

## Beth Sarim: Princes, Slander, and the Millennium

Massimo Introvigne

*CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions)*

maxintrovigne@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT:** A perpetual item of anti-Jehovah’s-Witnesses controversy is that they built a home in San Diego, California, the “House of the Princes” (Beth Sarim), to welcome there rulers and prophets of the Old Testament when they will be resurrected and serve as “Princes in All the Earth.” Waiting for the Princes, it was used by the second president of the Watch Tower Society, Judge Joseph Franklin Rutherford, who died there in 1942. The Jehovah’s Witnesses sold the property in 1948. The article reviews the story of Beth Sarim and the controversies that prevented Rutherford from being buried there, as he had wished. It discusses the anti-cult slander associated with Beth Sarim, and the gratuitous comparisons in the media with a controversial Los Angeles new religious movement called The Great Eleven. Finally, it situates the Beth Sarim episode within the context of the evolving millennial theology of the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

**KEYWORDS:** Jehovah’s Witnesses, Joseph Franklin Rutherford, Beth Sarim, Robert J. Martin, Millennialism, Divine Order of the Royal Arms of the Great Eleven, The Great Eleven.

### *Beth Sarim*

At the address 4440 Braeburn Road, San Diego lies a 2-story house built between October 10, 1929, and January 17, 1930, in Spanish eclectic style, with a 3<sup>rd</sup>-floor round tower. It was designated on August 23, 2001, as a historical landmark by the San Diego Historical Resources Board (Flanigan 2001; San Diego Historical Resource Board 2001, 2010, no. 474).

The house is known as Beth Sarim, the “House of the Princes,” and is mentioned in a significant part of the literature hostile to the Jehovah’s Witnesses. This is how their story goes. The Jehovah’s Witnesses believed that the world as we know it would soon end. The worthy rulers and prophets of the Old Testaments such as David, Joseph, and others would be resurrected and

would serve as “Princes in All the Earth” (Psalm 45:16, New World Translation used by the Jehovah’s Witnesses) before the end of the present system of things. The Jehovah’s Witnesses prepared a residence in San Diego to host these Princes. However, as the Princes did not manifest themselves, the house was in fact used by the second president of the Watch Tower Society, Judge Joseph Franklin Rutherford (1869–1942) to enjoy the good weather, a beautiful house, and a luxurious lifestyle. He died there on January 8, 1942.

The implication in the anti-Jehovah’s-Witnesses literature is often that Rutherford milked his gullible followers of their hard-earned money, and used the Princes as a pretext to enjoy a nice house in California. Told in these terms, the story is certainly false, and relies on typical anti-cult stereotypes. The real story of Beth Sarim is, on the other hand, much more interesting.

### *Who Built Beth Sarim and Why*

That Rutherford went to Beth Sarim because the expected Princes did not appear is not true. Documents clearly show that the house was originally built using private funds to give to Rutherford a place where he could work and take advantage of weather conditions better than those available at the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ headquarters in Brooklyn, New York. Why was this needed, and how did the idea of Beth Sarim as an administrative center for the resurrected Princes arise?

Those associated with the Watch Tower Society (the name Jehovah’s Witnesses was adopted later, in 1931) were conscientious objectors, as the Jehovah’s Witnesses are today. During World War I, their refusal to serve in the military was regarded as a serious crime in the United States, as in other countries. With others, Rutherford was arrested and sentenced to a jail term of 20 years on June 21, 1918. Happily, with the end of the war, cooler tempers prevailed. The 1918 decision was overturned on appeal, and the prosecutor decided to drop the charges.

However, the time spent in jail took a serious toll on Rutherford’s health. He was diagnosed with chronic pneumonia, and left with only one regularly functioning lung. Doctors noticed that warm weather improved his condition. In particular, time spent in San Diego was especially effective. A local doctor called

Albert Ernest Eckols (1904–1940) treated Rutherford and advised him to escape the humid and cold winter of New York. He should rather spend in San Diego the winter seasons, he advised, or better still the rest of his life. By 1929, Rutherford had been wintering in San Diego for a few years on the doctor’s recommendation. However, it had proved difficult to find a house suitable for Rutherford and his staff that could be rented for just a few months each winter (Martin 1930, 405).

Robert J. Martin (1878–1932) was one of the Watch Tower co-workers who had been arrested and sentenced with Rutherford in 1918. He came from a wealthy family, although he had sold his shares in the Martin Boards company to his brothers to devote himself full-time to the Watch Tower work. Martin testified that it was he and other Watch Tower devotees that prevailed upon Rutherford and persuaded him to acquire a permanent residence in San Diego. Finally, he accepted, and Martin went to California to consult with Dr. Eckols.

It was Eckols himself who purchased two lots of land in fashionable Kensington Heights, and transferred their property to Martin on October 8, 1929 (Flanigan 2001, 4). On October 10, Martin entered into a contract with the locally prominent J.W. Gernandt Construction Company to build the 2-story house, completed with a tower symbolizing the Watch Tower Society (Flanigan 2001, 2, 4). The notice of completion of the building was filed by Martin on January 17, 1930 (Flanigan 2001, 9).

On March 3, 1930, when media controversies had already started, William Edwin Van Amburgh (1863–1947), another of those sentenced in 1918, who served as treasurer of the Watch Tower Society, signed a written statement that “not one penny” had left the society’s coffers to pay for the house (Martin 1930, 406). Martin and others had provided the money.

On December 24, 1929, while the house was being built, Martin transferred the property of the lots and the building to Rutherford until the end of the judge’s life on earth, with the stipulation that it will then pass to the Watch Tower Society. Martin testified that in fact Rutherford “refused to have [the property] for himself, except to use it for the Lord’s work” (Martin 1930, 405). Hence, the provisions about the Princes arose from Rutherford’s insistence that the property originally funded and put at his disposal by his doctor and friends be deeded not to him but to the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society.

It should also be clarified that Rutherford was not on vacation in San Diego. He directed from there an organization that was growing and expanding to numerous countries, and wrote in the house several books (*Consolation* 1942, 5–6).

### *The Princes*

To understand the Princes connection, there is no need to consult the sensational accounts of the media of the time or the anti-Jehovah's Witnesses literature. What Beth Sarim had exactly to do with the Princes was clearly spelled out in the deed between Martin and Rutherford signed on December 24, 1929.

Both the grantor [Martin] and the grantee, the said JOSEPH F. RUTHERFORD are fully persuaded from the Bible testimony, which is the Word of Jehovah God, and from extraneous evidence that God's kingdom is now in course of establishment and that it will result beneficially to the peoples of earth; that the governing power and authority will be invisible to men but that kingdom of God will have visible representatives on the earth who will have charge of the affairs of the nations under the supervision of the invisible ruler Christ; that among those who will thus be the faithful representatives and visible governors of the world will be David, who was once king over Israel; and Gideon, and Barak, and Samson, and Jephthae, and Joseph, formerly the ruler of Egypt, and Samuel the prophet and other faithful men who were named with approval in the Bible at Hebrews the eleventh chapter. The condition herein is that the said WATCH TOWER BIBLE AND TRACT SOCIETY shall hold said title perpetually in trust for the use of any or all of the men above named as representatives of God's kingdom on earth and that such men shall have possession and use of said property hereinabove described as they may deem for the best interest for the work in which they are engaged.

[...] IT IS FURTHER PROVIDED that if the said JOSEPH F. RUTHERFORD while alive on the earth shall by lease, deed or contract provide that any other person or persons connected with the said WATCH TOWER BIBLE AND TRACT SOCIETY shall have the right to reside on said premises until the appearing of David or some of the other men mentioned in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews as above set forth even such person or persons so designated by the said JOSEPH F. RUTHERFORD in such lease or other paper writing shall have the right and privilege of residing on said premises until the same be taken possession of by David or some of the other men herein named and this property and premises being dedicated to Jehovah and the use of his kingdom it shall be used as such for ever. Any persons appearing to take possession of said premises shall first prove and identify themselves to the proper officers of said Society as the person or persons described in Hebrews chapter eleven and in this deed (Martin 1930, 406–7).

The last clause was not unnecessary. In an interview he granted in January 1931 to *The San Diego Sun*, a newspaper that at the end of the same year would merge with *The Evening Tribune* into *The Tribune-Sun*, a predecessor of the contemporary *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Rutherford explained that

One morning as I was going from the house to the garage, a queer-looking creature approached me, tipped his dirty hat and cried, "Howdy, judge, I'm David." "Go and tell that to the winds," I told him, and he left without arguing the matter (Wyatt 1931).

Rutherford did not believe that "a gaunt, unshaven tramp" might have been one of the Princes. He interpreted the Bible to the effect that

David, Gideon, Barak, Samuel, Jephtae [sic], Joseph and Samuel will be sent there to wrench the world from Satan's grasp clothed in modern garb as we are, and able, with little effort, to speak our tongue (Wyatt 1931).

Prophetically, in entering the house, Rutherford had declared that he realized "the possibility of some old codger turning up bright and early some morning and claiming he is King David" (*Pittsburgh Gazette* 1930).

The 1939 article commented that Rutherford "pictured the arrival of the biblical delegation perhaps in frock coats, high hats, canes and spats." He also noted that the Princes will find in the house "French telephones," "Kolnisch Wasser from Cologne," and "a new, yellow 16-cylinder" coupe car in the garage (Wyatt 1931). The journalist was clearly amused but at least he let Rutherford express himself in his own voice, and his article was less sensational than others published in the media of the time.

There is thus little doubt that Rutherford and the Jehovah's Witnesses did contemplate the possibility that the Princes may return and find a base of operations in San Diego. However, they did not appear during Rutherford's lifetime, and he died at Beth Sarim of cancer on January 8, 1942.

### *The Controversy About Rutherford's Burial*

Rutherford had expressed the wish to be simply buried within the Beth Sarim property. The local authorities objected that the lot was not an authorized cemetery, but the battle was soon fought not so much about funerary legislation but about the Jehovah's Witnesses.

In November 1941, Rutherford had surgery in Elkhart, Indiana, from which it became clear he would not recover. He asked to be brought back by train and ambulance to Beth Sarim, as he wanted to die and be buried there. In anticipation of his death, his co-workers formed a corporation called Beth Sarim's Rest, whose purpose was to operate a small cemetery located three hundred feet from the house and down the nearby canyon slope, invisible from any house. Rutherford confirmed his wish to be buried in the Beth Sarim property to Dr. George Roy Stevenson (1887–1959), the physician who assisted him in his last days and signed the death certificate (*Los Angeles Times* 1942a).

When Rutherford died, the corporation and the mortician sought permission for Rutherford to be buried there. However, although Beth Sarim's Rest was duly incorporated, it needed a "conditional permit" to operate a cemetery. The permit was sought, while Rutherford's remains continued to be kept in the mortuary (*Los Angeles Times* 1942a). It was denied by San Diego's Planning Commission after two weeks, on January 24 (*The Fresno Bee* 1942a).

The question was more political and religious than administrative. Several organizations petitioned the authorities not to grant the permit. The Veterans of Foreign Wars, which still resented Rutherford's advocacy of conscientious objection while another World War was being fought, wrote that "Judge Rutherford during his lifetime taught intolerance; therefore, as a manifestation of our 'tolerance,' we do not wish him buried." Troublemakers gathered in front of Beth Sarim, and sometimes trespassed inside the property, shouting cruel mockery such as "How long are you going to keep the old boy on ice?" (*Consolation* 1942, 3–4).

259 owners of nearby properties also signed a petition opposing the burial, but the Jehovah's Witnesses claimed that those who signed had been deceived by the Witnesses' opponents into believing that a large cemetery was planned there, while in fact they had no intention to bury in the plot anybody else than Rutherford. When this was clarified, some of the neighbors signed the Jehovah's Witnesses' own petition in favor of the burial, which in its first version gathered 1,070 names (*Consolation* 1942, 6). By the end of the process, the number of supporting signatures would rise to 14,693. After the denial by the Planning Commission, the Jehovah's Witnesses appealed the decision before the Board of Supervisors. The appeal was also denied, on February 2 (*Monrovia Daily News-Post* 1942; *The Ventura County-Star Free Press* 1942).

Undaunted, the Jehovah's Witnesses on January 6 brought the case to the local County Superior Court (*The Sacramento Bee* 1942) and, reportedly at the judge, Arthur L. Mundo's (1895–1983), suggestion (*Los Angeles Times* 1942b), filed on February 28 another request for burial further away from any house (*The Fresno Bee* 1942b). This

New location for interment was in almost the center of the property known as Beth-Shan, which is roughly 75 acres of canyon and mesa land, adjoining Beth-Sarim but separated by a half-mile width of canyon.

This property, also belonging to WATCHTOWER, has one small and one large dwelling upon it and a few out-houses, and consists of some fruit trees and other cultivated patches in aggregate about seven acres, and about 65 acres of unreclaimed brush, either too steep, or rocky, or inaccessible for development. It offers retreat for all forms of animal life common to this portion of southern California, such as coyotes, bobcats (lynxes), rabbits, Blue Mountain quail, doves, and songsters of many varieties, all of which die and are buried without fuss under the leaves of the cactus and greasewood. Judge Rutherford, in a discussion before his death, had said that as a second choice he wished to be buried somewhere on these wild acres.

In order that all the objections made in regard to the first site near to Kensington Heights might be removed in regard to this new site, it was requested that only a ten-foot-square cemetery be granted. The spot was also inaccessible except by private road a half mile long and closed by a gate. Dr. Alexander Lesem [1879–1957, the local County Health Officer] looked at the site himself and declared that there was no health hazard. (He also stated that there was no health hazard in the first site) (*Consolation* 1942, 9).

After a hearing on February 28, on March 14, 1942, the second petition was also denied by the Planning Commission (*Los Angeles Times* 1942b), with the Veterans of Foreign Wars continuing to agitate for denial of any burial outside of an established cemetery. On March 16, the decision was confirmed by the Board of Supervisors (*Los Angeles Times* 1942c). The Jehovah's Witnesses were treated quite harshly, with one of the commissioners telling them: "Our patience is at a limit; we cannot spend any time with this; we are too busy with defense work" (*Consolation* 1942, 11). The Jehovah's Witnesses appealed again to Judge Mundo of the Central District Court, where the trial started on April 1 (*Los Angeles Times* 1942d). It quickly turned into a trial of the Jehovah's Witnesses and their expectation that the Princes will return to Beth Sarim.

The local authorities admitted that there would have been no problems in burying an ordinary citizen in the new location. However, Rutherford was so famous that his burial place, even with no monument as the Jehovah's Witnesses

offered, would attract “pilgrimages.” In fact, pilgrimages to their deceased leaders’ graves are not part of the practices of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and they explained it to the court. To no avail, as Judge Mundo ruled against them on April 16 (*San Bernardino Daily Sun* 1942).

While according to some local media they had originally considered continuing the legal battle (*San Bernardino Daily Sun* 1942), the Jehovah’s Witnesses finally realized that in the heated war climate further appeals to higher courts would be futile. They decided, having obtained the authorities’ permission on April 18 (*Daily News* [Los Angeles] 1942; *Oakland Tribune* 1942), to bring the remains of Rutherford to Staten Island, New York (*Los Angeles Times* 1942e).

They were buried there on April 25, 1942, at dawn, in a burial plot of the Woodrow Road cemetery, near the Watch Tower Society’s property from where it operated a radio station. This was reported both by the Jehovah’s Witnesses (e.g. *Consolation* 1942, 16) and the media (*Red Bluff Daily News* 1942; *The Fresno Bee* 1942c). The *Los Angeles Times* offered more details than other newspapers:

The body was taken in a hearse from a funeral home to the cemetery without cortege. At the cemetery entrance a small group of followers was waiting. They carried the casket from the hearse to the grave. Nathan [Homer] Knorr [1905–1977], Rutherford’s successor and president of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, corporate title of the sect, read a few prayers and the casket was lowered into the grave (*Los Angeles Times* 1942f).

Rutherford, Martin, Van Amburgh, and Clayton J. Woodworth (1870–1951), who had been sentenced to jail together in 1918, all rest in the same cemetery and plot. In 1952, the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ publication *Awake!* commented

How appropriate it is that the remains of these men who labored together during their lifetime, Rutherford, Van Amburgh, Martin and Woodworth, should be buried there together! Not that we attach importance to the remains or to the spot of burial, but we see appropriateness in the circumstances and know that the unity is a reality (“The Things They Did Go Right with Them” 1952).

However, the fact that the Jehovah’s Witnesses burial site in the Woodrow Road cemetery had no grave markers was used to support the legend that Rutherford had been clandestinely buried in the area adjacent to Beth Sarim, in defiance of the court’s order. The legend is still occasionally repeated today. However,

Rutherford's remains traveled east pursuant to an official authorization by County Health Officer Dr. Lesem, and accompanied by the authorized mortician, Harvey Lewis (1885–1972). The legend is thus just a late legacy of the emotions that accompanied the whole controversy.

### *Media Reactions*

In 1806, Italian poet Ugo Foscolo (1778–1827) wrote one of the most famous poems of the Italian literature, one that generations of Italian students have been requested to memorize, “Sepulchers” (*Dei sepolcri*). It is a deep meditation on the meaning of the graves for the living. Foscolo, although a progressive poet himself, nostalgically lamented that the French Revolution and Napoleon I (1769–1821) had created a restrictive burial policy, while Italians were accustomed to see illustrious citizens buried in churches or in mausoleums placed in the center of their cities (Foscolo 1807).

American and, in particular, California funerary laws were never as strict as their European counterparts that followed the Napoleonic model. The Jehovah's Witnesses were able to argue in court that the case law of California's Supreme Court looked with favor both to burial in remote and isolated locations even when they were not legally part of cemeteries, and to liberally accommodating the wish of the deceased whenever possible (*Consolation* 1942, 8). In the Rutherford case, these precedents were not followed, not because of any peculiar local health or zoning reason but due to the hostility against the Jehovah's Witnesses.

The confrontation with the Roman Catholic Church in the area was particularly harsh. The fact that the Jehovah's Witnesses were conscientious objectors mobilized against them, in the middle of World War II, organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion (*Consolation* 1942, 10). Catholic media were among the most hostile in reporting about Rutherford's death (see e.g. *The Tablet* 1942). Ultimately, it was prejudice against the Jehovah's Witnesses that prevented Rutherford's wish to be buried in the property around Beth Sarim to be honored.

This was initially acknowledged by the local San Diego media. In January 1942, some of the articles published by *The Tribune-Sun* and *The San Diego Union* were surprisingly balanced. The *Union* reported, without disapproving it,

the opinion of Beth Sarim's next-door neighbor, one A.L. Jacobs, who said he had no sympathy for the Jehovah's Witnesses but he believed that if Rutherford "wanted to be buried there, that's the place to put him" (*The San Diego-Union* 1942).

The Jehovah's Witnesses acknowledged the initial fairness of the local media, calling their January reports "unbiased" (*Consolation* 1942, 7). However, they also noted that the tune of the media coverage changed in the following months, perhaps under Catholic influence. The media looked into their own archives and found that both local and national media had treated Beth Sarim in the 1930s as a typical example of the practices and beliefs of a "cult."

*Time* in 1930 compared the Jehovah's Witnesses to the two main Rosicrucian organizations that had their world headquarters in California, the Rosicrucian Fellowship in Oceanside and the Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis in San Jose, and offered a pseudo-sociological explanation of why "cults" were flourishing in the state:

Flowery, sun-drenched California, where Nature exhibits itself in mystical opulence, where plenty of people have plenty of money, where there are many invalids contemplating eternity, is particularly propitious for this flourishing (*Time* 1930).

In one of the most bizarre turns of the whole story, stereotyping the Jehovah's Witnesses as a "cult" was also reinforced by a comparison with an organization that had nothing to do with them, known as The Great Eleven.

#### *A Faulty Comparison: The Great Eleven*

A surprising number of newspapers, probably based on a United Press syndicated story, had published in 1930s stories about Beth Sarim and the Princes comparing the Jehovah's Witnesses to The Divine Order of the Royal Arms of the Great Eleven (*Nashville Banner* 1930; *The Neosho Daily News* 1930; *Washington Herald* 1930; *Syracuse Herald* 1930, which also offers a comparison with the community around Jiddu Krishnamurti, 1895–1986, in Ojai). Known in short as The Great Eleven, it was a Los Angeles new religious movement founded in 1922 by May Otis Blackburn (1881–1951). She had also established a parallel (but not identical) organization called "The Church of the Divine Science of Joshua, the Branch, the Headstone of the Corner" (Supreme

Court of California 1931, 2). Since Blackburn's movement is almost completely forgotten, an excursus into its history and controversies is needed.

Blackburn was born in Storm Lake, Iowa, but started gathering followers of her numerological speculations about the Bible and the universe (see Blackburn 1936) in Portland, Oregon, and moved to California in 1918. Most of her early followers came from Christian Science, and one of her organizations may have been called "The Church of the Divine Science" to offer them some continuity with their previous religion.

In California, May taught that she and her daughter Ruth Wieland (1898–1978) were the Two Witnesses mentioned in the Book of Revelation, and were receiving messages from Gabriel and other angels (Blackburn 1936). Gabriel had ordered that the revelations should be collected in a book to be published under the title *The Great Sixth Seal* or *The Lamb's Book of Life*. Not only would the book offer a new interpretation of the Bible and reveal hitherto unknown secrets on the origins and destiny of the universe; the publication itself would trigger apocalyptic events, leading to the millennial reign of eleven God-appointed queens, who would have their palaces in Hollywood and include May and her daughter.

When the media compared The Great Eleven to the Jehovah's Witnesses, two sensational events concerning the former organization had occurred. First, the police had discovered in 1929 that two members of The Great Eleven, William (1869–1944) and Martha Rhoads (1869–1944) had kept the body of their adopted daughter Willa Rhoads (1908–1925), who had died at age 16, preserved on salt and ice in the movement's headquarters, then moved it to various locations, hoping she might be resurrected when the kingdom of the eleven queens would come. Willa had been designated herself as one of the queens, and was buried together with the bodies of seven dogs named after the seven musical notes, which had been given to the girl by May Blackburn as a gift.

Whether the dogs had been "ritually sacrificed," as some claimed, and had a special mystical role was never clarified. The police investigated the matter, and found that no crimes had been committed (*Nashville Banner* 1930). It is also possible that Martha Rhoads's ideas about the possibility that Willa would not die and, once dead, might be resurrected came from her interpretation of Christian Science, her former religion, rather than from The Great Eleven's theology (Fort 2019, 258–59).

The second incident concerned a court case started against Blackburn by the nephew of the oil magnate Joseph Benjamin Dabney (1858–1932), Clifford Richard Dabney (1891–1977). He was a disgruntled ex-member of The Great Eleven, and claimed he had been fraudulently persuaded to donate significant sums of money, together with shares of oil companies and land, to support the movement and the publication of *The Great Sixth Seal*, which was never published. In fact, the heavy donations, together with disagreements with his uncle, had almost bankrupt him. Blackburn was arrested, prosecuted, and convicted of grand theft by the Superior Court of Los Angeles County on March 2, 1930.

The jury had heard damning testimonies not only about the Willa Rhoads incident, but also about the fact that the abusive husband of Blackburn's daughter Ruth, a man called Samuel Rizzio (1906–1929), had been killed by The Great Eleven's leaders, probably with poison. Rumors that other members had been killed also circulated. They have been regarded as believable by the author of the only (non-academic) nonfiction book on The Great Eleven, Samuel Fort (Fort 2019), and by those who wrote fiction on the sensational case. They included Rick J. Baudé, the grandson of The Great Eleven leader Gale Conde Banks (1890–1982), who authored *The Blackburn Chronicle* (Baudé 2008), and Kim Cooper, who in *The Kept Girl* (2014) put novelist Raymond Chandler (1888–1959) on the tracks of the homicidal movement (Cooper 2014).

That The Great Eleven committed serious crimes, including homicides, is thus the subject matter of a literary tradition. The movement is now defunct, although according to Fort it did not disappear in 1930, as others had claimed, but remained in existence for several decades (Fort 2019, 462). Fort does build a case for the criminal nature of The Great Eleven, but its legal story is different. In fact, one of the reasons The Great Eleven is of some interest is that it offered to the Supreme Court of California the opportunity for a landmark decision on religious liberty.

In their decision of November 30, 1931, confirming the opinion of the District Court of Appeal of California, Second District, Division One, which on March 23, 1931, had already overcome the Superior Court decision, the California Justices severely chastised the prosecutor for having introduced in the 1930 trial evidence about Willa Rhoads and the alleged homicide of Samuel Rizzio, with the obvious intent of prejudicing the jurors by exposing them to

matters that had nothing to do with the grand theft accusation. The Justices had no sympathy for The Great Eleven. In fact, they wrote that the movement's

whole plan of life and salvation is a babel of incoherency abounding in absurdities of an extreme type and the wonder is that rational minds should have become obsessed by such chimerical delusions (Supreme Court of California 1931, 6).

However, the Supreme Court noted that while it would be illegal to use such delusions to prey on the mentally weak, "In the instant case no claim is made of a weakening of mentality on the part of those who accepted the defendant in the role she manifested herself," including Clifford R. Dabney, who while he was a member of The Great Eleven was perfectly capable of functioning as a businessman (Supreme Court of California 1931, 6). It also came out that Dabney was not a reluctant participant in The Great Eleven but contributed to the movement's lore through his own visions, including one where he saw the founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910: Fort 2019, 415).

The Supreme Court concluded that Dabney and others had accepted a strange interpretation of the Scriptures but, being mentally competent, they had done it freely. According to the Justices, from Dabney's point of view at the moment he made the donations, his choice was rational because he believed he could access "the arcanum of all knowledge" and "the paltry dollars which he had expended (...) were as trifles compared with [the] priceless gifts" he hoped to acquire (Supreme Court of California 1931, 6).

While not resisting the temptation to pass judgement on The Great Eleven's doctrines as "absurdities," the Supreme Court ultimately came to a strong statement of religious liberty and the principle that judges were forbidden to investigate whether Blackburn was really talking with angels and receiving revelations.

Any legislative attempt to limit or regulate persons in their claims to the possession of exceptional spiritual power or knowledge would be rejected as a dangerous invasion of the state into the realm of religious freedom and privilege, which, from the beginning of our government, has been guarded by constitutional barriers. The framers of our criminal statutes had in mind material affairs and not spiritual matters nor the punishment of persons who claim or represent themselves, by divine favor, to be endowed with supernatural power, unless the intent to defraud is discernible in the pretense as to the possession of supernatural powers. This power in the instant case, according to the prosecution's evidence, was claimed by defendant to be derived from God agreeable with His written word as recorded in Holy Scripture. That book is an

open record and all who will may solve for themselves the extent or degree of divine power that mortals may hope to attain. Each person is at liberty to interpret it for himself (Supreme Court of California 1931, 5–6).

As for the alleged homicides, further investigations failed to find any evidence and, although vilified in the media, Blackburn was not arrested or prosecuted again until her death in 1951. *People v. Blackburn* appears thus as an early decision where claims by apostate ex-members (i.e., those former members of a religious group who have become its militant opponents: see Introvigne 2022a, 2022b), hints that something that decades later will be called “brainwashing” was at work, and sensational claims by the media were treated with a healthy skepticism by the Supreme Court of California. Its Justices reiterated the principle that professing and teaching unpopular beliefs is not a crime.

As the Court of Appeal had already stated,

It matters not how absurd the faith of the defendant and her followers may seem to be, if in good faith she believed in the cult or creed upon which she was founding this new society, and in the truth of the said representations. Defendant had the same right to organize a society based upon that faith, that her followers had to join with her in creating the society and establishing the community, provided only that they did not conspire together for some purpose prohibited by law. And if for the purposes of such society they chose to invest their money, that was no crime against the state (District Court of Appeal of California, Second District, Division One 1931, 5).

Both in 1931 and in 1942, the media could have applied these lessons in religious tolerance to the Jehovah’s Witnesses—not because the two groups were similar (they weren’t) but because the principle of religious freedom is universal. Instead, they maliciously used *The Great Eleven* to imply that the Jehovah’s Witnesses too were a “cult,” and that the claims about the return of the Princes were not less absurd than Blackburn’s angelic revelations.

The media coverage of Beth Sarim demonstrates that how the prejudice against groups labeled as “cults” (see Introvigne 2022c) operates is both old and repetitious. Groups that have very little in common with each other—such as the small, secretive *Great Eleven*, which was hardly capable of publishing anything about its beliefs, and the very public two-million-member organization of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, which by the 1940s had published a whole library of texts expounding its interpretation of the Bible—are lumped together under the same derogatory label of “cults.” The sins, real or otherwise, of one group, preferably the most extreme and bizarre, are extended to all the others. One egregious

example is an article in the *Washington Herald*, which uses The Great Eleven as evidence that “Judge Rutherford’s plan [for Beth Sarim] is one of many evidences of strange cult worship in California” (*Washington Herald* 1930).

But were the beliefs of the Jehovah’s Witnesses about the Princes “absurdities” of the type the Supreme Court of California found in The Great Eleven? The question can only be answered by putting the matter in a broader context.

### *But What About the Princes?*

“Fiducia christianorum resurrectio mortuorum; illam credentes, sumus” (The resurrection of the dead is Christians’ confidence. By believing it we are what we claim to be: Tertullian 2016, 5). These words by early Christian apologist Tertullian (155–220) can hardly be clearer. He believed that to be Christian, one has to believe in the resurrection of the dead.

The quote from Tertullian is still included today in the normative statement of the Roman Catholic faith, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which acknowledges that “Belief in the resurrection of the dead has been an essential element of the Christian faith from its beginnings” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1992, no. 991). The same *Catechism* proclaims that all “those who have done good” will rise with their bodies (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1992, no. 998). Obviously, they will include the patriarchs, kings, and prophets of the Old Testament who also “have done good.”

However, the Roman Catholic Church today acknowledges that how and when this resurrection will happen is the subject matter of different theological theories and interpretations. It teaches that the resurrection of the flesh will surely happen, but its “‘how’ exceeds our imagination and understanding” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1992, no. 1000). Based on these warnings, many contemporary Catholic theologians prefer not to speculate on these matters, and the same happens in most liberal Protestant churches. Eschatology is rarely preached today in Roman Catholic and many mainline Protestant congregations. As opposite to this, most Evangelical and conservative Protestants maintain a vivid interest for matters such as the Millennium and the resurrection of the flesh, although they offer very different interpretations (Wessinger 2016).

Several observers of the Jehovah's Witnesses, including the undersigned, believe that a main reason of their success is precisely that they offer a millennial hope increasingly difficult to find in mainline Christian churches. The fact that eschatology is regarded as the most difficult and uncertain part of theology has led to its virtual disappearance from the daily preaching and public discourse of many Christian congregations. This does not mean, however, that ordinary Christians have lost interest in these crucial matters. Organizations that offer clear answers and hope such as the Jehovah's Witnesses are thus successful (Introvigne 2015).

They are, however, not without opponents. Liberal Christians claim that pretending to know the truth about our eschatological future is pretentious and arrogant. Conservatives are not against raising questions about eschatology but find the answers offered by the Jehovah's Witnesses at odds with their standard premillennialism, and thus heretical. The very series of booklets that give to fundamentalism its name, *The Fundamentals*, included a detailed rebuttal of the "vicious system" of the Watch Tower by Presbyterian theologian and former missionary to Italy William Gallogly Moorehead (1836–1914; Moorehead 1910, 123).

When the Beth Sarim discussion occurred, there were also political undertones, which would later reappear in different times and forms. A militant right saw the Jehovah's Witnesses as unpatriotic and perhaps Communist, while a certain left saw them as arch-conservatives and perhaps Fascist (Knox 2018). Today, there is a certain rhetoric about "apocalyptic cults," which resorts, as mentioned earlier, to examples of criminal or suicidal groups, then lumps them together with peaceful and law-abiding organizations (Wessinger 2000). And today of course this strategy of grouping indiscriminately different organizations and phenomena as if they belonged to the same category of "cults" compares Christian millennialism with QAnon and other conspiracy theories, radical supporters of Donald Trump, and anti-vaccination campaigns during the COVID-19 crisis (see Introvigne 2022b).

When all this unnecessary dust settles, we discover that the belief in the resurrection of the flesh, which includes the bodily resurrection of those who "did good" both before and after Jesus, was unanimous in the early Christian church, and is still official Roman Catholic doctrine (although rarely preached). Views of a

literal Millennium are opposed by liberal denominations, but widely shared, although differently interpreted, within the vast Evangelical world.

This is not to say that there was nothing peculiar in the beliefs of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the 1930s and 1940s. They believed then that those who had faithfully served God in ancient times would be resurrected *before* the end of this system of things and would serve as "princes throughout the land," as the New International Version translates *Psalms* 45:16. In the 1950s, "further study of the Scripture indicated that those earthly forefathers of Jesus Christ would be resurrected after Armageddon" (*Jehovah's Witnesses—Proclaimers of God's Kingdom* 1993, 76).

The matter had always been regarded as speculative, as demonstrated by this passage in *The Watch Tower* of January 15, 1925:

While it is true that the ancient worthies are to be children of the New Covenant, yet there could be no good reason to say that God could not awaken them out of death if he wished to do so before the New Covenant is made. The fact that they are awakened out of death does not put them on trial.

Our opinion is that the ancient worthies will not be resurrected until every member of the Church is gone. We have reached that conclusion by a process of analysis, however, not by some Scriptural statement. We should not arbitrarily say that God will not resurrect them or that he will resurrect them; for we do not know. That he could do it, of course must be admitted. That his awakening them out of death would not be inconsistent with any part of his plan, seems likewise well taken, but it does not seem probable that he will do so ("Questions and Answers" 1925, 23).

The belief that the Princes will be the first to be resurrected, before Armageddon, and serve as the Lord's representatives on earth developed gradually and was then abandoned or corrected. Beth Sarim was a living testimony to a specific phase of the theological development of the Jehovah's Witnesses, based on an interpretation the organization no longer maintains today.

In 1947, Nathan Knorr, as Rutherford's successor as president of the Watch Tower Society, had already announced, before the doctrinal interpretation was revised, that Beth Sarim would be

disposed of, either by outright sale or by rent, because it had fully served its purpose and was now only serving as a monument quite expensive to keep; our faith in the return of the men of old time whom the King Christ Jesus will make princes in ALL the earth (not merely in California) is based, not upon that house Beth-Sarim but upon God's Word of promise ("All Nations Expansion' Assembly" 1947, 382).

In 1948, Beth Sarim was sold to a San Diego physician, Franklyn Davis Hankins (1905–1995), who in turn sold it in 1953 to Gilbert Aubrey Davidson (1868–1957), a banker and former president of the local Chamber of Commerce, of the Panama-California Exposition (Gaebel 1915), and of the San Diego Museum, who was an important figure in the growth of the city of San Diego. Davidson's heirs sold the house in 1959 to another physician and retired U.S. Army Captain, Clarence M. Ching (1908–1994) (Flanigan 2001, 6).

From another point of view, however, the spirit of Beth Sarim faithfully represented what the Jehovah's Witnesses are all about. One detail is that through the unsuccessful battle to bury Rutherford there the Jehovah's Witnesses were able to build a coalition of citizens concerned with religious liberty and, as their 1943 yearbook proclaimed, "a real witness was given in this territory for a period of months" (*1943 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses* 1942, 34). Witnessing for religious liberty will continue to be part and parcel of the Jehovah's Witnesses' testimony up to the present day.

Perhaps more importantly, as Rutherford's book *Salvation* stated in 1939,

the purpose of acquiring that property [Beth Sarim] and building the house was that there might be some tangible proof that there are those on earth today who fully believe God and Christ Jesus and in his kingdom (Rutherford 1939, 311),

as well as in a literal Millennium and in the resurrection of the flesh. By the 1930s, many Christian denominations were already reluctant to preach about eschatology, as if it were something incompatible with modern science and easily derided as superstition. Beth Sarim's paradox was that it fiercely proclaimed by its very controversial existence that some were not shy in cultivating and preaching a millennial hope, which just as the faith in Jesus remained "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (*1 Corinthians* 1:23, New International Version).

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