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Introduction

Between Idealism and Deceit

Originally, this book was intended to be an updated version of my previous book, *Jehovah's Witnesses On Trial*,⁴ which was released in Copenhagen forty-six years ago—six years after my wife and I had left the movement, the Jehovah's Witnesses. However, after having worked on this new Danish-English project since the summer of 2003, it soon became clear to me the task was much greater than I originally had imagined, and soon a completely new book was taking form. That the book got a brand new title is due to the fact that its general theme circulates around Judgment Day's *conspicuous absence*.

Even though the book's ostensible subject is the Jehovah's Witnesses movement, its range of concern is really a much more comprehensive consideration of church history. The topic concerns more than some idealistic and overwrought Christians in late-19th-century America who believed that Christ had (invisibly) returned to earth. In reality, the movement had simply recycled the motives and arguments that originally constituted the central revelations of the first Christians, namely the message that the world was very near its end: Mankind, first-century Jews *and* Gentiles, could be saved through conversion to Christianity, by means of which they would ascend to heavenly life on Judgment Day. History repeated itself in countless variations, and 2,000 years later it came, in the Jehovah's Witnesses' view, to mean that *millions of now-living people would never die*. It was an alluring message at a time when one of the most terrible wars the world had ever seen, indeed the first war ever to be called a World War, was raging.

At its basic level, this book deals with fundamentalism, which in our own time is ravaging the world like a plague. This fundamentalism erects concrete walls around its adherents by maintaining outdated perceptions and radical ideas which catastrophically affect current and future generations.

To provide a striking example of such fundamentalism was the task I undertook in 2003—a hopeless project on a hopeless case, as I, against all odds, tried to instill a new kind of hope.

Critical but Fair

From the start, this book was not intended as a scholarly treatise, and for this reason I, as far as possible, sought to avoid footnotes and foreign words. However, the revised version, including this English one, has many more footnotes that have been converted to endnotes at the back of the book. They contain only supplementary and more detailed information; their primary goal is to support the main text. By presenting the subject in this way, I hope the book can and will be read by as many as possible. It is a compromise between the personally experienced and the clinical unreadable. Yet despite my personal engagement, I have tried for a fair but critical treatment of the subject. Or at least that is what I hoped to achieve.

Work on the manuscript resulted not only in a re-acquaintance with the religious community of my childhood, but also in *yet another confrontation* with that community. Unlike the first time I wrote about this subject, in this instance I have included the stories of a number of other Witnesses who broke with the movement in the 1990s and still experience confrontational situations, giving them the opportunity to express the details of their journeys. Still, it is not the confrontation with the Witnesses alone which is interesting, but rather the revelation that a relatively tiny American religious movement, through the reuse of the early Christian Church's apocalypticism, has been able to invoke the whole world's attention in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries.

As I encountered these elements of my past again, I noted with astonishment and gratitude that, while I had left the fundamentalist beliefs of this movement light years before, the Witnesses steadfastly moved in the same old grind I had experienced more than fifty years earlier. Ravages of time, however, left traces in the movement's history and doctrines, which I will try to show.

Now, I thank my God and Creator for the fact that I had the strength to break free from this mental prison. So who then do I consider my creator, in addition to my parents and thousands of generations backwards in time? I don't know. But this is a lesser problem, as long as one can deal with one's own existence and live life to its fullest extent. Even though I make my own reflections concerning the origin and function of religion, reflections in which I still have not committed to dismissing the religious experience completely, religion is not a cause of private concern for me anymore.

Still, the origins of the idea of God are not the subject of this book, even though human beings' abuse of them stands in the center.

PART TWO

The Great Schism

“One fact must be familiar to all those who have any experience of human nature—a sincerely religious man is often an exceedingly bad man. Piety and vice frequently live together in the same dwelling, occupying different chambers, but remaining always on the most amicable terms.”

—Winwood Reade (1838–1875):
The Martyrdom of Man, 1872¹²⁵

William W. Reade was a British historian, explorer and philosopher. Quote partially taken from Ibn Warraq’s book: *Why I Am Not a Muslim*, Prometheus Books, New York, 1995.

Power Struggle 1916–1919²⁶

On Tuesday, October 31, 1916, or perhaps Wednesday, November 1, J. F. Rutherford boarded a train in Oakland, Maryland, bound for New York. He had suddenly changed travel plans. During a Bible Student convention in Oakland, he had received a telegram from his confidential friend Alexander Hugh Macmillan at Watch Tower headquarters in Brooklyn, New York. The telegram contained a coded message about Russell's death. Evidence suggests that Rutherford almost immediately packed his belongings, and then he took the first and best train connection to New York; if not for the telegram, he would have returned to Los Angeles, where he lived with his family. But fate yielded an alternative. A day or two later Rutherford was in the Bible Students' Brooklyn headquarters where he, apparently without significant resistance, seized control.

As I prepared this chapter, the intense drama of this period in the Bible Students' evolution gradually became clear to me; the movement had reached a turning point. Several times I found it necessary to rework and refine the chapter's substance, which was remarkably difficult to grasp. Only after consulting several internet sources, the original sources from 1917 and literature I possessed—and notably important: contemporary Bible Students and ex-Witnesses, who were well-versed in the material—did it become possible for me to compile the dramatic events that led to Russell's former legal adviser, *Attorney* J. F. Rutherford, determinedly seizing power of Russell's organization.

Through contemplation of the material, it became clear to me that Rutherford's takeover resulted not only in an eventual break with 75% of the Bible Students—who were members on October 31, 1916, when Russell died, and had left the movement by 1930 to 1932—but that Rutherford's takeover, strictly speaking, also meant a new movement was being created. Between 1916 and 1930, the movement greatly changed character compared to C. T. Russell's leadership, becoming more a *sect* or *cult*. Therefore, one understands perfectly well that the majority of the Bible Students—much to their credit—could not support or accept J. F. Rutherford as leader; only the most pliable and adaptive

members accepted the changes, and since that time those changes have characterized the movement.

Dominant and Crafty

J. F. Rutherford, who became known worldwide as “the Judge,” must have been a striking man, much as Russell was, heavily built and around six feet tall. Rutherford was reportedly dominant and nasty, spoke loudly, and as one journalist wrote of his stature, “more like a senator than most senators.” And, “He dressed like a lawyer, with stand-up collar and black bow tie, and carried his eyeglasses on a long black silk ribbon” (Pike). “He was a ‘man with a terrifying appearance,’” and against his “powerful personality, there were not many who could resist.” Relating to friends, he could act despotic, and against enemies ruthless, hard and sly. (Pike, 1954, p. 22; Penton, 1986, p. 47; Cole, 1955, chapter 6)

In 1959 the Society wrote:

“Judge Rutherford was warm and generous toward his associates but he was also a brusque and direct type of person, and his legal background and experience in early life gave him a directness in his approach to problems in dealing with his brothers that caused some to take offense” (*Divine Purpose*, 1959, p. 68).

Understanding Rutherford is a complex proposition, but for members who saw him only from a respectful distance, he eventually became the subject of an almost hysterical personality cult, despite his initiative “to root out any remnants of creature worship that might be left in the organization” (*Divine Purpose*, 1959, p. 69; *creature worship*: worship of C. T. Russell).

If we judge by the tone of his large literary output, beginning with *The Harp of God* in 1921 and ending with *Children* in 1941—a total of around twenty bound books—his style resembled the Old Testament, hateful and pompous. If we include his booklets, his production approaches 100 publications or more. He suffered, I believe, from a kind of “paranoia” and saw “enemies” everywhere; in fact, this was the name of one of his books from 1937. The first chapter is titled: “Fear.”

Christendom’s clergymen, and especially the Roman Catholic hierarchy, received his special attention as the most prominent representatives of “Satan’s organization”—from 1914–1918, in his view, those representatives did everything possible to destroy the Bible Students, the “only true Christians,” on earth. Rutherford seems to have been largely governed by fear. For example, when the US government accused him of treason in 1918, he wilted under the heat and compromised with the authorities’ demands, censoring passages in the so-called Seventh Volume—something many contemporary members of the movement do not know. In an apparent attempt to keep himself out of prison, Rutherford even recommended that Bible Students could now buy War Bonds (“Liberty Bonds,” *WT*, May 15, June 1, 1918; James Parkinson: “Trou-

Cleaning Up the Teachings

J. F. Rutherford built the “Jehovah’s Witnesses” on the rubble of the Bible Student movement. It was no small achievement *if one doesn’t consider his methods*. Perhaps I should summarize events:

- During the emergency situation after Russell’s death, Rutherford virtually seized power in Russell’s bereaved Watchtower Society.
- After the intense power struggle from 1916–1918, we can only speculate who Russell had selected as his true heirs.
- Rutherford stole Russell’s international project and decisively changed the preconditions for it.
- He gradually built a new teaching atop Russell’s old foundation.

In organizational terms it was probably Rutherford’s model that won within the Bible Students, but doctrinally it seems the largest of the opposition Bible Student associations—the by-products of Rutherford’s brutality—carried on Russell’s ideas, however, they did so less successfully than Russell’s earlier project. The offshoots’ dedication to him is reflected by the fact that Russell’s six-volume work, *Studies in the Scriptures*, is still published by these associations. They have dutifully passed the books to subsequent generations, almost as if they were sacred writings. It seems that Charles Taze Russell’s “gold watch” not only stalled, but it’s as if time stood still for his doctrinal successors.

At this point, I must stop for a moment and confess that I, to some extent, wrong the Bible Student groups who departed *Rutherfordism*. They should be more distinguished as groups, both in 1917–1919 and today. While Russell lived, and later when Rutherford took control, there were obviously diverging opinions among the Bible Students. This is why we cannot lump them all together as apocalyptic zealots. Not everyone had the perception, as A. H. Macmillan did, that on a certain date (October 1, 1914) the Day of Judgment would come and the saints would be retrieved home. Russell did not strictly adhere to this date-setting, as he clearly tried at the last moment (from 1911 onward) to retract elements of this teaching, but he was captured by his previous statements, leaving little doubt among the members that the world would be shocked and greatly altered around 1914 or shortly thereafter. In fact, a significant change would come to pass, but not quite in the way Russell had portrayed. Many in

the movement were skeptical of exaggerations, something probably reflected in *The Watch Tower*. It was very likely these more level-headed members gradually drifted away from Rutherford's new project and did so because they could not identify with it.

A comprehensive study of those groups would undoubtedly fill another volume or more, but for us, it is now time to focus on *Rutherford's Bible Students*.

1914, 1918 and 1925—New Central Years

Rutherford now initiated a gradual cleanup of the doctrines of Christ's Second coming and the world's end, and especially Christ's *invisible arrival time* which was substantially revised. These revisions, however, took some years to complete (into the late 1930s), because the opposition from the Russellites still lingered noticeably. This resistance lasted until 1931–1932, by which time about 75% of the original Bible Students had left the movement.

Rutherford had to proceed slowly and carefully.

As late as 1930 Rutherford seems to suggest that Christ's second coming, as implied by and according to Russell's old schedule for the end-time, started with an invisible "presence" from "about 1879," as stated in the book *Light I* from 1930.¹⁹¹ This suggests that Rutherford placed his bets on two horses: 1874–1879 and 1914–1918. In fact, Rutherford wrote "about 1879" (p. 12), but that year was supposedly only mentioned because Russell's magazine, *Zion's Watch Tower*, was first published that year.¹⁹²

Further into the book Rutherford's main point becomes more evident, for example, on page seventy where the prophetic years 1874, 1914, 1918 and 1922 are treated. The old Russellites must have had a hard time accepting that the second coming of Christ, in some strange way, had been moved from 1874–1879 to 1914–1918. Russell had given very strong assurances that he had arrived at 1874 as the year of the Second Coming with "mathematical precision"—with the year 1914 as the conclusion of Christ's forty years of *invisible presence*. (*Studies* 3, 1919 (1889), p. 129)

Rutherford discarded all that:

"It can now be seen that the events pictured in the first five seals were fulfilled from 1914 to 1918, but the meaning thereof man could not understand until after the coming of the Lord to his temple, in 1918. Prior thereto the church had been applying the prophecy of Matthew twenty-four to the events that came to pass from 1874 to 1914. Not until after 1918 was it understood by the church that these events apply after 1914; and hence the seals were not open to or discerned by the John class, that is to say, the remnant, until after 1918, and, in fact, very little until after 1922" (*Light* 1, 1930, p. 70).

Around 1940, Rutherford's advanced and revised arrival schedule for Christ's invisible presence was finally in place, and the official end time, as demonstrated in his book *Religion*, meant Jesus Christ "was enthroned as King

in the year 1914, and he came to the temple of God in 1918 and there began the assembling and judging of the consecrated ones” (*Religion*, 1940, p. 12).

In other words: Christ’s invisible return was to be counted *from* 1914.

Yet, the year 1914 was and is still maintained as the *central year* in the chronology. In 1914 the gentile times ended, just as in Russell’s old teachings, but the year 1874 lost its meaning *because Christ did not return until 1914* to sit on his heavenly throne and monitor the subsequent collection of the selected ones. And although it was not directly stated that Christ’s second coming was 1914, *a 40-year leap forward from 1874*, this was the general conclusion. (*Religion*, 1940, p. 12; 109, 110)

If one constructed a timeline, it would show Rutherford moved the entire end-times template forward during the 1930–1940 period so that, for example, what had previously ended in 1914 now started that year. It seems the Society’s leadership even then may have had the idea that their new chronology should run *at least* forty years into the future. Thus, when 1954 also passed, a *new year of interest* would emerge: 1974 (and later, 1975). And on and on, the chronology leapt forward as the leadership needed.

The movement’s traditional assumption held the length of King David’s reign as the model for Christ’s heavenly kingdom in the end times; they assumed Christ’s presence or governing period would last at least forty years (under Russell from 1874 to 1914). Therefore, I conclude that all the talk about impending apocalyptic events during those years may have been deliberate speculation of the Society, since as we have seen, they already had plans for the Society’s function forty or fifty years on or maybe even longer. (*Studies 7*, 1926 (1917), p. 61, 62)

Before the reorganization of the doctrines concerning Christ’s second presence, the main leadership clearly made no attempt to dispel the ordinary Bible Student’s expectations of a speedy ascension to heaven (1925), instead the leadership seems to have deliberately played on them while planning new campaign promotions aimed at the organization’s long-term survival. (*Divine Purpose*, 1959, p. 61)

To support this conclusion, I offer the following from the Seventh Volume: “The year 1914 brought the end of the Times of the Gentiles, but not the end of the Harvest work.” From here it follows that parallel events in the first and second centuries AD could point to “1980”¹⁹³—it’s unclear exactly if the harvest work itself would last that long or if it implies other aspects of the prophesies. The year 1980 is mentioned in connection with a future re-establishing of the “fleshly Israel,” but in a context that seems both absurd and confusing. Remember the re-establishment of the Jews was one event needed to be fulfilled in the course of “the great trouble” *before* the climax at Armageddon in 1914. (*Studies 7*, p. 67)

As noted earlier, Barbour and Russell had expected the re-establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine shortly after 1881, an idea not completely without

merit, because the press indeed wrote daily columns on the matter. So, Barbour and Russell were quite abreast of current events, so to speak. Around 1880 the Jews sought to colonize Palestine because they dreamed of a Jewish state under Turkish sovereignty. Shortly after, in 1897, the Zionists were also organized. Russell was very well informed about what happened in his time, and he fully understood the need to connect to the Jewish cause, and it was incorporated into his predictions regarding events during the “great trouble” between 1874 and 1914.

Millennium in 1925

In spite of this long-term strategy surrounding 1980 (see above), which I think was a slip-up by the two authors of the Seventh Volume, in 1920 Rutherford launched a new large-scale campaign with the book: *Millions Now Living Will Never Die*. This book’s timeline looked forward but only a few years. The “Million Book,” as it has been dubbed, was only 107 pages and published in Danish-Norwegian, Finnish, Swedish, French, German, Dutch, Yiddish, Greek, Arabic, Russian, Polish, Malay, Burmese and English, of course. It gave 1925 as the new disaster year. (*Divine Purpose*, 1959, p. 98)

In the Million Book the Judge writes “that the old world legally ended in 1914” and “that 1914 marked the beginning of the end of the world” (p. 12). He further suggested that “the great jubilee” and the “restoration of all things” would have their beginning in 1925, meaning the Millennium would begin in that year. (*Millions Die*, 1920, p. 18, 19; p. 87, 88)

Rutherford determined the year 1925 through “a simple calculation” (p. 88), based on a number of texts in the Old Testament—texts taken totally out of context. The “great jubilee cycle” (p. 89) began, according to Rutherford, in the year 1575 BC, and in accordance with Genesis 25:1–12, Israel celebrated a Jubilee every fiftieth year, and in all, they kept seventy years of Jubilee. (Jer. 25:11 and 2 Chronicles 36:17-21) In the Million Book Rutherford shows that seventy of those Jubilees multiplies to a period of 3,500 years. Starting from 1575 BC, this period “of necessity would end in the fall of the year 1925.” In 1925, a “full restoration” would then take place or the Kingdom of God would be fully implemented on Earth:

“The chief thing to be restored is the human race to life; and since other Scriptures definitely fix the fact that there will be a resurrection of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and other faithful ones of old, and that these will have the first favor, we may expect 1925 to witness the return of these faithful men of Israel from the condition of death, being resurrected and fully restored to perfect humanity and made the visible, legal representatives of the new order of things on earth” (*Millions Die*, 1920, p. 88,89 and 106, 107).

And at the end of the Million Book, Rutherford put forward the captivating idea that millions of the living would never die: