

Litch, Josiah (1809–1886)

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Josiah Litch, a Methodist minister and a physician, was a leading figure in the Millerite or Second Advent movement of the 1830s and 1840s.

Early Life (1809-1837)

He was born on April 4, 1809, in Lunenburg, Massachusetts, to Captain John and Jerusha Litch (1773-1836; 1768-1823).¹ His mother was a descendant of the Englishman Samuel Lincoln (1622-1690), a progenitor of President Abraham Lincoln, who was also born in 1809, two months before Josiah Litch.²

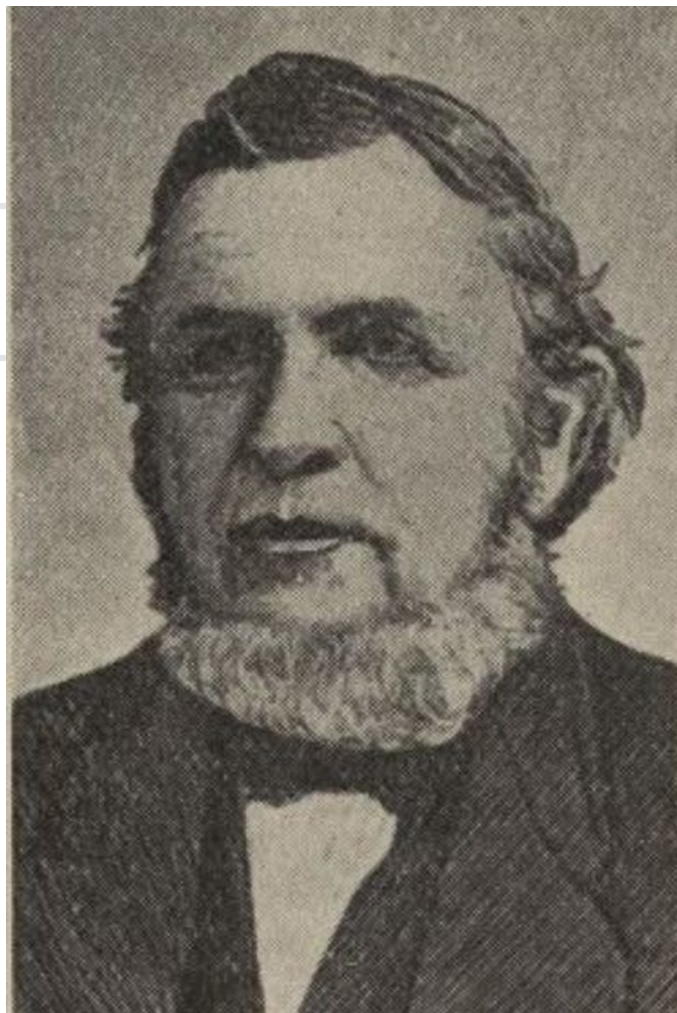
In his teenage years, Litch studied at the Wesleyan Academy at Wilbraham, Massachusetts.³ In 1826 the school came under the direction of Wilbur Fisk, who wrote shortly thereafter that “the students are generally well-behaved, diligent, and easily governed.”⁴ Fisk then added these telling words, “this is undoubtedly, in part, owing to that which rejoices us more than anything else—a revival of religion among us.”⁵ In all probability, it was during this revival that Josiah Litch experienced a profound spiritual rebirth that led him to join the Methodist church and begin training for the ministry.

In 1833 Litch was “admitted on trial” to become an itinerant preacher in the New England Conference of the Methodist Episcopal church, assigned first to the Sandwich, Massachusetts circuit.⁶ He was ordained a deacon two years later, admitted into “full connection,” and moved to Rochester, Massachusetts.⁷ Here he met Sarah Barstow (1812-1906), the daughter of fellow minister William Barstow who had preached himself hoarse and thus could not “attend to the duties of his profession” for many years.⁸ Soon after turning 27, Josiah Litch married Sarah on April 25, 1836.⁹ In January 1838, they welcomed their first son, William B. Litch (died in infancy).¹⁰ Two more boys followed, Wilber Fisk Litch and Josiah Lincoln Litch.¹¹

After his trial period ended, Litch was ordained an Elder in June 1837. Apparently he drove himself so hard that by the year’s end he was on the list of “superannuated or worn-out preachers.”¹² Litch had also begun joining various movements that endorsed unconventional ideas, setting a pattern that lasted a lifetime. In 1838 he became the secretary of the newly organized anti-slavery society in Barnstable, Massachusetts.¹³ At this time, the Methodist church in the North was divided over the issue of slavery. Joining the movement for the immediate abolition of slavery placed Litch at odds with his former principal at the academy, Wilber Fisk, who supported gradual emancipation of the America’s enslaved people, followed by colonization of the former slaves in Africa.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Litch still named one of his sons after Fisk.¹⁵ When Litch’s new convictions conflicted with established religion, he tended to favor the former, even if it raised the possibility of leaving his denomination. Litch may well have eventually joined Orange Scott in the Wesleyan Methodist Connection when it organized and broke away from the Methodist Episcopal denomination over the slavery controversy had he not encountered another man preaching an unconventional apocalyptic message.¹⁶

Apocalyptic Expositor (1838-1844)

In February 1838, probably during the time given him to regain strength as a “worn-out minister,” Litch was given a copy of Miller’s *Lectures*. He fit the typical pattern of ministers who joined William Miller (early on) in preaching the Second Advent, claiming to have been skeptical at first, then changing his mind after analyzing Miller’s arguments!¹⁷



Josiah Litch
Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

But once convinced that Miller's method of studying the Bible provided a reliable foundation, Litch plunged himself once again into his strenuous work mode, advocating his new convictions. He immediately summarized Miller's views in a 48-page pamphlet entitled *Midnight Cry*.¹⁸

Litch began spreading the new ideas wherever he went. If his first work served as an introduction to Millerism, the second served to spread his own views on the Second Advent doctrine. Litch produced his 204-page tome, *The Probability of the Second Coming of Christ*, with impressive speed—it was also published in 1838, only four months after he became convinced by Miller's message.¹⁹

In *The Probability* Litch first disclosed his prediction of the fall of the Ottoman Empire sometime in August 1840, based on his interpretation of the sixth trumpet in Revelation 9.²⁰ The book also put him on track toward Millerite eminence, evoking a minor sensation as far as Vermont. One month after the book's appearance, the *Vermont Telegraph* announced that "it appears that another writer, one J[osiah] Litch, has been making predictions, similar to William Miller's, in regard to 1843."²¹

As the spring of 1839 approached, Miller traveled to speak in Lowell, Massachusetts, where he first met the thirty-year-old "worn-out preacher." Miller said: "I also became acquainted with my Bro. J. Litch, who had previously embraced my views, and who has since so aided their extension by his faithful lectures and writings, and energetic and consistent course."²² That winter Litch preached the Second Coming in Cape Cod and its vicinity, where people were "anxious to hear" despite the plummeting temperatures. In addition to his Millerite activities, he still had a Methodist circuit rider's responsibilities to look after.²³

By July of 1840, though, Litch was beginning to lose interest in the circuit-riding sphere and began spending more time in Second Advent pursuits. His timely launch into Millerism, coupled with an "eloquent" and "forceful" pen landed him in an influential position in the movement. His prediction concerning the fall of the Ottoman Empire, in particular, drew attention. Litch staked much on his claim that when the sixth trumpet of Revelation 9 ceased to sound, the Ottoman power would crumble.²⁴ In early August 1840 he published two articles in *Signs of the Times* specifying August 11 as the date of the prophecy's fulfillment. If he proved correct, it would be an impressive validation of the year-day principle, and hence, the veracity of 1843 as the year when Christ would return.²⁵

Critics asserted that when August 11 passed without the fulfillment of Josiah Litch's prophecy, Adventism would die.²⁶ As the day approached, "the entire community were excited, and expectation of tiptoe."²⁷ The time passed without news of any empire crumbling to pieces, causing quite a trial for many believers. But in a letter published in the November 1, 1840 issue of the *Signs of the Times*, Litch reported the arrival of news that the European powers had issued an ultimatum compelling the Ottoman Empire to yield its sovereignty on August 15, vindication enough for Litch, though later reports clarified that August 11 was the day that the Ottoman power had placed itself under the supremacy of the Christian powers of Europe.²⁸ Discouraged adherents were cheered and the movement revived "with still greater power than ever before."²⁹ This was a tipping point in the history of Millerism because it contributed to the transformation of the "Advent cause" into a movement.³⁰

Litch played an integral role in the first Millerite General Conference, convened at Joshua V. Himes' Chardon Street Chapel in Boston on October 14 to advance "the rapid, general and powerful spread of 'the everlasting gospel of the kingdom at hand,' that the way of the Lord may be speedily prepared, whatever may be the precise period of his coming."³¹ Litch gave two addresses, one "to contemplate our blessed Savior's glorious advent near" and the next attempting to answer the question, "about what time may we expect the glorious kingdom of God to be revealed?"³² His previous success with reckoning the date of the Ottoman downfall added to the interest of the audience.

One listener proclaimed that Litch "spoke with great eloquence."³³ But another observed that he was "not a brilliant speaker" and that listeners would "hardly ever see" his eyes, which were downcast most of the time.³⁴ "You would think him exceedingly sluggish," another reported, but he could still hold his audience "as if spellbound" anywhere from one and a half to two hours.³⁵ Thus, it seems that Litch was able to connect with his audience from the podium in a way that drove his point home.

Litch's numerous Millerite duties (which included assistant editor of the *Signs of the Times*) competed with his responsibilities to his "beloved" Sarah and his children, and his "strong ties" to the Methodist Episcopal Church as a traveling minister.³⁶ He felt that the needs of his family presented "an insuperable barrier in the way of being exclusively devoted to the work of proclaiming the Lord's coming."³⁷ Until his family could eat from the tree of life in two or three years, he had to feed them himself. Nevertheless, he finally made the difficult decision to leave the Methodist ministry and give his full time to spreading the message of the near second advent, trusting God's providence. He became the first minister "devoted exclusively to the cause, excepting Mr. Miller."³⁸ News of his actions reached the ears of his Methodist superiors. They were alarmed and decided to assemble on June 9, 1841, to examine the "strange things" he had "been spreading before the community for some time past."³⁹ Litch was questioned for half an hour, but the meeting ended on good terms with the presiding elders wishing him welfare and success.⁴⁰ He immediately traveled to Lowell, Massachusetts, where he was appointed a general agent of the Millerite Publication Committee.⁴¹

During the winter of 1841-1842, Litch traveled to conferences in New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut, New York, and stopped by his native Lunenburg, Massachusetts.⁴² Here his “strange” persuasive powers were seen.⁴³ At the outset, people didn’t expect much from his quiet demeanor; but his proofs and logical arguments convinced many. The minister of the Methodist church, Rev. Samuel Heath, was converted and immediately began preaching “the doctrines of Millerism.” The new Lunenburg Millerites soon had the church to themselves as the “steadfast” Methodist members became exasperated and left.⁴⁴

In September of 1843, Litch witnessed an instance of Millerite extremism at a camp meeting held in Stepney, Connecticut.⁴⁵ The preacher, John Starkweather, worked the congregation into a frenzy, walking up and down the aisles shouting “Glory!” and “Hallelujah!” and singling some people out for eternal doom because of their attachment to worldly things. Some began denouncing their fellow listeners, while others unceremoniously removed their jewelry. While this was going on, Litch stood up and pronounced the agitation as of the devil, calling the real Millerites to leave their own camp meeting.⁴⁶ Although events like this one were not the norm, they could occur among those more interested in emotional excitement than biblical rationale.

When pressed to be more specific about the expected time of Christ return, William Miller calculated that the Jewish year 1843 ran from March 21, 1843 to March 21, 1844. In February 1844, with the year of expectation nearing its conclusion, Litch accompanied Miller and Himes in venturing south to preach in Washington, D.C.⁴⁷ Beginning on February 20, 1844, they preached for two weeks in the nation’s capital. Litch was surprised at the results: “A greater revolution in public sentiment has rarely been witnessed in so short a time,” he wrote.⁴⁸ Even government officials noted the public fascination with Miller, Himes, and Litch. “Are the Millerites in town?” a senator reportedly asked a newsman, who said that they were. “I thought so,” replied the senator, “for I never heard so much singing and praying in Washington before.”⁴⁹

March 21, 1844, dawned like any other day and ended without trumpets blowing. But Litch pointed out that Millerism did “not consist in merely tracing prophetic periods” and thus real believers would not be discouraged over a “definite point of time.”⁵⁰ The movement languished somewhat but was revived by Samuel Snow’s message, preached at the Exeter, New Hampshire camp meeting in August 1844, that Christ would return on the Day of Atonement (according to the Karaite Jewish calendar), October 22, 1844. It took the leaders a while to agree with him. Litch formally announced his acceptance a few days before October 22.⁵¹

Progression in Profession (1845-1886)

After the second disappointment, it did not take Josiah Litch long to reassess his Millerite interpretations and beliefs.⁵² Although he had previously thought that the “door of mercy” would close before the Second Advent, he came to believe (after 1844) that it was still open. This led him to conclude that the 2300 days did not end in 1844.⁵³

In 1845 he attended the Albany conference where the “open-door” Millerites attempted to bring order to the movement while distancing themselves from the “shut-door” Adventists (from which the future Seventh-day Adventists would emerge). Together with other leaders, Litch developed a plan of action outlining the direction the movement was to take.⁵⁴

In the 1850s factions arose within the Albany Adventists over issues of organization, and by 1858 the rift was widened over the question of conditional immortality. Litch was prominent among those who rejected conditional immortality and formed the American Evangelical Advent Conference while those who accepted the doctrine formed the Advent Christian denomination.⁵⁵

Moving away from the Millerite teachings, Litch came to believe that the Jewish people would be literally restored to the land of Israel—a view that gradually exerted a pull toward dispensationalism.⁵⁶ A different method of interpreting biblical prophecy accompanied that belief system, and thus Litch described himself as a futurist (rather than an historicist) to Dudley M. Canright in 1877—one of the several exchanges he had with Seventh-day Adventist ministers through the years.⁵⁷

He did retain his title of Reverend, though, and continued preaching, lecturing, and writing, publishing numerous books and articles in the following years.⁵⁸ He also attempted to establish a pharmaceutical business, promoting “Dr. Litch’s Medicines,” which included a cough remedy.⁵⁹ His two sons also followed the medical and ministerial sides of his life: William becoming a dentist and Josiah Lincoln a minister.⁶⁰

Toward the end of his life, Litch published a note calling his fellow believers to be patient. “I am now in my seventy-seventh year,” he wrote, “sixty of which (in an imperfect manner) I have spent in the ranks of Christ’s soldiers, and forty-eight years in proclaiming the blessed gospel of the kingdom at hand.”⁶¹ He pointed out that during his lifetime many who had proclaimed Christ’s advent had died. “But the whole family will soon meet over there.”⁶² His health began declining and soon he became confined to his bed. He died of “apoplexy” on January 31, 1886, in his home in Providence, Rhode Island.⁶³

Legacy

The two leading Seventh-day Adventist papers, the Review and Herald and the Signs of Times, published brief notices of his death. *Signs* observed that Litch had been “a co-laborer with Wm. Miller in proclaiming the advent,” and noted his previous interest in the types of the sanctuary as early as 1844. But since his “brethren” were not

interested, he desisted.⁶⁴ Both notices ended on a sad note—Litch had “rejected the third [angel’s] message.”⁶⁵

But still, Adventists had Litch to thank for pioneering several viewpoints of prophetic interpretation that exerted a profound impact on their eschatology.⁶⁶ One of these was the belief in a pre-Advent judgement, that Litch came by in an attempt to reconcile the doctrine of two resurrections, the millennium, along with the common proceedings of a trial.⁶⁷ Another was the understanding that the seven last plagues were yet to happen.⁶⁸

Litch did not see himself as rejecting new biblical truth, but as progressing in the ranks of Christ, even after experiencing bitter disappointments.⁶⁹ To the end of his life, he continued looking forward to the Second Advent, even if his understanding of the prophecies changed.

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¹. Almira Larkin White, *Genealogy of the Descendants of John White of Wenham and Lancaster, Massachusetts, 1638-1900* (Haverhill, MA, Chase

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2. See Waldo Lincoln, *History of the Lincoln Family* (Worcester, MA, Commonwealth Press, 1923).?
 3. J. M. Orrock, "The Speaking Dead," *The Light-Bearer*, March 1893, 20, cited in Daniel Royo, "Josiah Litch: His Life, Work, and Use of His Writings, on Selected Topics, by Seventh-day Adventist Writers" (M.A. thesis, Andrews University, 2009), 7.?
 4. Joseph Holdich, *The Life of Wilbur [sic] Fisk* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1842), 169.?
 5. *Ibid.*, 169.?
 6. Apollos Hale, another future Millerite, was admitted to the trial period as an itinerant preacher's trial along with Josiah Litch. See Methodist Episcopal Church, *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the Years 1829-1839*, vol. 2 (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), 198, 201.?
 7. *Ibid.*, 323, 325.?
 8. John Barry, *A Historical Sketch of the Town of Hanover, Massachusetts, With Family Genealogies* (Boston: John S. Barry, 1853), 231.?
 9. New England Historic Genealogical Society, *Vital Records of Rochester Massachusetts to the Year 1850*, vol. 2 (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1914), 27, 204.?
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 11. Barry, 231. See also *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1900. T623, 1854 roll: *Bethlehem, Northampton, Pennsylvania*; Page: 3; Enumeration District: 0101; FHL microfilm: 1241446. Ancestry.com, accessed May 2020, <http://ancestry.com>.?
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 14. Royo, 10-11.?
 15. "Obituary—Dr. Wilbur F. Litch," *The Dental Cosmos*, February 1913, 242-243.?
 16. Royo, 11.?
 17. Josiah Litch, "The Rise and Progress of Adventism," *Advent Shield and Review*, May 1844, 53.?
 18. *Ibid.*, 55.?
 19. Josiah Litch, *The Probability of the Second Coming of Christ About 1843, Shown by a Comparison of Prophecy with History, up to the Present Time, and an Explanation of Those Prophecies Which Are Yet to be Fulfilled* (Boston, MA: David Ela, 1838).?
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 21. "It Appears that Another Writer....," *Vermont Telegraph*, July 11, 1838.?
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 24. J. N. Loughborough, *The Great Second Advent Movement: Its Rise and Progress* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1905), 129-131.?
 25. *Ibid.*, 130, 131.?
 26. Litch, "The Rise and Progress of Adventism," 59.?
 27. *Ibid.*?
 28. Royo, 71-74.?
 29. Litch, "The Rise and Progress of Adventism," 60.?
 30. Jerry Moon, "Josiah Litch: Herald of 'the Advent Near,'" unpublished paper, 1973, Center for Adventist Research, James White Library, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, 16.?
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32. General Conference of Christians, *The First Report of the General Conference of Christians Expecting the Advent of the Lord Jesus Christ, Held in Boston, Oct. 14, 15, 1840* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1841), 25, 41.?
 33. "Mr. Litch spoke with great eloquence....," *Boston Post*, October 17, 1842.?
 34. "Advent Conference," *Vermont Watchman and State Journal*, October 27, 1865.?
 35. *Ibid.*?
 36. Litch, "The Rise and Progress of Adventism," 62.?
 37. *Ibid.*?
 38. *Ibid.*?
 39. *Ibid.*, 62-65.?
 40. *Ibid.*?
 41. See "New Arrangement," *Signs of the Times*, July 1, 1841, 56.?
 42. D. Hamilton Hurd, *History of Worcester County, Massachusetts* (Philadelphia: J. W. Lewis & Company, 1889), 779.?
 43. "Advent Conference," *Vermont Watchman and State Journal*, October 27, 1865.?
 44. Hurd, 779.?
 45. "Bridgeport, Conn., Sept. 7, 1843," *Tarboro's Press*, September 23, 1843.?
 46. *Ibid.*; Royo, 28-29.?
 47. Litch, "The Rise and Progress of Adventism," 76-79.?
 48. *Ibid.*, 79.?
 49. Joshua V. Himes, "Editorial Correspondence," *Midnight Cry*, March 14, 1844.?
 50. Litch, "The Rise and Progress of Adventism," 80.?
 51. Josiah Litch, "Bro. Litch on the Seventh Month," *Advent Herald*, October 16, 1844.?
 52. Royo, 39, 40.?
 53. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. edition (1996), s.v. "Litch, Josiah."?
 54. Royo, 41-43.?
 55. *Ibid.*, 42-43.?
 56. See Josiah Litch, *The Restitution, Christ's Kingdom on Earth: The Return of Israel* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1848).?
 57. C. W. Stone, "Newburyport, Mass.," *ARH*, July 12, 1877, 22; D. M. Canright, "Newburyport, Mass.," *ARH*, July 19, 1877, 30; Daniel T. Bourdeau, "Province of Quebec," *ARH*, Dec. 2, 1880, 364.?
 58. See, for instance, Josiah Litch, *Christ Yet to Come: A Review of Dr. I. P. Warren's "Parousia of Christ"* (Boston: American Millennial Association, 1880); Josiah Litch, *A Complete Harmony of Daniel and the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Haffelfinger, 1873).?
 59. "Dr. Litch's Pain Curer," *Raftsmen's Journal*, December 23, 1857; "Dr. Litch's Medicines," *Raftsmen's Journal*, October 10, 1860.?
 60. John M. Comstock, *The Congregational Churches of Vermont and Their Ministry, 1762-1914, Historical and Statistical* (St. Johnsbury, Vermont: The Caledonian Company, 1915), 155, 157. Concurring with Daniel Royo, the earliest reference I found to Josiah Litch as a physician is in the *Advent Herald*. See "Dr. Litch's Medicines," *Advent Herald*, August 11, 1855.?
 61. Orrock, 20, cited in Royo, 47; Josiah Litch, "Twenty-five Years Ago," *Advent Herald*, April 7, 1863.?

62. Orrock, 21.?
63. "Eld. Josiah Litch died at his home..." *ARH*, February 16, 1886, 112.?
64. "Elder Josiah Litch, M.D....," *Signs of the Times*, February 25, 1886, 128.?
65. "Eld. Josiah Litch died at his home..." *ARH*, February 16, 1886, 112.?
66. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. edition (1996), s.v. "Litch, Josiah."?
67. Royo, 95, 96.?
68. *Ibid.*, 3.?
69. Orrock, "The Speaking Dead," 21.?

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