



I

“OLD VIRGIL DUG UP” (1788-1804)

Rev. Adoniram Judson, father of the eventual celebrated pioneer missionary to Burma, experienced a rather inauspicious beginning to his own career as a Congregational minister.¹ In 1776, after graduating at age twenty-six from Yale in New Haven, Connecticut, Judson continued to study for the ministry under Joseph Bellamy, a prominent pastor in Bethlehem, Connecticut.² During the decade that followed, three congregations in Massachusetts invited Judson to become their minister. But he declined each of those invitations because they did not measure up to his inflexible, idealized conviction that he should not accept a pastoral call unless it was unanimous.

In the summer of 1786, however, he accepted the invitation to pastor the First Church of Malden, Massachusetts, though that call was far from unanimous. (At that time Malden was a town of 1,000 inhabitants, located five miles north of Boston, then a thriving city of some 20,000.) A year before Judson's arrival at Malden, the congregation suffered a split when members from the southern portion of the parish withdrew and set up their own

- 1 Adoniram Judson senior was born in Woodbury, Connecticut, in June, 1752, the seventh and final child of Elnathan and Mary Judson. Wayland, *Memoir*, vol. 1, pp. 11-12, provides genealogical information dating back to William Judson, progenitor of the Judson clan in America, who came to Massachusetts from Yorkshire, England, in 1634.
- 2 Bellamy had played an active role in promoting the Great Awakening when it swept through New England in the early 1740s. At that earlier time he helped encourage another young ministerial candidate, David Brainerd, who afterward became the eminent missionary to Colonial American Indians.

church. A substantial minority of those who remained at First Church opposed the Calvinistic theology of their new minister, Judson.

Perhaps ministerial acquaintances or his repeated lost opportunities to minister had finally persuaded Judson to moderate his idealized standard for a pastoral call. Likely an even more significant factor that led to his change of heart just at that time was the fact that he had fallen in love and desired to marry. By accepting the Malden pastorate, which paid a decent salary and included the use of a large, two-story parsonage, he would be able to provide adequately for a wife and family. Judson married Abigail Brown on November 23, 1786, just months after beginning his ministry at Malden.³

Abigail Judson gave birth to their first child, a son, on Saturday, August 9, 1788. He was named Adoniram after his father. A little over two and a half years later, on March 21, 1791, Mrs. Judson bore a daughter who was named, like her mother and grandmother, Abigail Brown. Unfortunately, less than two weeks after Abigail's birth, due to ongoing conflict with some members of his congregation, Rev. Judson received his "Dismission" from Malden's First Church.

Often during the many months that followed, Judson was away from his home for days at a time, participating in ministerial activities and investigating pastoral possibilities. His wife had a special surprise prepared for him upon his return from one such journey. In his absence of the past week she had taught their son, still just three years of age, to read. Judson listened in amazement as young Adoniram read aloud an entire chapter from the Bible. That was one of the first indications the Judsons had of their son's exceptional mind.

While still in Malden, after turning four years of age, Adoniram used to gather other young children of the neighborhood to play church, fulfilling the role of officiating minister himself. Even then his favorite hymn, appropriately enough in light of his later career, began with the words, "Go preach my Gospel, saith the Lord."

³ She had been born at Tiverton, Rhode Island, on December 15, 1759, and was the eldest daughter of Abraham and Abigail Brown.



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In January, 1793, Rev. Judson assumed the pastorate (with a unanimous call) of the Congregational Church in Wenham, about twenty miles northeast of Malden and five miles north of Salem. Wenham, with its 500 residents, was about half the size of Malden. Though the Wenham church building had begun to fall into disrepair, Rev. Judson happily traded that slight disadvantage for the far greater advantage of ministering in peace to a unified congregation for which he was doctrinally well suited.

Two more children were born to the Judsons while they lived in Wenham. Mrs. Judson bore her second son on May 28, 1794, and he was named Elnathan after his paternal grandfather. A second daughter, Mary Ellice, was born on February 18, 1796, but died less than seven months later on September 12.

At the time of his sibling's death, Adoniram Judson, Jr, was eight years old. He was high-spirited, even “exceedingly enthusiastic”. Though very active and energetic, he was more interested in reading than in play. He had a sharp, inquisitive mind and found riddles and brainteasers irresistible. He stored many of these in his memory and used them to confound his schoolmates. Adoniram manifested strong self-confidence and, like many firstborn children, was a natural leader.

When eight or nine years old, Adoniram spotted an “enigma” printed in a newspaper along with a challenge for the readers to solve it. He did not rest until he had worked out a satisfactory solution to the puzzle. Carefully writing out his answer in his best handwriting, he placed it in an envelope addressed to the editor and secretly delivered the missive to the post office. But the postmaster took the letter for some mischievous prank of the local minister's eldest son and returned it to his father. The boy was in awe of his father. An acquaintance of Rev. Judson described him:

He was ... a man of decidedly imposing appearance. His stature was rather above the average height. His ... erect position, grave utterance, and somewhat taciturn manner, together with the position which he naturally took in society, left you somewhat at a loss whether to class him with a patriarch of the Hebrews, or a censor of the Romans.



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He was, through life, esteemed a man of inflexible integrity, and uniform consistency of Christian character.⁴

Young Adoniram was stunned and immediately ill at ease when he spotted the returned letter on the family dining room table after tea. “Is that yours, Adoniram?” his father asked soberly.

“Yes, sir,” he responded quietly.

“How came you to write it?” When the boy did not answer, another question followed, “What is it about?”

“Please read it, Father,” he managed falteringly.

“I do not read other people’s letters. Break the seal and read it yourself.”

Adoniram complied, then placed the letter in his father’s hands. Mr. Judson asked to see the newspaper that contained the riddle. After reading and rereading both the puzzle and the proffered solution, he laid them on the table, crossed his hands on his knees and gazed intently into the fire for a very long time, saying nothing. When at last he returned from his reverie, the topic of conversation was changed and the letter not mentioned again. Adoniram went to bed that night not knowing whether he was to be punished or commended.

The next morning the father, again in a grave tone, informed his son, “I have purchased a book of riddles for your use. It is a very common one but as soon as you have solved all that it contains you shall have more difficult books.” Then with uncharacteristic affection he patted him on the head and added, “You are a very acute boy, Adoniram, and I expect you to become a great man.”

The son eagerly accepted the “book of riddles” but was disappointed to discover it was merely the same mathematics textbook that the older boys were studying in Master Dodge’s school where he too was a student. Still, he was thrilled that his father had praised him. And he consoled himself with the thought that if there was anything puzzling in the math book he was sure he would like it.

⁴ Wayland, *Memoir*, vol. 1, p. 14.



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Of Rev. Judson’s anticipation of greatness for his son expressed on this and other occasions, it has been noted: “Though not ... ambitious of personal distinction, he appears to have coveted eminence for his children with more than a wise eagerness; and to have been in the habit of stimulating his son to exertion by the assurance that he would certainly become a great man.”⁵ Another observed:

His father stimulated his ambition to the utmost. He seems early to have formed the hope that his boy was to become a great man, and he took no pains to hide this expectation; so that even in childhood Adoniram’s heart came to be full of worldly ambition, which in subsequent years had to be nailed to the cross.⁶

Rather early on Adoniram began to gain a reputation for his outstanding scholarship, especially in arithmetic and ancient languages. Not long after the newspaper “enigma” incident, a gentleman in the neighboring town of Beverly sent him a mathematical problem and offered him a dollar for the solution. Adoniram immediately shut himself in his bedroom where he worked hour after hour to solve the problem. While the reward was tempting, he was even more concerned to uphold his reputation.

The next morning he was summoned from his seclusion to amuse Elnathan who was ill. Adoniram began to build a house made of corncobs for the younger brother, laying a strong foundation then proceeding with the superstructure with unaccountable deliberation, seeming somewhat distracted. “That’s it!” he suddenly exclaimed, “I’ve got it!” He jumped up, scattering the materials for the half-built house, dashed back to his bedroom and recorded the correct solution to the problem.

By age ten his proficiency in Greek and Latin had become clear at Master Dodge’s school. His classmates nicknamed him Virgil or even “old Virgil dug up”, likely after the renowned Roman poet of

5 *ibid.*, p. 13.

6 Edward Judson, *The Life of Adoniram Judson* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1938), p. 2.



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the first century B.C. Adoniram was a voracious reader and quite random in the types of books he enjoyed. He devoured everything from the theological tomes in his father's library to popular novels and plays that he borrowed from others. Rev. Judson, who granted his son a significant amount of unsupervised free time, probably was not aware of (and probably would not have approved) Adoniram's reading such secular, fictional fare.

The book of Scripture that most intrigued the boy was Revelation. Before he turned twelve he overheard visitors in his parents' home discussing a newly published exposition of the Apocalypse that was proving to be "a work of rare interest". A rather intimidating gentleman in the neighborhood owned a copy of the book and, after considerable wrestling with his own reserve, young Judson paid him a visit and asked to borrow it. When he was coldly and sternly refused, he was unable to conceal his disappointment from his father.


"Not lend it to you!" the indignant parent responded with unanticipated sympathy, "I wish *he* could understand it half as well. You shall have books, Adoniram, just as many as you can read, and I'll go to Boston myself for them." The father fulfilled his promise but, to the son's perplexity and further disappointment (which he dared not verbalize), the desired work on the Apocalypse was not obtained.

Due to a combination of declining health and inadequate compensation, Rev. Judson resigned from his Wenham pastorate in the summer of 1799. May of the following year found the Judsons living in Braintree, a few miles south of Boston. That summer Rev. Judson was employed by the Massachusetts Home Missionary Society as a missionary to the "interior parts of Vermont". After that, for the better part of two years, it is not known what ministry and work opportunities he had with which to provide for his family. In May of 1802, Judson was called as pastor of the newly-formed, conservative Third Congregational Church of Plymouth, Massachusetts. Plymouth was then a good-sized town of some 3,500 residents. Both the Third Church's new edifice and the spacious house Judson had built for his family not far from the church enjoyed a pleasant view of the harbor.




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A few months after settling in Plymouth, Adoniram, then aged fourteen, became seriously ill. For a long time he was extremely weak and his recovery was doubtful. More than a year passed before he was able to resume normal activities. While he was laid aside he spent many long days and nights contemplating what he would like to do with his life. He considered becoming an orator, a poet or a statesman, or pursuing some other career by which he could attain the highest eminence. But such pleasant prospects were blasted when he realized that even if he achieved the prominence he desired, he could not hold on to that honor forever. What would it profit him after a hundred years had passed that America had never seen his equal? When he became alarmed at the boundless swelling of his own abominable pride as revealed by such thoughts, he tried to comfort himself with the notion that it was caused by the fever in his brain.



One day he pondered the possibility of becoming a prominent divine in order to gain the eminence he desired. Gradually, however, he concluded that the humble Gospel minister who labored only to please God and benefit his fellow man was worthy of greater honor than was the renowned worldly divine who pursued the same perishable objects of fame and fortune that other men sought to gain through their occupations. Only the selfless, humble minister would have his fame sounded before him as he entered the eternal world. But no sooner had he begun considering the possibility of gaining that type of eternal fame than the words flashed through his mind, “Not unto us, not unto us, but to Thy name be the glory” (Ps. 115:1). In light of that scriptural perspective, even the pursuit of eternal glory for oneself seemed inappropriate, perhaps blasphemous.



These musings left him confounded, and stirred up within him a flood of feelings that had till then remained dormant. He now clearly saw the vanity of worldly pursuits and was, on the whole, ready to admit the superiority of religious ones. But his father had often said he would one day be a great man and that was still what he was determined to be. He felt like he had ventured onto dangerous ground.



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He had always said and thought, so far as he had thought anything about it, that he wished to become truly religious; but now religion seemed so entirely opposed to all his ambitious plans, that he was afraid to look into his heart, lest he should discover what he did not like to confess, even to himself – that he did not want to become a Christian.⁷

Such uncomfortable introspections were likely suppressed, at least to a degree, as Judson returned to health and normal activities. Having lost a year of schooling, he threw himself into his studies more intensely than ever before. In the next twelve months he completed two full years of schooling. As a result, by the time his sixteenth birthday arrived in 1804, he was ready to enter college.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 9.