

# Disappearing Act: Hiram Edson's Cornfield Experience

By Ross E. Winkle

A picture is worth a thousand words”—and sometimes a lot less. And it is a picture—an evocative illustration—that came to mind whenever I infrequently thought about Hiram Edson (1806–82), one of the early pioneers in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This particular illustration (*opposite*) was created by Harry Anderson and published by *Review and Herald* in 1944. In it, one can see Edson standing in a cornfield and looking up into heaven, where Christ stands before the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary. For some reason, that illustration has been etched in my memory.<sup>1</sup>

In the course of my research on Edson this past spring, I ran across an extract of Clifford Goldstein's 2003 book *Graffiti in the Holy of Holies* on the *Adventist Review* Web site. I was not surprised to find Goldstein refer to Edson's post-Great Disappointment experience on that gloomy morning of October 23, 1844. Here's what I read: "For the next few moments let's forget about 1844, 'the investigative judgment,' Ellen White, and Hiram Edson's vision in the cornfield."<sup>2</sup>

I went ahead and purchased Goldstein's book. But when I found the page on which Goldstein mentioned Edson, I was startled. Instead of referring to "Hiram Edson's vision in the cornfield," the book only mentioned "Hiram Edson in the cornfield."<sup>3</sup> The vision had vanished like the mist of an October morn.

A textual variant! Well, perhaps not. But I started feeling more and more like Sherlock Holmes as my somewhat casual research suddenly become an intriguing



ing redaction-critical mystery. Why did the Web extract differ from the published book at this point?

I decided to contact some of the parties potentially involved in this mystery. Goldstein quickly replied to my inquiry, but after trying to reconstruct what might have happened, he concluded he was just guessing. But he then asked me whether I thought Edson had had a “vision” like Ellen White or had rather seen something “as in his mind’s eye.”<sup>4</sup> To me, this raised the question of whether he was the one who had used the word *vision*.

I then inquired at Pacific Press, Goldstein’s publisher, and received a response back from Russ Holt, vice president for product development. He also mentioned that he was not sure how the change took place, but thought it was what would have normally taken place during the editorial process. He thought that the *Adventist Review* had used an earlier copy that was then later revised into what one finds in the published book.

Holt then said that the decision to take the word *vision* out of the earlier draft did not affirm or deny that what Edson experienced was “a ‘vision’ or merely an insight on Edson’s part.” According to Holt, there was no attempt to minimize Edson’s experience, and he cautioned me not to read too much into the change in wording.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, I wrote several times to the *Adventist Review* to see whether there might be light from that corner of the publishing triangle. On July 1, I sent virtually the same communication I had previously sent to Goldstein and Holt to Carlos Medley via e-mail; I received no reply. On July 29, I sent the same basic communication to the “letters” e-mail address at the *Review*; again, I received no reply. Finally, I wrote a letter on September 28 to William Johnsson, the editor. I have not received a response.

The primary account of Edson’s experience comes from Edson himself, written sometime before his death in 1882. A key part of his manuscript, of which only a fragment remains, describes what happened on the morning of October 23, 1844.<sup>6</sup>

After breakfast I said to one of my brethren, “Let us go and see, and encourage some of our brn [*sic*].” We started, and while passing through a large field I was

stopped about 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.<sup>7</sup>



Although this autobiographical portion of Edson’s manuscript was written by hand before his death in 1882, there is no extant, published record of its existence before 1910, when A. W. Spalding adapted it for an article in the *Youth’s Instructor*.<sup>8</sup> The manuscript was given to H. M. Kelley when he visited with Edson’s daughter, and a portion of it was printed in the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* in 1921. Kelley stated that Edson had written it “immediately after the disappointment in 1844.”<sup>9</sup>





However, there is no extant, contemporary evidence that corroborates Edson's autobiographical account. When Edson died in 1882, his obituary in the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* simply mentioned that Edson had had "a rich experience in connection with the movement of 1843-44." There were no other published references to his experience for more than forty-five years after 1844.<sup>10</sup>

The interpretation of Edson's cornfield experience has had a checkered history.<sup>11</sup> The first published account of the experience was written by J. N. Loughborough in 1892, a decade after Edson's death. Edson sometimes traveled from church to church with Loughborough, and they had much time to talk and share stories.<sup>12</sup> Loughborough himself stated in his earliest published account of the story that Edson "told me" the story of the experience:

[A]s he was praying behind the shocks of corn in a field, the Spirit of God came upon him in such a powerful manner that he was almost smitten to the earth, and with it came an impression, "The sanctuary to be cleansed is in heaven." [Edson] communicated this thought to O. R. L. Crosier, and they together carefully investigated the subject.<sup>13</sup>

Loughborough's two identical accounts were apparently the only published accounts of Edson's experience until the first decade of the twentieth century, yet there are at least five accounts of the story by him, and one finds discrepancies among them in some of the details.<sup>14</sup> Besides that, they do not agree in details with Edson's account.

Writers have utilized a number of terms to describe what happened to Edson in the cornfield—without stating that he saw a vision. For example, Edson had: a conviction; a discovery; a flash (of conviction, discovery, insight, light, truth, understanding, and so forth); an illumination; an impression; an insight; a perception; and/or a realization.<sup>15</sup> Some writers explained that an idea or new thought "struck" Edson. Some wrote about apparent supernatural events associated with his experience, while avoiding mention of any vision.<sup>16</sup>

Several writers have either explicitly or implicitly questioned whether or not Edson's experience was a vision. Don F. Neufeld, for example, referred to an understanding that flashed into Edson's mind but questioned the visionary nature of his experience. But he was not consistent, and just weeks later he described Ellen White's early vision in February of 1845 as com-

prised of representations flashing into her mind.<sup>17</sup>

At least one other account indicated that Edson's experience was close to being a vision, but apparently not the real thing. And another starkly concluded, regarding Edson's account of his experience, that it "should be relegated to the level of apocryphal literature to which, without doubt, it belongs."<sup>18</sup>

But there are a few who have stated that what Edson experienced really was a vision. F. W. Bartle, manager of the New York Food Company, in writing of Edson's October 23 experience in a 1935 letter to W. A. Spicer, not only expressed his belief that it was a vision but also asserted that "Elder Hiram Edson had visions before Sr. White did."<sup>19</sup>

More recently, in 1994 Glen Greenwalt underscored his belief that Edson's experience was not only "truly visionary," but was, in fact, a vision. Greenwalt found parallels with the phenomena of biblical visions, and to him they indicated a similar pattern of God reminding his people that he had not abandoned them. He moreover identified Edson "with the prophetic, heavenly vision, and Ellen White with the practical, down-to-earth vision," recognizing that this might confuse those Adventists who "recognize Ellen White, and not Hiram Edson, as the prophetic messenger to the remnant church."<sup>20</sup>

A few months later Desmond Ford, although showing appreciation for Greenwalt's overall article, nevertheless maintained that Edson's experience was neither accurate nor inspired, basing his conclusions on his interpretation of Daniel 8. Furthermore, he emphatically stated: "There was no such vision."<sup>21</sup>

Although there are apparently some historical discrepancies in the extant portion of Edson's manuscript, and although it appears that he wrote later understandings back into his experience of October 23, could his experience have still been a vision from God? The language of his account and its wider literary, historical, and theological context appears to support such a conclusion.<sup>22</sup>

First, Edson's statement that "I was stopped" is exactly the same as what one finds earlier in his account. On passing a house, he noted: "I was stopped in the road opposite the house, by some unseen power, and could not make progress. I know not what was the cause. . . ." He then described a "shadowy form in human shape" standing before him and concluded that the "Lord's angel" was accompanying and leading him.<sup>23</sup> The use of identical language here indicates that both references should thus be seen to be understood by him as supernatural in nature.

Second, Edson not only describes other charismatic



phenomena in his manuscript, but we know that he was also involved in charismatic phenomena in 1849—five years later. In a letter he then wrote to James White, the editor of the *Present Truth*, he mentioned the Spirit being poured out “so that the place was awful, and glorious”; the Spirit being poured out again (with Ellen White receiving a vision); two occasions of speaking in tongues and the interpretation of tongues by another person; two dreams of his (one in which Ellen White was symbolically shown initially opposing his efforts to reclaim “Bro. Rhodes”); and one by another person; and a number of “impressions” he had had.<sup>24</sup>

In the same issue, editor James White defended Edson’s description of charismatic experiences, particularly underscoring the biblical support for “such special revelations” as visions and dreams, as well as impressions.<sup>25</sup>

Third, although Edson does not explicitly say that he had a vision, his experience does mirror details in some biblical visionary accounts. Edson states that “heaven seemed open to my view.” In Ezekiel 1:1, the prophet Ezekiel stated that while he was on the banks of the Chebar River, “the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God.” Visionary accounts of the heavens opening occur in several other biblical texts.

Luke’s account of Stephen’s martyrdom in Acts 7:55–56, where Stephen saw the heavens opened and Christ standing at the right hand of God, is particularly illuminating in comparison to Edson’s experience. Although Luke does not describe this as a vision, some Seventh-day Adventists insist not only that it was a vision, but also that Stephen was consequently a prophet.

And finally, Edson’s repeated use of words like “that,” followed by information about what was seen, has been seen by a few as undermining the visionary nature of his experience. But a similar literary style was not unknown in accounts of Ellen White’s visions.<sup>26</sup>

Did Edson create his October 23 experience wholesale? This appears unlikely. Other aspects of the historical portion of his account have rarely—if ever—been questioned; in fact, historian George R. Knight states that the poignant description of the disappointed Adventists (“we wept, and wept, till the day dawn”) is one of the most frequently quoted portions of his account.<sup>27</sup> But perhaps pathos is more attractive and easier to deal with than ecstasy.

In any case, other questions rise to the surface. Did Edson come to believe only later in life that he had really had a vision? Did he anachronistically utilize visionary language in telling his account? Or, could it be that Edson’s experience in the cornfield really was a vision?

Perhaps we will never know.

If his experience were a vision, it is interesting to note that the autobiographical portion of Edson’s manuscript suggests it was not the first vision or visionary experience he had. Edson wrote about an earlier prayer meeting experience this way:

Before the close of the meeting, our preacher very hesitatingly gave a faint invitation, that, if there were any in the congregation who felt like seeking the Lord, and desired prayer for them, if they would make it manifest by rising on their feet we would engage in prayer for them; when some eighty at once arose, without being urged. And thus I saw literally fulfilled, what was presented before me the night before, when in prayer before the manger.<sup>28</sup>

Edson’s reference to “what was presented before me” is exactly the same language Ellen White used on a number of occasions in describing the content of her visions.<sup>29</sup>

Edson has become famous in Seventh-day Adventism because of his remarkable experience in the cornfield on October 23, 1844. There has been reticence, however, to describe his cornfield experience as a vision. This is striking in light of the experience having been described as being as “revolutionary” as what happened on the day Jesus rose from the dead and “among the most dramatic moments in religious history.”<sup>30</sup>

Among possible factors for this state of affairs, one should consider the following: (a) Edson never explicitly described it as a vision; (b) there was a strong sentiment against visions and dreams among the early Adventists after October 22; (c) Adventist understanding of the phenomena, nomenclature, and taxonomy of visions developed over time; (d) Edson’s manuscript contained speculative interpretations of biblical prophecies, which may have tainted the whole account in the minds of some; (e) Edson was apparently not held in high regard when he died; and (f) there has been a repeated emphasis on underscoring the biblical—rather than visionary—origin of and basis for Seventh-day Adventist beliefs.<sup>31</sup>

The view that Edson’s experience was visionary came into prominence for a while in the twentieth century.





ry after his autobiographical account was rediscovered, largely due to Spalding's earlier writings on the subject. But since then, the nature of Edson's experience in the cornfield on that dreary October morning in 1844 has become contentious, and it has become, in a number of ways, a "disappearing act" within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It has sometimes been handled with kid gloves, masked in more acceptable language, downgraded in significance, and marginalized.

In some cases reference to Edson's experience is mysteriously missing from where one would expect it. For instance, when the White Estate commissioned Elfred Lee in 1989 to paint the mural entitled "The Christ of the Narrow Way," based on Ellen White's first vision, it and the artist carefully chose to include 144 individuals who had made special contributions in making the Seventh-day Adventist Church what it is today.

The mural was unveiled on October 22, 1991. Intriguingly, although Lee portrayed beams of light falling to the earth from Christ, the High Priest in the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary, those beams were falling not on Hiram Edson, but on Joseph Bates. In fact, Hiram Edson is nowhere to be found among the 144 individuals.<sup>32</sup>

Recently, I spent a number of weeks reading from several collections of the best stories from *Guide* magazine's fifty-plus years to my nine-year-old son, Tristan.<sup>33</sup> Virtually every story was a fascinating and gripping account of how God had revealed not only his power but also his care for those who trusted in him. And almost every time, at the end the story, I would say to Tristan, "What do you think about *that*?!" or, "Can you believe *that*?!" (and sometimes I had a hard time believing).

Tristan would frequently respond with something like "Wow!" or "That's a neat story!" and we would sometimes have the opportunity to talk further about God's miraculous activity in the lives of his people.

What would Tristan say if I read him the story of Hiram Edson? Which version of the story would I read? Would he see Edson's experience as a divine encounter with God? As a mighty act? As a vision? Perhaps; perhaps not. Maybe Edson's experience was "only" a conviction, an impression, an insight. Such responses and experiences, however, can be powerful and life changing. Although not appearing as "mighty" as the Exodus from Egypt, they can turn out to be as revolutionary as the thoughts that coursed through the disciples on that dreary and bitter

Sunday after they encountered the risen Christ.

But I tend to think Edson's experience entailed more than that.

## Notes and References

1. See, for instance, LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1954), 4:882.
2. The extract comes from Clifford Goldstein, *Graffiti in the Holy of Holies: An Impassioned Response to Recent Attacks on the Sanctuary and Ellen G. White* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2003), quoted on <[www.adventistreview.org/1003-1548/story5.html](http://www.adventistreview.org/1003-1548/story5.html)>, accessed Nov. 30, 2004.
3. Goldstein, *Graffiti*, 119.
4. Personal e-mail communication, July 2, 2004.
5. Personal e-mail communication, Aug. 3, 2004.
6. The entire manuscript had originally been placed in the Advent Source Collection in Washington, D.C., but only twelve of the approximately thirty sheets remain. See the discussion in James Nix, "The Life and Work of Hiram Edson" (Unpublished term paper, Andrews University, 1971), 87-88.
7. Quoted in George R. Knight, comp. and ed., *1844 and the Rise of Sabbatarian Adventism* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1994), 126.
8. A. W. Spalding, "Light on the Sanctuary: Adapted from the Manuscript of Hiram Edson," *Youth's Instructor*, Mar. 8, 1910, 4-6.
9. H. M. Kelley, "The Spirit of 1844," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 23, 1921, 4-5.
10. B. L. Whitney, "Edson," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Feb. 21, 1882, 126; Merlin Burt, "The Historical Background, Interconnected Development, and Integration of the Doctrines of the Sanctuary, the Sabbath, and Ellen G. White's Role in Sabbatarian Adventism from 1844 to 1849" (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 2002), 252, 253.
11. Fernand Fisel, "Edson's Cornfield 'Vision': Frisson or Figment?" *Adventist Currents*, July 1983, 25-27.
12. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 1996 ed., s.v. "Edson, Hiram"; J. N. Loughborough, Letter to the editor ["From Bro. Loughborough"], *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Mar. 17, 1853, 176.
13. J. N. Loughborough, *Rise and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventists, With Tokens of God's Hand in the Movement and a Brief Sketch of the Advent Cause from 1831 to 1844* (Battle Creek, Mich.: General Conference Association, 1892), 114; repeated in idem, *The Great Second Advent Movement: Its Rise and Progress* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1909; originally published by Southern Publishing in 1905), 193.
14. For a full account, see Nix, "Life and Work," 146-57 (Appendix D) and 206-9 (Appendix J).
15. For example, on conviction, see: Roy Adams, *The Sanctuary Doctrine: Three Approaches in the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, Andrews



- University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1981), 1:39 n. 3; regarding flash: Matilda Erickson Andross, *Story of the Advent Message* (Takoma Park, Md.: Review and Herald, 1926), 50; in regard to illumination: Francis D. Nichol, *The Midnight Cry* (Takoma Park, Md.: Review and Herald, 1944), 458; on impression: Adams, *Sanctuary Doctrine*, 1:39 n. 3; about perception: P. Gerard Damsteegt, "How Our Pioneers Discovered the Sanctuary Doctrine," *Adventists Affirm* 6 (fall 1992): 22; and in regard to realization: C. Mervyn Maxwell, *Magnificent Disappointment: What Really Happened in 1844 . . . and Its Meaning for Today* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1994), 79.
16. Compare Maxwell, *Magnificent Disappointment*, 79; Don F. Neufeld, "No Sanctuary, No True Adventism," *Adventist Review*, Nov. 9, 1978, 20; and "Restored Barn Dedicated at Hiram Edson Farm," *Adventist Review*, Nov. 24, 1994, 6.
17. Neufeld, "Aftermath of Autumn Disappointment," *Adventist Review*, Jan. 10, 1980, 16; idem, "Edson's October 23 Experience," *Adventist Review*, Jan. 17, 1980, 18–19; idem, "A Significant Early Vision," *Adventist Review*, Jan. 31, 1980, 18–19.
18. Adriel D. Chilson, *They Had a World to Win: Fascinating Glimpses into the Lives of Our Adventist Pioneers* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2001), 19; Fisel, "Edson's Cornfield 'Vision,'" 26.
19. Quoted in Nix, "Life and Work," 201 (Appendix H). Bartle was "nearly seventy years of age" (ibid.), so he was still a teenager when Edson died. He had had a clerk make a copy of Edson's manuscript, but he mentions to Spicer that could not locate it.
20. Glen Greenwalt, "The Sanctuary—God in Our Midst," *Spectrum* 24 (October 1994): 46–48.
21. "Desmond Ford Applauds Glen Greenwalt on the Sanctuary," *Spectrum* 24 (Apr. 1995): 60. Instead, Ford sees Edson's experience as a "conviction."
22. Burt, "Historical Background," 250–53; Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1977), 117 n. 93; idem, "Among Sabbatarian Adventists (1845–1850)," in *Doctrine of the Sanctuary: A Historical Survey*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, Md: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of SDAs, 1989), 5:22 n. 3; and Fisel, "Edson's Cornfield 'Vision,'" 25–26.
23. Knight, 1844, 124.
24. Ibid., 123–25; Hiram Edson, "Beloved Brethren, Scattered Abroad," *Present Truth*, Dec. 1849, 34–36.
25. James White, editorial, *Present Truth*, Dec. 1849, 40.
26. Compare Fisel, "Edson's Cornfield 'Vision,'" 26; Mervyn Maxwell, *Tell It to the World*, 2d rev. ed. (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1982), 51; and idem, *Moving Out*, 27. For instance, Ellen White once saw a "Mr. \_\_\_\_" in one of her visions and wrote: "I saw that he was deceived in regard to himself, that he was not in favor with God." Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1982), 451, 452.
27. Quoted in Knight, 1844, 120, 125.
28. Ibid.
29. Compare, for instance, Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Health: And Instruction to Medical Missionaries*, 2d ed. (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1951), 412; idem, *Selected Messages: From the Writings of Ellen G. White* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1980), 3:53; idem, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), 1:141 and 266.
30. James Joiner, *These Were the Courageous* (Nashville: Southern Publishing, 1968), 33. Compare Froom, *Prophetic Faith*, 4:884–87; Arthur Whitefield Spalding, *Captains of the Host* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1949), 95–97; and idem, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1961), 1:102–5. See also, Maxwell, *Moving Out*, 27.
31. Damsteegt, *Foundations*, 121; Spalding, *Origin and History*, 57–59; LeRoy Edwin Froom, *Finding the Lost Prophetic Witness* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1946), 4; Nix, "Life and Work," 91–94; Paul A. Gordon, *The Sanctuary, 1844, and the Pioneers* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1983; reprint, Silver Spring, Md.: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2000), 166–74; Maxwell, *Magnificent Disappointment*, 78–79; Neufeld, "Edson's October 23 Experience," 18; and idem, "Ellen White and Crosier's Day-Star Article," *Adventist Review*, Jan. 24, 1980, 15. Compare the charge of the visionary origin of doctrine revisited recently in Dale Ratzlaff, *The Cultic Doctrine of Seventh-day Adventists: An Evangelical Resource; An Appeal to SDA Leadership* (Sedona, Ariz.: Life Assurance Ministries, 1996), 103–4.
32. Kenneth H. Wood, ed., *The Christ of the Narrow Way: A Book of Art, History, and Inspired Writings, Featuring a Heroic Mural Based on the First Vision of Ellen G. White* (Silver Spring, Md.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1993), 5.
33. Helen Lee, ed., *Guide's Greatest Miracle Stories* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2001); Helen Lee Robinson, ed., *Guide's Greatest Prayer Stories* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2002); and idem, ed., *Guide's Greatest Sabbath Stories* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2004).

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