

Joseph Marsh (1802-1863)

Joseph Marsh was born in St. Albans, Vermont. The family moved to LeRoy, New York, when Joseph was still young. They joined the Methodist church, but then they became acquainted with the teaching of the oneness of God. They rejected the trinity, and were eventually forced to leave the Methodist fellowship.

Joseph was baptized in 1823. Joseph entered the ministry in 1824, quickly gaining the reputation of "The Boy Preacher." On August 4, 1830, Joseph married Sarah Adams in her hometown, Sennet, New York. Joseph and Sarah had three daughters. For the next 13 years, Joseph pastored Christian churches in New York at Milan, Sennett, Union Mills and Clay.

Joseph was an avid Bible student, searching out all avenues of doctrine to satisfy his mind and heart. He stated in the December 1846 issue of *The Voice of Truth* that he had studied the state of the dead in his "early ministry" 20 years before. From his study he determined the Bible was silent on the subject of disembodied spirits. The body goes to the grave to await resurrection. The doctrine of Hades as a site for disembodied spirits, he

wrote, "is of heathen origin."

Shortly after Marsh assumed editorial responsibility for *The Christian Palladium* which he held from May 1839 until December 1843, he began the series entitled "Church of God"—a defense of that name as being the scriptural name for the church. Marsh later published the booklet, *Church of God*, a copy of which is in the Archives of Atlanta Bible College in McDonough, GA.

By the 1840s, Marsh was involved in the Adventist movement and began to publish articles in *The Palladium* on the second coming. David Rowe, Adventist historian, has suggested that, under Marsh's editorial direction, *The Palladium* was so influential in its Adventist message it very likely was the means by which Joshua V. Himes became informed of the message and the activities of William Miller.

William Miller set the final date for Christ's return to earth as October 22, 1844. When Christ did not return, there was a great disillusionment among Second Adventist believers. This period describing their pain has come to be known as the "Great Disappointment" or "Bitter Disappointment" which cast the Miller-led Adventist movement into chaos.

The Church of God has refrained from date-setting for the past 150 years so as to avoid bringing disrepute upon the soon return of the Lord and upon the denomination. No one knows the day or hour because even Christ does not know when He will return. It is said the Lord will reveal it to Him, and the church is told to "watch."

After the Bitter Disappointment, Marsh began to question the Millerite movement, a fact that became apparent by his absence at the Albany Conference in New York on April 29, 1845. Miller had called for the conference at Albany intending to unite all Adventist leaders behind the collapsing movement, but that goal did not succeed. In spite of his disillusionment with Miller, Marsh called a unity conference in Rochester for April 2-5, 1846.

By 1851, when Marsh published *Age to Come*, his prophetic interpretation was nowhere similar to Miller's. Joseph Marsh's interpretation of prophecy set him apart from all other Adventists because of his understanding of the last days, the future of the Jews, the times of restitution, the establishment of the throne of David, the destiny of the wicked, the nature of resurrection of believers and the time of that resurrection, and the nature of the thousand-year reign of Christ known as the Millennium.

Marsh and his followers were nicknamed "Judaizers," "Restorationists," "Soul Sleepers," and later, "Restitutionists." Marsh said that Jesus restored Eden after he returned to earth. Christ is to be the Creator of the new heavens and new earth. Christ would not just return and find Eden already restored.

Marsh was anti-creedal. The Adventists left orthodox churches, repudiated their creeds, and were not anxious to adopt new ones. Marsh said creeds were of human origin and imperfect. Truth never changes but creeds do.

In 1848, Marsh began to publish *The Advent Harbinger*. He had completely broken with William Miller at this point. Within the year, *The Bible Advocate* merged with *The Harbinger*. By June 1849, Marsh changed the name to *The Advent Harbinger* and

Bible Advocate and numbered it volume one. By the time he began *The Advent Harbinger*, Marsh was fully convinced of the prophetic accuracy of the Age to Come. He began discussing it in the pages of *The Harbinger*, and slowly but surely readers began to respond, some to agree, others to question. Marsh was never to be completely free of critics. His life would have been much sweeter if he could have preached tirelessly for the Lord without being cut down by those who disagreed so vehemently with him.

By the time Marsh published his book, *Age to Come* in 1851, he had put the puzzle together. In it, Marsh clearly defined the doctrine which became so important to the future leaders in the Church of God namely R.V. Lyon, J.M. Stephenson, Thomas Wilson and L.E. Conner. The doctrine of the Age to Come represented a shift in the established paradigm of Adventist thought. It certainly was a shift away from orthodox teaching. It would not be easy for Marsh to promote this new teaching, but he was well suited to do it. He owned his own printing press.

Marsh called a Union Conference at Rochester in April 1851. About 24 men attended from New England, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and elsewhere. This proved to be a unifying meeting of Age-to-Come believers. And so now it appeared there were two camps: the Second Adventists and the Age-to-Come believers.

The summer of 1851, after the successful conclusion of the Rochester Union Conference, Marsh and his wife departed on a western and southern trip. Marsh planned to visit throughout Ohio; Jeffersonville, Indiana; Alton, Illinois, near St. Louis; Elizabeth, Illinois, where his brother Lorenzo resided; and Beloit, Wisconsin, being the northern most point on the frontier.

On Marsh's return east, he planned to stop in Indiana at Kingsbury, Hudson and Middlebury. He then planned to go north to Nankin and Detroit, Michigan, to visit the Seymours at Nankin. The trip spanned May 7 to July 8. While in Cleveland, Marsh stayed with Newell Bond who had attended the Rochester Union Conference. Throughout this trip, people were friendly, and his subscription list for *The Harbinger* and *The Children's Friend* increased. He also sold many copies of his new hymnal, *The Millennial Harp* (1854).

Marsh noted that the principle of Christian liberty had taken root in Indiana and elsewhere. He said, "They will not bind men's minds, nor be bound. They are free in Christ."

From Indiana the Marshes traveled by riverboat down the Ohio River and up the Mississippi River to St. Louis. At St. Louis, Sarah Adams Marsh visited her brother, Washington Franklin Adams, who assisted them greatly in their journey. Joseph preached three times in large halls at St. Louis.

He said while there were no congregations of followers in that city, a great interest was awakened. He noted that St. Louis was a great and bustling city, yet slavery was practiced there. This grieved Marsh for he was a neighbor and friend to Frederick Douglass, and as an abolitionist, Joseph participated in the Underground Railroad. Joseph assisted Frederick Douglass in purchasing a home in Rochester, New York.

Marsh explained in the next issue of *The Advent Harbinger*, July 19, 1851, that "the great mass of religious papers of the day are wedded to some abstract doctrine or exclusive sect." *The Harbinger*, he went on to discuss, stood on the side of representing THE WHOLE BIBLE.

He had no ulterior motive in becoming sectarian as other Adventists' sheets were doing. *The Harbinger* would continue to follow the principles of literal interpretation, such as "Father Miller" had set forth during the Millerite movement to explain the second coming, the Kingdom of God, the return of Israel, etc.

Eugene Stilson has written that with the Jewish interpretation of the Age to Come, came also the Jewish interpretation of the oneness of God based upon Deuteronomy 6:4, "Here, O Israel, the Lord our God is one." The Church of God has believed the oneness of God from the beginning, but this doctrine, while present in the Marsh literature, is not emphasized. In fact, oneness does not appear in emphasis until the turn of the 20th century. The doctrine of oneness was accepted by Marsh and many others in the Christian Connexion, but it was not a test of fellowship in the Age-to-Come movement until after the Church of God sorted out the nuances of the Age to Come and the Abrahamic Faith, after 1870.

By the time Marsh began publishing *The Advent Harbinger* and *Bible Advocate*, 1848-1854, his views on the Age to Come were clearly entrenched in his mind. In the space of 30 years, the center of publishing for the Age-to-Come movement had moved from the east coast to Chicago, the bustling center of the west. Thomas Wilson was editor of *The Restitution*, but it was

of short duration. During the great Chicago Fire of 1871 the office of The Restitution burned and, possibly, Joseph Marsh's press with it. The paper did not die, however, as it was passed on to several other editors and continued publishing in Indiana and Ohio until 1925.

In this manner, Joseph Marsh's heritage was passed along to other faithful believers who carried on the work that had burdened Joseph Marsh with controversy. While the Wilsons in Geneva, Illinois, preferred to emphasize the Abrahamic covenant and faith, calling it "One Faith," the ultimate result of that theological system is its rightful inclusion in the Age-to-Come prophetic system.

In 1863, while the Civil War raged, Marsh began a western trip to the frontier, especially to south-central Indiana where a fervent dispute brewed between Nathaniel Field and several other Adventists, some of them being of Church of God persuasion. It should be mentioned that Joseph Marsh firmly advocated that the name "Church of God" was the only scriptural name given in the New Testament, but he also believed in free investigation and was therefore against sectarian tendencies.

While in Indiana, Marsh again became ill with typhoid fever. He quickly cancelled his evangelism trip and returned to his daughter's home in Michigan where he died. He is interred at the Brookside Cemetery in Tecumseh, MI, in section M, lot 26.

The developing Church of God suffered at the death of Joseph Marsh. Joseph Marsh served the Lord in the face of extreme opposition during times of crisis and chaos in America's secular and religious culture. He expected the Lord's soon return. His answer to questions pertaining to future events was, "if time lasts." He set his course toward the second coming and Age to Come in the midst of hardship and did not turn back.

Print