, 1883,” Washington, DC, tract, 1883.

<sup>72</sup>Nathan Hatch points out that the developments that enabled Christianity to be democratized were higher literacy rates, mass printing and distribution, and the “democratic art of persuasion.” *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 30, 57, 126, 136.

<sup>73</sup>William Still, *Still’s Underground Rail Road Records*, Revised Edition (Philadelphia: William Still, 1886), xi. Recent Still biographer William C. Kashatus speculates that Still’s conversion to Christianity

Throughout a life of activism, Still did indeed keep his “faith and hope” in the advent doctrine, maintaining correspondence with Joshua Himes and writing, for instance, a lengthy and heartfelt letter to him in 1850 on his reunion with his long-separated brother Peter Still. Himes printed the letter in his advent paper, prefacing it by calling Still a “beloved colored brother in Philadelphia, who rejoices with us in the hope of a speedy redemption.”<sup>74</sup> Still’s commitment to an imminent parousia went further than letters, however: throughout the 1850s and 1860s he donated substantial funds to Himes’s adventist ministry and maintained a subscription to its paper.<sup>75</sup>

Samuel Ringgold Ward (1817–c. 1866) was also drawn to Millerism on an intellectual level.<sup>76</sup> Ever the interlocutor, in the late 1840s and early 1850s, Ward kept up a vigorous debate with Joshua Himes and other adventists, his colleagues in abolitionist circles. On one occasion in 1849, Ward spent a weekend debating with Himes and two other adventist ministers. Reflecting on the meeting, he states that the three visitors “proclaimed a great amount of truth” but that he “differ[ed] in some respect” from their “views of things to be done as preparatory to the great event.”<sup>77</sup> On setting a date for the parousia, Ward later averred, “we place but little confidence in human chronology, and human calculation . . . all human speculation, in regard to [a precise date] have failed. So they always will.”<sup>78</sup> But Ward maintained that the advent was fast-approaching and was a featured speaker on the parousia at adventist events.<sup>79</sup>

### III. Effects

After African Americans accepted Millerism, what did it do for them? What effect did this apocalyptic belief have on the thinking and behavior of blacks? An urgent concern in black religious studies and eschatology is how a belief in the next world affects real-world involvement, or social activism. However, the tension between activism and non-activism has everything to do with what apocalypticism does to the mind, and so the two threads will be merged here. After discussing this, the role of Millerism in the personal formation of black activists will be explored.

A figure no less than Booker T. Washington criticized the tendency of apocalyptic thinking to detract from practical action among blacks when he commented, “a large element of the Negro Church must be recalled from its apocalyptic vision back to earth.”<sup>80</sup> Scholarship has both confirmed and challenged Washington’s observation. In his influential volume, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Eugene Genovese maintains that most

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was primarily for social mobility in “hope[s] to reap the financial security and fame that tend to motivate most ambitious young men who were about to embark on their life’s journey.” *William Still: The Underground Railroad and the Angel at Philadelphia* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2021), 23. This cynical assertion lacks corroboration, however, and fails to explain Still’s openness about his Millerism more than forty years after the movement had been publicly disgraced.

<sup>74</sup>William Still, “Remarkable Coincidence,” *Advent Herald*, November 22, 1851, 327.

<sup>75</sup>E.g., *Advent Herald*, January 14, 1860, 16; *Advent Herald*, April 18, 1865, 64; *Advent Herald*, January 19, 1869, 11. The word “adventist” is used to denote believers in the near advent who came from Millerites and continued believing after the Great Disappointment.

<sup>76</sup>Ronald K. Burke discusses Ward and adventism in *Samuel Ringgold Ward: Christian Abolitionist* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), 6–7.

<sup>77</sup>Samuel Ringgold Ward, “The Second Advent Friends,” *The Impartial Citizen*, March 28, 1849, 8.

<sup>78</sup>Samuel R. Ward to W. E. Whiting, *The Impartial Citizen*, March 6, 1850, 2.

<sup>79</sup>“Advent Meetings,” *The Impartial Citizen*, January 9, 1850, 2.

<sup>80</sup>Booker T. Washington, “The Religious Life of the Negro,” *The North American Review*, vol. 181, no. 584, July 1905, 22.

black captives held to a “quietist version of millennialism” in contradistinction to occasional expressions of the “politically militant millennial,” such as Nat Turner’s rebellion. The millennial quietism of the former “helps explain the limits of revolutionary impulse among slaves.”<sup>81</sup> Genovese’s reasons for the lack of politically militant millennialism are interesting,<sup>82</sup> but his strictly Marxist notions of grand revolutionary impulses ignore the manifold subtle but revolutionary acts of resistance by enslaved black millennialists, which undermined slavery, helped catalyze the Civil War, and ultimately brought about blacks’ freedom.<sup>83</sup> Eddie Glaude, Jr., rejects Genovese’s claim of quietism, seeing the dominant metaphor of Exodus in the African American experience as eschatological in nature, while innately political, and a wellspring of political activism by the enslaved.<sup>84</sup> Christopher Z. Hobson points out that some may consider apocalyptic discourse “socially quietist,” but among antebellum blacks, it “encourage[d] steadfastness and courage in the face of persecution” and spoke “strongly to those under absolute tyrannies or unassailable imperial hegemony and help[ed] keep intact the belief in a liberated future.”<sup>85</sup> Derek S. Hicks sees African American eschatology as inherently revolutionary because it “challenge[s] present circumstances that stand in contrast to God’s desire for justice and equality of all people.”<sup>86</sup>

Blacks primarily engaged millennialist thought to resolve the racial injustice they experienced, Timothy E. Fulop posits. Christian millennialism gave them “great strength” due to its “divinely inspired criticism and rebellion against the present social order.” Far from a quietist ideology, Fulop thinks that criticism against whites’ injustice to blacks was “inherent in black millennialism,” and indeed, “some of the strongest criticism of white Christianity and American society can be found in black millennialism.”<sup>87</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham alludes to this inherent quality when she documents how black Baptist women’s “religious posture” was “contextualized within a racial tradition that conflated private/eschatological witness and public/political stand.”<sup>88</sup>

Three categories of the African American prophetic “racial tradition” are identified by Hobson. The most relevant for this study is the “Daniel-Revelation tradition,” which assumes that “the present world as a whole is doomed yet foresees a new world of justice

<sup>81</sup>Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 272.

<sup>82</sup>Genovese’s two reasons that black slaves were quietest millennialists are the Southern “regime” being “too pervasive, too strong, too stable”; and the African American civilization not being at its height and their native African traditional religion not having a concern for the otherworldly requisite for politically militant millennialism (Genovese, 274–275).

<sup>83</sup>Although not critical works, Junius P. Rodrigues has probably compiled the most information on slave resistance. See Junius P. Rodriguez, ed., *Encyclopedia of Slave Resistance and Rebellion*, vols. 1 and 2 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007).

<sup>84</sup>Glaude, Jr., *Exodus!*, 6–7, 112. See also Herbert Robinson Marbury, *Pillars of Cloud and Fire: The Politics of Exodus in African American Biblical Interpretation* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

<sup>85</sup>Christopher Z. Hobson, *The Mount of Vision: African American Prophetic Tradition, 1800–1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 27.

<sup>86</sup>Derek S. Hicks, “Eschatology in African American Theology,” in Anthony B. Pinn and Katie G. Cannon, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 251.

<sup>87</sup>Timothy E. Fulop, “‘The Future Golden Day of the Race’: Millennialism and Black Americans in the Nadir, 1877–1901,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 84, no. 1, Jan. 1991, 75–99.

<sup>88</sup>Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 135.

and holiness” and has “prove[d] the most relevant to African American apocalypticism.”<sup>89</sup> Hobson suggests that the continual appeal of the apocalyptic for blacks is its ability to “help keep intact the belief in a liberated future” for those “living under absolute tyrannies or unassailable imperial hegemony.” Apocalyptic prophecy defeats the ubiquitous “prop of injustice” that claims “present conditions are inevitable and unchanging,” and instead assures that “the present is transitional and subject to judgment.”<sup>90</sup> Raphael Warnock refers to black “eschatological consciousness” as “a creative counterworldliness,” and allows that it “has empowered [black] people to fight as hopeful agents of freedom against the overwhelming tide of history.”<sup>91</sup> In an assertion with intriguing ramifications for this present study, Matthew Harper contends that the “defining feature of African American eschatology was hope,” and therefore the emancipation of black captives in 1865 was “*the* key moment in black Protestants’ eschatology” (emphasis his). For blacks, “eschatology was political.”<sup>92</sup>

Admittedly, apocalypse theories and the people who believe them are too variegated for any generalization. The variables at play are the kind of apocalypse one holds, the personality and condition of the person who holds the belief, and the conditions (or perception of conditions) of one’s world. However, an exploration of the effect of Miller’s doctrine on the thinking and behavior of blacks provides compelling case studies and considerations for this line of inquiry.

William James Watkins, Jr., (b. 1826; hereafter referred to as Watkins Jr) was a protégé of Frederick Douglass and a fiery abolitionist in his own right.<sup>93</sup> The son of abolitionist and Millerite leader William Watkins, Sr., Watkins Jr was a lifelong believer in the Millerite faith in which he was raised. His antislavery activities as a journalist and attorney—writing, speaking, lobbying, testifying before Congress, assisting fugitive slaves, and defending blacks in court—were fueled by his belief in the near advent. A few examples will show how the parousia shaped his thought and activism.

In an 1850 letter to William Lloyd Garrison excoriating white supporters of slavery, Watkins Jr shares his theological underpinnings for the black freedom struggle in the final paragraphs:

When we reflect upon the position which we, as [black] people, occupy in this boasted land of liberty; when we behold our fellow-countrymen the victims of the Juggernaut spirit of caste, persecuted on account of complexional peculiarities, we are, with the ancient martyrs, led to exclaim, ‘How long, O Lord, how long!’ But although clouds and darkness are round about us, the sun shall not hide his face for ever. ‘Sorrow and darkness may continue for a night, but joy shall break forth in the morning.’ And that eventful morning is not so far in the future but we can descry it with the telescope of Hope. . . .

Every thing around us indicates our speedy resurrection from the tomb in which we and liberty lie buried. The angel is preparing to roll the stone away. The time is coming when those who would look for us must not seek among the tombs, for we shall have risen, to mingle our voices with those of redeemed

<sup>89</sup>Hobson, *The Mount of Vision*, x–xii, 26.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*, 27, 30.

<sup>91</sup>Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, and Public Witness* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 29.

<sup>92</sup>Harper, *The End of Days*, 4–5, 13.

<sup>93</sup>Samuel Salsbury, “William James Watkins,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, March 2, 1855, 1.

millions in singing the funeral requiem of those merciless tyrants who vainly hoped we were buried beyond the power of resurrection.

Fly swiftly round, ye wheels of time,  
And bring the welcome day.<sup>94</sup>

The imminent parousia grounded Watkins Jr's thought and activism by giving him an assurance that God was on the side of blacks and no human power could prevent God from emancipating them. His theology lessened the power of the proslavery oppressors of blacks in his mind, so he had greater confidence in battling them. The efforts of the enemies of freedom that Watkins Jr lays out in the letter are efficacious for a brief time, but ultimately impotent before the apocalyptic power of God, which will be unleashed on behalf of blacks against their oppressors momentarily, or as Timothy Weber aptly put it, "only one second from a divine in-breaking."<sup>95</sup>

But why would Watkins Jr work so vigorously for the freedom of black slaves if God would free them momentarily? He supplies the answer in the last lines of a letter to Frederick Douglass on January 26, 1854, published in the *Frederick Douglass' Paper* a week later:

Slavery is destined to die, for it is mortal. Truth, the moral gravitation of God's universe, is on the side of humanity. And Truth will live and burn, amid the tempest and the storm, for God hath stamped it with the impress of imperishable life. But each one must do his and her duty. An individual responsibility rests upon us. The slave will be free; but if you and I, and all around us do not help accelerate the day of his redemption, God will enter into judgment with us. May each one, then, at all times, in all places, and under all circumstances, be found *doing something* for those who cannot help themselves.<sup>96</sup> (emphasis his)

Watkins rhetorically elides the emancipation moment for blacks with the parousia; or perhaps they are indistinguishable in his mind. Whatever the case, he declares that even though God would emancipate the slaves, God had placed a responsibility on the privileged to help the underprivileged, a responsibility extensive and far-reaching. If the privileged failed to do it, they would be judged similarly to the slave oppressors. Watkins Jr's belief in the imminent parousia of a God who would emancipate enslaved blacks and judge their oppressors, but demanded humans to also work for the liberation of blacks lest they be judged as well, is "militant adventism," to use Warnock's phrase.<sup>97</sup> Watkins's eschatology did, as James Cone insists black eschatology must do, "forc[e] the oppressed community to say no to unjust treatment, because its present humiliation is inconsistent with its promised future."<sup>98</sup>

Like Watkins Jr, Samuel Ringgold Ward's apocalyptic beliefs fueled his abolition activism. The major objection Ward had with many white adventists with whom he

<sup>94</sup>William J. Watkins, "George Thompson," *The Liberator*, December 2, 1850, 1.

<sup>95</sup>Timothy Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 9.

<sup>96</sup>William J. Watkins, "Letter from Wm. J. Watkins," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, February 3, 1854, 3.

<sup>97</sup>Raphael Warnock applies this term to Martin Luther King, Jr., in *The Divided Mind of the Black Church*, 44–45.

<sup>98</sup>James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2010), 145.

debated was that they abandoned politics as a vehicle for reform. He writes, “We practically differ from the mass of Adventists” because “they do not think it important to labor, directly, in the reforms of the day, especially at the ballot box, because time will soon cease, and we cannot, therefore, succeed in the establishment of a righteous government, nor in bringing about the prevalence of rights in any other direction.”<sup>99</sup> But Ward, who ironically was himself an adventist, states, “We regard Christ as saying to us, Occupy till I come: which, as we understand it, means, Preach and practice the truth, and the whole truth, as long as time shall last.” He continues, “We do not say we shall not and need not vote for the abolition of slavery . . . because Christ will soon come down and free the slave &c. What Christ will do, is one thing. What he has made our duty, is another. And whether we shall succeed, or not, is no concern of ours. That, God will see to.”<sup>100</sup> Ward, who dubbed himself a “Christian abolitionist,” engaged in abolitionist politics in accordance with Christ’s injunction to “occupy till I come,” and his activism was to “preach and practice the truth.” Religion was his politics. Ward’s adventism did not keep him from overt partisan politics either; he was Gerrit Smith’s running mate for the US presidency in 1852.<sup>101</sup>

The next black Millerite to join this discussion of the effect of the apocalypse on real-world engagement is a complex case. John W. Lewis (1809–1861) was a thoroughgoing abolitionist activist, Frederick Douglass once remarking, seemingly without hyperbole, that Lewis was “one of the oldest and ablest advocates for human freedom ever raised up among the colored people of the United States.”<sup>102</sup> Before he became a Millerite, Lewis was variously an AME and Freewill Baptist minister; agent for the papers *The Liberator*, *Colored American*, and *The Northern Star and Freeman’s Advocate*; founder and principle of the New-England Union Academy; founder and president of the first black temperance society in New England; agent for several antislavery societies; vice president for the Colored People’s Convention in Maine and New Hampshire; and an abolitionist orator. For Lewis, all of these pursuits were for the same end: black liberation.

Lewis became a Millerite in 1842. The next year in May at the Millerite conference in Boston a collection of \$30 (\$1,100 in 2023) was taken up for him, the “highly esteemed colored preacher,” to “spend his whole time laboring among that much neglected class of our brethren.”<sup>103</sup> One may infer here that since Lewis would now do ministerial work full time that he would cease his activism. But Lewis was a Christian abolitionist, like Samuel Ward, and for him there was no difference between abolition and the gospel; abolition was the gospel, and vice versa. Lewis’s *modus operandi* throughout his ministerial career had been to go to a town and preach the gospel, the first precept

<sup>99</sup>Samuel R. Ward, “Second Advent,” *The Impartial Citizen*, January 23, 1850, 2. Ward was apparently overstating his case when he wrote “the mass of Adventists” had given up on abolition through politics, as in other places he was more tempered in his assessment. See Samuel R. Ward to W. E. Whiting, *The Impartial Citizen*, March 6, 1850, 2; Samuel R. Ward, “We beg to leave. . .” *The Impartial Citizen*, February 13, 1850, 2.

<sup>100</sup>Ward, “Second Advent,” 2.

<sup>101</sup>Van Gosse provides a helpful overview of the black political milieu from which Ward operated in *The First Reconstruction: Black Politics in America from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>102</sup>Frederick Douglass, *The Frederick Douglass Paper*, April 7, 1854, 2. For perhaps the most detailed write-up on Lewis’ life, see Benjamin Baker, “Lewis, John W.,” *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists* (<https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=9JFA&highlight=y>).

<sup>103</sup>N. Southard, “Declaration of Principles,” *Signs of the Times*, June 7, 1843, 108.



of which was antislavery. Before he baptized anyone, in his words, they had to “pledge and determine to strike, by their moral power and religious influence, at the root of slavery, and not to give over till this Babel of abominations shall fall.”<sup>104</sup> Slavery was the first subject on his preaching schedule, and he would not move on to another precept until his audience verbally assented to antislavery. He did not alter these methods as a Millerite minister.

A word should be said here about Lewis’s abolition efforts as a Christian minister. Forty years ago, John McKivigan observed that “historians have customarily ignored or dismissed the activities of the Christian abolitionists.”<sup>105</sup> Since then, Christian abolitionists have gotten more scholarly attention, but not as much as they should.<sup>106</sup> In 2020, Ben Wright criticized “recent historiography” for “privileging political action over ideological context,” thus “miss[ing] how Christianity inspired and limited American abolitionism.”<sup>107</sup> This may harken back to the issue that caused the 1840 abolitionist schism and subsequent ruptures in the abolitionist community, namely, the debate over what efforts were most effective for ending slavery. Historians seem to have ruled that only a certain category of abolitionist activity was effective, the overtly “political” type, and so this is what scholarship has mainly been concerned with. This assumption forestalls an appreciation of the methods Christian ministers used to undermine the institution of slavery, including preaching against slavery, making antislavery a prerequisite for Christian rites such as baptism and Lord’s supper, requiring a denouncement of slavery for church membership, appropriating tithes for antislavery activities, assisting fugitive slaves, using church buildings for antislavery purposes, and others. Carol V. R. George even argues that non-elite black Christian ministers in the antebellum period practiced “parochial abolitionism” by simply improving the lives of blacks in their parishes, thus enlarging black freedom.<sup>108</sup> George calls for “a reassessment of what qualified as legitimate abolitionist activity,” and this present paper is a modest response to this call.<sup>109</sup>

For most of his career, John Lewis combined Christian abolitionism and political abolitionism—although a clear distinction cannot always be made between the two. Yet as the expected advent neared, he abandoned faith in the American political system

<sup>104</sup>See John W. Lewis to Bro. Burr, *Morning Star*, June 24, 1840, 35; John W. Lewis to Bro. Burr, *Morning Star*, January 6, 1841, 146; John W. Lewis to Bro. Burr, *Morning Star*, May 13, 1846, 15; John W. Lewis to Bro. Burr, *Morning Star*, March 29, 1854, 203.

<sup>105</sup>McKivigan, *The War Against Proslavery Religion*, 75.

<sup>106</sup>For works on Christian abolitionists, or abolition and Christianity, see Douglas M. Strong, *Perfectionist Politics: Abolitionism and the Religious Tensions of American Democracy* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999); John R. McKivigan, ed., *Abolitionism and American Religion* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1999); Anna M. Speicher, *The Religious World of Antislavery Women: Spirituality in the Lives of Five Abolitionist Lecturers* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press); Molly Oshatz, *Slavery and Sin: The Fight against Slavery and the Rise of Liberal Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Ben Wright, *Bonds of Salvation: How Christianity Inspired and Limited American Abolitionism* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2020); and Kenyon Gradert, *Puritan Spirits in the Abolitionist Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

<sup>107</sup>Ben Wright, *Bonds of Salvation: How Christianity Inspired and Limited American Abolitionism* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2020), 5. Wright critiques Sinha’s *The Slave’s Cause* for largely overlooking Christian abolitionism.

<sup>108</sup>Carol V.R. George, “Widening the Circle: The Black Church and the Abolitionist Crusade, 1830–1860” in Timothy E. Fulop and Albert J. Raboteau, eds., *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 155–173.

<sup>109</sup>*Ibid.*, 157–158.

to free black people, believing abolitionists were wasting their time engaging with it to obtain their aims. His mounting frustration from years of working for emancipation with no tangible results had resonated with the Millerite pessimism of human government (the American political system) and brought him to the conclusion that the parousia was the only hope for black freedom.

In an open letter addressed “To the colored people of the United States who love our Lord Jesus Christ,” written in April 1844, Lewis provides what is perhaps the clearest articulation of Millerite liberation theology. He begins by stating that “no people have felt a deeper interest in the great cause of human freedom than” African Americans. However, abolitionism, “a cause which we have fondly hoped would ultimately result in the emancipation and enfranchisement of the whole human family, without respect to nationality or complexion,” had failed them, and “we are still in bondage and affliction, under an aristocratical power.” But the end of the world “is just upon us” when “the eternal kingdom of God” will be established “in power and righteousness.” Because of this, all hope in the American political system—laws, legislatures, congress, voting—that abolitionists used to attempt to free blacks, should not be trusted. Only at the coming of Christ will slavery and all of its attendant injustices and crimes be “forever settled.” “The poor bondmen of the south” were to only “hope in Him who is to come . . . whose right it is to reign King over all the earth.” Lewis signs the letter, “Your brother in the hope of soon seeing the Lord.”<sup>110</sup>

As upbeat as Lewis’s letter ends, the balance of it is replete with profound disappointment in America. As an activist who had labored his adult life to obtain basic human rights from the US government—something that took tremendous optimism and fundamental faith in the government to improve itself and do right—Lewis was publicly stating that the government was so consumed with “aristocratical power” that prying blacks from its grip was something only God could do, and God would have to disrupt history to do it. And so Lewis’s embrace of Millerism reflects where he was with his confidence in the American government. Already religiously inclined as a minister when he encountered Millerism, the thought that God would do for blacks what the oppressive government refused to do would have accorded with Lewis’s dawning realization. This eschatology could explain and solve the failure of his churches, Baptists and Methodists; his profession, abolitionist; and perhaps frustration with himself for ever trusting any of them. John Lewis’s theology in his open letter comports with the five ways Norman Cohn posits millennial movements envision salvation: “collective,” all blacks would be emancipated; “terrestrial,” Christ would come to earth to free blacks; “imminent,” Christ would appear in 1843–1844; “total,” instead of the schemes of many groups of partial emancipation, Christ’s emancipation would be total; and “miraculous,” emancipation would be done by God physically coming to the earth.<sup>111</sup>

Viewing it from the “retrospective perfect,” John Lewis’s fundamental assumption was mistaken; the American government did finally free blacks. However, when Lewis wrote the letter in 1843, legal emancipation for blacks was twenty years away and for all anyone knew was as pie-in-the-sky as a heavenly paradise. In fact, the America did not manumit blacks in Lewis’s lifetime. He died about two weeks after

<sup>110</sup>John W. Lewis, *The Midnight Cry!*, May 16, 1844, 352.

<sup>111</sup>In Norman Cohn’s analysis, millenarian movements always envision salvation as “collective,” “terrestrial,” “imminent,” “total,” and “miraculous.” *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, Revised and Expanded (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 15.

the Civil War commenced, having immigrated to Haiti in a colonization scheme to try to find a better life for his people.<sup>112</sup>

The subject of the opening story, Jabez Campbell, was also a Christian abolitionist who lost faith in the American system. Campbell was born free in Delaware in 1815 but was enslaved twice, once at eight, and again for almost five years as a teenager, to pay off his father's debts. Campbell taught himself literacy and other subjects and became an AME preacher in 1838, subsequently enjoying success as a revivalist and church builder throughout New England. He accepted Millerism in 1842 and began sharing Miller's doctrine in AME churches, using the standard Millerite charts to illustrate the dramatic prophecies of Daniel. But as with other black Millerites, Campbell suffered setbacks for his beliefs. When his name came up for ordination as elder at the AME annual conference in New York City in June 1843, "objections were made against brother Campbell's ordination for having imbibed and promulgated certain notions concerning the glorious Second Advent of Christ, in which he is not sustained by the discipline of our church." Campbell was given time to defend himself, but his ordination was voted down and a motion was approved to prohibit AME preachers from presenting on the second advent.<sup>113</sup>

But the psychological benefit of the imminent parousia was worth the social toll for Campbell. When he wrote to Garrison that very soon "God himself will award them [his assailants on the train] according to their works . . . with this assurance I have committed myself and all that I have into his hands," it is clear that Campbell derived consolation from the assurance of swift and perfect justice from an eschatological tribunal.<sup>114</sup> This consolation was often all blacks had, the antebellum judicial system being what it was. In effect, Campbell replaced the American court, in which he had no confidence, with the advent court, in which he had full confidence. That Campbell permitted Garrison to publish his account of the train incident in *The Liberator* indicates that Campbell was nevertheless still somewhat invested in exposing racial oppression in this world.

The effects of the Millerite doctrine on blacks could be more dramatic than Campbell's calm assurance. Perhaps the most dramatic is when it caused the actual emancipation of blacks. Enoch Jacobs, the Millerite minister mentioned earlier, reports at his evangelistic meetings in Kentucky that John F. Christian, "a [white] Baptist preacher of superior talents" from Virginia, "attended the lectures—searched his Bible, and on his bended knees embraced the glorious truth." When Christian's friends found out, they disowned him, and he prepared to go on a tour proclaiming the parousia. Before Christian left his home, though, he freed his four black slaves.<sup>115</sup> In other places, it was feared that Millerite ministers would try to emancipate slaves with their moral persuasiveness. One example is when a judge in the Eastern Shore of Maryland commented to the visiting Millerite Joseph Bates, "Mr. Bates, I understand that you are an abolitionist, and have come here to get away our slaves."<sup>116</sup>

There are a couple of reports that black captives who accepted the parousia chose to stop working. A slave from Georgia named Sampson, described as "of considerable

<sup>112</sup>"Death of Rev. J. W. Lewis," *The Liberator*, January 17, 1862, 11.

<sup>113</sup>"The Little Horn Among Colored Methodists," *The Midnight Cry!*, October 26, 1843, 85.

<sup>114</sup>Jabez P. Campbell, "Diabolical Outrage," *The Liberator*, April 28, 1843, 66.

<sup>115</sup>"Decidedly Rich," *The Louisville Daily Courier*, October 23, 1844, 2; E. Jacobs, "Letter from Bro. Jacobs," *The Midnight Cry!*, October 19, 1844, 135; John F. Christian, "Letter from Bro. Christian," *The Day-Star*, July 3, 1845, 2/34.

<sup>116</sup>"A Good One," *New York Daily Tribune*, March 2, 1844, 7

intelligence and some education,” accepted the near parousia at a Millerite meeting in Western New York while travelling with his master, a Mr. Jones. When Sampson returned to the Jones plantation in Georgia, he started a revival among the slaves with his charismatic preaching, “no ordinary degree of eloquence and having intense conviction of truth.” In the open air, Sampson spoke to crowds of hundreds of enslaved blacks, who responded enthusiastically to his apocalyptic message. As the predicted time of the advent drew near, the enslaved Millerites stopped working, opting instead to meet together to praise and worship. After a while, Jones forbade the slaves to speak any more of Millerism, and so it became an underground religion.<sup>117</sup> The Jones plantation was not an isolated phenomenon. Millerite ministers, literature, dissemination, and practice were banned in many parts of the South for the threat they posed.<sup>118</sup>

Richard Landes maintains that “the historian’s task is to follow the apocalyptic beliefs past their failure, to look for the transformations wrought by the embarrassment, the cognitive dissonance, of having to acknowledge the mistaken yet treasured belief, the almighty promise broken.”<sup>119</sup> Such an interrogation is often what is missing from Millerite and millennial movement studies. However, for several blacks, Millerism and its community prepared them to make significant contributions to the freedom struggle.

Anthony Burns (1834–1862), the fugitive slave whose famous 1854 court case was a critical development in bringing the national debate over slavery to a boiling point, learned of Miller’s doctrine in Stafford County, Virginia.<sup>120</sup> In his biography, Burns states that “the doctrines of Millerism had penetrated the little obscure Virginia county, and filled all hearts with alarm” during an outbreak of scarlet fever that devastated the small community. Millerism “became the universal topic,” with “white and black shar [ing] alike in the excitement.” A mark of the revival was that “the barriers of class and caste were, for the time, thrown down, and never before had there been such unreserved communication between master and slave.” Around ten years old at the time, Burns “shared in the general excitement” and “earnestly set about a preparation for the future life.” Repairing to the forest to pray, there he was possessed by “extravagant hopes and terrors” in the form of supernatural visions. Burns’s biography states that eventually the “extreme religious excitement subsided, but he [Burns] never lost the sense of spiritual need.”<sup>121</sup>

The entrance of Millerism into Burns’s community caused him to witness for the first time the collapse of racial barriers and the approach of something like equal communication between black and white. His personal spiritual crisis expanded his worldview beyond his parochial setting to the wider world and larger aims, elevating him above his plantation prison. Significantly, Burns states that it was his conception of God that later moved him to risk everything and escape his bondage. He recalls his

<sup>117</sup>Mrs. E. C. Sickles, “Georgia Negro Millerites,” *New York Observer and Chronicle*, June 24, 1875, 53, 25.

<sup>118</sup>The best discussion of this can be found in Robert W. Olson, “Southern Baptists’ Reactions to Millerism” (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1972), 75–100.

<sup>119</sup>Hans-Christian Lehner, ed., *The End(s) of Time(s)*, 361.

<sup>120</sup>Albert Von Frank speaks of the Burns case as a “pocket revolution” that “set Boston on its ear. . . and made slavery at last unpopular there.” Albert J. Von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson’s Boston* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1998), xii.

<sup>121</sup>Charles Emery Stevens, *Anthony Burns: A History* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1856), 162–163.

thought process, “that the Bible set forth only one God for the black and the white races, that He had made of one blood all the nations of the earth, that there was no divine ordinance requiring one part of the human family to be in bondage to another,” and no Bible text gave anyone the right to enslave him. “From that moment,” Burns says, “with a clear conscience and full integrity of Christian character, he applied himself to the recovery of his inalienable right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>122</sup> Millerism initiated the spiritual process that compelled Burns to obtain his freedom.

Sojourner Truth was also transformed by Millerism. In the late summer of 1843, she travelled with the Millerites with whom she had been living in Hartford, Connecticut, to nearby Monroe and Windsor Locks to attend two Millerite camp meetings. Camp meetings were gatherings popularized during the Awakenings in America where believers met for days or weeks in the country during the warmer months to hold religious services, perform rites, and commune with each other, often worshipping and camping in tents. Camp meetings were breeding grounds for outrageous behavior, but these particular two that Truth attended in Connecticut would become notorious in the media as bywords of Millerite fanaticism. Indeed, William Miller himself condemned the behavior there, which included a woman trying to walk on water across the Connecticut River; a man boasting the power to halt a train by willpower alone; the disposal of clothing, jewelry, and artificial teeth; dramatic faith healing; mindreading; spasmodic outbursts; loud prophesying; and generally boisterous behavior.<sup>123</sup> Sojourner Truth operated as a prophet at the camp meetings, rebuking the outlandish carryings-on, comforting those who were terrified of the approaching advent, and confounding Millerite ministers with her theological sagacity. Her 1850 *Narrative* depicts the Millerites there in awe of her sermonizing and singing, this claim credible because of the testimonies of people throughout her career reacting to her in the same way.<sup>124</sup> At the urging of Millerites, Truth stayed with them into the winter, and then went onto another Millerite camp meeting in Massachusetts, where she purportedly became a hero by preventing a posse of a hundred ruffians from torching a tent.<sup>125</sup>

In this critical moment in Truth’s formation as a public activist, Millerites affirmed her gifts, receptive to her ministry of exhortation, prophesying, singing, and correction, as well as the role of spiritual guide to them. Nell Irvin Painter sees this as a two-way relationship, suggesting that her time with the Millerites moved Truth, then Isabella Baumfree, to experience a rebirth as “Sojourner Truth,” selecting the name “Sojourner” as a nod to the Millerite belief that she did not have long on earth because of the near advent. From her time with Millerites, Painter asserts that Truth “launch[ed] the career of antislavery feminism for which she is known today.”<sup>126</sup> That Truth discussed her time as a Millerite at length during a formative period of her life in

<sup>122</sup>Stevens, 174–175.

<sup>123</sup>See Bliss, 227–239. Josiah Litch, “Protest,” *The Midnight Cry*, September 14, 1843, 29; W.S. Campbell, “The Windsor Camp-meeting,” *Signs of the Times*, October 11, 1843, 64. For a treatment of camp meetings in the Millerite movement, see Milton Lee Perry, “The Role of the Camp Meeting in Millerite Revivalism, 1842–1844” (PhD diss., Baylor University, 1994).

<sup>124</sup>Truth biographers Erlene Stetson and Linda Davis remark that Millerites “took her [Truth] in with admiration and affection.” *Glorying in Tribulation: The Lifework of Sojourner Truth* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994), 98.

<sup>125</sup>Truth, *Narrative*, 109–120.

<sup>126</sup>Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, 87. See also Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz, *The Kingdom of Matthias: A Story of Sex and Salvation in 19th-Century America*, Updated Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 178–179.

*Narrative* lends credence to Painter's claim. If Millerism was indeed instrumental to the formation of Truth as a civil rights activist, then her tenure with the community spurred her to real-world activism instead of otherworldly dissociation. In her lengthy career as an advocate for blacks and women, in fact, Truth maintained a conviction in the near parousia, lecturing on the second advent until illness precluded her itinerating (her last documented mention of the parousia in a lecture is in 1878), and being treated at the Seventh-day Adventists' Battle Creek Sanitarium in the last year of her life.<sup>127</sup>

The final consideration of Millerism's effect on social activism returns to William Still. As mentioned above, Still embraced Miller's doctrine at twenty-two after his father died. When compiling his *Underground Railroad* volume, he included a confessional paragraph affirming his belief in Millerism, by then a movement disgraced long ago. Millerism must have been pivotal in his life, as there is no obvious gain from him including this as part of his story, and in fact it could have diminished his credibility. It seems significant that the so-called "Father of the Underground Railroad" believed in the near parousia while engaging in his death-defying activism.

#### IV. Contributions

This final section shows what blacks contributed to the Millerite movement, how they shaped it, because their contributions to the largest premillennial movement in antebellum America are noteworthy. Blacks shaped Millerism and made it theirs by joining the movement and thus demonstrating its viability and expanding its racial parameters; as leaders and ministers guiding the movement, bringing people in, pastoring congregations, and spreading Miller's message, especially in new areas and those difficult or impossible to reach for white ministers; as prophets casting a vision and giving direction to Millerites; defending against detractors; giving financial support; and keeping the critique of deliverance that the parousia promised prominent in Millerite rhetoric. These contributions are seen in the biographies of several black Millerites, and something of the social price they paid to make them.

William James Watkins, Sr. (1803–1858), was a prominent Millerite minister from the early 1840s until his death in 1858. For years a notable intellectual in black America, Watkins was a Baltimore-based educator, physician, and Methodist minister; a onetime mentor of William Lloyd Garrison, who persuaded Garrison to jettison colonizationism for immediate abolition; a protégé of Daniel Coker; and the "very judicious coloured Baltimorean" referred to by David Walker in his *Appeal*.<sup>128</sup> In 1842, Watkins, his wife Henrietta, and their seven children accepted the doctrine of the imminent return of Christ and quickly became a highly regarded Millerite family.<sup>129</sup> Their son, William Watkins, Jr., was discussed above, and Richard, another son, was an

<sup>127</sup>For reports on Truth's belief in the second coming on one of her final lecture tours, see "Sojourner Truth," *Brooklyn Daily Times*, December 7, 1878, 2; "Current Events," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 7, 1878, 2; and "Sojourner Truth Lecturing," and *The Sun* (New York City), December 7, 1878, 1. On Truth's treatment at the Battle Creek Sanitarium, see Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, 254; and Washington, *Sojourner Truth's America*, 377–378.

<sup>128</sup>See "William Watkins, The Teacher," in Leroy Graham, *Baltimore: The Nineteenth Century Black Capital* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982), 93–146; Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 214–220; and Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 79, 82, 115.

<sup>129</sup>"From Sister Henrietta Watkins," *Advent Herald*, February 11, 1860, 47.



ordained Millerite minister.<sup>130</sup> Frances Ellen Watkins, later Harper (1825–1911), was adopted by William and Henrietta Watkins sometime after her mother died when she was three years old, and was sixteen when the Watkins family accepted Millerism.<sup>131</sup> It is not known if Harper ever became a Millerite, even though it certainly influenced her worldview, judging from the imagery of catastrophic apocalypse common in her poetry.<sup>132</sup>

Upon his acceptance of Millerism, William Watkins was embraced by top Millerite leaders, Joshua Himes especially, who knew Watkins well from abolitionist circles, and whom he considered “one of their [blacks’s] most efficient ministers.”<sup>133</sup> Watkins became a fulltime Millerite minister, holding public meetings, engaging in public religious debates, distributing advent literature, and making inroads in winning blacks to Millerism. In Baltimore, Watkins oversaw a “small, but firm band of colored believers,” one of dozens of black Millerite church groups in the East. He pastored the church from 1842—through and beyond the 1844 Disappointment—until 1852.<sup>134</sup> On numerous occasions, Himes and other leaders visited with Watkins’s church and family in Baltimore. Members of the church, in turn, sent donations to Himes to fund the ministry and spread the Millerite message in Baltimore.<sup>135</sup> To his parishioners, Watkins was a “parochial abolitionist,” visiting and counseling with them, providing monetary assistance to those in need, promoting healthy living, and nourishing them spiritually. As a public figure, Watkins’s hortatory letters and exegetical articles regularly appeared in the main Millerite papers, often taking up several columns.

Socially, though, Watkins suffered for his connection with Millerism. About a month and a half after the Disappointment, he wrote to Himes that in believing in the near second coming, “a man can scarcely take . . . a more effectual step to degrade himself in the eyes of the church and the world.”<sup>136</sup> In other places, Watkins revealed he was called “crazy,” and his family and followers faced ridicule from the community. Watkins’s acceptance of Millerism diminished his standing as a black leader in Baltimore and probably caused him to lose his appointment as a Methodist Episcopal minister around the time Jabez Campbell was denied ordination by the

<sup>130</sup>William Watkins, “Letter from Bro. W. Watkins,” *The Advent Herald and Signs of the Times*, January 6, 1847, 174.

<sup>131</sup>The details of Frances E. W. Harper’s early life are patchy. William Still in *The Underground Railroad* credits William and Henrietta Watkins with taking in and raising Harper at three when her mother died, and William with educating her at his Baltimore school. William Still, *The Underground Railroad*, 755. For later biographical sketches, see Utz McKnight, *A Call to Conscience* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2020); Michael Stancliff, *Frances Ellen Watkins Harper: African American Reform Rhetoric and the Rise of a Modern Nation State* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Melba Boyd, *Discarded Legacy: Politics and Poetics in the Life of Frances E. W. Harper, 1825–1911* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1994); and Francis Smith Foster, ed., *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader* (New York: The City University of New York, 1990), 3–40.

<sup>132</sup>See Smith Foster, ed., *A Brighter Coming Day*, 166–167, 190, 244–249, 371–374, 385–386; and Matt Sandler, *The Black Romantic Revolution: Abolitionist Poets at the End of Slavery* (Vero Beach, FL: Verso Books, 2020), 119–151, 185–203.

<sup>133</sup>Joshua V. Himes, “Editorial Correspondence,” *Signs of the Times*, March 6, 1844, 36.

<sup>134</sup>William Watkins, “Letter from Bro. Wm. Watkins,” *The Advent Herald and Signs of the Times Reporter*, December 18, 1844, 151.

<sup>135</sup>William Watkins, “Letter from Bro. W. Watkins,” *The Advent Herald and Signs of the Times*, January 6, 1847, 174.

<sup>136</sup>*Ibid.*, 174

AME for his Millerite beliefs.<sup>137</sup> But his newfound faith seemed to somewhat buffer him against these slights. For Watson, the imminent parousia meant a surcease to the injustice and oppression of blacks' earthly existence in just a short time. He stressed to his readers and parishioners in articles that "our only hope [is] the speedy coming of Christ to deliver his people, to set up his kingdom, and destroy his enemies,"<sup>138</sup> pointedly excluding the ineffectual efforts of abolitionists and the moral failures of his Methodist communion. This belief that the parousia was the only hope of blacks sustained Watkins and his Baltimore flock longer than it did most other Millerites, despite ostracism from the public.

In September of 1852, Watkins and his family relocated to Toronto, Canada, joining a movement of hundreds of free and fugitive blacks migrating to Canada to escape the smothering oppression of America, seeing America's northern neighbor as a "Promised Land," "a Canaan for political asylum seekers."<sup>139</sup> A half a year after their move, the Watkins family was visited by Himes, by then the leader of the largest group of former Millerites. Himes noted in his journal that the Watkins home was "surrounded with every blessing" and that Watkins "still holds the Advent doctrine, and is an honor to the cause."<sup>140</sup> Even in the improved racial atmosphere of Canada, Watkins did not let up on inveighing against America's injustice to his people, no longer David Walker's "The Colored Baltimorean," now "The Colored Canadian." William Watkins died in Toronto in 1858.

Another black minister who substantially contributed to the Millerite movement was William Ellis Foy (1818–1893). Foy was a Freewill Baptist minister and abolitionist when he became a Millerite. He claimed to receive divine revelations while worshipping among black congregations in Boston's Beacon Hill neighborhood in early 1842.<sup>141</sup> Initially reluctant to share his visions because of his race, after his first lecture on them to a white Methodist Episcopal congregation, the twenty-three-year-old black man was in high demand by white Millerite audiences, prophesying of awful judgment scenes that exposed the hypocrisy of American Christians, and an interracial heaven. One record based on Millerite eyewitnesses of Foy describes him as "having a good command of language, with fine descriptive powers" and "creat[ing] a sensation wherever he went." "By invitation he went from city to city to tell of the wonderful things he had seen," it says of his talks on his visions, "and in order to accommodate the vast crowds who assembled to hear him, large halls were secured, where he related to thousands what had been shown him," resulting in "scores respond[ing] to his entreaties."<sup>142</sup>

<sup>137</sup>See J. Gordon Melton, "African American Methodism in the M. E. Tradition: The Case of Sharp Street (Baltimore)," *The North Star: A Journal of African American Religious History*, vol. 8, no. 2, Spring 2005, 17; Graham, 124.

<sup>138</sup>William Watkins, "Letter from Bro. W. Watkins," *The Advent Herald and Signs of the Times*, January 6, 1847, 174.

<sup>139</sup>See Sarah-Jane Mathieu, *North of the Color Line: Migration and Black Resistance in Canada, 1870–1955* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 34. Canada's welcoming attitude, of course, would not last; after the Civil War it would enact xenophobic legislation to keep blacks out.

<sup>140</sup>Joshua V. Himes, "My Journal," *Advent Herald*, April 30, 1853, 141.

<sup>141</sup>For a biography of William Foy, see Delbert Baker, *The Unknown Prophet*, Revised & Updated (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2013). A shorter and more recent bio of Foy is Benjamin Baker, "Foy, William Ellis," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists* (<https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=9CEN>).

<sup>142</sup>J. N. Loughborough, *The Great Second Advent Movement* (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1906), 145–146.

Local media depicted Foy much differently, however. The *Portland Tribune* of Portland, Maine, Foy's home city, reported satirically in early 1844 that "the Millerites of this city, have recently imported a great bull nigger, who has been rolling up the white of his eyes, showing his ivory, and astonishing the good people by his dreams and prognostications." The piece continued to mock the visions of the "fat and greasy black" who "can neither read nor write" but would soon be "drawn through the streets, by the devoted disciples of Miller" in a chariot while being worshipped as God.<sup>143</sup> This article so seamlessly elides antipathy toward blacks and Millerites that it is impossible to distinguish which is more distasteful to the writer. Foy, the "imported great bull nigger," xenophobia over a bed of racism, will subvert the present system and be worshipped. The mocking tack taken by the *Portland Tribune* to convey lighthearted dismissal only underlines the threat that black Millerites, or at least black Millerite prophets, posed to whites.

Foy's ministry among the Millerites extended beyond the Great Disappointment of October 1844. In early 1845, John and Charles Pearson, two white Millerite brothers who considered Foy's prophetic caliber to be on par with the Old Testament seers, published the black man's spiritual memoir with the aim that "the despised and humble few, who are patiently waiting for the appearing of their glorious King, may be refreshed and comforted, in this hour of trial."<sup>144</sup> That Foy's persistence in the cause outlasted the last predicted date—and indeed like Still, Watkins, and Lewis, he seemed rather unfazed by the blow that staggered most other Millerites—suggests the movement's black leaders had more than a superficial attachment to it, but were committed to its core tenet.

William Foy provided a charismatic prophetic voice to Millerites at the highest and lowest points of the movement. His revelations of an equalizing last judgment and racially integrated heaven challenged the white supremacist religious dogma of the day propounded by the Protestant churches of which Millerites were a part. By his claim of receiving divine visions and its validation by hundreds of Millerites, Foy evinced a God who passed up whites as a chosen vessel to a black man in antebellum America.<sup>145</sup> As an evangelist, Foy substantially increased the ranks of Millerites and spiritual interest among Christians. In these ways, Foy joined other blacks in democratizing Millerism and American Christianity and, however incrementally, shifted national feeling toward the emancipation of blacks.<sup>146</sup>

<sup>143</sup>"When will wonders cease?" *Portland Tribune*, February 10, 1844.

<sup>144</sup>William E. Foy, *The Christian Experience of William E. Foy* (Portland, ME: J. and C. H. Pearson, 1845), 6.

<sup>145</sup>William Foy and Sojourner Truth were not the only black Millerites regarded as prophets in the movement. William Johnson Hodges (d. 1872), whose free black parents were prominent citizens in today's Virginia Beach and brothers Willis A. Hodges and Charles E. Hodges were delegates to the Virginia Convention, became a Millerite in New York City in 1843. He sold his grocery store there and pastored an advent church on Broadway in Manhattan for a decade. A year after the Great Disappointment, Hodges was reported by the newspapers as making additional prophecies on the date of the parousia, and a number of white Millerites followed him. See Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., *Free Man of Color: The Autobiography of Willis Augustus Hodges* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 59; "Brooklyn Intelligence," *New York Daily Herald*, December 8, 1845, 3; and "The Black Millers," *New York Daily Herald*, December 28, 1845, 2.

<sup>146</sup>David Goldfield and other scholars have argued that the Second Great Awakening resulted in more evangelical religion in the political and public sphere, fomenting a polarizing discourse of good and evil that ultimately caused the national schism and Civil War. While this contention is highly controversial, few dismiss the Second Great Awakening as at least a minor catalyst for black freedom. See David Goldfield, *America Aflame: How the Civil War Created a Nation* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011).

Other blacks were shapers of the Millerite movement. Edward Mitchell (1794–1872) was the first black to graduate from Dartmouth College (1828), and in so doing was the third black to graduate from an American college and the first to graduate from an Ivy League school. Upon graduation, he served as a Baptist minister in Canada, becoming the first black in the country to hold a college degree and the first black ordained minister to pastor white congregations.<sup>147</sup> While pastoring in southern Quebec, Mitchell accepted Miller's teaching in 1835 and became an early proponent of Millerism, introducing it in southern parts of the province. In October 1840, Mitchell hosted William Miller at the Baptist church he pastored, and later defended Miller when he was under fire from critics.<sup>148</sup> There is evidence that Mitchell held to the near second advent as late as 1861.<sup>149</sup>

Concluding where this article began, after the train incident, AME minister Jabez Campbell went on to top leadership in the Millerite movement. On the day after the Great Disappointment, Campbell married a woman named Stella Medley in New York City. But this premeditated earthly ceremony did not indicate that he had abandoned the movement. In April 1845, Campbell was a delegate to the Albany Conference, the official convocation of Millerite leaders, to chart the course of the demoralized movement going forward. Alongside William Miller, Joshua Himes, and others, Campbell developed "a plan for future operations, present[ed] a declaration of principles in the defence of which we have labored, and consult[ed] respecting our future association."<sup>150</sup> Despite the plans he helped lay for the continuance of the movement, it is not known how long Campbell remained an adventist. However, in time, he fully repaired his relationship with the AME Church and was elected its eighth bishop in 1864.<sup>151</sup>

## V. Conclusion

This article has touched on the perpetual crisis blacks faced in antebellum America around the most fundamental of human rights, freedom. In the 1830s–1840s, the organizations that blacks depended on to join them in working for their liberation splintered over black freedom, structurally formalizing a dearth of commitment that had been evident for decades. This and other harsh realities made blacks especially receptive to the teaching of a farmer-theologian who propounded an imminent, violent end to American tyranny by a God coming to liberate black people and judge their oppressors. A movement of abolitionist and antislavery whites and blacks formed around his doctrine, creating a community attempting to reflect the egalitarian ethos of the parousia. Blacks substantively contributed to and shaped this movement, and even though the event on which it centered never materialized, they appropriated the doctrine and movement for liberation.

<sup>147</sup>For a full biography of Mitchell, see Forrester A. Lee and James S. Pringle, *A Noble and Independent Course: The Life of the Reverend Edward Mitchell* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2018).

<sup>148</sup>Lee and Pringle, 128–131; Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 120–121.

<sup>149</sup>"Travels about Home. No. 9," *Advent Herald*, October 12, 1861, 3/323.

<sup>150</sup>"Mutual Conference of Adventists at Albany," *Advent Herald*, May 14, 1845, 1.

<sup>151</sup>Edward W. Lampton, *Digest of Rulings and Decisions of the Bishops of the African Methodist Episcopal Church from 1847 to 1901* (Washington, DC: Record Publishing Company, 1907), 81. See Dennis C. Dickerson, *The African Methodist Episcopal Church: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 116, 123.

Specifically, black Millerites used the apocalyptic for coping with perpetual oppression, individual betterment, greater confidence in activism, instantiating egalitarianism, corporate visioning, and reinvigorating the struggle for freedom—all to hasten their eventual emancipation and expand democracy in America. Black eschatology made sense of the black experience in America in a profound way, articulating their desiderata, expressing the angst and frustration and joy and hope of black souls. Ultimately, instead of regarding historical apocalyptic groups like the Millerites as crazy or misguided, they should be taken seriously to deepen understanding of the dysfunction and injustice in society and people's response to it.<sup>152</sup>

**Benjamin Baker**, PhD, is a lecturer in History at Howard University.

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