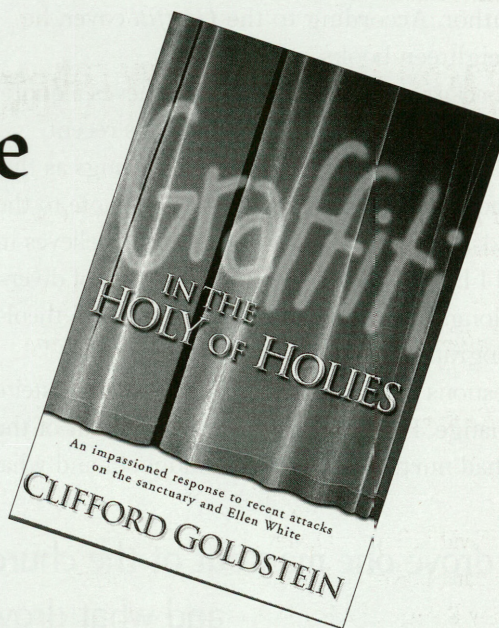


Fireworks in the Holy of Holies

By Alden Thompson

A review of Clifford Goldstein,
Graffiti in the Holy of Holies.
Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2003.
175 pp., \$12.99.



The subtitle to *Graffiti in the Holy of Holies*, firmly implanted on the front cover, describes the book as an “impassioned response to recent attacks on the sanctuary and Ellen White.” Indeed.

Goldstein refers primarily to Dale Ratzlaff, a former Adventist (fourth generation) who served as a Seventh-day Adventist pastor for thirteen years, seven of them as Bible teacher at Monterey Bay Academy, in Central California, and who now maintains an active outreach ministry to former Adventists.¹ Goldstein is responding primarily to Ratzlaff’s *The Cultic Doctrine of Seventh-day Adventists* (1996). But *Graffiti* is also haunted by the long shadow of Desmond Ford’s declaration at the Adventist Forum session at

Pacific Union College in 1979 that it is “impossible” to prove the investigative judgment from the Bible.

Currently editor of the *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*, Goldstein also writes a column for the *Adventist Review*—his strident “Seventh-day Darwinians” (July 24, 2003) has triggered an ongoing avalanche of agony and ecstasy within Adventism. A Jewish atheist who came into the Church through the ministry of conservative “historic” Adventists right at the time that the Ford crisis



was unfolding, Goldstein has become a prolific Adventist author. According to the *Graffiti* cover, he has written eighteen books.

All that background is crucial if one believes a quote that opens a chapter in another of Goldstein's recent books, *God, Gödel, and Grace*: "We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are."² Attributing the quote to the Talmud, Goldstein is not clear that he himself believes it. But I do, and I have tucked it into my collection of diversity quotes alongside another favorite of mine: "All theology is autobiography."

Two questions loom large as I ponder the Goldstein-Ratzlaff exchange. First, what drove one man out of the church that had nurtured him from childhood, and what

White. Goldstein did not grow up haunted by Ellen White's statement that we "are to stand in the sight of a holy God without a mediator."⁴ He recognizes the problem and quotes his wife—"raised in the Adventist Church"—to illustrate what he calls "folk Adventism"—popular but *false* conceptions about our doctrines. If the Adventist Church really does *teach* what he says it does, then it should *do* what he says, and ... get rid of the pre-Advent judgment, because any doctrine that goes contrary to the gospel should be abandoned."⁵

What Goldstein does *not* say is that the lack of assurance from which many Adventists suffer is rooted in the early experience and writings of Ellen White. For me, the idea of growth provides the solution. I find the

What drove one man out of the church that had nurtured him from childhood, and what drove another man in?

drove another man in? Second, how effective is Goldstein's *Graffiti* in defending Adventism and responding to the issues raised by Ratzlaff?

A brief answer to the first question might note that the highly structured Adventism that Goldstein welcomed with open arms became an unbearable burden for lifelong Adventist Ratzlaff. Theological issues are involved, too, probably shaped by genetics as much as by environment. But these are difficult to assess since no two of us put the pieces together in just the same way. I suspect that the real divide between these two men is the tension between human freedom and responsibility, on the one hand, and divine sovereignty, on the other.

Illustrations of that human-divine tension are impressive, both in Scripture (Jeremiah—Ezekiel in the Old Testament; James—Paul in the New) and in Christian history (Pelagius—Augustine [400s], Arminius—Calvin [1500s], Wesley—Whitefield [1700s]). Augustine's radical version of that divide puts it in terms of grace and free will: "In trying to solve this question I made strenuous efforts on behalf of the preservation of the free choice of the human will, but the grace of God defeated me."³

Goldstein is more on the side of free will, Ratzlaff on the side of grace, but if I understand their positions, both reject the predestinarian theology for which Augustine and Calvin are famous; both affirm free will, grace, and the substitutionary atonement. Yet they stand apart.

So why is Adventism a haven for Goldstein, but a prison for Ratzlaff? The shortest answer is Ellen

evidence to be powerful, persuasive, even exhilarating. Something dramatic happened in her experience in and around 1888, bringing her great joy in the Lord.⁶

Goldstein has tasted the good fruit of that development: the last chapter of *Graffiti* cites thirteen beautiful Ellen White "grace" quotes. But only two of them come from before 1888, one in 1883 and one in 1886.⁷ He has also discovered Ellen White's 1885 comments on "Joshua and the Angel," a grace-filled view of the investigative judgment based on Zechariah 3:1. I would simply note that a striking addition makes the later parallel in *Prophets and Kings* even better.⁸

Goldstein faults Ratzlaff for overlooking this positive side of Ellen White. But Ratzlaff is right in noting that Goldstein fails to address the earlier passages.⁹ Ironically, even though he doesn't argue for "growth" himself, Goldstein does quote Ratzlaff on the point: "To her credit, unlike many of the 'prophets' of her day, her change in doctrine was usually toward mainstream Christianity."¹⁰

Adventists have often said that those who leave the Church simply join the ranks of the unchurched. That may still be the dominant trend. But as Adventists become part of the social and economic mainstream, many former Adventists are moving into churches that represent the two sides of the great divide.

Those of a more liberal/rationalist bent slip into churches in the free-will Methodist/Wesleyan tradition, whereas those seeking a more sovereign God, like

Ratzlaff, join churches closer to the Evangelical/Reformed (Calvinist) tradition, which emphasize grace and assurance. If Adventism intends to be a body of Christ for all people, it must find ways to preserve a healthy balance between those two impulses.

Turning to the second issue, that is, *Graffiti* as a defense of Adventism and as a response to Ratzlaff, I find myself intrigued by a number of features. Goldstein describes *Graffiti* as an expanded version of *1844 Made Simple*.¹¹ Thus the first five chapters defend the Adventist understanding of the 1844 experience, focusing primarily on the book of Daniel; chapter six addresses assurance; chapter seven deals with Ellen White.

The whole discussion provides a fascinating—and painful—commentary on issues of change and diversity in Adventism and the inner dialogue between tradition (what we've been “taught”) and present religious experience. And since neither Ratzlaff nor Goldstein is a neutral bystander, the result is a vivid blend of piety, passion, and reason.

In what follows I try to capture the essence of three key issues that shape the dialogue, ordered here according to what I see as degrees of intensity: (1) religious experience, (2) biblical interpretation, and (3) eschatological perspective.

1. Religious Experience. Among conservatives, those on either side of the great divide between human freedom and divine sovereignty rarely recognize the other view as legitimate. The tendency is to deny the differences between them or to label one view as true, the other false.

Within Adventism, the interplay between the perspectives is intriguing: Ford's 1979 presentation divided the crowd between those who believed they must stand in the sight of a holy God without a mediator and those who knew they couldn't—and contrary to some perfectionist rhetoric, the divide is not between the careful and the careless. I suspect that Goldstein, Ford, and Ratzlaff would all agree that in a sinful world, standing before God without a mediator is not

possible. Grace is crucial for all three.

Only Goldstein, however, defends the “Adventist” doctrine of judgment, but he does so by appealing to Ellen White's later writings. Perhaps most surprising of all, however, is how the thoroughly theocentric Ford lifts a page from the free-will side of the ledger and argues for a thoroughgoing conditionalism. Ratzlaff seems indifferent to the issue; but Goldstein differs from Ford with a passion, a crucial factor in both of the next issues.

2. Biblical Interpretation. Goldstein, Ratzlaff, and Ford are all eager to make their points from Scripture. But none of them, it seems to me, adequately recognizes how believers synthesize “biblical” doctrines from a

cluster of biblical passages. All of them imply that doctrine can simply be demonstrated by exegesis, that is, from the contextual interpretation of a particular passage.

Ford's methodology, applied consistently, would mean that most of the book of Hebrews could not be called “biblical,” for Hebrews is highly creative in handling the Old Testament. Jesus as the true Passover lamb

would also not be “biblical.” In short, Adventists talk about the once-for-all (antitypical) Day of Atonement of Leviticus 16 in the same way that early Christians talked about Jesus as the once-for-all (antitypical) Passover lamb. Interestingly enough, Goldstein's Jewish heritage enables him to see immediately the links between Daniel and Leviticus 16.¹²

Ratzlaff (following Ford) rightly argues that Daniel 7 and 8 do not address issues of personal salvation. Judgment brings condemnation to the beast and the little horn. The saints are not at risk before God. But Ratzlaff ignores Daniel 8:17, the strongest argument in Goldstein's arsenal: “Understand, O mortal, that the vision is for the time of the end” (NRSV). Goldstein, however, lacking a consistent conditional-



ism, does not follow Ford's lead and allow for multiple applications. Thus he misses a marvelous opportunity to universalize the sanctuary/judgment doctrine. Instead of seeing the little horn of Daniel 7 and 8 as a type of every desecrating power, the little horn is "solely, totally, and only Rome, pagan and papal."¹³

Ford lays a solid biblical foundation for multiple applications, moving from Daniel's day and the sanctuary desolated by Babylon in 586 B.C.E., to the desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes in 168/167 B.C.E., to the destruction by Rome in 70 C.E. But his Augustinian bent compromises his ability to take the final step and

which appeared in a vision to your brother Daniel. But it was not explained to him as I now explain or have explained it to you" (4 Ezra 12:11-12 RSV). Virtually all commentators agree that the author of 5 Ezra saw the interpretation of the fourth kingdom shifting from Greece to Rome.

Since Daniel identifies only Babylon in chapter 2 (the image) and none of the kingdoms in chapter 7 (the beasts), and never correlates the ram and he-goat from chapter 8 with the other chapters, the door is open for multiple applications. Adventist apologists are right in noting that apocalyptic is never explicitly conditional.

"Apocalyptic is unbeatable because its reheatable."

—Ernst Käsemann

focus on the heavenly sanctuary after 1844, the only sanctuary left after 70 C.E. And that brings us to the question of eschatology.

3. Eschatological Perspectives. I have suggested elsewhere that for Ratzlaff and others who share his experience, three issues, all linked with eschatology, constitute the *real* reasons for their departure: assurance, relations with other Christians, and Sabbath (experienced as test, rather than as gift).¹⁴

Graffiti largely ignores the Sabbath question, but takes prophecy and eschatology very seriously. And here is the crux of the matter as I see it. Because Ford linked his attack on the investigative judgment with an attack on the "historicist" approach to eschatology, many thoughtful Adventists, Goldstein included, have felt that the two must stand or fall together.¹⁵ The resulting defense of a strict historicism obscures the powerful biblical evidence for multiple applications.

Goldstein defends the classic four-kingdom interpretation of Daniel, paralleling the kingdoms of Daniel 2, 7, and 8, and identifying the fourth kingdom as Rome. But what he does *not* say is that the book of Daniel itself never makes those correlations. It is an interpretation in the light of history. Indeed, only when Rome became the dominant world power could it be seen as the fourth kingdom.

The angelic interpreter makes that point explicit in explaining the "eagle vision" in 4 Ezra, a noncanonical Jewish apocalypse from the end of the first Christian century: "The eagle ... is the fourth kingdom

But they typically have *not* recognized how believers treat apocalyptic prophecies as conditional by applying them to their own day. Hence the quip by the German scholar Ernst Käsemann: "Apocalyptic is unbeatable because it's reheatable."

Is the idea of multiple applications still viable in Adventism? Tantalizing impulses point in that direction. Ellen White's comment, "We may have less to say in some lines, in regard to the Roman power and the papacy" can be added to her famous quote that "the promises and the threatenings of God are alike conditional."¹⁶

Even a staunch conservative like Mervyn Maxwell recognized that in Jesus' day the "most popular" candidate for the desolator of the sanctuary was Antiochus Epiphanes and that the disciples were likely surprised to hear Jesus put the desolation in the future. Commenting on Matthew 24:15, Maxwell says: "In other words, old interpretations are *bound to be inadequate*. Only interpretations made in relatively recent years have any chance of getting the real issues straight."¹⁷

An illustration from Scripture provides another strong argument for multiple applications: Peter takes the "dark day" of a grasshopper plague in Joel and reapplies it to the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Then, in Revelation 6:12, the dark day joins the earthquake and the falling stars as marking the Second Coming itself. Yes, Adventists have pointed to the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, the dark day of 1780, and the falling of the stars in 1833. But the symbols remain alive and powerful. I believe the same principles can apply to the prophecies of Daniel.

By way of conclusion, let me be perfectly clear about my own position: I am with Goldstein on the investigative judgment—but wish he could be more forthcoming on Ellen White’s growth and development. I am with Ford on multiple applications—but wish he could be more consistent and make peace with 1844. I am with Goldstein, Ford, and Ratzlaff on the question of grace—but wish Ratzlaff could discover joy in God’s gracious gift of the Sabbath.

Finally, a quibble about the vivid language of *Graffiti*. Actually, compared to vintage Goldstein, he is close to his best behavior in the book. He almost always refers to Ratzlaff with the prefix *Brother*, as in Brother Dale or Brother Ratzlaff. That seems to soften the blows considerably, though Ratzlaff may feel otherwise. Still, to refer to an apparently inconsistent argument with the word *hilarious* (for example) is a bit much.¹⁹ I’d also like to see *debunk* disappear from Goldstein’s active vocabulary. Seventeen times in one book is about seventeen times too many.

As for Brother Dale, I must admit that we have not done a good job handling the issues that ultimately led him away from Adventism. In one of my exchanges with him he told of church administrators telling him: “Your main problem is that you are trying to be too honest.” And, “Dale, we both know that the doctrine (1844/investigative judgment) is wrong but we can’t do anything about it. Do what you can with a clear conscience and don’t make any waves.” That’s not a happy commentary on my church.

By God’s grace we can do better than we have done in the past. Will Goldstein’s book move us in that direction? I hope and pray that it will.

Notes and References

1. Ratzlaff publishes the bimonthly *Proclamation*. His books include: *Sabbath in Crisis* (1990, 1995), revised and reissued as *Sabbath in Christ* (2003), and the *Cultic Doctrine of Seventh-day Adventists* (1996). All are published by <www.jeremiahfilms.com> Life Assurance Ministries, P.O. Box 11587, Glendale, Ariz. 85318. For more on Ratzlaff’s organization, visit <www.ratzlaf.com>.
2. Clifford Goldstein, *God, Gödel, and Grace: A Philosophy of Faith* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2003), 61.
3. Cited in Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, 1996), 117.
4. *The Great Controversy* (1888; Takoma Park, Md.: Review and Herald, 1911), 425.
5. Goldstein, *Graffiti*, 116.

6. See Alden Thompson, “From Sinai to Golgotha,” a five-part series in *Adventist Review*, December 1981, with follow-up issue, July 1, 1982; also “Even the Investigative Judgment Can Be Good News,” *Westwind* (Walla Walla College alumni journal) (winter 1982). Available online at <www.aldenthompson.com>.

7. Goldstein, *Graffiti*, 168–71. Goldstein himself dates only one of the quotations.

8. *Prophets and Kings* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1917), 589, adds to the Lord’s rebuke of the adversary: “They may have imperfections of character; they may have failed in their endeavors; but they have repented, and I have forgiven and accepted them” (compare *Testimonies for the Church* [Oakland, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1885], 5:467–76).

9. Goldstein, *Graffiti*, 171. Ratzlaff responded in *Proclamation*, 5:1.

10. Goldstein, *Graffiti*, 172, citing *Cultic Doctrine*, 351.

11. Clifford Goldstein, *1844 Made Simple* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1988).

12. Goldstein, *Graffiti*, 69.

13. *Ibid.*, 43. Compare Goldstein’s *Adventist Review* column for Dec. 27, 1999: “Solely, Totally, and Only Rome.”

14. “Conversations with the Other Side,” *Spectrum* 31.4 (fall 2003), 54–59; “Response to Dale Ratzlaff,” *Ministry*, Feb. 2004, 30–32, 38.

15. “Preterism,” which limits applications to the author’s own day and excludes the possibility of prediction, is not an option for Ratzlaff, Ford, or Goldstein. Neither is “futurism,” the popular “conservative” approach that envisions a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, though Ratzlaff’s worshipping community is closest to that perspective. Adventists are now virtually alone in arguing for “historicism,” the classic Protestant approach and the obvious reading of Daniel (though not of Revelation). The Disappointment has nudged Adventism toward conditionalism, an idea central to the understanding of “idealism” with its multiple applications.

16. *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (1923; Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1944), 112 [undated quote]; *Evangelism*, 695 [Ms 4, 1883];

17. Mervyn Maxwell, *God Cares*, vol. 1: *The Message of Daniel for You and Your Family* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1981), 269, 270.

18. Goldstein, *Graffiti*, 125.

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