

Saints and Sinners

Awaiting the Third Coming of Christ?

By George Plagenz

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Has the Second Coming — Jesus' return to earth — come and gone? Did it happen and we didn't notice? It is the belief of nearly [6] million people in the world — members of the Bahá'í faith (pronounced Ba-high) — that Christ has already made his Second Coming.

A newspaperman in Wisconsin scooped the world with the story. William Sears was with the United Press bureau in Madison, Wis., when he came upon his story completely by chance. As he worked nights, he often had time to read on the job. One night he came upon a book about a group of people who had eagerly awaited the return of Christ in the 19th century.

Sears was particularly interested in the story of William Miller, a Bible student who calculated that, after studying the promises of the prophet Daniel in the Old Testament, Christ would return to earth in 1844. Miller had narrowed it down even further — Oct. 22, 1844. So on that day, he and his followers, who numbered about 100,000, climbed the hills and the housetops around Hampton, N.Y., where Miller lived, and waited for Christ's return, which never materialized. Miller and his disappointed disciples concluded that they must have made some mistake in their arithmetic. Sears the reporter wasn't so sure.

Something of a Bible student himself, Sears figured that the prophet Daniel and Miller were right about 1844 and that Christ had indeed returned — but the event had taken place somewhere else and had gone unnoticed by the world. Sears began looking at all available historical records for 1844. Were there any stories or legends of a man claiming to be the Messiah that surfaced that year?

On one of his several trips to the Middle East for the United Press, Sears heard the strange tale of a young man who had been sentenced to death for instigating a religious-reform movement in Persia (Iran today). The story was that the man in question was hanging, suspended by ropes, from a crossbar in the public square while a firing squad took aim at him. But when the smoke of [750] rifles had cleared, the man stood on the ground unharmed. The guns of his would-be executioners had severed the ropes but he had miraculously escaped the volleys and ran off free.¹

The young man was known as the Báb (pronounced Bob), which means "gate." He had been traveling through Persia proclaiming he was the gate (or door) through which would come the Promised One. His first announcement that the Second Coming was imminent was made, Sears learned, on May 23, 1844!

¹ This isn't quite correct. There were two men suspended, the Báb and a young believer. When the smoke cleared, the youth was standing among the shattered ropes. The Báb had returned to His prison cell to finish a letter. He had not "run off."

As John the Baptist had been the forerunner of Christ, according to the New Testament, the Báb claimed to be the forerunner of this new promised redeemer. The Báb died in 1850, but his followers continued to await the Promised One. In 1863, one of their number proclaimed he was the one the Báb had foretold. His name was Bahá'u'lláh, which in Arabic means "the Glory of God."

Sears had noted in his Bible studies that the Messiah was referred to countless times as "the glory of God," or "the glory of the Lord." For instance, Isaiah had said in one of his best-known prophecies, "Arise, shine, for thy light has come and the glory of the Lord (Bahá'u'lláh) is risen upon thee." Sears, who published his research in 1961, became a Bahá'í himself.

The Bahá'í faith, unlike most Eastern religions, is more practical than mystical. The essential message is the oneness of mankind. Principles of the religion include universal peace based on a federation of nations. "Bahá'ís do not engage in political activities, officially support candidates or run for public office. The rules that guide a Bahá'í in his daily life include loyalty, obedience to government and abstinence from alcohol. Service to mankind is regarded as a form of worship. The first proclamation of the equality of the sexes occurs in Bahá'í teachings. As there is no clergy, Bahá'ís conduct their own meetings at which sacred writings are read and prayers are said. Since Bahá'ís believe the solidarity of society ultimately depends on the stability and unity of the family, all Bahá'ís, no matter their age, must get the consent of both parents (if they are living) before they can be married. Bahá'ís reside in more than 300 countries of the world. In the United States, there are more than 500 "spiritual assemblies" (groups of nine or more Bahá'ís). Well-known Bahá'ís have included Dizzy Gillespie, Vic Damone and Gail Martin, daughter of the late Dean Martin. The center of the Bahá'í community in the United States can be found in Wilmette, Ill. The world center is located in Haifa, Israel.

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