

CHARLES TAZE RUSSELL AND THE SECRET RAPTURE

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In 1894 Pastor Charles T. Russell, the first president of the Watch Tower Society and founder of the movement which ultimately became Jehovah's Witnesses, wrote a brief sketch of the development of his views that was included in a special edition of the journal *Zion's Watch Tower*. Describing the growth in knowledge experienced by his Bible study group in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, from 1872 to 1875, he indicates that it was during this period that he arrived at the conclusion that Christ's second coming would be an *invisible* event:

During this time, too, we came to recognize the difference between our Lord as "the man who gave himself," and as the Lord who would come again, a spirit being. We saw that spirit beings can be present, and yet invisible to men

It was about January, 1876, that my attention was specially drawn to the subject of prophetic time, as it relates to these doctrines and hopes. It came about this way: I received a paper called *The Herald of the Morning*, sent by its editor, Mr. N. H. Barbour But judge of my surprise and gratification, when I learned from its contents that the editor was beginning to get his eyes open on the subjects that for some years had so greatly rejoiced our hearts here in Allegheny — that the object of our Lord's return is not to destroy, but to bless all the families of the earth, and *that his coming would be thief-like, and not in flesh, but as a spirit -being, invisible to men*¹

In this account Russell indicates that "for some years" before he met Barbour in 1876, he and his associates had been of the conviction that Christ's return would be invisible. In fact, he states that it was his discovery that Barbour agreed with him on this point that

¹ "Harvest Gathering and Siftings," *Zion's Watch Tower* (Extra Edition), April 25, 1894, pp. 96, 97

awoke his interest in Barbour's time calculations and got him to contact him from the beginning. If Russell's presentation of the order of events is correct, then he did not learn about Christ's ~~inevitable~~ ^{visible} coming from Barbour (who said he got it from B.W. Keith, a reader of his paper). So when and how did Russell arrive at this idea?

Some interesting light is thrown on this question by one of Pastor Russell's closest associates, Paul S. L. Johnson, in a book on Russell published in 1938 entitled *The Parousia Messenger*.² Referring to a lengthy interview he had with Russell in 1903, he gives us the following information:

While on a visit at the Bible House in Allegheny in the Fall of 1903 during the Russell-Eaton Debates, we asked our Pastor how he had come to his understanding of the Lord's Word; and in response to our question he gave us an account, lasting six hours and spread over two evenings, of his growth in the Truth from his seventeenth to his thirtieth year

From 1872 to 1875 Bro. Russell continued to increase in grace, knowledge and fruitfulness in service. It was in Oct., 1874, that he came to see that Jesus in His resurrection became a Spirit being, and that therefore He would not in His Second Advent come in the flesh, but as a glorious Divine Spirit, and necessarily then would be invisible to human natural sight. He embodied these thoughts as well as those on the object of our Lord's return in a tract entitled, *The Object and Manner of Our Lord's Return*.³

² *The Parousia Messenger* (Series 9 of *Epiphany Studies in the Scriptures*), Philadelphia, 1938. Perhaps some may mistrust P. S. L. Johnson as a historical source because of his imaginative typological interpretations and the role he played in the organizational crisis of the Watch Tower Society in 1917. But aside from these matters, he has been found to be very trustworthy when recording events and making observations. A scholar, who has written under the pen-name Steve Anderson, has made an extensive study of Johnson's writings from a historical point of view for many years. His conclusion is: "When it comes to events, observations, dates, day, hour, etc., there is no one I have such confidence in as PSLJ. This, of course, has reference to the things he had experienced himself, for example the meeting with CTR in 1903. The memory of Russell was decidedly worse. He did not have the same sense for precision as PSLJ, even if he had a clear mind." Johnson also kept a diary.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 368, 369, 437

Thus it was in October 1874, according to this report, that Russell embraced the secret rapture notion. Although this date might very well have been devised afterwards, to demonstrate that Russell was enlightened on this subject exactly at the point of time that he later, thanks to Barbour, came to accept as the date of Christ's invisible return (October 1874), it may also be taken at face value, as there seems to be no reason to doubt that Russell, some time before he was confronted with Barbour's views, had adopted the secret rapture doctrine.⁴ That his view of Christ's second coming really included all the main features of the secret rapture doctrine is very evident from his statements in the pamphlet he published on the subject, *The Object and Manner of Our Lord's Return*, his earliest written discussion of the matter: "Briefly stated we believe the scriptures to teach that, at His coming and for a time afterwards He has come, He will remain invisible; afterward manifesting or showing Himself in judgements and various forms, so that "every eye shall see Him Thus we learn that when He *appears* in glory we are with Him, and of course we must be caught to meet Him before we could appear with Him."⁵

Russell's conception of the secret rapture idea and his way of formulating it reveals his dependence on other exponents of it. An indication of his real source may be found in an interesting incident

⁴ Russell stressed this claim on other occasions, too. Paul S. L. Johnson, in his *Present Truth* magazine of January 1, 1927, p. 6, says: "On two different occasions Bro. Russell told us that it was in the very beginning of the Fall of 1874 that the manner of our Lord's return became clear to him." The other occasion was evidently some time in 1914.: "Our dear Pastor assured us in 1914 that it was in September or October, 1874, that he first recognized that the Lord's Second Advent would be invisible; and he began at once to teach it to others." (*Ibid.*, Sept. 1, 1935, p. 128) As Russell's "enlightenment" on this subject coincided with the date that he later accepted as that of Christ's return (Oct. 1874), it was seen as evidence of divine inspiration: "The Lord made known in 1874 to Pastor Russell that our Lord is no longer in the flesh, but is a Spirit" (*Ibid.*, Jan. 1, 1928, p. 7)

⁵ *The Object and Manner of Our Lord's Return*, Rochester, N. Y., pp. 39, 43. This pamphlet was published in 1877, not earlier as some have claimed. This is demonstrated not only by the date on all existing copies and the fact that it was published by Barbour, but also by its contents. The discussion of the word *parousia* (pp. 51-54), with the reference to the *Emphatic Diaglott*, for example, clearly reflects information Russell got from Barbour in 1876.

related by Russell himself during the interview in 1903. When Russell had published his booklet on *The Object and Manner of Our Lord's Return*, it was read by a friend of Dr. Joseph A. Seiss, a well-known Lutheran pastor at Philadelphia and a strong champion of millenarianism. According to Paul S. L. Johnson's report from the interview, Dr. Seiss had some unclear views on the pre-millennial advent and millennial reign of Christ and was seeking for a solution to his difficulties. His friend, therefore, "suggested that Bro. Russell was the very man to render the needed help."⁶ As a result, Dr. Seiss sent for Russell, who came to Philadelphia in person, bringing *The Object and Manner of Our Lord's Return* with him. This visit must have taken place in 1877, at the earliest, after Russell's tract had been published.⁷ During the discussion with Seiss, the subject of the secret rapture was dealt with, a fact about which Johnson gives the following remarkable information:

When Bro. Russell told us the story of his contacts with Dr. Seiss, he told us a matter that astonished us. He said that in one of Dr. Seiss' publications the latter stated that our Lord would be invisible in His Second Advent, and that, while explaining his own view, Bro. Russell reminded Dr. Seiss of this statement of his, when to Bro. Russell's surprise Dr. Seiss did not remember ever having entertained such a thought. He had the regular nominal church view of our Lord's rising from the dead in the flesh, and, of course, did not explain His invisibility in His Second Advent on the ground that spirit beings are invisible, as did our Pastor Commenting on Dr. Seiss' pertinent forgetfulness, Bro. Russell expressed astonishment that one once having such a thought could have forgotten it.⁸

There are two things to be noticed in this episode: (1) Russell had read some of Seiss's publications and knew that Seiss held Christ's second coming to be invisible; (2) Russell claimed that Seiss had

⁶ Paul S. L. Johnson, *The Parousia Messenger*, p. 527

⁷ Johnson states that the visit "occurred between 1875 and 1877," a statement based on the mistaken view that *The Object and Manner* was published earlier than 1877. *The Parousia Messenger*, p. 526.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 529

forgotten that he had ever entertained such a view. These are peculiar statements, indeed! Was Seiss really an adherent of the secret rapture doctrine? Did he advocate it in his writings? If he did, how could he ever have forgotten his own views on the subject? Is it possible that Russell was not the *teacher* of Dr. Seiss, as one might conclude when reading about the interview, but his *disciple*? An examination of Seiss's publications will throw some light on these questions.

DR. JOSEPH A. SEISS — THE CHAMPION OF THE SECRET RAPTURE DOCTRINE

During the nineteenth century, the works of leading British millenarian expositors, as well as British millenarian journals, soon reached the United States and through them came the secret rapture idea. As in England, a number of millenarian journals such as the *Literalist* (Started in 1840), the *American Millenarian and Prophetic Review* (published from 1842 through 1844), the *Theological and Literary Journal* (founded in 1848) and the *Prophetic Times* (1863-1881) appeared in America. The last mentioned was *the leading millenarian periodical* in the United States during the period in which it was published. It was edited by the very man mentioned above, Dr. Joseph A. Seiss, with the assistance of ten other editors. Dr. Seiss was a man of remarkable energy and ability. "In addition to his work as editor of the *Prophetic Times*, he wrote dozens of books — at least seven on millenarian subjects — ministered to a Philadelphia congregation described as the largest English Lutheran church in America, served from 1867 to 1879 as editor of the *Lutheran*, and was president of the board of the Philadelphia Lutheran Theological Seminary from 1865 until his death in 1902."⁹ He was born in 1823, and if his meeting with Russell took place in 1877, he was fifty-four years old at that time and at the zenith of his activity, while Russell was but a young man of twenty five years.

⁹ Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press., 1970), p. 95

There can be no doubt that Seiss was a strong advocate of the secret rapture idea, at least from the early 1860s and on, and there is no evidence to show that he ever abandoned that view. In one of his most popular works, *The Last Times and the Great Consummation*, he said in a separate note entitled, "On the two stages of the translation":

There seems also to be an intimation that even Christ's coming is to possess two distinct stages He is to come "as a thief in the night"; but he is also to come "in the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory," "taking vengeance on them that know not God," and to be "admired in all them that believe." In the one case he is seemingly invisible, removing as by stealth those who are waiting and ready In the other case, "every eye shall see him," and he rides forth upon his celestial chariots as a mighty conqueror, crushing down before him all his foes both great and small and gathering to himself the great totality of them that believe on his name. Both these comings, or stages of his manifestation, cannot occur at one and the same time, and so would involve a twofold translation.¹⁰

This was written in 1863, in the very year that the *Prophetic Times* was launched. In the first issue of this periodical, the editors published a kind of creed, "We believe," of which the twelfth article contained a cautiously formulated commitment to the secret rapture doctrine.¹¹ In the subsequent issues, this matter was brought up time after time, and Seiss made no secret of his position. In 1865 he published the article "The Manner of Christ's Coming," in which he argued that the first stage of the coming will be invisible;¹² and in 1866, in another article entitled "The Stealing Away of the Saints," he drew the same conclusion.¹³ In 1871 another of the editors of the *Prophetic Times*, E. E. Reinke, defended the two-stage coming idea in the article "For and With," stressing that Christ's *parousia* is

¹⁰ J. A. Seiss, *The Last Times and the Great Consummation*, revised and enlarged edition, (Philadelphia and London, 1863), pp. 350, 351. This book was first published in 1856. As is seen, Seiss assumes more than one rapture of the saints.

¹¹ *The Prophetic Times*, Vol. I, 1863, p. 14

¹² *Ibid.*, Vol. III, 1865, pp. 186,187

¹³ *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, 1866, pp. 172-5

ferent from his *epiphany*.”¹⁴ From that time the secret rapture was given increased space in the journal, with a number of articles supporting it being published in each of the subsequent volumes: In 1872 one writer, under the signature “F.P.M.,” discussed “The Object of Christ’s Second Coming,”¹⁵ and in 1873 the Reverend Richard Chester argued that the interval between the two stages would be three and a half years.¹⁶

One of the most interesting discussions of the secret rapture theory was the article, “The Two Stages of the Advent,” written by John G. Wilson and published in the issue of September-October 1874.¹⁷ As did other expositors, Wilson held that the first stage of Christ’s coming would be invisible and that fleshly Israel would be restored to Palestine during the interval before Christ’s final manifestation. Interestingly, Wilson asserted that the length of this interval “will be at least forty years.”¹⁸ Barbour, too, followed by Russell, held the interval to be forty years, from 1874 to 1914.¹⁹

From 1875 John G. Wilson acted as the editor-in-chief of the *Prophetic Times*, the name of which was now slightly changed to *The Prophetic Times and Watch Tower*.²⁰ Dr. Seiss went on advocating the secret rapture doctrine, for example, in the article, “The Jews and the Near Coming,” stressing that the word *parousia* means “presence”: “The Scriptures also distinguishes between a simple *parousia* or *presence*, and his *Epiphaneia* or *appearing*, manifestation. There may be *parousia* without *Epiphaneia*, though an

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. IX, 1871, pp. 59-64

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. X, 1872, pp. 1-5

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. XI, 1873, 149-153. This was also Seiss’s opinion.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. XII, 1874, pp. 129-33. There are reasons to believe that C. T. Russell was a regular reader of the *Prophetic Times*, and if his claim that it was in October 1874 that he first came to see that Christ’s coming “would be invisible to human natural sight” is to be trusted, it is quite possible that Wilson’s article may have influenced him.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 132

¹⁹ See, for example, *Three Worlds* by N. H. Barbour and C. T. Russell, Rochester, N. Y., 1877, pp. 9, 1922. At first this period was seen as identical to the “times of trouble.”

²⁰ In 1879, when C. T. Russell started his own periodical, *Zion’s Watch Tower*, he may have borrowed the name in part from the *Prophetic Times and Watch Tower*.

Epiphaneia always implies presence, but distinguishes that presence as apparent, manifest, visible.”²¹ In the same article he also contended that the conversion of Israel would take place in the period of Christ’s presence.

That Seiss did not change his mind on the secret, invisible coming is also evident from an article he wrote for the *Rainbow* magazine in 1877 entitled, “The Disturbed Thessalonians.” Again he stressed the *invisibility* of the first stage of Christ’s coming: “Take for example the arrival of the Saviour at those regions of the air whither his saints are to be gathered together unto him; what right have we to suppose that it will at once be visible and known to men in general? Has not the Lord’s coming been repeatedly described as partaking of the nature of the coming of the thief? Has not he himself so described it, as well as his apostles?”²²

Thus it is clearly seen that Dr. Seiss — at least from the early 1860s and all the time up to his meeting with Charles Russell — was a strong champion of the idea that Christ’s second coming will consist of two stages, the first of which is an *invisible presence* in the air. In view of this fact, is it really likely that Seiss, at his meeting with Russell in 1877 or thereabouts, “did not remember ever having entertained such a thought,” as Russell stated during the interview in 1903? The answer to this question is obviously an emphatic “No!” For some reason Russell wished to conceal the real facts from Paul S. L. Johnson during the interview. What were his reasons?

RUSSELL — ORIGINATOR OR PLAGIARIST?

Why should Russell try to give the impression that Dr. Seiss did not believe that Christ’s coming would be invisible — that he at some time in the past had hinted at the idea and then forgotten it — when he in fact was a strong champion of this idea and had been that throughout his later life? The fairly obvious answer seems to be that *Russell had taken over his understanding of the manner of Christ’s*

²¹ *The Prophetic Times and Watch Tower*, Vol. I, 1875, p. 56

²² *Rainbow*, August 1877, p. 343

return from Seiss, or learned it from his *Prophetic Times*, but wished to retain the impression that he had given earlier that he had been enlightened (more or less miraculously) on the subject in the autumn of 1874, exactly at the point of time which he later came to accept as the date of Christ's invisible return. As Paul S. L. Johnson had read one of Seiss's publications where the invisible coming idea had been suggested,²³ Russell could not, of course, altogether deny that Seiss had touched upon the subject in the past, claiming instead that Seiss had forgotten it at the time of their meeting.

Pastor Russell's discussion of the second coming of Christ in his *The Object and Manner of Our Lord's Return* — the booklet he brought with him to Dr. Seiss — is very similar to that of Seiss in his earlier publications. In 1864, for example, he published a little tract entitled, *The Lord at Hand*, in which he presented the subject in a way that spontaneously brings to mind Russell's booklet of 1877. Like Russell, Seiss approaches the subject from two angles, the *object* and the *manner* of Christ's return: "Notice, then, *the objects* for which He is to return," says Seiss, and explains these to be: (a) to take the saints unto himself, (b) to destroy his enemies, (c) to deliver the Jews and restore them in their land, and (d) to restore and deliver the suffering creation and "establish his glorious kingdom upon the earth." Then Seiss proceeds to the *manner* of the Lord's return: "Notice, too, *the manner* of His coming, which is also very particularly described. It is written that He is to come 'in like manner' as He ascended; that He will come suddenly, when people generally will not be at all expecting such a thing; that He will come first 'as a thief in the night,' invisible to steal away His waiting and watching saints, as He took Enoch of old; that He will at some stage of the advent be visibly manifested in splendor and great glory"²⁴

²³ This is stated directly by Paul S. L. Johnson: "In fact, it was Dr. Seiss' book on *The Last Times*, which advocated the pre-Millennial advent and Millennial reign of Christ, that convinced the writer of the truth of these two doctrines and thus began to shake the writer's faith in the Lutheran creed." *The Parousia Messenger*, p. 525. See note ⁸ above. → 10

²⁴ Dr. Joseph Seiss, *The Lord at Hand* (Philadelphia, 1864), pp.2,3. In this pamphlet Seiss states that six thousand years from the creation of mankind would end in 1872, not in 1870 as he had held one year earlier. ~~N. H. Barbour's~~
Joseph Seiss

These views and arguments, presented by Seiss in many of his subsequent publications and articles, were identical to those published by Charles Russell years later. It is quite obvious that Russell did not originate his view of Christ's invisible coming and presence himself, but he took it over from others. Although it cannot be proven absolutely, it appears that in particular he plagiarized his ideas on the matter from Dr. Seiss.²⁵

Today Jehovah's Witnesses still hold to the secret rapture-invisible presence conception but in a considerably different form from that of their founder, Charles T. Russell. The background of this difference is that a series of prophetic failures from 1878 and thereafter forced Russell and his followers to repeatedly re-interpret the doctrine. When Barbour's date for Christ's coming, 1873-1874, failed, it was his adoption of the secret rapture idea that saved that date. He could claim that Christ actually *had* arrived in 1874, but *invisibly*.²⁶ When in 1876 Russell accepted Barbour's chronological scheme, both men thought that the "harvest" was a period of three and a half years from the autumn of 1874 to the spring of 1878, when the translation or rapture of the saints was expected to take place.²⁷ When this expectation was not realized, Russell tried to save this date, too, by re-interpreting 1 Corinthians 15: 51 to mean that the rapture would occur *at the moment of dying*, explaining that all the saints that died from the spring of 1878 and on were immediately translated into the presence of Christ. At the same time, the "harvest" was extended to the autumn of 1881, when it was believed that the final translation would take place.²⁸ When that date failed also, the "harvest" was

acceptance of this date may have made it easier for C. T. Russell to accept it as valid when he met Barbour in 1876.

²⁵ According to Richard Rawe of Soap Lake, Washington, George Stetson and George Storrs, the two men Russell mentions as his teachers in the extra edition of *Zion's Watch Tower* of April 25, 1894, on page 96, advocated the secret rapture doctrine. But their doctrine of it was of a different type from that of either Seiss or Russell. Thus Russell could hardly have learned it from them. Rawe has made a careful study of this matter.

²⁶ *Zion's Watch Tower*, October-November 1881, p. 3

²⁷ Barbour and Russell, *Three Worlds*, pp. 120, 124-30

²⁸ *Zion's Watch Tower* (Extra Edition) April 25, 1894, pp. 103-4. *Herald of the Morning* (ed. N. H. Barbour) August 1878, p. 22; October 1878, p. 52

extended to 1914, the concluding rapture of the saints being expected in the autumn that year.²⁹ When that date had ~~past~~,^{pa} and Russell and his associates were still on earth, the rapture was postponed till April, 1918.³⁰ Russell, however, did not live to see that date fail.

The last attempt to fix a date for the death and subsequent “glorification” of the last church member was made by Joseph F. Rutherford, the second president of the Watch Tower Society, who focussed on 1925 as the year when this would be accomplished.³¹ When this prediction failed, too, no new date was set for the completion of the rapture. To handle the failures of 1914 and 1918, Rutherford, in 1927, moved the time for the first resurrection from 1878 to 1918,³² and in the early 1930s he changed the date for the beginning of Christ’s invisible presence from 1874 to 1914.³³

These interpretations are still fundamental to the message of Jehovah’s Witnesses today. The explanation respecting the invisible rapture is still based on that of Russell’s ingenious “solution” for the 1878 failure, although that date has now been largely forgotten. Accordingly, those “anointed Christians” who have died since 1918 are thought to have been immediately changed at the moment of death and united with Christ. Such a “rapture” is, of course, more secret than ever, as the bodies of these deceased are left on earth to be buried or cremated in the ordinary manner.

Perhaps some may feel that too much space has been devoted to the discussion of the origin and history of the secret rapture theory while nothing has been said to prove whether this idea is correct or not. This may be quite true. But an understanding of the origin and development of this idea is very helpful. As was demonstrated in an

²⁹ *Zion’s Watch Tower*, October 1884, p. 8. C. T. Russell, *Studies in the Scriptures*, Vol. 2, 1889, p. 77

³⁰ *The Watch Tower*, September 1, 1916, pp. 264-5

³¹ J. F. Rutherford, *Millions Now Living Will Never Die!* (Brooklyn, N. Y.: International Bible Students Association, 1920), p. 88. *The Watch Tower*, October 1, 1921, p. 295.

³² *From Paradise Lost to Paradise Regained* (Brooklyn, N. Y.: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1958), p. 192

³³ *The Golden Age*, 1934, pp. 379-80

earlier article,³⁴ the idea of a two-stage coming of Christ was originally necessitated by the belief that Israel will be restored to its own land after the coming of Christ, to be delivered at his manifestation to the world. The restoration of Israel, therefore, has traditionally been a constituent element of the secret rapture doctrine, and it was also a part of Pastor Russell's prophetic scheme. Interestingly, however, this feature of the schema was dropped by the Watch Tower Society in the early 1930s. Yet the idea that Christ's *parousia* is invisible and is divided into several stages is still taught by that organization. The reason for this is, of course, that without this concept it would be impossible to hold that Christ's second coming took place in 1914. But in order to defend this view they, like Robert Govett in the last century, are forced to argue that the Greek word *parousia*, when used of Christ's coming, does not mean "coming" but only "presence," and should always be so translated. Only on this assumption is it possible to retain the view that Christ has been *invisibly* present since 1914. But does the Greek word *parousia* always mean "presence"? Was it so understood by the early translators of the New Testament? How was this word used at the time of the apostles? What does the Biblical context indicate as to its meaning? These questions will be answered in future articles.

³⁴ *The Christian Quest*, Spring 1988, pp. 37-59

The final article was published as "Appendix B" in the book *The Sign of the Last Dasy – When?* by C. O. Jonsson and W. Herbst, Commentary Press Atlanta 1987, pp. 249-265