

Unraveling Adventist Prophecy: The History and Meaning of the Millerite Charts

By Susan L. Palmer

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NOTE / DISCLAIMER: The approach that this paper takes is *more* that of a *historian* than a *biblical scholar* for *that* is what I *am*. I am *not* an *expert* on the theological intricacies of the apocalypse *nor* do I claim to be an *expert* on the Books of Daniel and Revelation, the two books of the Bible from which many of the images in the charts come. (Of course, the research that I have done would suggest that *no one* is an expert on Revelation, given the *huge* array of opinions on what Revelation is even about, never mind what it means!) And although I drew from a number of very different sources in writing this paper, I am especially grateful for the work of Dr. David Dean, an Advent Christian theologian, professor, and minister, who presented a paper on this topic, on the occasion of another chart exhibit, in January 2000.

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TERMINOLOGY (as it applies to the charts):

--Millerite – Charts coming from the era of the Millerite Movement - - Late 1830s–1844
(Great Disappointment) / 1849 (Death of Miller)

--Adventist – Charts coming from the era after the demise of the Millerite Movement but before the organization of distinct and separate denominations in the early 1860s. (It is also a general term for those religious groups who believe in / emphasize the Second Advent (coming)—the actual, physical return of Jesus Christ to earth in the future.)

--Advent Christian & Seventh-Day Adventists – Two of the Protestant denominations coming out of the Millerite Movement after the Great Disappointment. Even though Christ did not return when expected, these Adventists still believed that it would be soon and they (especially the ministers) continued to preach this and make charts to illustrate their arguments.

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Today we live in the age of PowerPoint, smart phones, and the World Wide Web. Information, and the visual aids to understand it, is literally at our fingertips--anytime, anywhere. It is what we know (especially young people). So please come take a journey with me into the foreign country we call the past—back about 170 years to the early 1840s. There are no phones, televisions, radios, or

computers. The major way in which people communicate is through handwritten letters and publications—especially newspapers. The idea of visual aids does exist, but in rather limited form (like line drawings to illustrate books and newspaper articles).

In such a setting, what do you do to get out the word about an imminent, world-changing event, like the return of Jesus Christ? That was the dilemma that the Millerites faced, especially William Miller, the founder of the Millerite Movement and the man who predicted that Christ would return to earth, not just soon, but imminently—sometime between March of 1843 & March of 1844. Miller had no idea about how to spread this message on a massive scale, but fortunately for him, he met a man, named Joshua V. Himes, who did. Himes was a minister from Boston, who also was something of a PR genius, and he applied this talent to the Millerite Movement. He took the early 19th-century form of mass communication—publications (especially newspapers but also single-sheet broadsides, pamphlets and books)--to a whole, new level in a religious movement. One Millerite paper reported that by May, 1844 (the year of Christ's anticipated return), approximately five million pieces of Millerite literature had been produced. And that number kept growing, even after the Great Disappointment of 1844. Millerite Isaac Wellcome claimed that by 1854 (ten years after the Great Disappointment), Himes had distributed a total of more than ten million pieces, just from his office in Boston

Even more innovative (for its day) than this wide array of publications was the distribution process. Many Millerite materials were sent out to cold prospects. Materials were mailed to clergy and well-known persons across the United States, to postmasters across the country who were asked to give the materials away to their customers, and to British and American missionaries at their posts abroad. Millerites even put their literature on ships leaving from the ports of Boston and New York City, a practice that got writings on Millerism to the other side of the globe. According to one prominent Millerite, Josiah Litch, materials made their way “to China; to Burmah; to Hindoostan; to the East Indies; to Persia, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, Constantinople; into Africa, the W. India islands, the Islands of the Pacific.”

Another major way by which Millerites tried to communicate complex ideas quickly was through the use of pictorial charts. Charts could not be distributed nearly as widely as publications, given their size, but they still played an extremely important role in the movement. The pictorial, prophetic, Millerite charts were so effective that they continued to be made and used by Advent Christians (and, I should add, Seventh-Day Adventists) well into the twentieth century—more than one hundred years after the Millerite Movement. Millerite preachers used these charts to illustrate the complicated

chronologies, calculations, biblical symbolism, and prophecies fulfilled that had led to Miller's conclusions about the second coming of Christ. The most famous and popular chart of the time, the "1843 Chart" (which was created / published in 1842, but was about Christ's return in 1843), measured about three by five feet, but others were larger, as they were to be used as a visual tool in large halls; the great, traveling, Millerite tent; and even in the open air, where they were sometimes hung on trees. Although the practice of illustrating biblical prophecies was not original to the Millerites (it had been done in books on prophecy for centuries), Millerite preachers innovated by enlarging their scale so that they could be seen by an entire audience in a large space.

The charts were not just used by preachers in services or lectures. Even when traveling, a preacher would sometimes hang a chart while on a boat or ship (or in some other conveyance or public space). The arresting, often frightening images on a chart would invariably draw a crowd, thus affording a preacher yet another opportunity to spread the message of Christ's imminent return. Millerites believed that time was short and that no opportunities to spread their message should be allowed to slip away. These charts were so intriguing and so frequently used that they became a hallmark of the Millerites. (People find them equally alluring today. They not only fascinate historians of religion and biblical scholars, but historians of folk art as well.)



Before I discuss these charts any further, let me just tell you a bit about the Millerite Movement. On October 22, 1844, people in various parts of the country (but especially in the Northeast) gathered together in public buildings or in private homes, singing and preaching and praying. Their spiritual bags were packed; they were ready to go to a much better place--a place they had read about and dreamt about and worked so hard to get to. They were awaiting the arrival of their Lord Jesus Christ, who, they believed, would sweep up the saved, destroy the wicked, and make the earth anew. These people were Millerites, followers of William Miller, a New York farmer and preacher, who had taught them that the approximate time of the Lord's arrival could be determined through a set of calculations based on Scripture.

Although few people today have even heard of Millerism, it was a nationally known movement by the 1840s, its meetings attended not just by the lowly, but by ministers and other educated people as well, mostly from various Protestant denominations. Stories about the movement filled the national press, especially in 1843-44, the period that Miller had predicted for Christ's return. Because of the huge numbers of people that Miller's preaching (and that of his lieutenants) drew and its

extensive coverage by the mainstream press, as well as the countless numbers of Millerite publications, Millerism became nationally and even internationally known.

As a result of years of intense Bible study, Miller came to the conclusion that Christ would not only personally and visibly return to earth, but would do so in the very near future, sometime between March 1843 and March 1844. Miller concluded that Christ would descend from the heavens and that the righteous (both the dead and the living), now immortal, would be caught up to meet the Lord in order to reign with him for a thousand years over a new earth that had been cleansed by fire. According to Miller, at the end of the thousand years, the souls of the wicked then would be judged and sent to eternal damnation.

In spite of their “blessed hope,” March 1844, marking the end of Miller’s predicted time period, rolled by without the return of Christ. However, many retained their hope, thinking that the calculations had simply been somewhat off. A few months later, at an August 1844 campmeeting, Samuel S. Snow, a man who up to this point had played just a minor role in the movement, presented a new and quite specific date, based on a different set of assumptions and calculations. He said that Christ would return on October 22, 1844. This announcement ignited a whole new level of enthusiasm within the Millerite Movement, enthusiasm that rose to considerably greater heights than that produced by Miller’s predicted time consisting of an entire year. Virtually all of the established Millerite leadership initially rejected this idea, including Miller himself. However, given the huge wave of joyful acceptance that Snow’s prediction generated, Miller and his top lieutenants finally embraced it at the eleventh hour, although somewhat reluctantly.

With many Millerites absolutely convinced that Christ would return on one, specific day, there was no soft edge to break their fall when, once again, Christ did not appear. Not only did they have to deal with this unbearable disappointment, they also had to cope with the profound humiliation that they felt, especially since this second and much greater disappointment generated a huge outpouring of ridicule and abuse from nonbelievers.



However, leading up to 1843 / 44, Millerite leaders were convinced that the time of Christ's return to earth was nearly upon them and that they had a huge task before them—to win as many souls for Christ, via a conversion experience, as possible. Time was so short that they used every method they could think of to spread their urgent message. Although the use of pictorial charts was clearly not their only method to do this, it was one of the most important ones (along with publications).

At their May 24, 1842 General Conference, Millerite leaders made the decision to lithograph (and thus mass produce) what today we call the 1843 chart--the earliest printed, Millerite chart and the most iconic. It, in effect, became a template or prototype for many of the charts to follow.

There were a number of probable reasons why, in the last year before Christ's anticipated return, Millerite leaders ordered the publication of the 1843 chart (and used charts in general):

--**FIRST**, their dramatic pictures captured the interest of people and drew them to Millerite services. And the mere act of hanging up a chart (with its terrifying beasts and peculiar figures) in public was enough to start drawing a crowd, which usually grew further as the lecturer began to explain the symbolism and chronologies.

--**SECOND**, the charts helped people understand the content of the sermon better and retain it longer because of the striking visuals used.

--**THIRD**, they structured the content and thus standardized the message, as growing numbers of lecturers (clergy and laymen alike) took to the road, spreading the Adventist message.

--**FOURTH**, the charts (especially the 1843 one, with its **tiny print** of instructions for the preachers) guaranteed a minimum amount of accuracy in the message, as a growing number of inexperienced people, who had not fully mastered the material (and about whom people had been complaining because of this), took up preaching for the cause. The tiny print varies in content, but it all is fairly mundane and falls into three major categories:

- 1) just a biblical citation to show the origin of an image
- 2) a biblical citation plus a ready-made interpretation of it

3) a historical fact - - Ex. The image of a man on a horse with a gun is accompanied by the following note: "Fire arms first used on horse-back by the Turks (fact in history)"

--**FIFTH**, they helped preachers to give not just a clear presentation, but an efficient one as well--as time was often at a premium (given the fact that Millerite presentations were sometimes given on boats and trains – literally on the run!).



So what was the content of these charts (especially the 1843 one)? Virtually all of the charts were trying to show that Christ's return to earth was imminent (or at least sooner rather than later) and that this was based on prophecy as found in the Bible (especially the books of Daniel [Old Testament] and Revelation [New Testament]). Thus, the symbols in the charts are images that are described in the Bible. Some of the charts also suggest that big events in history, like the death of Christ, the rise of Rome and then the Papacy, and the French Revolution / reign of Napoleon happened at the exact time that was predicted in the Bible, the implication being that if it accurately predicted those events, then the Bible can also be trusted to accurately predict the Second Advent. I will mainly discuss the 1843 chart because, as noted earlier, it became a template for many of the charts that followed. (NOTE: The 1843 chart was created to convince people of Christ's return in 1843. Since most of the charts that we have were made after the 1843-44 period, obviously they do not argue for Christ's return in 1843. However, they still argue that Christ's return will be soon, and many of the images seen in later charts were inspired by the 1843 chart.) So let's take a look at the 1843 chart. I will discuss it in terms of its: 1) Numbers and 2) Images.

NUMBERS

The numbers in the 1843 chart are there to illustrate the major, distinct element of the 1843 chart - - the idea that not only would Christ return soon, but that He would return around 1843. And in this chart, you see multiple calculations—that is, multiple ways of getting to the year 1843. You also see a timeline running down the far left -hand side of it, starting with 700 BC and ending with 1800 AD. This was another way of showing a connection between milestone events / eras in the past and a great, future event, like the return of Christ.

How did Miller calculate such a thing? Millerite calculations (like any others) are the products of the assumptions behind them. Change the assumptions and the calculations also change. People who challenged the date (both then and now) often challenged the assumptions rather than the numbers themselves. For example, one assumption in biblical prophecy is that a “day,” as stated in the Bible, is really a year. But even Miller did not always stick with this code because he was also known to have argued that a “day” equaled a millennium (although he does not do so in the 1843 chart). One also makes assumptions in using the dates from one calendar (like the Jewish one) over another. And the historian in me must remind you that the supposedly concrete dates of history are really just interpretations or commonly held assumptions. Since specific dates were critical to his calculations, this was a big problem, one that he seems not to have been terribly aware of.

Thus, looking at the 1843 chart, we see basically two types of numbers: “year days” as found in prophecy and actual calendar days that Millerites linked to either the beginning or ending of prophetic periods. As to where the actual biblical calculations in the 1843 chart came from, I do not even begin to have the necessary, in-depth knowledge of biblical prophesy and its codes to explain them to you, so at this point, I will figuratively give the floor to Dr. David Dean, who IS an expert on these things. In his 2000 lecture at AU, he gave explanations for two of the calculations. I will read you one of these—for the chart’s upper right-hand calculation.

2520	7
- 677	X 12
1843	84
	X 30
	2520

The math here is based upon God’s threat (Leviticus 26:28-34) to punish disobedient Israel “seven times over” if the nation continues in its rebellion. Miller and his followers understood the word “time” to mean a symbolic “year,” which consists of 360 literal years [sic., days]. Seven “times” would be equal to 84 months of 30 days each, or a total of 2520 days (each a literal year in length). The early Adventists considered that period of time presently underway because Israel was still a scattered nation. It would end with the Second Coming of Christ (Daniel 12:7). But when had the “seven times” (2520 days) begun? Miller pointed to B.C. 677 when Babylon carried Judah’s king Manasseh into captivity (See Jeremiah 15:4-7 and 2 Chronicles 33:9-11). If the captivity began in 677 BC and continues until Christ’s Return then one only needs to subtract 677 from 2520 to see that...Christ will come back in 1843. **(David Dean, “Holy Arithmetic, Horrible Beasts and Hell-Bound Churches: The Message of the Early Adventist Prophetic Charts,” p. 4)**

You may not understand all of this, but two things are apparent: FIRST, such calculations often were quite complicated and SECOND, they were based on an array of shaky assumptions—the actual number of days in a month or a year, the belief that the 2520 years / days actually began with the B.C. 677 event (as opposed to any number of others), etc.

Images

I suspect that the numbers in the 1843 chart often made the eyes of audience members in the 1840s glaze over (similar to the effect on YOU if this entire lecture was just on the calculations, or as David Dean calls them—“Holy Arithmetic.”). However, we know that for generations the images of the fearsome-looking beasts in the 1843 chart (and others) had exactly the opposite effect! To start, I would like to quote again from Dr. Dean’s 2000 lecture. It illustrates the impact that prophetic charts had on people, even in the 20th century.

The fame and popularity of these early prophetic charts...lay more in the colorful and often grotesque images depicted on them than in their mathematics. This was true for me as a high school boy in the 1940s when I saw my first prophetic chart. The Rev. Jared Fremont Whitman...came to my home church in New Bedford, MA for a series of evangelistic meetings. He brought his prophetic charts with him so that I found myself sitting in a congregation which was literally surrounded by canvas charts on three sides from floor to ceiling. The imagery around me was colorful and captivating. The painted figures were at the same time bizarre and bewildering. I was not frightened...but startled, intrigued, and open-eyed with curiosity over their meaning. In the days before ET, those prophetic symbols might just as well have been invaders from outer space. **(David Dean, “Holy Arithmetic, Horrible Beasts and Hell-Bound Churches: The Message of the Early Adventist Prophetic Charts,” p. 5)**

Now, let’s look at the chart’s images. Moving to the right of the left-hand timeline, we see the image of a large man, who is divided into sections, and some of the chart’s animal images. The animal images on the left side of the chart were largely taken from the book of Daniel and are positioned on the chart in a column-like manner and in chronological order, moving from top to bottom.

Prophecy is concerned with things that happen over time—with historical events that seem to fulfill biblical prophecy or are milestones on the way to the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. In the 1843 chart, the animals represent various governments in history, as does the large image of a man on the

left (each section of which represents a different government or civilization). The message is very clear, whether looking at the animals or the large man--governments / civilizations rise and then, just as assuredly, fall, making way for another one in a different part of the world. As history progresses, and each successive government / civilization falls, it shows that no human creation, like government, can create heaven on earth and that the line of successes and then failures ultimately leads to the Second Advent.

The image of the large, metallic man comes from the book of Daniel, in which Daniel also sees and then interprets a dream that King Nebuchadnezzar had. In the dream, he sees a man having:

- Head of GOLD** (Chart – This represents **BABYLON**)
- Breast & Arms of SILVER** (Chart - This represents **MEDO-PERSIA**)
- Belly / thighs of BRASS** (Chart - This represents **GREECE**)
- Legs of IRON** (Chart – This represents **ROME = Era of Ceasars**)
- Feet of IRON / CLAY** (Chart - This represents **ROME = Disintegrating Stage**).

Then, in the dream, suddenly a stone breaks the image into many pieces, which disappear, while the stone that broke up the image turns into a great mountain. Daniel's interpretation of this is that: ONE, the head is Babylon / King Nebuchadnezzar; TWO, each succeeding government in the future will be inferior to the previous one; and THREE, once the world reaches the iron and clay toes of the figure, it is close to the end time. The stone breaking apart the man and then turning into a mountain symbolizes the replacement of earthly governments with God's Kingdom, which will last forever & be superseded by no one.

In another vision of Daniel's, he sees the waters being stirred up by the "four winds," resulting in the appearance of four, different, great beasts from the sea. These four beasts, as mentioned earlier, also represent different governments / civilizations:

- LION – BABYLON**
- BEAR / RAM** (with *two* horns) - **MEDIA & PERSIA**
- LEOPARD – GREECE - Post-Alexander the Great** (with *four* heads,
denoting the *four divisions of the kingdom* following Alexander's death)

OR

- GOAT - GREECE** (with *one* horn between his eyes, denoting **Alexander the Great**, BUT the horn eventually being replaced by *four* horns, denoting the *four divisions of the kingdom* after Alexander's death)

- Unnamed, but STRONG, TERRIBLE BEAST**, having:

--**ten horns**, denoting the **ten divisions** made in the **FORMER ROMAN EMPIRE by the northern, invading tribes** between 439 & 507 AD—the Vandals, Ostrogoths, Saxons, Britons, Franks, Visigoths, etc.
--later, a small, **eleventh horn** (the eastern remnant of the Roman Empire) having the eyes and mouth of a person, which **pulls out three of the first ten horns**, denoting a **remnant of the Roman Empire re-conquering three areas taken by different tribes**.

In the lower, righthand part of the chart, we see images from Revelation (a strange, even surreal book which consists of different visions that John sees about the end days / the apocalypse before the Final Judgment of humankind by God):

--**GREAT, RED, 7- HEADED DRAGON** (with **ten horns**) – Satan (Rev. 12)

--**WHORE OF BABYLON** – Woman in finery & holding a cup while riding a red beast (Rev. 17 & 18). Her appearance in the 1843 chart does not exactly match the description in Revelation, but it is close enough to see what she symbolizes—worldly pleasures (especially of the flesh) and sins of all kinds. Her cup, Rev. says, is “full of abominations.” She, of course, will meet a bad end. Why the label “Babylon”? Babylon / the Babylonian Empire was one of the great, ancient civilizations portrayed in Millerite charts. At the height of its power and glory, Babylon was a large, bustling city-state with an advanced culture, but in Judeo-Christian culture, it had a much more negative meaning—that of corrupted power, excess and immorality.

--**“WOE” ANGELS** (Rev. 8) – The breaking of the *seventh* seal of God’s book by the Lamb (Christ) produced *seven* angels (with *seven* trumpets) who brought various kinds of disasters to humankind & the earth as a part of the end days. The last *three* were called the “woe” angels, who unleashed a plague of locusts, a murderous army of 200 million, a great earthquake, and a great hailstorm—in short an apocalyptic nightmare!

Toward the end of Revelation, there is a description of a new heaven and a new earth—what the Bible calls a “new Jerusalem”—that will come after the resurrection of the righteous and the

punishment of the wicked, and some of our charts reflect that more pleasant topic, including one in this exhibit.

Anti-Catholicism

Another thing that one might notice about the 1843 charts, and others, is a seeming bias against the Papacy / Catholicism. (Note that the whore of Babylon is wearing papal-looking headgear and another terrible-looking animal has the pope's head [wearing the papal tiara], on one of its horns.) Nineteenth-century Protestantism did not look kindly upon Roman Catholicism (and Catholics returned these negative feelings). This Catholic-Protestant conflict, of course, had its primary roots in the Reformation of the early 1500s. Many Protestants believed that by the medieval era, the church had lost its way and no longer looked like the early church of the New Testament. They (and this includes the Millerites) wanted to return the church to the way it was depicted in the New Testament—in other words, to an era in which they thought the church was more simple and more pure. This belief is called Restorationism and still exists today in some Protestant denominations. The Catholic-Protestant feud in the United States, a country with deep British roots in the early nineteenth century, was also influenced, no doubt, by the centuries-old, harsh colonization of Ireland by the British. This colonization highlighted and exacerbated the Catholic-Protestant divide and produced disturbing stereotypes of the Irish / Catholics—i.e., the Irish were savages, the Catholic Church was corrupt and sexually indecent, etc.

In the nineteenth century, religious differences and hostilities in the United States were very much reflected in its government, economy, and society. It was the Protestants who controlled governmental power, and American Protestants' disdain for Catholicism was reflected in the widespread stereotype of Catholics (i.e., the Irish) as stealers of elections whose first loyalty was to the papacy rather than to the United States government (a belief that as late as the 1960 presidential election, John F. Kennedy would have to fight against). Irish Catholics also were discriminated against economically and stigmatized socially. In fact, the 1840s (and especially the 1850s, which produced a national, anti-immigrant political party) was almost exactly the same time period as the Millerite Movement, an era in which anti-Catholicism reached an all-time high as Catholic immigrants from Ireland and Germany started coming to the United States in unprecedented numbers.

Since that historical, anti-Catholic environment was the context in which the 1843 chart (and several others) was written, it is hardly surprising to see such anti-Catholic symbolism as the Catholic Church presented as Babylon. However, as the Millerite Movement developed, the Roman Catholic

Church was not the only one that acquired the label of “Babylon.” Since Miller was not interested in creating a new denomination (why bother if the world is about to end?), he urged his followers to remain in their various churches, and they did for a while. But as time went on, Millerites increasingly met with and identified with fellow Millerites rather than their fellow church members, and their home churches became increasingly impatient with hearing about Miller’s urgent admonition to repent before Christ’s imminent return. Thus, eventually these home churches, representing an array of Protestant denominations, also acquired the label of “Babylon,” and some Millerite leaders (though not Miller himself) began urging their fellow Millerites to “come out of Babylon”—i.e., leave their unbelieving churches. Some left voluntarily and some were expelled by their home churches (including Miller!). Although this later development is not reflected in the 1843 chart, it is in some of the later Adventist charts.

So what then is the significance of the charts for our time?

FIRST, today there are still some denominations that believe in and preach Christ’s soon (if not imminent) return to earth, one of them being the Advent Christian denomination, which founded this school in 1893. So for them, these charts have great theological significance.

SECOND, the charts are, in and of themselves, works of art—not on par with the work of the great masters obviously—but art nevertheless. They are examples of folk art, the kind of simple art work done by everyday people, often for utilitarian purposes rather than being just art for art’s sake. In fact, one art historian, Dr. Carol Brown, thought the charts in the Jenks Collection so significant that in 2003, she included several of them (including the 1843 chart) in a traveling, folk art exhibit that she curated under the auspices of the University of Memphis. It was called “Coming Home! Southern Self-Taught Artists, the Bible, and the American South.”

THIRD, as cultural artifacts, the charts reflect a very different America from the one that we live in and confirm the old adage that I used at the beginning of this paper--that the past IS a foreign country. We see in them an America in which the Protestant, Anglo-Saxon cultural stamp is much more in evidence, and although diverse in comparison to many other nineteenth-century countries, is a pale reflection of the cultural and religious diversity of today. And we see an America in which the primary religious conflict is between Catholics and Protestants rather than Muslims and Christians / Jews (although there are some hints of anti-Muslim beliefs in them, including the 1843 chart). In short, by the nineteenth century, the Catholic-Protestant feud must have seemed to be never ending,

but, of course, it wasn't. Perhaps this gives us hope today for the end of the seemingly endless conflict between the Muslim and Judeo-Christian worlds.

And **FINALLY**, the charts remind us that often we do not know what we think we know--that, like the Bible, everything in this world is complex, contradictory, and very much open to interpretation, interpretations that are based on the assumptions and belief systems that we hold. They also tell us that, in spite of this, people often have a need to not only understand this world, but to know what lies beyond it. And so the journey to find answers to that eternal question goes on. It is interesting to think about how future generations will try to answer it....

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