

Uriah Smith

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The Most “Versatile” Advent Pioneer and Author of

“DANIEL AND THE REVELATION”

Arthur W Spalding

THE boy, Uriah was twelve years old when, on October 21, 1844, with his mother and his older brother John, he joined the company at Fitchburg, Massachusetts, who were looking for the Lord Jesus to come. The Smith's home was at West Wilton, a few miles north, over the New Hampshire line; but Brother Tolman, the leader of the Adventist Company at Fitchburg, had invited them for the great day.

The meeting tent was pitched in Tolman's yard. In the evening the company met there and began their services. They expected their Lord the next day. A rough element from the town gathered around and began to pelt the tent with apples from the nearby orchard. Waxing bolder as the evening fell and as the liquor they were drinking took hold of them, they stood in the door and aimed at the lanterns hanging from the ridgepole, which they shortly demolished, leaving the tent in darkness. Then they cut the guy ropes, shoved a large hog inside, and collapsed the tent upon the company.

Extricating themselves, the men, women, and children took refuge in Tolman's house. But the mob, most of them now drunk, began throwing sticks and stones, broke all the windows, and drove the people out. Uriah and his brother took refuge in the barn, which the roisterers invaded, but without finding the boys. Finally the night passed.

That was Uriah Smith's introduction to the warfare of the Second Advent, in which he was to prove a champion; but for the next eight years, following the disappointment, he had no part in it. His mother, a lady of fine sensibilities and poetic genius, held to her faith, and in 1851, under the teaching of Joseph Bates, she added to this the seventh-day Sabbath. Now she prayed and worked for her children's conversion also.

Uriah, by this time nineteen years old, was pursuing his studies and aiming at the career of teaching. His sister, Annie, finishing at a young ladies' seminary in Charlestown, was like-minded. They were given an offer to teach in a newly established academy, at what were then high salaries; but the mother's prayers and Providence intervened. Annie, at her mother's request, went to hear Joseph Bates in Boston and was convinced of the Sabbath truth. Shortly thereafter she took up the work- of proofreader and copy editor in James White's little publishing establishment. Uriah, being induced the next year to attend an Adventist meeting at Washington, New Hampshire, was likewise converted, and in 1853, at the age of twenty he joined the publishing force at Rochester, New York. For half a century thereafter he was connected with the Review and Herald, most of the time as its editor.

Uriah Smith was doubtless the most versatile man in the early company of Seventh-day Adventists. Inheriting the mechanical genius of his father and the artistic nature of his mother, he distinguished himself in a number of directions. An artist, at twelve years of age he produced a pen-and-ink bird's-eye view of his native town, exact and spirited; and the art remained with him throughout his life. In lieu of photo engraving, not then developed, he made the first illustrations of the periodical he edited, himself carving the woodcuts. Having lost a leg from an infection when he was fourteen, he invented an improved artificial foot, which not only gave him greater comfort but helped his exchequer. Another invention was an adjustable school desk much appreciated in the days when straight-backed wooden seats were the rule. There is today in the Review and Herald office, as a museum piece, the commodious and ingenious editor's desk which his hands made. He invented a shorthand system, with which he reported the first sessions of the General Conference of the church, of which in the early years he was secretary. The nicety of his touch is indicated in his signature, which stands out with copperplate symmetry above all his fellows'.

He was a poet and hymn writer, though in this respect excelled by his gifted sister, Annie, whose, brief but highly valued service was cut short by her death in 1855. More than this, Uriah Smith developed a prose style clear, concise, emphatic, and sometimes with a cast of gentle irony, which made his editorials delightful reading. His reasoning was close, well based, and convincing. Perhaps the mechanical excellence of all his work, manual and mental, tended to form his style with a solidity that lacked the flexibility of some others; yet often it rises into sublime periods and is graced with delicate art.

Besides some poetical works, he wrote several books upon Bible subjects. His greatest and most enduring work. *Thoughts on Daniel and the Revelation*, which has gone through many revisions and editions, is still, despite various later commentaries, the standard classic in its field. He began it, while still a young man, as a tentative series of articles in the church paper, drawing from the editor, James White, the dubitable commendation that it was indeed “thoughts,” not an oracle. But growing in breadth and depth and power as the youthful student searched his sources and his soul, it became one of the chief weapons in the arsenal of Seventh day Adventist exegesis. Published at first as two separate volumes, the two became one when, in 1881, George King proposed their combination, with illustrations, and established with the single volume the beginning of the great colporteur work for which this church has become noted.

For all his accomplishments, Uriah Smith was a modest man, retiring, perhaps humble. It would not be correct to say that he was unconscious of his powers, and he was ever ready to do battle for his cause; but he never sought the limelight. Often he sat unnoticed in the assembly, having taken his seat, not in the front, but in some obscure corner. It took persuasion to get him to preach a sermon. He preferred, indeed, the writer’s pen to the preacher’s forum; and it was as a writer that he best showed his powers. His sermons were models of logic and learning, but lacked the fervor of the evangelist. None surpassed him, however, in ardent faith in the message which he proclaimed, and to this his testimony was constant and sustained through all his half-century of service.

When Seventh-day Adventists established their first advanced school, Battle Creek College, in 1874, Uriah Smith became, and for many years remained, the head of the theological department. As a teacher he was thorough, systematic, and inspiring. He made distinct contributions to the forming faith of the church and in the exposition of prophecy he became the most prominent leader.

The sunset of life came while he was still the senior editor of the church paper, the *Review and Herald*. Long had he cherished and molded the policies and teachings of that paper, the editorship of which he inherited from its founder, James White. As a youth he had joined the publishing force in Rochester when its physical equipment consisted of a Washington hand press and a few fonts of type.

He sat with the small working force at the rude table where young women folded the sheets. John Loughborough stabbed the signatures with an awl for the girls to stitch with needle and thread, and Uriah trimmed the edges with his penknife. He lived to see the *Review and Herald* the largest printing establishment in the State of Michigan, with the latest improved machinery and working force of more than a hundred.

Then he saw it go down in fiery destruction. On the next to the last day of the year 1902, the *Review and Herald* main plant burned to the ground. It was to rise, thereafter, with greater power and, transplanted to the capital of the nation, become one of the foremost religious publishing companies of the country. But that resurrection Uriah Smith was not to see. Continuing his editorial work for yet a few weeks in improvised quarters in a remaining building, he sounded the note of faith and courage that belongs to a cause not comprised in brick and machinery but in the spirit of Christian truth.

On the morning of March 6, 1903, walking down to the office, as was his wont, he conversed cheerfully on the way with various friends and associates. Within sight of the scene of most of his half-century’s labors, he fell, stricken with apoplexy, and expired in his home without regaining consciousness.

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