

Marsh, Joseph Arnold

(1802–1863)

DOUGLAS MORGAN

Douglas Morgan is a graduate of Union College (B.A., theology, 1978) in Lincoln, Nebraska and the University of Chicago (Ph.D., history of Christianity, 1992). He has served on the faculties of Washington Adventist University in Takoma Park, Maryland and Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee. His publications include *Adventism and the American Republic* (University of Tennessee Press, 2001) and *Lewis C. Sheafe: Apostle to Black America* (Review and Herald, 2010). He is the ESDA assistant editor for North America.

Joseph Marsh was a leading Christian Connection minister and editor who threw his influence behind the Millerite movement and figured prominently in the struggle of Second Advent believers to reformulate their faith after 1844. In that process, he became a leading proponent of a distinctive form of millennialism called the “Age to Come” teaching. Adherents of this doctrine eventually formed the Church of God General Conference (Abrahamic Faith).



Joseph Marsh. Credit: Atlanta Bible College Library and Archives, shared by elparker2 at FamilySearch.org.

Christian Connection Preacher and Editor

Joseph was born in St. Albans, Vermont, on December 6, 1802, to Lemuel Marsh (1770-1850) and Rosanna Warner Marsh (1776-1824). He was the sixth of their 14 children. Remarkably for that era, only one died in infancy, though six of the other 13 died by their early 30s.¹ The family moved to Genessee County in western New York around 1818 or 1819. When Joseph was 19, he and his brother Josiah ventured out on their own to Ohio, but soon returned to New York after a land transaction went awry. Joseph went to live with his brother James in Rochester and did carpentry to earn some income.²

It was in Rochester in 1823 that “my soul . . . was first emancipated from sin,” Marsh later wrote. He was baptized in the Genessee River and “united with those called christians.” He did not mean Christians in general but rather a movement that sought to restore the apostolic church in America based on the Bible alone, freely interpreted by individual believers. They wished to be called by no other name than “Christian” because they rejected all denominational names and creeds and the divisions they signified. Called to “preach the word of life” at the time of his conversion, Joseph became a minister in the Christian Connection, a major sector of the Christian movement, based in the Northeast.³

Marsh proved successful as an itinerant minister, first planting and reviving congregations in Pennsylvania. He then went to the west, developing a “wide circuit” that included Zanesville and Columbus, Ohio, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.⁴

Joseph married Sarah Mariah Adams (1808-1870) on August 4, 1830, in Sennett, New York. They had three daughters: Sarah Eliza (1832-1900), Mary Maria (Morehouse) (1835-1900), and Permelia Jane (Parker) (1836-1913).⁵ From 1835 to 1838 Marsh pastored the church in Milan, northern New York state, one of the larger congregations in the Connection. In 1839, he was appointed editor of the *Christian Palladium*, one of the most influential positions in the loosely-organized denomination. The Marsh family thus moved to Union Mills, New York, locale of the publishing office for the *Palladium* and the Christian General Book Association, and of another large Connection congregation that Joseph now pastored.⁶

Second Advent Editor and Preacher

During Marsh’s tenure as editor, the preaching of William Miller about the imminent second advent of Christ gained national attention and a large following. Marsh’s fellow Christian Connection minister, [Joshua V. Himes](#) of Boston, was the chief organizer and publicist for the Millerite movement.⁷ Marsh opened up the pages of the *Palladium* to a robust debate over the issues raised by Miller concerning interpretation of apocalyptic prophecy.⁸ Near the close of 1842, Marsh came out in favor of the most controversial aspect—the time element. Miller claimed that Christ would return to earth “about 1843” at the conclusion of the 2,300-day period of Daniel 8:14. In a letter, published by Himes in the December 21, 1842 issue of *Signs of the Times*, Marsh declared: “I am fully convinced as to the time, and mean to proclaim it fearlessly from the pulpit and the press. My course is fixed—let the consequences follow.”⁹

Marsh thus knowingly put his position as editor of a moderately prestigious religious journal at risk, but the Second Advent movement had won considerable support in the [Christian Connection](#). Another year would elapse before the opposition prevailed and Marsh was forced out as *Palladium* editor effective November 1, 1843.¹⁰

Marsh now fully devoted himself to the Second Advent cause. He vigorously supported [Charles Fitch’s](#) uncompromising summons, published in the summer of 1843, to come out of “Babylon,” defined as all

denominations and organizations that opposed the message of Christ's imminent return to rule the earth: "It is evidently as much our duty to come out of Babylon, as it was for Lot to flee from Sodom, on the morning before its overthrow," Marsh wrote in December 1843. "I am aware that by some this will be called ultraism, come-outism, or some other ism; but what of that? we should not seek to please men, but God."¹

Moving swiftly to deploy his editorial experience and resources, Marsh began issuing a new periodical, the *Voice of Truth and Glad Tidings of the Kingdom at Hand*, initially published at Albany beginning in January 1844.¹² Soon thereafter he moved the paper's editorial office, and his family, to Rochester, New York, which would remain his home base for about 15 years.

Inquiry and Conflict After 1844

After expectations centering on October 22, 1844, as the date of Christ's return proved erroneous, Himes, in the November 5 issue of the *Midnight Cry*, attributed the error to fallible historical authorities relied upon for the calculation. In other words, specifying October 22, 1844, as the date on which the 2,300-day period in Daniel 8:14 concluded was simply mistaken. By contrast, Marsh wrote in the November 7, 1844, issue of *Voice of Truth* that "we have been mistaken in the *nature* of the event we expected . . . but we cannot yet admit that our great High Priest did not *on that very day*, accomplish all that the type would justify us to expect."¹³ Thus, Marsh was the first to propose the "right date, wrong event" frame for looking back on the mistaken expectations about October 22, 1844, and to suggest that the "right event" had something to do with Christ's work as High Priest, typified by the Day of Atonement.

Marsh, however, never pursued these seminal suggestions in the way the founders of Seventh-day Adventism did in developing the church's teaching concerning a final phase of Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary beginning on October 22, 1844, and continuing until just prior to his Second Coming. Rather, amidst the welter of disappointment, confusion, ideas, and conflict following 1844, Marsh ended up charting a way forward that would differ both from the Sabbatarians as well as the majority Adventist group that emerged along the lines laid down by the conference at Albany, New York, convened by Joshua V. Himes in April 1845.

Throughout the first half of 1845, Marsh kept the columns of his paper open to the view that the door to the heavenly wedding banquet (symbolized in the wedding parable in Matthew 25) had been shut on October 22, 1844, and that little if any evangelistic work remained to be done to bring others into the kingdom. But a new interpretation that re-set the time of Christ's return to April 1845 soon became his overriding interest. The idea was based on the time span between the sounding of the trumpet that announced the Jubilee on the Day of Atonement (October 22, 1844) and the actual beginning of the Year of Jubilee when the Hebrew new year began six months later (see Leviticus 25:8-12).¹⁴

These views put Marsh at odds with Joshua V. Himes, who regarded them as unsound and dangerous. However, Himes respected Marsh and recognized the influence he wielded and thus paid him a personal visit in March

1845, to persuade him to attend a conference to encourage and unite Advent believers scheduled to begin on April 29, 1845, in Albany, New York. Marsh declined, in part because he thought it “highly probable” that Christ would return by April 23.¹⁵ After that expectation met with disappointment, he could have made it to Albany by the 29th but still declined to go. Perhaps the main reason that Marsh kept his distance from Albany was his grave concern that Millerites, having come out of the “polluted temples” of ecclesiastical Babylon, not “build one of *our own* after any of her patterns.”¹⁶

The [Albany Conference](#) was of historic significance in establishing an identity and ongoing purpose for Second Adventists, severed from their previous denominational affiliations by the crisis of 1843-1844, as a distinct body of Christian believers. The conference agreed upon a 10-point statement of beliefs, passed resolutions supporting ongoing evangelistic proclamation of the imminent return of Christ, affirmed the congregational form of church governance, and approved ordination of five ministers.¹⁷

Though he found some things to commend, Marsh protested that the “doings of the Albany Conference,” considered as a whole, “look like forming a new sect” with “a sectarian name”—Adventist. Marsh’s deep conviction, springing from the defining claim of the Christian Connection, was that it ran contrary to apostolic order for the church to take a name not found in the New Testament itself. His conviction now was that any name other than “CHURCH OF GOD” was “unscriptural, antichristian, and should be rejected by every child of God.”¹⁸ Furthermore, Marsh charged that the plans for the future formed at the Albany Conference constituted a practical denial of professed belief to be looking for Christ’s coming at any hour.

Marsh remained at odds with Himes and the Albany Conference Adventists with regard to organization. However, during the summer of 1845 Marsh decisively repudiated the “shut door” teachings he had previously entertained. He thus drew closer to the emerging Adventist majority in rejecting biblical interpretations that attached significance to October 22, 1844, and in embracing a renewed evangelistic mission.¹⁹

When Joseph Bates published his tract *The Seventh Day Sabbath, A Perpetual Sign* in 1847, Marsh broke his own vow of silence on the subject by re-publishing in the *Voice of Truth* an article he had written two years before. In it he contended that the Sabbath was part of the law that was “nailed to the cross” and thus no longer obligatory.²⁰

During the summer of 1847, the *Voice of Truth* was renamed *Advent Harbinger*. In 1848, after merging with another periodical, it became *Advent Harbinger and Bible Advocate*.²¹

Marsh and the Millennium

Theological innovations pertaining to the millennium and the restoration of Israel that Marsh set forth in 1850 and 1851 would constitute his signature contribution to the post-1844 development of Millerite Adventism. Before 1850, Marsh held to the following three standard Millerite positions:

1. The millennium, or 1,000-year period described in Revelation 20, will begin *at the same time* as the descent of the New Jerusalem to the New Earth, cleansed by the fire of Christ's coming and "restored to its Eden state."
2. The New Earth will be "the eternal abode of the righteous in their resurrection state." The eternal fate of all will have been decided prior to its commencement, with no further opportunity for salvation.
3. "The only restoration of Israel yet future, is the restoration of the Saints in the New Earth." The church constitutes the "Israel of God" in the New Testament."²²

Marsh defended these positions as late as 1849, but in 1850 he began introducing a new understanding in the *Advent Harbinger*, then set it forth in a book published in 1851, *The Age to Come, or Glorious Restitution of All Things Spoken of by the Mouth of All the Holy Prophets Since the World Began*. Marsh now held that:

1. The millennium of Revelation 20 will be a 1,000-year period during which resurrected and immortalized saints will dwell on earth *preceding* the descent of the New Jerusalem from heaven to the New Earth—that is, the earth made new for eternity—as described in Revelation 21.
2. The millennium will be a period of probation in which mortals—Jew and Gentile—will have further opportunity to enter the millennial Kingdom.
3. A millennial restoration of ethnic Israel (or, "Israel after the flesh") will take place. When Christ returns establishes his royal throne in Jerusalem, a Jewish remnant will repent and return to the land of Palestine.²³

The founders of Seventh-day Adventism, who were formulating their beliefs around this same time, likewise came to understand that the earth will be made new (Rev. 21) after the close of the millennium (Rev. 20). However, against Marsh, they held to the original Millerite teaching on the other two points noted above. They understood Scripture to teach that the period of opportunity for salvation will close in connection with the return of Christ and the first resurrection at the beginning of the millennium. All who are in Christ will be taken to heaven and dwell there throughout the millennium and then, at its close, descend with the New Jerusalem to an earth made new.²⁴ Also, like Miller, they rejected the idea that biblical prophecy points to a millennial restoration of the Jewish people.²⁵

Marsh's Age to Come teaching drew considerable interest and attention in Adventist circles, Sabbatarians included, during the 1850s. In 1854, two Age to Come Adventist preachers, D. P. Hall and J. M. Stephenson, accepted the seventh-day Sabbath. But when James White refused to publish Age to Come teachings in the *Review and Herald*, Hall and Stephenson joined the Messenger Party, a Michigan-based group that had just begun publishing criticism of Ellen White's visions and James White's financial dealings in a periodical called

Messenger of Truth. For the founders of Seventh-day Adventism, it was the first challenge from within, but it could not sustain unity and dissipated by 1858.²⁶

Final Decade and Legacy

Marsh's intense wariness about replicating "Babylon" made it difficult to organize the Age to Come Adventists, though some short-lived attempts were made in the 1850s and again in 1888.²⁷ In 1921, Marsh's theological heirs formed the Church of God General Conference (Abrahamic Faith). This denomination has endured to the present, with headquarters located, since 2009, in McDonough, Georgia. As of 2010 it included 84 churches in the United States and Canada with a total membership of 3,421.²⁸

For most of the 1850s, Marsh continued to pastor a Second Advent church in Rochester and edit his paper, eventually renamed the *Prophetic Expositor and Advocate*. In Rochester, the Marshes were neighbors to the renowned abolitionist Frederick Douglass and his family. According to a biography of Marsh's daughter, Jane Marsh Parker, fugitive slaves were sometimes housed in the cellar of the Marsh home.²⁹

In the late 1850s further controversy divided and finally decimated Marsh's church. One major point of contention was Marsh's opposition to the insistence of another minister, John Thomas, that rebaptism was necessary for those who had been baptized before affirming the Age to Come message. In 1860, Marsh sold the *Expositor and Advocate* and the family moved to Oshawa, Canada.³⁰ There, Marsh rejoined the Christian Connection, but given the wide scope of individual liberty honored in the Connection, he apparently retained his distinctive beliefs about the millennium. Because his health had been declining, he preached only occasionally. Two years later, though, he again took up traveling evangelism in the United States. In 1862 he was appointed state evangelist at a conference held in Jeffersonville, Indiana. Soon afterwards, though, he contracted typhoid fever and died in the home of his daughter Mary Marsh Morehouse and her husband Emory in Tecumseh, Michigan, on September 13, 1863.³¹

Newspaper obituaries in Rochester described Joseph Marsh as a well-respected "exemplary citizen," sincere in the "peculiar doctrine" he advocated.³² For Marsh, biblical truth was of supreme importance and he dedicated his life to contending for that truth as he understood it, unfettered by any form of ecclesiastical authority or by the weight of popular opinion. His story remains instructive, especially, perhaps, for adherents to his distinctive millennial doctrine, but also for the heirs of all those who sought to reorient their Adventist faith during the period of intense inquiry and argumentation that followed the disorientation of 1844.

SOURCES

Burt, Merlin. "The Historical Background, Interconnected Development, and Integration of the Doctrines of the Sanctuary, the Sabbath, and Ellen G. White's Role in Sabbatarian Adventism From 1844 to 1849." Ph.D. diss.,

Andrews University, 2002.

"Death of Eld. Joseph Marsh." *Millennial Harbinger and Bible Expositor*, September 23, 1863.

Froom, Le Roy Edwin. *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, Vol. 4 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1954)

"Has he Gone up Higher?" *Millennial Harbinger and Bible Expositor*, October 28, 1863.

Hepworth, Patra Anne. "The Ancestry of George Josiah Marsh." Accessed November 25, 2024,

<http://www.myninetravelers.com/his-uncle-joseph-marsh.html>

"Joseph Marsh Family Tree." *FamilySearch*. Accessed November 25, 2024,

<https://www.familysearch.org/tree/pedigree/landscape/2ZSH-49S>

Knight, George R. *Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism*. Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993.

Marsh, Joseph. *The Age to Come, or Glorious Restitution of All Things Spoken of by the Mouth of All the Holy Prophets Since the World Began*. Rochester: Advent Harbinger Office, 1851.

[Marsh, Joseph]. "Elder J. Marsh's Western Visit." *Christian Palladium*, October 16, 1837.

Mattison, Mark M. "Joseph Marsh's Doctrinal Development and Conflicts with Christadelphianism." *A Journal From the Radical Reformation* 2, No. 2 (1992-1993): 41-67. Restoration Fellowship, accessed November 29, 2024, <https://focusonthe kingdom.org/JRAD.html#3>.

Tallmadge, David Arthur. "'Come out of Babylon': A Study of Millerite Separatism and Denominationalism, 1840-1865." Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1970.

"The Voice of Truth." *Signs of the Times*, January 11, 1844.

"A Watchman Awake." *Signs of the Times*, December 21, 1842.

NOTES

1. "Joseph Marsh Family Tree," *FamilySearch*, accessed November 25, 2024, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/pedigree/landscape/2ZSH-49S>.
2. A brief biographical sketch of Joseph Marsh is included Patra Anne Hepworth, "The Ancestry of George Josiah Marsh," accessed November 25, 2024, <http://www.myninetravelers.com/his-uncle-joseph-marsh.html>.
3. Marsh related his conversion experience in "Elder J. Marsh's Western Visit," *Christian Palladium*, October 16, 1837, 179. For an overview of the Christian Connection and the restorationist Christian movement more generally, see Paul K. Conkin, *American Originals: Homemade Varieties of Christianity* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 1-8.

4. Hepworth, "Ancestry of George Josiah Marsh."
5. "Joseph Marsh Family Tree," *FamilySearch*.
6. Le Roy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, Vol. 4 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1954), 703; "Ancestry of George Josiah Marsh."
7. Douglas Morgan, "Himes, Joshua Vaughan (1805–1895)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, September 13, 2020, accessed November 27, 2024, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=49HD>.
8. Froom, *Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, Vol. 4, 702-705.
9. "A Watchman Awake," *Signs of the Times*, December 21, 1842, 105.
10. George R. Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993), 115.
11. "Letter from Bro. Joseph Marsh," *Signs of the Times*, January 3, 1844, 166, cited in Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 157.
12. Albany is indicated as the publication locale for the first issue in "The Voice of Truth," *Signs of the Times*, January 11, 1844, 197. The Adventist Digital Library lists February 1844 as the starting point for publication of the *Voice of Truth*, with Rochester as the location; <https://adventistdigitallibrary.org/adl-426632/advent-harbinger>.
13. Quoted in Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 230-231.
14. Merlin D. Burt, "The Historical Background, Interconnected Development, and Integration of the Doctrines of the Sanctuary, the Sabbath, and Ellen G. White's Role in Sabbatarian Adventism From 1844 to 1849" (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 2002), 70-72, 85-98.
15. *Ibid.*, 95-97.
16. Quoted in Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 230-231.
17. *Ibid.*, 270-273.
18. Quoted in Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 275-276.
19. Burt, "The Historical Background," 190-191.
20. *Ibid.*, 296.
21. *Ibid.*, 342.

22. "Fundamental Principles on which the Second Advent Cause is Based," *Advent Herald*, May 22, 1844, 124; Mark M. Mattison, "Joseph Marsh's Doctrinal Development and Conflicts with Christadelphianism," *A Journal From the Radical Reformation* 2, No. 2 (1992-1993), 43-44, 48, at Restoration Fellowship, accessed November 29, 2024, <https://focusonthe kingdom.org/JRAD.html#3>.
23. Mattison, "Joseph Marsh's Doctrinal Development," 48-49.
24. "Fundamental Principles," *Signs of the Times*, June 4, 1874, 3, see paragraphs 18, 23, and 24; "Official Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists," No. 24, 26, and 27, <https://www.adventist.org/beliefs/>.
25. Douglas Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic: The Public Impact of a Major Apocalyptic Movement* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 199.
26. Theodore N. Levterov, "Messenger Party," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, January 29, 2020, accessed November 28, 2024, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=99S5>.
27. Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 288-289.
28. "Church of God General Conference (Abrahamic Faith, McDonough, GA)," Association of Religion Data Archives, accessed November 28, 2024, <https://www.thearda.com/us-religion/group-profiles/groups?D=199#Sources>.
29. Marcelle LeMénager Lane, "The Life and Work of Jane Parker Marsh," Rochester Historical Society Publications XXIII (1946), quoted in Hepworth, "The Ancestry of George Josiah Marsh."
30. Mattison, "Joseph Marsh's Doctrinal Development," 52, 65-66.
31. Ibid., 66; Hepworth, "The Ancestry of George Josiah Marsh"; "Has he Gone up Higher?," *Millennial Harbinger and Bible Expositor*, October 28, 1863, 394.
32. "Death of Eld. Joseph Marsh," *Millennial Harbinger and Bible Expositor*, September 23, 1863, 272.

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000