CHAPTER 19

Jehovah’s Witnesses
Anticipating Armageddon

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Introduction

Despite the fact that the Jehovah’s Witnesses are probably the best-known religious minority worldwide, there is surprisingly little academic study of the Watch Tower organisation. There are many mainstream Christian critiques of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, but most of these seek to rebut presumed doctrinal errors and allegedly faulty understandings of scripture, and do little to explore the somewhat complex origins and intricate worldview of their supporters. The few independent academic studies that have appeared in recent times tend to be either sociological (Beckford 1975; Stark and Iannaccone 1997; Voas 2008) or explore legal or historical issues relating to the Society (King 1982; Hesse 2001; Peters 2001; Henderson 2010).

Originally known as the International Bible Students Association, the movement was established by Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916) in Allegheny, Pennsylvania. Although Russell denied that he was an Adventist (Russell 1894), his movement grew up within that context, and not long after the Great Disappointment of 1844, when William Miller—often regarded as the father of Second Adventism—wrongly predicted Christ’s return. Adventists were coming to terms with the failed prophecy. Some of Miller’s supporters, most notably Hiram Edson and Ellen G. White, had spiritualised the unfulfilled event, claiming that 1844 marked an event that took place in the heavenly realm, where Christ had gone to cleanse the sanctuary in preparation for receiving the faithful, while many Adventists continued to calculate dates. It is against this background that the Jehovah’s Witnesses, then known simply as Bible Students, must be understood. In common with many Adventists, Russell came to believe in the heavenly event, but continued to calculate dates relating to past and future earthly events.

Adventism was characterised by a number of presuppositions. It was customary to divide human history into a number of Ages or ‘dispensations’: the antedeluvian world, the present world, and the world to come, the second of which was characteristically divided into a Patriarchal Age, a Jewish Age, and a Gentile Age. The Gentile Age was regarded as having a correspondence with the Jewish Age, giving rise to the Adventist theory of ‘doubles’—events in the
former prefiguring the latter, known as types and anti-types. Biblical prophecy, to which Adventists attached considerable importance, could therefore have more than one fulfilment, sometimes referred to as a 'lesser' and a 'greater', and several of the 'greater' fulfilments could still be expected in modern times. Special attention was given to the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, which contained enigmatic references to numbers and time periods, and Adventist writers characteristically attempted to decode these prophecies, thus giving rise to an interest in end-time calculations. Above all, Adventists held that humankind was living in the last days, and that, notwithstanding Miller's failure, Christ would return soon to gather his faithful into heaven.

The Adventists', and subsequently Russell's, end-time calculations are not arbitrary, as critics such as Walter Martin (1985: 110–111) have suggested. They are complex, and are mainly based on several time periods referred to in the book of Daniel, where the author mentions 'seven sevens' and '62 sevens' (Daniel 9:25), '70 weeks', 'seven weeks and threescore and two weeks' (Daniel 9:24–27), 'a time, times and half a time' (Daniel 7:25), 2300 days, and 1335 days (Daniel 8:14 and 12:12). The early Adventists had speculated about these prophecies and the time periods to which they referred, and devised a number of principles for interpreting these time periods. One such principle was the 'year for a day' rule, which treated certain biblical references to days as years; each day of creation was reckoned as a 1000 year period, and God's 'Great Sabbath'—the period of the earth's completed creation—being equivalent in length to the six preceding creative days.

Charles Taze Russell and the Bible Students

In a brief autobiographical article, Russell relates that he was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, where he was brought up, first as a Presbyterian, and subsequently as a Congregationalist. Russell had problems with the teachings of mainstream Christianity: in particular, he could not accept Calvinist ideas of predestination, and the notion that an all-loving God would subject the wicked to eternal punishment in hell. Having had his faith utterly shaken by his doubts, Russell was passing a rather dingy building one evening in 1869, and, hearing singing coming from inside, decided to go in. There he heard the Adventist preacher Jonas Wendell (1815–1873), who had been one of Miller’s followers (Russell 1906).

Inspired by Wendell's preaching, Russell gathered together a small group of men, who met regularly between 1870 and 1875 to study the Bible. They came to believe that Christ would return, not in physical form, but rather as an