

Off The Shelf episode 83

Part 2 of the Interview with Arthur Antunes, author of “O SEGREDO DO SÉTIMO ANJO: A DERROCADA DO BRANHAMISMO” (The Mystery of the Seven Seals: The Downfall of Branhamism)

Rod Bergen: So there's two laws. There's two groups of people. There are groups of people who are on the inside. And there are people who are on the outside. So if you're related to the pastor or you're the pastor's friend, this would never happen to you.

Arthur Antunes: Yes. That's how it works here. Both in my church and in my former church. And I know other churches in this movement, the Jo-wa-keem movement, that has the same kind of motivation using fear to control the people.

Rod Bergen: Double standards, hypocrisy, which is pretty common in the message, to my view. If you're close to the pastor and the pastor likes you, you can get away with a lot of things, as long as not too many people find out.

Arthur Antunes: Yeah. Like William Branham and his family used to have a double standard.

Rod Bergen: Yeah, exactly. You look at the pictures. William Branham could wear shorts, but nobody else could. His kids... the girls could cut their hair and have bangs and there are pictures around. In fact, in Canada here, Christmas trees were frowned upon.

Rod Bergen: Even though William Branham had a Christmas tree, it's just because he preached against Christmas trees, people took that as a standard, even though he didn't actually live up to that standard himself.

Arthur Antunes: Yeah. This issue about Christmas trees. We don't have it here in Brazil. I remember that I was kind of shocked when I saw a picture of William Branham without a t-shirt for the first time. Have you ever seen that picture?

Rod Bergen: Yeah. Yeah.

Arthur Antunes: So I was really shocked and I remember that my first day of researching about William Branham, I found that picture of him wearing shorts and I was so shocked and I tried to send this picture for some friends. And they said that it was okay because he was a prophet. They excused his behaviour even though it makes no sense.

Rod Bergen: Double standards.

Arthur Antunes: Yeah. That's how people treat problems and difficult issues in the message.

Rod Bergen: So were there any people who started questioning the message prior to you starting to ask questions? We'll get into your journey, but was there any people in the church who started questioning the message. If somebody stood me up in front and said, oh, you did the sin and stood me up in front of the church, that would be the last time I ever went to the church, but that's just who I was. Somebody tried that on me, I would be gone.

Arthur Antunes: Okay. I had never heard anything bad about the message before and the message and my church was very big. So I really thought...

Rod Bergen: Sorry to interrupt... by big, how many people were in the church?

Arthur Antunes: Okay. My pastor, my former pastor had churches in three or four cities. If you counted everybody from these churches, put together, we were about 300 people, I think.

Rod Bergen: Okay. About 300 people. And that would include all the churches together.

Arthur Antunes: Yeah. My church, in my city alone, was about 120 or 130 people in total.

Rod Bergen: Okay. Interesting.

Arthur Antunes: This is big in Brazil. Every city here in Brazil has a message church. It's very different from Canada. When I visited Canada, I was shocked because there were not very many message churches in Canada. Very few cities with message churches. But here in Brazil, every city has a church.

Rod Bergen: So if you were going to guess as to how many people would be in the message in Brazil, what would your guess be?

Rod Bergen: Would it be 10,000?

Arthur Antunes: Let me think. There is a meeting here in Brazil. We call it the national meeting. Okay. And it happens three times a year in Goiania. This church in Goiania has these national meetings, and we have about 6,000 to 7,000 people in the meetings. So my guess would be that we have more than 20,000 people in the message in Brazil.

Rod Bergen: More than 20,000 people... I would expect that in all of north America, we wouldn't have... so Canada and the US, we wouldn't have more than 50,000 people. I would be surprised if it was more than 50,000 people.

Arthur Antunes: Yeah. I agree with you. Because when I was in Canada, I was surprised with how many people were in each church. There were fewer churches, not one in every city as in Brazil. But I was surprised at the size of the individual churches. I've been to Cloverdale Bible Way, and it's a very big church, but it is the only church in the area.

Rod Bergen: Yeah. There are a few other smaller churches. There's a Lee Vale church in probably about two towns away. But , it would be less than a hundred people, I would think. And there are some other small churches, but, throughout British Columbia there would be, man, I don't know, .

Rod Bergen: And there's the church that left Bible way, Living Word Assembly, that would have now maybe about 350 people in it. I don't know how many people are in Bible way now. It went way, way down. And now it might be...

Arthur Antunes: I believe 300 because I've been there after the split. And I guess it would be about 300 people now.

Arthur Antunes: Yeah.

Rod Bergen: So it's quite interesting, but I don't think that it, it's not a large movement in Canada. It's not a large movement in the U S. There's lots of really small churches, a few larger ones, but not a lot of large churches. It's larger in Africa, but as you've said Kacou Phillipe, and that is taking lots of people from the message.

Rod Bergen: So it's becoming very disjointed.

Arthur Antunes: Yes. I remember when I was in Jeffersonville, I had a very strange experience. I was in a supermarket and I was talking to a woman in there. And she knew that I was not from the U S because of my accent. And she asked me where I was from. So I said that I was from Brazil and, she said to me, she asked me why I was in Jeffersonville.

Arthur Antunes: And I answered, because of Branham Tabernacle. and she had no idea of the message or the importance of the Jeffersonville church in terms of global impact of the message. I suppose because it is a very small church from a U S perspective. Branham Tabernacle is a small church. But she had no idea that people from outside Jeffersonville knew about this church in her city.

Rod Bergen: And this is the thing. People go, oh, Jeffersonville. First time I went to Jeffersonville, this church is tiny. It could only seat a couple of hundred people.

Arthur Antunes: Yeah, probably a maximum of 200 people, right?

Rod Bergen: It was never large. And people say, oh, people didn't stand up to William Branham. There was nobody there. And if you didn't agree with them, you left because really everybody there was focused on William Branham was the next best thing to God. And if you disagreed with it, you got shut down. And again, fear was rampant. And so people who disagreed just left, they didn't make a fuss. They just left. So going back to the question, were there any people who started questioning the message prior to you starting to ask questions?

Arthur Antunes: Okay. I had never heard anything bad about the message before. When I started to do my own research, I knew there were some people that had questioned things about the message and about William Branham before me, but no one was able to stand for the truth. Because they knew that they were going to suffer consequences with their family, and with friends, they just left. They stopped talking about the message. No one ever stepped forward to say the things they had uncovered about the message. What they thought about the message. Or to prove that the message was a lie.

Arthur Antunes: I believe you talked to another Brazilian that is making a difference and doing a very great job, Will. You talked to him a couple of months ago?

Rod Bergen: I did an interview with them. We haven't published anything and we're going to do an interview here. But I did an interview in Portuguese. They translated it.

Rod Bergen: Yeah. They're really doing a good job.

Arthur Antunes: Yes. So he was the first Brazilian that I knew was saying bad things about the message, but so I think he was the first one that I was aware of.

Rod Bergen: And to be clear, we're not saying bad things necessarily. We're saying that it's not the truth and we have done research to prove that it's not the truth.

Arthur Antunes: Yes Exactly.

Rod Bergen: And I asked this of everybody who comes on to be interviewed, who has come out of the message. Many people who are still in the message, they look at those who leave and say, "you never really believed." How would you respond to something like that?

Arthur Antunes: Okay. As I said, everyone in my family was born into the message.

Arthur Antunes: So the message was everything I knew. Everything I knew. It would be like you questioning a fish in an aquarium to ask if it believes in water. Of course, it believes because it's the only thing that it has ever known. But it does not know about the sea, about the ocean. This is the same thing with me. The message was everything I knew. So for me, it was clear that the message was true because, for example, my father and my mother were in the message, and I always believed everything, 100%, what they said to me.

Arthur Antunes: I had never thought about questioning the stories that they told me about brother Branham, because they are my parents. Why would I question them? So, yes, I really believed the message.

Rod Bergen: So what was it, Arthur, that led you to start questioning the message?

Arthur Antunes: Okay. I think that the first time that I questioned the message, I was, I think I was 18 or 17, and a friend of mine, we were talking about criminal cases, serial killers and stuff like that.

Arthur Antunes: And I was talking to him about Jim Jones and he said to me, "Did you know that Jim Jones was a friend of William Branham?" And I had no idea of it. No idea. I was scared for the first time about the message and when I got home, I took my laptop and I started researching Jim Jones and William Branham about it. And I found a William Branham research website from John Collins.

Arthur Antunes: Yeah. And I remember that I read this article about William Branham, and Jim Jones. And I was so scared that I closed my laptop and I stopped my research because I had this fear of questioning the Holy Spirit.

Rod Bergen: Of course, and this is what people tell you. If you question the message you are in danger of blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

Rod Bergen: And this fear that comes on people is so powerful that they refuse to question. And this happens to ministers. These ministers saying, oh there's no issues, these issues you're raising, what are the answers to them? They have never looked. They know about them, but they won't look at them.

Rod Bergen: The one honest minister I know said he started looking at the issues and they made his head hurt. So he stopped. But other than that, they don't look at these issues.

Arthur Antunes: In 2013 or 2014, Voice of God Recordings in Brazil sent a letter to pastor Jo-wa-keem, the leader of the movement, and explained to him about John Collins, the work of John Collins.

Arthur Antunes: And they had a meeting with, I think, with 70% of the ministers in Brazil in the message. And pastor Jo-wa-keem told them don't go to this website, to never listen to anything related to John Collins again, because he was crazy, an evil spirit was evident in his life and things like that.

Arthur Antunes: So the pastors in Brazil, they know that something was going on with John Collins and these websites online, but they don't know what's going on because they are too scared to question.

Rod Bergen: So what happened then? You read this thing about Jim Jones. It filled you full of fear. You close your laptop, you didn't look at it, but then what happened?

Arthur Antunes: I didn't do any more research for, I think, two years after this Jim Jones thing. And then I traveled to Jeffersonville and I was walking in Jeffersonville and I saw the bridge, the municipal bridge.

Arthur Antunes: And I took my cell phone and I Googled a very simple statement. "16 men dying on the municipal bridge in Jeffersonville". And... Google had no articles about it. And I was very scared because I had never thought that it could be a lie because it is so easy to check this information

Rod Bergen: It is now. It used to be very hard, but it's very easy now.

Arthur Antunes: Yes. I believe that someone researched this before me, and I knew that it was a lie, but I didn't tell anyone about what I found out... that nothing happened... that 16 men didn't die on the bridge. And I came back to Brazil, and it took me one more year to realize that I had too much information, that the message was be a lie, and I had to do something about it.

Arthur Antunes: And it was in, I think, February of this year, 2021, that I opened Believe The Sign for the first time, and started digging out for more information.

Rod Bergen: So it was an accumulation of issues. Jim Jones, the municipal bridge... that started a process whereby you finally said I need to have some answers.

Arthur Antunes: Yes. And in this period of between Jim Jones and going to Jeffersonville, I discovered problems with the 1977 prediction of the end of the world. And I tried talking to some of the message ministers, to try to get some answers, but they always answered that it was a prediction, not a prophecy. But I had problems with excusing William Branham for making such a bad prediction.

Rod Bergen: So was there one issue that caused you to finally come to the realization that you should reject the message and that William Branham wasn't who he said he was?

Arthur Antunes: : I think it was when I discovered the problems with the cloud, the Arizona cloud, that it was a lie. I remember when I read for the first time, your article in Believe The Sign, and I was very scared, because this was something I had believed to be true for my whole life.

Arthur Antunes: I have some relatives that have the picture of the cloud in their houses, like the picture of William Branham, a picture of the cloud inside their houses. And so I was very sad when I discovered that the cloud was made by a rocket and William Branham was far away from where it happened. And only went hunting seven days after it happened.

Arthur Antunes: So I think that the cloud was the major issue that made me feel that my heart was out of the message. As I said before, my whole family is in the message, so I am not out, like officially, because they can't know yet that I have this kind of information.

Rod Bergen: So what led you to write your book?

Arthur Antunes: Okay. So it was because of my family and my friends, because I know that they are good people and they are real Christians. Although I know that many people in the message are not Christians, because they put William Branham in the same place as Jesus Christ. So I had to write this book and try to reach as many people as I could, to show them that we were in a false teaching, a false doctrine.

Arthur Antunes: So this was the major goal to write the book, it was to reach my family and my friends, and as many people as I can. To make them realize that William Branham was not the seventh angel and not the second coming of Elijah.

Rod Bergen: And you're doing it because you love these people.

Arthur Antunes: Yes. It's because of my love for them.

Rod Bergen: So what is happening currently in the message in Brazil? How are they reacting to your book? Is it too early yet? It's just been published.

Arthur Antunes: Yeah, I think it was published in a very problematic period in Brazil in the message, because as I said to you, the biggest pastor in Brazil has just died and there are a lot of allegations of sexual scandals that are happening in the message in Brazil.

Arthur Antunes: So with respect to the new book, I think 2000 people have read it at the end of July. So it's not a very big movement, but I do have some friends that are sending me the book and asking if I have read it yet.

Rod Bergen: So it's started to gather word of mouth . So the sexual scandals, I understand that Joaquim, who died, now it's come out that it's alleged that he was involved in some sexual scandals, some raping of women?

Arthur Antunes: Yeah

Rod Bergen: Can you elaborate on that?

Arthur Antunes: So the first reports of sexual abuse, that we know of, happened, I think, two decades ago, in the early 2000's. And this pastor used his office in the church to have sexual relations, with sisters in his church. But we don't know yet if he actually raped them, or was just abusing his power to coerce them into having sex with them.

Arthur Antunes: Yet we know that he was abusing his power, because some, I think three or four women, went to the police and every one of these four women say, that when they were in his office, Jo-wa-keem used to say to them, that he had to have sexual relations with them, to be the best pastor, because sexual relations gave him power to preach better. So he was abusing his power as a pastor.

Rod Bergen: And these people knew that if they did something he didn't like, he'd make them stand up in front of the whole church

Arthur Antunes: yes, exactly. Exactly. And there is a woman that worked with the church as, not a song leader, but she worked as part of the music in the church and the pastor said to her that she was going to be fired if she did not have sexual relations with him.

Rod Bergen: Oh yeah. So that's clearly an abuse of power.

Arthur Antunes: It's not rape but it's clearly an abuse of power. It's a criminal case here in Brazil.

Rod Bergen: Yeah. And that is the definition of injustice, it's when people who are in power, abuse that power, to manipulate and get things that they want from people who don't have power.

Rod Bergen: Yeah. It's interesting. The story of Joaquim Gonsalves is similar to what started my questioning the message. The pastor of our church, Ed Byskal, had covered up the sexual abuse of a minor. I found out about it, as did

some of the others in the church, in the leadership. He didn't tell the parents of the young man who was abused.

Rod Bergen: He didn't tell the spouse of the abuser that they were being cheated on. And the surprising thing, and what really started me questioning the message, was the complete failure of any message ministers to react to this terrible crime. Many well-respected message ministers ignored scripture.

Rod Bergen: They refused even consider the evidence and they came out in support of the pastor. You're having the same thing in Brazil.

Arthur Antunes: Yeah. A lot of pastors, I would say that 90 to 95 percent of the pastors related to Jo-wa-keem, stayed where they were, and said that the women were lying. And there is a young girl, I think she's 17 or 16, that was abused this year in January.

Arthur Antunes: And a man that worked in the church, I think one week before the sexual abuse scandal came out. He called this girl. And he knew that her family was a poor family. And he tried to pay money to them to keep quiet.

Rod Bergen: Wow. The other thing too, is that the message ministers that didn't come out in support of Ed Byskal... there were a number of them that that knew that this was happening.

Rod Bergen: They just put their heads down and ignored it. And then eventually 11 of the 12 deacons in a church, the entire trustee board, three associate ministers they asked for the pastor's resignation. It was going to turn into a big fight. So everybody just left. The majority of the church congregation left as well.

Rod Bergen: But message ministers like Tim Pruitt, Ron Spencer, Jason Watkins, they just ignored the evidence and they publicly opposed the board of the church who took a stand against Ed Byskal's sin. And as a result of this support, a significant minority of the congregation stayed. These are people who refuse to believe that their pastor could have committed such a sin.

Rod Bergen: And they were told that we had no evidence and that we were just spreading lies. So they stuck their fingers in their ears and wouldn't listen. And the failure of ministers like Donnie Reagan, Ron Peterson, Barry Coffey, they knew about it. They didn't say anything about it. It's completely bizarre.

Rod Bergen: They took William Branham's word, that individual churches were completely sovereign, to mean that shouldn't say anything, even though this is not in scripture anywhere. So again, this is an example of William Branham's word being exalted. And in fact, I know that Donny Reagan has been on the platform with Ed Byskal.

Rod Bergen: How can I respect someone who ignores sin in their own ranks? They attack those who left the message. This is what William Branham said in a sermon in 1965, it's called, Trying to do God a service without it being His Will,. William Branham attacks the 50 year old message of the Pentecostal church.

Rod Bergen: And he said, they're trying to eat old manna that fell back yonder 50 years ago, the Pentecostal church, why I always said, wiggle tails in it, maggots, it'll kill you if you eat it. And the message is now filled with Pharisees, ministers who scream against denominations, scream against people like me who left the message, but the ignore the sin that exists in their own ranks.

Rod Bergen: And it's all because they placed the word of William Branham above that of the Bible.

Arthur Antunes: And I have to say that Billy Paul knew about these sexual cases in Brazil since 1998. Because now we know that Jo-wa-keem was living with two women at the same time, between 1984 and 1998. And one of the women told Billy Paul about it.

Rod Bergen: So they were his mistresses?

Arthur Antunes: No, he was married but he didn't live with his wife. He lived with another woman.

Arthur Antunes: Oh, wow.

Arthur Antunes: Yeah. And this woman, after 14 years of living with the pastor, and not being his wife, she got pregnant and she was sent to a place to have an abortion. So she was forced to have an abortion by the pastor.

Arthur Antunes: And after the abortion, she was so sad that she wrote a letter, and sent it to a lot of ministers in Brazil. And she also sent the letter to Billy Paul. And this year, I saw for the first time, the reply of Billy Paul to her letter. And so he knew about the issue, that a message pastor was living with a woman who was not his wife, and he didn't do anything about it.

Rod Bergen: Oh, wow. That's interesting. You wouldn't happen to have a copy of the letter.

Arthur Antunes: : The letter from Billy Paul? I think I can get it. I can get.

Rod Bergen: I would love to see it.

Arthur Antunes: Yeah, we don't have the copy of the letter written by the woman because those pastors that received the letter, I think that they just threw it away.

Arthur Antunes: So we don't have a copy of her letter, but we have a copy of the response to her from Billy Paul.

Arthur Antunes: I can get it and I email it to you.

Rod Bergen: Great. It sounds like the message is in some difficulty in Brazil,

Arthur Antunes: it's going through some trouble here

Rod Bergen: and your book has coming out just at the right time. We've got it listed on our website and we will do whatever we can to promote it amongst the people in Brazil.

Arthur Antunes: The problem here in Brazil is that people don't know English. Just, I think, 2% of our population can speak proper English and I think three or four percent can read in English. So that's why people don't go to your website, Believe The Sign or William Branham research. Because even though we have the tools to translate them, the tools are not very good to translate to Portuguese.

Rod Bergen: So what's your view of those who are still in the message? It sounds like to me that you see them as having been deceived, and are still being deceived, by people who are abusing power for the most part. Would that apply to the most part for ministers in the message.

Arthur Antunes: Yes, it, it applies because as I said, they would regularly take people in front of all the congregation, to expose their sin, to make everyone know about their sin.

Arthur Antunes: But when the major pastor in the message in Brazil did something much worse than anything anyone in the congregation ever did, the

pastors didn't do anything. They are covering up the sin of the pastor to deceive people. This is my point of view in this situation.

Rod Bergen: So what's the financial situation of ministers in the message? Are they quite well to do?

Arthur Antunes: Yes, they are very wealthy compared to the regular population here. So I would say that, for the most part, ministers in the message in Brazil are rich people compared to the regular population.

Rod Bergen: Brazil is not a wealthy country. The majority of people live in standards significantly below what we would look at in the middle class here in Canada or the U S.

Arthur Antunes: Someone who was considered quite rich in Brazil would be considered a regular person in the U S or Canada.

Rod Bergen: Yeah. And I know crime is rampant in Brazil. There's a lot of violence. There's a lot of kidnapping that goes on. It's not to the same standards that we would have in Canada or the U S as far as the level of violence in the country.

Arthur Antunes: Yes. And I know some pastors here in Brazil that, in this period of time that we are living, in the pandemic... A lot of people from their churches, they have lost their jobs. So the pastors, instead of helping the church with money, like helping those members with heart conditions. They are just spending money... buying new cars, and buying houses, and not helping the members of the church.

Rod Bergen: So unlike Paul the apostle who said we're supposed to help the poor. Paul said, yes, that's something I've always wanted to do is to help the poor. This is not something in the ministers of the message. They're not interested in helping the poor.

Arthur Antunes: Yeah. They are not interested in helping the poor in the church.

Arthur Antunes: And I had never heard, I'm serious, I have been in the message for my whole life... decades. And I had never heard any pastor helping the poor outside of the message. They don't care. They just don't care for the poor. They just care for the members in the church, but only the members that give money to them.

Arthur Antunes: So they have an obligation to those who have given money to them. They have to help the people from the church, but they just do it because it's an obligation.

Rod Bergen: Yeah. And they don't do it to the people who are really hurting. Only the people who've been good to them. Exactly. So Arthur, what's your advice to anybody who's still in the message?

Arthur Antunes: So my advice to those still in the message is always to look for the truth in the scriptures. I don't say to people, that you have to read my book, and believe a hundred percent of what I say. I just hope that they try to understand what's wrong in the message, and compare the message with the scriptures, because the Bible has to be our only book.

Arthur Antunes: We should not have anything above the Bible. The Bible should be our absolute, it has to be. And I know that a lot of ministers in the message say that the Bible is the absolute, but it is not. The message... The absolute is the voice of William Branham. And this is not the way that we should live a Christian life. This is not the Gospel.

Rod Bergen: Arthur, I want to thank you for being with us on the podcast today. Really appreciate your coming on with us and sharing your story. We will look forward to seeing your book and we'll do whatever we can to help your book reach the people, the Portuguese-speaking message people around the world.

Rod Bergen: And look forward to the Holy Spirit leading and guiding people. As we say, we don't want people to believe us. We don't want people to trust us. We're just saying, look at the evidence. As Luke said to his friend, Theopolis, here's the evidence, look at it. Jesus presented evidence, John, the Baptist told his disciples go and talk to Jesus and ask him if he's the guy that is to come. Because John had some doubts. Jesus, didn't say, oh, don't doubt me. That's terrible. You just, blasphemed the Holy Spirit. He said, oh, you want to see the evidence? I will show you the evidence. Evidence is good. We are called to have a reasonable faith, not a blind faith. People who follow Jehovah's witness doctrine, people who are Mormons have the same issues and need to examine the evidence and people in the message needs to do the same thing.

Arthur Antunes: Yes. And the last thing that I would like to say is, I am sorry for my English. I know that it's not perfect. So sometimes I have to stop to think a little bit before talking. So I'm sorry.

Arthur Antunes: You did a good job.

Arthur Antunes: Thank you.

Rod Bergen: And we really appreciate having you on and we will look forward to publishing this and look forward to a conversation again in the future.

Rod Bergen: Thanks for being on off The Shelf.

Arthur Antunes: Thank you for having me here. And again, it was a pleasure to talk to you personally. God bless you, and I hope to talk to you some more in the future.