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Recommended Citation

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Chapter 1

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JOSEPH BATES: ORIGINATOR OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST MISSION THEORY

GEORGE R. KNIGHT

Joseph Bates was Seventh-day Adventism's first theologian as well as the denomination's first mission theorist. In the late 1840s he developed a chain-of-events approach to history and prophecy centering on the flow of events from Revelation 12:17-14:20. His prophetic chain-of-events logic eventually drove the denomination into worldwide mission as an eschatological imperative.

Joseph Bates (1792-1872) recognized no dividing line between history and theology. They were two aspects of the same topic. For him, Sabbatarian Adventism was a movement and a theological message rooted in history. More than that, he equated the form of history with prophecy both fulfilled and being fulfilled. His unique understanding eventually gave birth to a missiological impulse that would drive Seventh-day Adventism to take its message to every corner of the earth.

Moving toward a Chain-of-Events Understanding of Prophecy

Bates's starting point was rooted in the prophetic understandings of Millerite Adventism, a movement that came to an end with the nonappearance of Christ in October 1844.¹ In the post-disappointment period, Millerism would split into two main parts. Both of them, in Bates's mind, had gone off the prophetic track and departed from essential truth. As a result, he penned little books against them.

In *The Opening Heavens* he labored with the Spiritualizers, who had given up a literal understanding of the Second Advent and who had declared Christ had come in spirit. As Bates put it, "Thousands who have been looking for the personal appearing of the Lord Jesus from heaven in these last days, have, in their disappointment about his coming, given up the only Scriptural view, and are now teaching that he has come in spirit" (Bates 1846a: 1).

In that little book Bates took one of his first steps toward placing what would eventually become Sabbatarian Adventism into the flow of prophetic history. As early as December 4, 1844, he had been exploring the implications of Revelation 10 and noted that the Revelator was providing "a history of the events which were to transpire" before the sounding of the seventh trumpet. Bates concluded a letter to the periodical *Voice of Truth* by asking the Lord to "help us to obtain our true position on this stormy sea, and again spread all our sails for the gale that shall waft us into the harbor of glory" (Bates 1844:187-88). Historical positioning within the prophetic framework was crucial to him. He began to work out its details in *The Opening Heavens*.

In April 1847 Bates took on the other major post-Millerite branch in his *Second Advent Way Marks and High Heaps: Or a Connected View, of the Fulfillment of Prophecy, By God's Peculiar People, From the Year 1840 to 1847* (Bates 1847b). His title may seem strange, but across time people have marked trees and set up little piles of stones (heaps) to indicate the paths from one location to another. Bates employed those symbols to indicate how God had led His Adventist people in their recent past. For the rest of his life he would view God's providential leading as a series of waymarks and "high heaps."

In *Second Advent Way Marks* Bates lamented the fact that the majority group of ex-Millerites (those who had organized at Albany, New York, in May 1845) had denied the fulfillment of prophecy in October of 1844 and had thus begun to move away from William Miller's understanding of prophecy.

“Thousands on thousands,” he wrote in an 1848 book, had followed their Adventist leaders and had “turned into the enemy’s ranks, leaving the remnant to finish up the work” of preaching God’s truth and gathering in the 144,000 (Bates 1848:97, 98).

Central to his thinking was the fact that the fulfillment of Bible prophecy was a “harmonious chain of events” that had both sequence and direction. And at the focal point of that chain of Bible prophecy were the messages of the three angels that proceeded from Miller’s hour of God’s judgment message up through the time that the Sabbath message would be given right before the second advent of Christ (Rev. 14:6-20; *ibid.*, 100, 102-04).

Soon after the disappointment Bates began to utilize the chain-of-prophetic-events approach to history. He brought the concept to its maturity between 1846 and 1848. But he would continue to focus on that interpretive model for both history and theology for the rest of his life.

J. N. Loughborough later recalled that when he was working with Bates as a young preacher in 1853 and 1854, the older man’s “favorite subject” was waymarks and high heaps (Loughborough n.d.:1). In that interpretation of history, Bates bequeathed a legacy to Sabbatarianism that would shape both its theological self-understanding and its mission.

Developing the Chain-of-Events Eschatology

It would be in the two editions of his *Seventh Day Sabbath: A Perpetual Sign* that Bates would most fully enunciate his chain-of-events eschatology—an eschatology that would lead directly to Sabbatarian mission theory. The August 1846 edition of *The Seventh Day Sabbath* not only featured Bates’s new understanding of the Sabbath, but it did so from largely a Seventh Day Baptist perspective. That is, the seventh day was the correct day and Sunday had been a medieval substitution for God’s holy day.

But there were two points of special interest in the 1846 edition of the *Seventh Day Sabbath* that indicate that Bates was beginning to interpret the Sabbath in the light of an Adventist theological framework rather than a merely Seventh Day Baptist one. The first is the thought in the “Preface” that “the seventh day Sabbath” is “to be restored before the second advent of Jesus Christ.” That idea derived from the restorationist platform that Bates had brought with him from the Christian Connexion. According to that understanding, the Reformation was not complete and would not be until all the great Bible

truths neglected or perverted down through history found their rightful place in God's church (Bates 1846b:1; cf. Kinkade 1829:331).

The second very Adventist tilt in the 1846 edition is Bates's interpretation of the Sabbath within the context of the book of Revelation. He tied the Sabbath to the three angels' messages of Revelation 14. "In the xiv ch. Rev. 6-11, [John] saw three angels following each other in succession: first one preaching the everlasting gospel (second advent doctrine); 2d, announcing the fall of Babylon; 3d, calling God's people out of her by showing the awful destruction that awaited all such as did not obey." Then "he sees the separation and cries out, 'Here is the patients [sic] of the Saints, here are they that keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.' . . . Now it seems to me that the seventh day Sabbath is more clearly included in these commandments, than thou shalt not steal, not kill, nor commit adultery, for it is the only one that was written at the creation or in the *beginning*" (Bates 1846b:24).

The linking of the seventh-day Sabbath to the three angels of Revelation 14 was a crucial step in "adventizing" Bates's understanding of its importance. He would build extensively upon that connection in his 1847 revision of the *Seventh Day Sabbath*.

By the time of the January 1847 revision, Bates clearly saw the messages of the three angels of Revelation 14:6-11 as a chain of events that prepared the way for preaching of the Sabbath in verse 12 and the Second Advent in verses 14 through 20. At that point in his understanding the preaching of the three angels was completed by October 22, 1844, and at that time the emphasis on what God wanted to be preached was the Sabbath-present truth. He was quick to note that for the past two years a people had been uniting 'on the commandments of God and faith or testimony of Jesus.' For Bates, Revelation 14:6 and following set forth the history of God's people up to the end of time (Bates 1847a:58, 59).

James White and his wife soon adopted Bates's chain-of-events understanding of eschatology. But James White would refine his understanding of the third angel's message to include verse 12 in the third angel's message and argue that the third angel's message had begun to be preached in October 1844 (White 1847:11). Eventually he would come to see that even though the first angel's message had begun to be sounded by Miller in the 1830s, the second by Charles Fitch in 1843, and the third by the Sabbatharians after October 1844, all three of them must be preached simultaneously until the Second Advent. That was important, since the first angel's message was to be given "to every nation,

and kindred, and tongue, and people” (Revelation 14:6; Knight 2004:143-44). By logical extension, that meant that the third must also be preached to the entire world.

White did not see the extent of that logic clearly in the 1840s. But in 1849 he could write that “our past Advent experience, and present position and *future work* is marked out in Rv. 14 Chap. as plain as the prophetic pencil could write it” (White 1849; cf. 1848). It was that progression message that Bates and White would preach as a ‘chain of events’ extending from the time of Miller “down to the time when ‘the vine of the earth’ will be cast ‘into the great wine-press of the wrath of God’” (White 1850:65, 68).

Thus by the last quarter of the 1840s the logic of a worldwide mission was in place even if the vision hadn’t yet matured. But because of the chain-of-events approach to history and eschatology that Bates had developed from the book of Revelation, the Sabbatarian Adventist believers were missiologically active from their inception, even if their first mission field was restricted to other ex-Millerites (i.e., those who had accepted the first and second angels’ messages and logically needed to move onto the third, with its end-time Sabbath message).²

The Chain-of-Events Understanding and Worldwide Mission

The important thing to note is that a chain-of-events missiological understanding was in place by the late 1840s. It was an understanding that gave urgency to outreach. Those outreach endeavors were evident from the very beginning of Sabbatarian Adventism.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Sabbatarian Adventism and the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been its continuing growth across time. In 1845, when there were an estimated 50,000 Albany or first-day Adventists, there existed almost no Sabbatarians. As we noted above, the Sabbatarian movement really didn’t get under way until about 1848.

D. T. Taylor published the first Adventist census in 1860. He counted 584 ministers, with 365 advocating Sunday and 57 the seventh day. Beyond that, he estimated some 54,000 lay members, but did not attempt to break them down according to belief. However, other sources indicate that more than 3,000 were Sabbatarians (Taylor 1860a:81; Neufeld 1996:577).

Taylor’s census also gathered estimates regarding the subscription lists of the various Adventist journals. The Advent Christian *World’s Crisis* and the

Evangelical Adventist *Advent Herald* (movements representing nearly all of the Sundaykeeping Adventists) had circulations respectively of 2,900 and 2,100 subscribers, while the much smaller Sabbatarian group supported 2,300 subscriptions to the *Review and Herald* and 2,000 to the *Youth's Instructor*. Taylor went out of his way to note that the promoters of the Sabbatarian *Review and Herald*, "though a decided minority, are very devoted, zealous, and active in the promulgation of their peculiar views of Sunday and Sabbath" (Taylor 1860b:19; 1860c:89).

A century and a half later the Evangelical Adventist denomination would be gone and the Advent Christians would claim a United States membership of 26,264, while the Seventh-day Adventist Church recorded 880,921 members in the United States and approximately 13,000,000 worldwide. As Clyde Hewitt, an Advent Christian historian, put it, "the tiniest of the Millerite offshoot groups was the one which would become by far the largest" (Linder 2002:347, 358; Hewitt 1983:275).

The same sort of picture emerges when we compare the statistics of the Seventh Day Baptists with the Seventh-day Adventists. Their 4,800 members in the United States in 1995 were fewer than their estimated 6,000 in the 1840s. As one Seventh Day Baptist preacher told Bates, "There was a power attending" the Sabbatarian message "that waked up, and brought people to keep the Sabbath, which [the Seventh Day Baptist] preaching could not do." He claimed that the Baptists had been able to convince people on the correctness of the Sabbath, but that they could not get them motivated as the Sabbatarians did (Linder 2002:358; Hull 1852:69; Thomsen 1971:93).

In the face of such statistics, it is obvious that merely preaching the correct doctrine of the Advent or the Sabbath was not sufficient in itself to create a mission mentality that would lead to serious growth. What, we need to ask, did the Sabbatarians have that the Sunday-keeping Adventists and the Seventh Day Baptists lacked? That question takes us back to Bates and his chain-of-events understanding of prophetic history.

Bates's perspective finds its roots in Millerism. It was a state of prophetic urgency that made Millerism a mission-driven movement. And that arose from a specific interpretation of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. The Millerites gave of their time and means because they believed with all their hearts that they had a message people *must* hear.

That same impetus entered Sabbatarian Adventism through Bates's extension of the chain-of-prophecy view of history beyond the first and second

angels' messages to the third. In other words, Bates's historical/theological understanding not only maintained Miller's prophetic scheme of interpretation but extended it in such a way as to give meaning to both the 1844 disappointment and the remaining time before Christ's advent. Central to that expanded interpretation was not only the progressive nature of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14, but his placing of the second-apartment ministry of Christ (Revelation 11:19) and the seventh-day Sabbath (Revelation 12:17; 14:12) in an apocalyptic, great-controversy context. The Sabbatarians through Bates began to see themselves as a prophetic movement rather than merely as another church.

That self-understanding would eventually drive the Sabbatarians to mission. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the conviction that they were a movement of prophecy had resulted in Seventh-day Adventism sponsoring one of the most widespread mission-outreach programs in the history of Christianity. By 2003 it had established work in 203 of the 228 countries then recognized by the United Nations (*Annual Statistical Report* 2002:69).

That kind of dedication did not come by accident—it was the direct result of Bates's chain-of-events prophetic understanding of mission responsibility. Motivating that prophetic conviction was the imperative of the first angel of Revelation 14:6, 7 to preach “to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people” and the teaching of Revelation 10:11 that the disappointed ones “must prophesy again before many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings.”³ While the full extent of that commission was not apparent to Bates in the 1840s (he still held largely to his shut-door convictions), it became progressively clearer to the denomination that would follow him in its understanding of prophecy.

Hewitt, seeking in 1983 to explain the success of the Seventh-day Adventists as opposed to the attrition faced by his Advent Christians, touched upon an essential element when he noted that “Seventh-day Adventists are convinced that they have been divinely ordained to carry on the prophetic work started by William Miller. They are dedicated to the task” (Hewitt 1983:277). Both the conviction and the earliest dedication to the task of spreading the third angel's message find their roots in the thought and life of Joseph Bates, who would become not only Adventism's first theologian but also its first “missionary.”⁴

In contrast to the prophetically-based Sabbatarian conviction, Hewitt's father wrote to F. D. Nichol in 1944 that the Advent Christians had given up Miller's interpretation of Daniel 8:14 and the 2,300 days and had no unanimity on the meaning of the text (Hewitt 1944). Another leading Advent Christian

scholar interviewed in 1984 noted that his denomination no longer even had any agreed-upon interpretation of the millennium—a teaching at the very heart of Miller’s contribution (Crouse 1984).

The other post-Millerite Adventist bodies all stepped off Miller’s prophetic platform. That abandonment eventually led to missiological aimlessness. By way of contrast, Joseph Bates not only stayed on the platform but strengthened and extended it in such a way that the logic of his prophetic chain-of-events impelled the Sabbatarians to become an aggressive mission-oriented movement.

In 1869 the Seventh Day Baptist General Conference sent a message to the Seventh-day Adventist General Conference, rejoicing “that in God’s good providence he has, in you, so largely increased the number of those who observe His holy Sabbath.” It is strange to the Seventh Day Baptist leadership, the message continued, “that after the apparently fruitless toil of the long night which has been upon us, this gratifying change [in the number of Sabbathkeepers] should come so suddenly.” The letter went on to reject any eschatological implications of the Sabbath (“Response from the Seventh day Baptists” 1869:176).

But it was just those eschatological, prophetic implications that stood at the center of Bates’s understanding of both history and theology. It was what he did with them that would make the Sabbatarians an aggressive, mission-oriented people from 1848 onward.⁵ Thus he was not only Sabbatarian Adventism’s first theologian and first historian, but also its first mission theorist.

Notes

¹ For more on Millerism, see Knight (1993).

² For a review of the history of Seventh-day Adventist mission, see Knight (1995: 57-80).

³ For a helpful treatment of the prophetic root of Adventist mission, see Damsteegt (1977).

⁴ For Bates’s work as Sabbatarian Adventism’s first missionary, see Knight (2004:172-190).

⁵ For a treatment of the ever-widening Seventh-day Adventist concept of mission, see Knight (1995:57-80).

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