

Jehovah's Witnesses:

An Adventist and Russellite Offshoot

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Introduction

Jehovah's Witnesses (JW's) claim that their modern day history began in the late 1800's when Charles Taze Russell founded the Watch Tower Tract Society. Until recently Jehovah's Witnesses have not discussed much 18th century Adventism as the source of Russell's beliefs. The evidence indicates that Russell got most of his ideas on theology and chronology (historic premillennialism) from the writings and teachings of numerous Adventists. Russell became a Second Adventist and the "Bible Student" movement Russell founded became an Adventist sect or offshoot. Likewise, the Jehovah's Witnesses of today are an offshoot of Russell's Adventist sect. This article contains a brief overview of the evidence for these historical developments.

Charles Taze Russell

C. T. Russell was born in 1852 in Allegheny, Pennsylvania in the US. He grew up in the Presbyterian faith with his father reportedly a high level Mason as well. He later joined a Congregationalist church. Troubled by his church's teaching on hell and other topics, he apparently became a skeptic during his teen years. This reportedly occurred as a result of Russell trying to convert an "infidel" to Christianity at the age of sixteen. In the words of one commentator, "The infidel thoroughly routed the young Russell, and he became a skeptic. He saw, for instance, that with the doctrine of eternal torment in it he could not believe in the Bible." **1**

At the age of eighteen in about 1869 he attended a Second Adventist church meeting held by Jonas Wendell, in Russell's words, "to see if the handful who met there had anything more sensible to offer than the creeds of the great churches." **2** More "sensible" than the eternal punishment doctrine apparently. This meeting helped re-establish his faith in the Bible (Adventists believe in soul sleep).

After this, Russell soon started a Bible study with some relatives and associates. This included his father who had previously become interested in Adventism (around the time of C. T.'s skepticism). Not surprisingly, one of the first things discovered by the group was there was no eternal punishment or hell as traditionally conceived. Gruss noted, "according to his own position as cited by Stewart, Russell had to eliminate the doctrine of eternal punishment to believe the Bible... The Bible was studied" with this in mind. "It is strikingly strange for one to study the Bible starting from this point," he said. **3**

Russell the Adventist

During the time of his Bible study, Russell was influenced heavily by several Adventists such as George Storrs, Jonas Wendell, George Stetson and Nelson Barbour. Other possible influences were Christadelphians, the Lutheran minister Joseph Seiss and possibly Freemasonry. The Watchtower Society has in more recent years admitted this

Adventist influence on Russell, stating for example that Russell "learned much of the mortality of the soul" (soul sleep) from George Storrs. **4** Russell himself acknowledged his indebtedness to Adventists such as Stetson, Storrs, Wendell and Barbour. **5** Thus, even according to the Society today, Russell learned "much" about theology including soul sleep from Adventists, not from the Bible alone. Russell's Bible study group seems to have been an Adventist oriented study. In fact, according to Jonsson, Russell's Bible study group had numerous and close contacts with certain Adventists, including a group under the leadership of Jonas Wendell in Allegheny and George Storrs' congregation in New York. **6**

Much of Russell's theology came from these and earlier Adventists. Some of Russell's beliefs can be traced back to the very beginning of the Second Advent movement started by William Miller, such as certain time calculations and some of Russell's type/antitype hermeneutics. **7**

Nelson Barbour

One major influence on Russell's beliefs during this time was Nelson Barbour of Rochester, New York. Barbour was the publisher of the Adventist magazine, *The Midnight Cry* which had a circulation of 15,000. It proclaimed that Jesus would return visibly in 1874. When Jesus didn't return, Barbour was at first puzzled. His readership "dwindled to about 300" as a result. **8** One of *The Midnight Cry's* readers was B.W. Kieth who later became a contributing writer to Russell's *Watch Tower* magazine. He noted that in Benjamin Wilson's *Emphatic Diaglott* Greek/English interlinear translation of Matthew 24, the word *parousia* translated as coming was rendered as "presence." It was suggested that Barbour had the date of Christ's return right (1874) but had expected the wrong thing (a visible return). Barbour believed that Jesus was invisibly "present" since 1874. Most of his readers didn't accept this explanation of his prediction of Christ's return, resulting in his readership dwindling as noted above. However, one person who did accept this explanation was Charles Russell.**9**

In October of 1874, *The Midnight Cry* ceased publication. In 1875 the magazine was restarted as *Herald of the Morning*. After receiving a copy of the Herald magazine in about 1876, Russell was impressed with Barbour's "invisible presence" views on Christ's coming (which Russell apparently came to believe independently from Barbour) and he accepted much of his chronological views. His acceptance of Barbour's chronology came about in the following manner: After reading the Herald, Russell wrote to Barbour about his chronology. Later in 1876, Russell arranged a meeting with him in Philadelphia to see if he could convince him, in Russell's words, "that the prophecies indicated 1874 as the date at which the Lord's presence and the 'harvest' began." "The evidence satisfied me," Russell said. **10** Jonsson noted:

It is apparent that during these meetings Russell accepted all of Barbour's time calculations, including his calculation of the Gentile times. While still in Philadelphia, Russell wrote an article entitled "Gentile Times: When do They End?" which was published in George Storrs' periodical the Bible Examiner in the October 1876 issue. **11**

Barbour and Russell soon became partners in publishing *Herald of the Morning*, Russell becoming an assistant editor of the Adventist magazine.

Herald of the Morning, July, 1878.

C.T. Russell, J.H. Paton listed as assistant editors. "Times of the Gentiles end in 1914" bottom right.

In 1877, Barbour wrote and published the book, *Three Worlds and The Harvest of This World* (Also called, *Three Worlds: Or Plan of Redemption*). It listed C.T. Russell as the co-publisher. Barbour though was the sole writer of the book. **12** In it, Barbour set forth his Adventist views on Millennial theology and chronology.

On theology, he taught in the book, as Russell would later in *The Watch Tower*, that the Church and Jesus together constituted The Christ (pp. 5-6). Jesus and His bride, the Church, constituted the "Second Adam and Eve" (p. 11). The church will become Gods, in fact, they would "become part of the Godhead" (p. 13). This Christ or God class would redeem humanity during the "probationary" period of the Millennium (p. 10) and thus become the "spiritual mother" of the rest of mankind (p. 16). These 144,000 "spiritual beings" would "materialize" as men on earth at will during their Millennial reign or remain invisible while on earth, thereby keeping tabs on the spiritual development of mankind during this period (pp. 43-47). Mankind's worship would in part consist of serving and obeying these "rulers" or "instructors" in the Millennium (p. 68).

On chronology, Barbour set forth his view that the "6,000 years" from Adam's creation ended in 1873 (pp. 76-77). Jesus returned in 1874, and the "Harvest" would be from 1874 to 1914. 1914 would see the end of the "Gentile Times," the setting up of the kingdom of God on earth, etc. In the chapter on "The Times of The Gentiles" Barbour wrote (pp. 83, 84):

Hence, it was in B. C. 606, that God's kingdom ended, the diadem was removed, and all the earth given up to the Gentiles. 2520 years from B. C. 606, will end in A.D. 1914, or forty years from 1874; and this forty years upon which we have now entered is to be such "a time of trouble as never was since there was a nation." And during this forty years, the kingdom of God is to be set up. (But not in the flesh, "the natural first and afterwards the spiritual)," the Jews are to be restored, the Gentile kingdoms broken to pieces "like a potter's vessel." and the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord and his Christ, and the judgment age introduced. These are some of the events this generation are to witness.... I am not willing to admit that this calculation is even one year out.

All of this Russell carried with him with little modification when he started *Zion's Watch Tower* magazine in 1879. However, exactly from whom he got his doctrines is not known as many of his Adventist associates believed in many of these views prior to Russell in addition to Barbour. Penton stated that Russell got his beliefs in the "ransom" doctrine, the paradise earth "restitution" doctrine, "negative feelings" towards the churches, conditionalism (soul sleep) and celebrating the "Lord's Supper" or "Memorial" once a year on "Nissan 14" from the Second Adventist, George Storrs. **13** As stated above, current Watchtower writers also admit that Russell "learned much" about soul sleep from Storrs.

Other possible influences

The role the Lutheran minister Joseph Seiss had on Russell's teachings, if any, is even less clear. It is clear Russell was aware of Seiss' book on Pyramidology, *A Miracle in Stone*, as he quoted it favorably in his *Thy Kingdom Come* in the chapter on Pyramidology. **14**

Penton stated Carl Olof Jonsson demonstrated that Henry Drumond in 1828 first advocated the idea of an invisible second presence of Christ with his "two-stage coming doctrine." This was picked up later by Seiss and Jonsson concludes Russell probably "plagiarized" the works of Seiss in his "invisible presence" doctrine in his *Object and Manner of Our Lord's Return* booklet. **15** However, Crompton noted a similar view held in 1815 :

Of particular note...was James Hatley Frere who, in 1815, had published A Combined View of the Prophecies of Daniel, Esdras, and St. John, in which he expressed the belief that the second coming would be not a literal event but a spiritual one and would take place in 1822-3....it was a similar view to that of Frere that was to become an important part of Russell's belief system later in the century. 16

Penton also claimed that Seiss believed Jesus was not resurrected in the flesh, but as a spirit, something JW's believe to this day. Seiss also produced other books such as *The Gospel in the Stars* on a Christianized Astrology. Seiss had numerous occult/fringe beliefs, many of which were also believed by Adventists, including Russell. Exactly who influenced who is now hard to determine. In any case, by the late 1800's, Russell was clearly a Second Adventist. It is clear that he shared many beliefs with the Adventists of his day, associated with several of them and even helped edit and publish Adventist material before starting his own Adventist publication.

Masonic influences

In addition to these influences, Russell was, apparently, a high level Freemason. What effect this had on his views is unknown. That his involvement in Masonry at least surfaced in his works is demonstrated by several Masonic symbols Russell used on his publications such as the "Cross and Crown" symbol and others on the *Watch Tower* covers, and the supposed 330 Masonic "[winged-sun-disc](#)" emblem from Egyptian mythology which adorned the covers of the 1911 and following editions of the *Studies in the Scriptures*. The fact that Russell put the Masonic symbols on his literature's covers appears to indicate that he was broadcasting to other Masons his involvement in the "secret society," thus it was apparently an important part of his life and beliefs and something researchers of Russell should examine. **17**

The Bible Students

A doctrinal dispute between Russell and Barbour over the atonement resulted in Russell ending his partnership with Barbour and publishing his own magazine, *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence* in 1879. When Russell left, he took many of Barbour's readers with him, including J.H. Paton, the Herald magazine's other assistant editor. He continued with Barbour's chronology of 1874 being the date of Christ's invisible return, 1799 as the start of the time of the end and 1914 as the "end of the Gentile Times" as well as the numerous Adventist Millennial teachings discussed above. Paton contributed many articles to *The Watch Tower* for several years. Some of these were still from a Trinitarian perspective, stating for example that Jesus was not Michael the Archangel **18** but "God manifest in the flesh." **19** Russell encouraged Paton to write a book to replace Barbour's *Three Worlds* for *Watch Tower* readers which he did (*Day Dawn*). A doctrinal dispute with Russell over the Atonement or "ransom" doctrine caused Paton to leave. After he and Paton parted ways, Russell produced his own book, *The Plan*

of the Ages (later called *The Divine Plan of the Ages*) as the first volume of his *Millennial Dawn* series (later changed to *Studies in the Scriptures*). Russell soon became the remaining major teacher among the "Bible Students." He became an Arian and wrote numerous articles against Trinitarianism, etc. further distancing himself and the Bible Students from the mainline churches and even the Adventist churches.

The apostasy and restoration

As did some Adventists before him, Russell increasingly viewed all other churches as apostate and his movement was part of the "restoration" of the truth that had been largely lost for centuries. His views and literature as a result became more and more important in his and his follower's eyes. The Bible Student movement and Russell's teaching soon became synonymous with the "Truth." Russell's writings took on greater importance and significance as time went on. By 1906 Russell was saying:

Many are the inquiries relative to the truths presented in MILLENNIAL DAWN and ZION'S WATCH TOWER, as to whence they came...Were they the result of visions? Did God in any supernatural way grant the solution to these hitherto mysteries of his plan.... how comes this revelation of God's truths?.... No, dear friends, I claim nothing of superiority, nor supernatural power, dignity or authority; nor do I aspire to exalt myself in the estimation of my brethren of the household of faith, except in the sense that the Master urged, saying, "Let him who would be great among you be your servant,".... No, the truths I present, as God's mouthpiece, were not revealed in visions or dreams, nor by God's audible voice, nor all at once, but gradually.... Neither is this clear unfolding of truth due to any human ingenuity or acuteness of perception, but to the simple fact that God's due time has come; and if I did not speak, and no other agent could be found, the very stones would cry out.

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While on the one hand claiming no special "authority," Russell clearly desired to be the "servant" in the estimation of the "household of faith." He claimed to be the "mouthpiece" of God. The "due time" had come to restore the truth lost for millennia and God had chosen him alone. He alone was publishing the "meat" in "due season" by the early 1900's and if no one other than him could be found to speak for God, the very stones would have a hissy fit and speak for God themselves, apparently. While others before him paved the way in giving the "midnight cry," such as Miller and Barbour, Russell believed he was finally chosen as the one in restoring true Biblical teaching. By 1910, for example, he wrote the following infamous comments about his literature's importance:

The plan of reading twelve pages of the STUDIES IN THE SCRIPTURES each day, tried by so many, results in more Bible study than any other way we know of....

Furthermore, not only do we find that people can not see the divine plan in studying the Bible by itself, but we see, also, that if anyone lays the SCRIPTURES STUDIES aside, even after he has used them, after he has become familiar with them, after he has read them for ten years–if he then lays them aside and ignores them and goes to the Bible alone, though he has understood his Bible for ten years, our experience shows that within two years he goes into darkness. On the other hand, if he had merely read the

SCRIPTURE STUDIES with their references, and had not read a page of the Bible, as such, he would be in the light at the end of the two years, because he would have the light of the Scriptures.... 21

While saying everyone needed to decide for himself, etc., Russell clearly wanted everyone to "study" the Bible solely from his writings. No one could even see the so-called "divine plan" from reading the Bible, you had to read his book, *The Divine Plan of the Ages* with your Bible next to you to look up the proof texts. Reading the Bible alone would lead to spiritual darkness. All this derived logically from his self-appraisal of being "God's mouthpiece" and the "servant" to the entire "household of faith" combined with his view that the rest of the churches were apostate. These developments further alienated the churches and Adventist groups from Russell and his movement (and vice versa).

JW's: A Russellite offshoot

Likewise, the Watchtower Society under the leadership of "Judge" Rutherford, Fred Franz, and others has continued to evolve into an exclusivist sect and has distanced itself further, not only from the mainline churches, but from many of Russell's teachings and thus from the various Bible Student groups. The Bible Student groups today all adhere more closely to Russell's teachings than does the Watchtower Society he founded. The Society stopped publishing his *Studies in the Scriptures* in 1928. Many Bible Students believe for the most part that the Society has become apostate as it no longer believes in many of Russell's teachings as expounded in his *Studies*. As Russell warned about those who would do such a thing, the Society has gone into spiritual darkness. JW's are viewed by many Bible Students as part of the Whore of Babylon and tell JW's to "get out of her my people."

JW's are happy to return the favor as they believe the Bible Students are still stuck on the "old light" of "Pastor" Russell and thus haven't kept up with the latest "light" or "present truth." Thus JW's are no longer "Russellites" or followers of Russell as detractors have called them and they used to proudly call themselves. **22** Russell is no longer viewed by the Watchtower Society as the "faithful and wise servant" alone serving the "meat in due season" or proper explanation of the Scriptures as they taught until 1927. **23** They have gone back to the original view that the "servant" is a class of people, the 144,000, of which Russell was only one. The truth is still being progressively revealed to the modern "remnant" of the 144,000 who are currently leading the corporation Russell founded. Russell is viewed by JW's today as the founder of their movement who helped revive the truth and separated them from Babylon the Great, but who taught many things that are no longer the "truth" as the "light has grown brighter" since his day. JW's therefore do not and are not encouraged to read Russell's material at all, except the brief quotations provided by the Society's writers in their current publications.

To illustrate how far JW's have evolved from Russell's beginnings, if Russell were alive today and attended a Kingdom Hall, and still advocated the beliefs he held to when he died, he would be shunned and disfellowshipped from the Society he founded. Crompton concluded that Russell's chronological system was an almost complete "replacement" of Miller's system and the current JW system is a "replacement" of Russell's system with a different one. **24** Jehovah's Witnesses therefore can be categorized as an Adventist and Russellite offshoot. JW's are a group that can attribute their existence to Charles Russell who's beliefs, in turn, came from the Second Advent movement of the 1800's. While

retaining much from Adventism and Russellism, JW's no longer accept much of either system's teachings and thus do not fellowship with either group or consider them brethren. Both groups are just as apostate to JW's as any others in Christendom. **25** If a JW were to visit an Adventist or Bible Student church meeting, he/she could be disfellowshipped for apostasy.

References and notes:

1. E.D. Stewart, "Life of Pastor Russell," *Overland Monthly*, 69:129, Feb., 1917. Quoted in Edmond Gruss, *Apostles of Denial*, (Presbyterian and Reformed), 1970, 1986, p. 39.
2. *Watch Tower Reprints*, p. 3821. The *Watch Tower Reprints* are reprints of the *Watch Tower* magazine (in small type in seven volumes) from 1879 to 1919. These were published by the Watchtower Society in 1920. Hereafter referred to as Reprints.
3. Edmond C. Gruss, *Apostles of Denial*, (Presbyterian and Reformed), 1970, 1986, p. 40. Hereafter, Gruss.
4. *Jehovah's Witnesses: Proclaimers of God's Kingdom*, (New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society), 1993, p. 46. Hereafter, *Proclaimers*.
5. *Reprints*, pp. 288-9; 3821-3; *Proclaimers*, p. 120.
6. Carl Olof Jonsson, *The Gentile Times Reconsidered* (Atlanta: Commentary Press), 1986, p. 27. Hereafter, Jonsson.
7. Robert Crompton, *Counting the Days to Armageddon Jehovah's Witnesses and the Second Presence of Christ* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co.), 1996, pp. 20- 21. Hereafter, Crompton.
8. Jonsson, pp. 26-27.
9. *Reprints*, pp. 230-231.
10. *Reprints*, p. 3822, Jonsson, p. 28.
11. Jonsson, p. 28.
12. M. James Penton, *Apocalypse Delayed The Story of Jehovah's Witnesses* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 1985, p. 19. Hereafter, Penton.
13. Penton, pp. 16-17
14. Charlse Taze Russell, *Studies in the Scriptures*, series III, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Allegheny, PA: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society), 1891, 1908 ed., pp. 327-8.
15. Penton, p. 18.
16. Crompton, p. 18.
17. Fritz Springmeier, *The Watchtower & the Masons*, (Portland, OR.: self published), 1990, 1992; Ken Raines, "The Winged-Sun-Disc," *JW Research*, vol. 2, #1, Winter, 1996, pp. 22-24.
18. *Reprints*, p. 48.
19. *Reprints*, p. 27.
20. *Reprints*, p. 3821.
21. *Reprints*, pp. 4684-4686.
22. Walter Martin and Norman Klan, *Jehovah of the Watchtower* (Minneapolis, MN.: Bethany House Publishers), 1953, 1974, p. 41; *The Golden Age*, March 17, 1920, pp. 409-414.
23. J. F. Rutherford, *The Harp of God* (Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society), 1921, pp. 237, 239.
24. Crompton, p. 18.

25. For example, in discussing individuals such as Paul S. L. Johnson who broke away from the Watchtower and formed the Layman's Home Missionary Movement, they said, "individuals in responsible positions came to view themselves as the channel of spiritual light.... they sought to get others to follow them, or as the apostle Paul put it, 'to draw away the disciples after themselves'.... Paul S. L. Johnson....claimed to be the steward (or, man in charge) referred to by Jesus in his parable at Matthew 20:8." *Proclaimers*, pp. 627-9.

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