

Hiram Edson: The Man and the Myth

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Many Adventists have certain preconceptions concerning Hiram Edson: That he was a simple farmer; that he had a vision in a cornfield; that he wrote articles about the heavenly sanctuary; and that he died a *highly revered* pioneer. The *reality* is more *complex*. By *not* evaluating his life in the larger social, intellectual, and religious context of disruption and change that characterized Antebellum America, we have failed to separate the *man* from the *myth*.

Except for brief preaching forays into Pennsylvania and Canada in the 1850s, Edson spent his *entire life* (1806-1882) in upstate New York, the heart of the Burned-over District.¹ His Port Gibson farm was located only a few miles east of Rochester, a hub of numerous social movements such as women's suffrage, utopian societies, abolitionism, the Underground Railroad, dress reform, pacifism, and temperance.² The intellectual currents of Transcendentalism, evolutionism, Mesmerism, nativism, and Anti-Catholicism sank *deep roots* in his region.³ Radical religious groups, including Millerites, Mormons, Spiritualists, Shakers, Quakers, and three Amana societies existed within a few miles of his house.⁴ In this paper, I will briefly discuss how Edson's experience mirrored this larger milieu in which he lived.

From 1839 to 1843, Edson was a steward in the Port Gibson Methodist Episcopal Church, responsible for the judicious use of the funds and literature donated by the members. But after attending a three-week series of meetings led by the Millerite preacher Thomas Barry at

Rochester in 1843, Hiram and Esther (his second wife) became Adventists. As zealous soul-winners, they held spirited revival meetings in their home at which many attendees experienced conversion.⁵

Beginning in 1843-44 this charismatic sheep farmer began having celestial encounters similar to those that Joseph Smith, who lived in Palmyra four miles away, had experienced a few years earlier with the angel Moroni (who brought the golden plates from which Smith wrote the *Book of Mormon* in 1830).⁶ Edson called his encounters “presentments”: supernatural sound-and-light shows that presented to his mind vivid images of events he anticipated would *soon* come to pass.⁷ Here are three examples.

One day as Edson, alone in his barn, knelt to pray, “a personage,” whom he believed to be Jesus, stood above him. Edson tried to rise, but fell to his knees once again. While prostrate, he witnessed a scene flash before his eyes. He saw a minister delivering a bland discourse, then calling for those who wanted special prayer to stand; the entire congregation leaped to their feet. Shortly thereafter, while his family attended meetings at their church, he saw this presentment fulfilled when, after the preacher’s boring sermon and call for special prayer, a three-week revival followed and members began holding prayer and song services in their homes.⁸

On another occasion, similar to Joseph Smith’s encounter with the angel Moroni, Edson saw “a shadowy form in human shape.” He then heard what he took to be an angel’s voice telling him to go talk with his neighbor about his eternal salvation, which he did.⁹

Another time while relaxing by his fireplace, Edson heard an audible voice telling him to go and heal a deathly ill friend. When he *refused*, the floor suddenly seemed to drop from under him and he saw himself falling toward hell. Crying out for God to save him, he heard the voice once again say, “*Go* heal thy sick neighbor.” Making his way to the man’s home that night,

Edson entered and found his way by the light of a candle. Stumbling up the stairway to the sick man's bedroom, he placed his hands upon the man's head and cried, "*Brother*, the Lord Jesus make you *whole*." Immediately the man opened his eyes, threw back the covers, and jumped out of bed, leaping around the room and praising God. As his family rushed upstairs, Edson prayed for them, and some of them experienced conversion.

The next day as this healed man was chopping wood, his physician rode by and expressed amazement at the man's recovery. "I expected to find you *dead!*" The man replied, "I am a *well* man. The *Lord* has healed me." A great revival occurred in the church because of this faith healing. Eighty were converted at one meeting and between 300-400 individuals experienced conversion within a few years' time.¹⁰

As a result of this experience, Edson declared: "I also learned an additional lesson, namely, that God was ready and willing to hear and answer prayer for the sick, and to stretch forth his hand to heal and raise them up, and restore them to health. Since that time, I have shared in, and witnessed *many* incidents of like character."¹¹ In fact, between 1844 and 1852, *numerous* cases of faith healings occurred in Rochester and vicinity.¹²

Like Margaret and Kate Fox of nearby Hydesville, who in 1848 claimed to communicate with a being they called "Splitfoot" by means of a rapped alphabetical code,¹³ Edson witnessed incidents of ecstatic communication among Sabbatarian Adventists. During the night of November 17-18, 1849, Edson dreamed of entering a room in which six discouraged individuals were praying. One of them said to him, "*Oh!* Brother Edson, I am in the *dark!*" Edson believed this dream was fulfilled eight days later when he attended a prayer meeting in the Harris home in Centerport with the Whites, the Beldens, and Richard Ralph. He heard Ralph express doubts regarding whether they should try to find Samuel Rhodes, a former Millerite recluse. While all

knelt in prayer, Ralph asked God to pour out His Spirit upon them. *Immediately*, he began speaking in an unknown language. He interpreted this as directions from God for Edson and himself to go to the Adirondacks, find Rhodes, and return him to active ministry. When they reached Rhodes, he told them that three nights earlier, he had dreamed that two men were seeking him. Then Ralph once again spoke in an unknown tongue after which he assured Rhodes that God extended hope, mercy, and forgiveness to him and that he should return with them. Rhodes did so, and within weeks, his preaching led to the conversion of forty souls.¹⁴

I would suggest that in order to understand Edson's cornfield experience, it is important to consider this *broader background* of glossolalia, faith healings, visions, dreams, presentments, and encounters with supernatural beings among Mormons, Spiritualists, Millerites and others who lived in Edson's immediate vicinity. One might say that in upstate New York between 1830 and 1844, the hills were *alive* with the *sounds* of the *supernatural*!

Early on Wednesday morning, October 23, 1844, following breakfast in the Edson kitchen and prayers for guidance in the granary, Edson and his houseguest, Owen Russell Loomis Crosier (1820-1912) took a shortcut across a cornfield on their way to "encourage the brethren." In Edson's words, here's what happened:

We started, and while passing through a large field I was stopped midway of the field. Heaven seemed open to my view, and I saw *distinctly*, and *clearly*, That instead of our High Priest coming *out* of the Most Holy of the heavenly sanctuary to come to this earth on the tenth day of the seventh month, at the end of the 2300 days, that he, for the *first time entered* on that day the second apartment of that sanctuary; and that he had a work to perform in the Most Holy *before* coming to this earth...¹⁵

What exactly Edson "saw *distinctly* and *clearly*" has divided church historians, scholars, skeptics, and popular writers for nearly two centuries. As discussed in chapter 4 ("Disappointed Millerite") of my book *Hiram Edson, the Man and the Myth* (currently at Oak & Acorn press), *four* distinct views exist among the 53 writers I have examined: Edson had a *vision* (25 authors);

he felt a *flash of light* (5 authors); he received an *impression or insight* (21 authors); or he experienced *no* supernatural illumination at all (2 writers). But if Edson's previous supernatural experiences shed any light on what happened that morning, then his words "I saw distinctly and clearly" suggest that he had another *presentment*, or what the French call a *son et lumière* (sound and light) show that was indeed *very vivid*.

So *how* did the citizens of Ontario and Wayne counties react when word got out that Edson was experiencing presentments and that some Adventists had been instantly healed by prayer while others were speaking in unknown tongues? As might be expected, reactions were mixed: *Most* people simply ignored these phenomena, *several* saw them as divinely inspired, while a handful reacted as *violently* toward Adventist charismatics as others had in attacking Quakers and Shakers in New York and Mormons in the Midwest.¹⁶

During one of Hiram and Esther's cottage meetings in 1844, a gang of forty men, intent on tarring and feathering every Millerite leader they could catch, *stormed* into the house. Grabbing one Adventist man, they dragged him toward the door. When another believer tried to intervene, a member of the mob snatched a griddle iron from the wood stove and hit him *hard* above the eye, cutting a bloody gash in his forehead and knocking him nearly unconscious to the ground. Edson stepped between the two men and shouted, "I won't give up my faith [even] if you cut me into inch pieces and feed my flesh to the foxes of the desert and the fowels [*sic*] of the air." Surprisingly, Hiram's biblical allusions to Isaiah 13:21 and 1 Samuel 17:44 calmed the angry mob, and they left.¹⁷

Subsequently, the Edsons received *death threats* from hostile neighbors who had probably read Joseph Marsh's slanderous charges against Hiram Edson. In the February 24, 1847 issue of the Advent Christian newspaper, *The Voice of Truth and Glad Tidings*, editor

Marsh in nearby Rochester had accused Hiram of taking his fifteen-year-old son George out into the woods, removing his coat, tying his hands, and whipping him with six beech whips “*so unmercifully* that by the cries of murder of the son, the neighbors were called to his relief.” Marsh stated that for this offence, Edson had been arrested by the sheriff, tried before a jury, found guilty, and fined fifteen dollars for his “barbarity.”¹⁸ Yet *no evidence* has been found in the Manchester docket books or justice books of the 1840s to support Marsh’s allegations that Edson was arrested and fined for beating George (if he indeed did so).¹⁹

One suspects, however, that it was *not* Edson’s alleged beating of his son that upset Marsh. Instead, he charged Hiram with “receiving a *revelation from God*” to punish his son. Furthermore, Marsh accused him of teaching “the *wild delusions* of the doctrine of the shut door and its kindred absurdities.” In short, Marsh was using his newspaper to mock Edson’s claim to receiving divinely inspired presentments, including his October 23, 1844 experience in the cornfield. This may reflect widespread knowledge, and no doubt, *strong disapproval*, of Edson’s claim to receive celestial revelations.²⁰

Understanding the hostile atmosphere that Hiram and Esther faced in Port Gibson places in a broader context a *strongly* worded testimony that Ellen White sent them in 1850:

I saw that Brother and Sister Edson would have to move soon from the place where they now live, for there was *enmity* enough in the hearts of the wicked there to take their lives, for they *hated* them for the truths they believed and have advocated, for it *condemned* them, and a number of times the wicked had it in their hearts to take the lives of Brother and Sister Edson; but God had defeated the wicked and guarded their lives.²¹

Although White occasionally employed hyperbolic prose to emphasize the points she was making, given the evidence at hand, it appears that the wisest course for the Edsons was to leave Port Gibson. Heeding her advice, they sold their farm and moved farther east, first to Oswego in 1850, and then to Port Byron in 1852.

Between 1849 and 1867, Hiram Edson wrote two pamphlets, twenty articles, and sent twenty letters and reports to the *Present Truth* and the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*.²² Yet *not a single one* of these refers to his October 23 cornfield experience. More surprisingly still, *not a single one* of his pamphlets or articles focuses on the day of atonement, the investigative judgment, or Christ's on-going ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. Instead, as discussed in chapter 8 ("Speculative Theologian") of my forthcoming book, Edson was a *numerologist* and a *ymbologist* par excellence who enjoyed toying with type/antitype analogies. His lengthy articles mirror the concerns of previous Millerite writers such as William Miller, Charles Fitch, Josiah Litch, Joseph Marsh, and Joseph Bates.²³ They focus on biblical arithmetic (the 70 weeks, 1260-day, 1290-day, 1335-day, 2300-day, and 2520-day prophecies²⁴); tenuous predictions (the end of the world in August 1845 and on May 19, 1850²⁵; the Jews' return to Palestine in 1850²⁶); and apocalyptic type/antitype symbols (such as the King of the North—Russia, the King of the South—Egypt,²⁷ Ahab and Jezebel—Roman Catholicism, Balaam—popes in Rome²⁸) to mention only a handful.

In reality, Edson's turgid, speculative prose disqualified him in the eyes of *Review* editors James White and Uriah Smith to clearly explain the sect's views on the heavenly sanctuary. Instead, during the 1850s that task was entrusted to *six* other men: O. R. L. Crosier (six articles); James White (six articles); J. N. Andrews (nine articles); Uriah Smith (20 articles); Charles Sperry (one article); and Elon Everts (two articles).²⁹ Between 1861 and 1876, at least 96 *more* articles appeared in the *Review* focusing on the heavenly sanctuary: 56 by Uriah Smith and 40 by Joseph Waggoner—and *not a single one* by Hiram Edson.³⁰

Finally, despite his dramatic cornfield experience in 1844; his role in organizing Sabbath Conferences and local congregations;³¹ his many contributions to the *Review* in the 1850s and

1860s; his receiving ordination and ministerial credentials in 1870;³² and his generous financial contributions to the Advent movement³³ during the 1870s and early 1880s, Hiram Edson closed his career under a *dark cloud of doubt and distrust*. His insistence that the Review book committee publish his 200-page manuscript on England in Bible prophecy in 1874; his peddling peculiar prophetic views around the New York-Pennsylvania Conference; and his absence from Sabbath services near the close of his life³⁴ led Dudley M. Canright to call him a “confirmed *crank*, and a *trial* to the church.”³⁵

When he died on January 8, 1882, the *Review* gave him an obituary of *only 22 lines*.³⁶ Joseph Bates’ obituary in 1872 had filled 34 lines;³⁷ even the apostate Alonzo T. Jones had received 31 lines in 1923.³⁸ One could argue, therefore, that the *brevity* of Edson’s obituary indicates that at the time of his death, he was *not* on the best of terms with his brethren.

Not until the 1940s-1960s would his reputation be restored by Arthur W. Spalding, who in his books *Footsteps of the Pioneers* (1947), *Captains of the Host* (1949), and *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists* (1961-62), placed Edson on a *par* with James and Ellen White, Joseph Bates, J. N. Andrews and other early pioneers as a *key player* in discovering Present Truth, organizing Sabbath Conferences, bringing unity, and financially supporting the fledgling Sabbatarian Adventist movement.³⁹ Likewise, from 1992 to the present, Adventist Heritage Ministries, by acquiring the former Edson property and erecting upon it Luther Edson’s barn, a visitor center, and a Bible Prophecy Trail and Garden where regular “Sanctuary Festivals” are held, has burnished Edson’s reputation further.⁴⁰ But if he were alive today, Hiram Edson would be utterly *astonished* by the positive transformation of his reputation among twenty-first century Adventists.

¹ Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (NY: Cornell University Press, 1950).

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- ² See Jerome L. Clark, *1844*, 3 vols. (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1968), 2:79, 141-196, 254, 273-74; 3:67-69, 78, 88-89.
- ³ See Clark, *1844*, 1:171-173, 203-278, 352-358, 373-380.
- ⁴ See Clark, *1844*, 1:15-83, 90-94, 103-104, 345-52, 361; 2:162-169.
- ⁵ LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, 4 vols. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1982 [1954]), 4:889-890.
- ⁶ Clark, *1844*, 1:90-94, 103-104.
- ⁷ Viah Cross, "Hiram Edson's Experience," 1, affidavit as related to P. Z. Kinne (no original date), typed manuscript, November 11, 2002, CAR, JWJ, AU. F. W. Bartle also stated that Edson called these experiences "presentments" in a letter to W. A. Spicer, September 4, 1935, CAR, JWJ, AU.
- ⁸ Cross, "Hiram Edson's Experience," 1.
- ⁹ Hiram Edson, handwritten autobiographical manuscript (undated), VT000272, CAR, JWJ, AU.
- ¹⁰ Cross, "Hiram Edson's Experience," 2-3; C. Mervyn Maxwell, *Tell It to the World: The Story of Seventh-day Adventists* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1976), 48.
- ¹¹ Edson, handwritten autobiographical manuscript, VT000272, CAR, JWJ, AU.
- ¹² See, for example, Brian E. Strayer, *J. N. Loughborough: The Last of the Adventist Pioneers* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2014), 68-69; J. N. Loughborough, quoted in Ellen G. White Estate, *A Critique of Prophetess of Health* (Takoma Park, MD, Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1976), 43; and Richard E. Kuykendall, *The Dreamer and the Two Men She Loved* (n.p.: Trafford Publishing, 2021), 8. Those healed included Frances Howland, William Hyde, Clarissa Bonfoey, Anna White, Luman Masten, Harvey Cottrell, and Oswald Stowell.
- ¹³ Clark, *1844*, 1:352 and Merlin D. Burt, *Adventist Pioneer Places: New York and New England* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2011), 119.
- ¹⁴ Hiram Edson, November 26, 1849 Letter to *Present Truth*, December 1849, 36 and D. E. Robinson, "The Gift of Tongues in Early Adventist History" (n.d.), 1-4, manuscript 032461, CAR, JWJ, AU.
- ¹⁵ Hiram Edson, "Description of Hiram Edson's Experience in the Cornfield on October 23, 1844 Plus Some Other Experiences in His Life Around the Same Time," undated manuscript VT000272, CAR, JWJ, AU.
- ¹⁶ See Richard Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 15-16 and Clark, *1844*, 1:159-172.
- ¹⁷ Viah Ophelia Cross to O. A. Olsen, September 14, 1913, manuscript VT000274, CAR, JWJ, AU. This incident, however, occurred when Viah was about a year old, so one must assume others told her about it years later.
- ¹⁸ Joseph Marsh, "Greatly Mistaken," *The Voice of Truth and Glad Tidings*, February 24, 1847, 1.
- ¹⁹ In response to a 1997 inquiry into this matter by Robert Allen, Pauline Mitzewich, the Deputy Town Clerk of Manchester, New York, informed him that after searching the docket books and one justice book covering the 1840s, "we cannot find anything on your request for information regarding Hiram Edson and the child abuse case against him." Pauline Mitzewich to Robert Allen, November 17, 1997, letter in the author's possession.
- ²⁰ See Fernand Fisel, "Edson's Cornfield 'Vision': Frisson or Figment?" *Adventist Currents* (July 1983):27.
- ²¹ Ellen G. White, manuscript no. 7, August 24, 1850, *Manuscript Release* 6:251.
- ²² See Brian E. Strayer, Selected Bibliography, in "Hiram Edson, the Man and the Myth," book manuscript (2023).
- ²³ See Strayer, chapter 8, "Speculative Theologian," 126-128.
- ²⁴ For a discussion of Edson's apocalyptic time prophecies, see Strayer, chapter 8, "Speculative Theologian," 129-130, 132, 134-138.
- ²⁵ Hiram Edson, May 21, 1845 Letter to *The Jubilee Standard*, May 29, 1845, 90-91; Edson, *The Time of the End: Its Beginning, Progressive Events, and Final Termination* (Auburn, NY: Henry Oliphant, 1849), 3.
- ²⁶ Hiram Edson, *An Exposition of Scripture Prophecy, Showing the Final Return of the Jews in 1850* (Canandaigua, NY: Printed at the Office of the Ontario Messenger, 1849), 1-41.
- ²⁷ Edson, *Time of the End*, 3-8.
- ²⁸ Edson, "An Appeal to the Laodicean Church," *Advent Review Extra*, 1850, 1-16.
- ²⁹ Strayer, chapter 9, "Sanctuary Expositors," 140-149.
- ³⁰ Brian E. Strayer, "Charts Analyzing the Number of Articles on the Sanctuary in *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, volumes 1-15 (1850-1876)," typed manuscript (1974-1975), 49 sheets in the author's possession.
- ³¹ See Strayer, chapter 6, "Active Layman," 88-100.
- ³² Report of the ninth session of the New York-Pennsylvania Conference, *Review*, August 23, 1870, 78.
- ³³ James White, *An Appeal to the Working Men and Women in the Ranks of the Seventh-day Adventists* (1873), 30, 79, 104 and list of donors, *Review-Supplement*, April 27, 1876, 2.
- ³⁴ See Strayer, chapter 11 ("Dark Days"), 168-171.

³⁵ Dudley M. Canright, *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced* (London and Edinburgh: Fleming H. Revell, 1905), 63.

³⁶ Buel Whitney, obituary for Hiram Edson, *Review*, February 21, 1882, 126.

³⁷ Obituary for Joseph Bates, *Review*, April 16, 1872, 193.

³⁸ Obituary for A. T. Jones, *Review*, June 28, 1923, 22.

³⁹ See Strayer, chapter 12 (“Edson’s Legacy”), 182-183.

⁴⁰ Strayer, chapter 12, 184-190.