

Mormonism in the Methodist Marketplace

James Covell and the Historical Background of Doctrine and Covenants 39–40

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On January 5, 1831, Joseph Smith received a revelation directed to one James Covill, an experienced Protestant minister and a potential convert to Smith's nascent Church of Christ. Like so many of Joseph Smith's early revelations directed to specific individuals, this one assured the recipient that the Lord knew him personally: "I have looked upon thy works and know thee and verily I say unto thee thy heart is right before me." The Lord promised Covill that if he obeyed the revelation and submitted to baptism that he would be assigned "a greater work"—to "Preach the fullness of my Gospel, . . . to build up my Church & to bring forth Zion" in preparation for the Second Coming of Christ.¹ Unlike most other revelations contained in the Doctrine and Covenants, though, this was followed by another the next day received by Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon, "telling them why James obeyed not the Command which he Received." Covill, according to this second revelation, succumbed to the temptations of Satan and "the fear of persecutions & cares of the world."² Because his interest in the Church was short-lived, Covill has largely been excluded from historical narratives

1. The revelation is today canonized in the Doctrine and Covenants as Section 39. For the earliest manuscript version of the revelation, see "Revelation, 5 January 1831," in Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Manuscript Revelation Books*, facsimile edition, first volume of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2009), 87–91.

2. "Revelation, 6 January 1831," in Jensen, Woodford, and Harper, *Manuscript Revelation Books*, 91.

At the annual meeting of the Mormon History Association in 2009, I listened to several researchers and editors at the Joseph Smith Papers Project speak on the recently discovered Book of Commandments and Revelations. I was especially intrigued by a comment made almost in passing about a seemingly insignificant correction to the historical record—James Covill, the subject of two revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants, was identified as a Methodist rather than a Baptist preacher, as the current historical note accompanying section 39 indicates. I was, at the time, completing a master's thesis exploring the influence of Methodism on early Mormonism and immediately wondered how this new information about Covill spoke to my research.



After finishing the thesis, I began a close reading of the two revelations and was both surprised and delighted at the ways in which Covill's religious affiliation changed the way I read them. Baptists and Methodists were bitter competitors for converts in antebellum America and the most successful evangelicals of their day. They shared a commitment to proselytizing the new nation but differed in key points of doctrine and church government—those themes immediately stood out to me in the Covill revelations, and I drafted a short historical note on why it matters that James Covill was a Methodist and not a Baptist that I planned on submitting for publication. Before doing so, I learned that other historians had identified a Methodist preacher by the name of James Covel, who they supposed was the James Covill in question. Encouraged by this possibility, I began scouring Methodist sources online and then later in the archives. Digging through manuscript records and microfilm copies of old periodicals, I was slowly able to piece together James Covel's preaching career—I even found two letters he wrote that were published in denominational newspapers.

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of Mormonism, aside from an occasional mention as an example in lesson materials on the consequences of rejecting the Lord's counsel.³

When the Doctrine and Covenants was first published in 1835, the two revelations discussing Covill were included as sections 59 and 60, respectively, and included for the first time Covill's last name; in the earliest manuscripts he is simply called "James," and in the Book of Commandments, published in 1833, he was identified as "James (C.)."⁴ In 1839, while preparing the Manuscript History of the Church, Joseph Smith and his scribes added a little more detail to Covill's story. James Mulholland recorded that Covill first approached Joseph Smith after the Church's conference held in Fayette, New York, on January 2, 1831, noted that Covill "had been a Baptist minister for about forty years" and added that upon rejecting Mormonism, he "returned to his former principles and people."⁵

That additional biographical information has been repeated by historians for years and is the basis for the current historical headnotes accompanying the revelations in Latter-day Saint scripture. The Book of Commandments and Revelations, a manuscript discovered in 2005 during a search through historical documents possessed by the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by the Joseph Smith Papers Project, however, identifies Covill not as a Baptist minister but rather "a Methodist priest."⁶ Written primarily in the hand of John Whitmer from 1831 to 1835 and recently published as volume 1 of the Revelations and Translations series of the Joseph

3. See, for example, "Revelations to James Covill: Sections 39–40," in *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual: Religion 324 and 325* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981, 2001), 79–80.

4. *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of the Latter Day Saints: Carefully Selected from the Revelations of God, and Compiled by Joseph Smith Junior, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, Frederick G. Williams, Presiding Elders of the Church* (Kirtland, Ohio: F.G. Williams & Co., 1835), 187–88; *A Book of Commandments, for the Government of the Church of Christ, Organized According to Law, on the 6th of April, 1830* (Zion [Jackson Co., Missouri]: W. W. Phelps and Co., 1833), 85–87.

5. See Manuscript History of the Church, A1:91 in Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith, Volume 1: Autobiographical and Historical Writings* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 346; "History of Joseph Smith," *Times and Seasons* 4 (October 15, 1843): 353–54.

6. "A Book of Commandments and Revelations," in Jensen, Woodford, and Harper, *Manuscript Revelation Books*, 387. The heading to Doctrine and Covenants 39 does not actually identify Covill's religious affiliation at all, but the index found at the back of the Book of Commandments and Revelations identifies the section as "A Revelation to James a Methodist Priest." Like nearly all non-Anglican Protestants, Methodists in early America did not actually recognize "priest" as a priesthood office; their ministers were Deacons, Elders, or simply "preachers." In January 1831, James Covell was an Elder in the Methodist Protestant Church.

Smith Papers, the “Book of Commandments and Revelations” contains the earliest surviving manuscript copies of several of Joseph Smith’s revelations, including the two discussing James Covill, likely written soon after they were received in January 1831.⁷ Because of the earlier provenance of these manuscript versions of the revelations, they are likely more accurate than the details provided later by Mulholland and other scribes. Additionally, attempts to find a Baptist minister in the Fayette area in January 1831 have proved fruitless.⁸

Following up on the suggestion that Covill was a Methodist and not a Baptist, historians Sherilyn Farnes and Steven Harper found insightful corroborating evidence:

Covill had been a minister for forty years and then covenanted to obey the Lord’s will as revealed to Joseph Smith—but he had been a Methodist, not a Baptist minister. There is no sign of Covill in Baptist records, but a James Covel appears in Methodist records beginning in 1791, forty years before section 39 was received, when he was appointed as a traveling preacher on the Litchfield, Connecticut, circuit. He rode various Methodist circuits for four years as an itinerant preacher. In 1795 James married Sarah Gould, the daughter of a Methodist preacher, on October 28. James rode the Lynn, Massachusetts, circuit for a year before he “located.” That is, he settled, raised a family, apparently practiced medicine, and largely dropped out of the Methodist records. Sarah and James had a son, James Jr., who followed his father into the ministry. The Covels moved to Maine and then to Poughkeepsie, New York, around 1808. It is not clear where they were when they heard of Joseph Smith and the restored gospel about 1830, but most likely they were still somewhere in New York.⁹

7. While March 1831, when John Whitmer was called by revelation to keep a history and record of the revelations received by Joseph Smith, seems the more likely date the Book of Commandments and Revelations was started, some argue for an earlier date, pointing to the summer of 1830. Based on the available evidence, I tend to favor early 1831 as the likely starting point. Either way, the manuscript copies of the two revelations focusing on Covill were likely transcribed no later than November 1831, when John Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery took the collection to Missouri in an abortive initial attempt to publish the Book of Commandments. See Robert J. Woodford, “Introducing a Book of Commandments and Revelations: A Major New Documentary ‘Discovery,’” *BYU Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 7–8; and Robin Scott Jensen, “From Manuscript to Printed Page: An Analysis of the History of the Book of Commandments and Revelations,” *BYU Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 19–52.

8. Robert J. Woodford, “James Covel (Covill, Covil),” unpublished paper in my possession, 3. As Woodford notes, “Lyndon W. Cook found a Baptist minister named James Covell over 130 miles away in Chautaugua County whom he supposed was the man found in LDS Church records.” See Lyndon W. Cook, *Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith: A Historical and Biographical Commentary of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 56.

9. Steven C. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants: A Guided Tour through the Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 132–33. See also Harper,

Additional research in Methodist manuscript collections and periodicals adds further detail to Harper and Farnes's initial findings, confirming that James Covell, the Methodist preacher, was stationed near Fayette, New York, in January 1831 and that the details from his ministry bear out suggestions that he is likely the James Covill discussed in sections 39 and 40 of the Doctrine and Covenants. In addition to presenting that evidence, this article also considers what this newfound knowledge contributes to our understanding of the revelations.

Understanding that James Covell was a Methodist (and not a Baptist) preacher sheds new light from a unique vantage point on the key debates and issues that permeated the religious world in which early Mormonism emerged; it also reveals the way its earliest investigators and converts understood its message regarding the proper nature and mode of baptism, missionary work, and church government.¹⁰ The Covell case is particularly important precisely because he never converted to Mormonism. Analyses of Mormonism's reception by others are generally drawn from either the later remembrances of its most faithful converts or the writings of its most bitter enemies, but the story of James Covell—a man intrigued and perhaps even somewhat convinced by what Mormonism had to offer, but who ultimately rejected that message—provides a new and refreshing point of view. He had much in common with many of Mormonism's other early investigators, and Mormonism surely appealed to him for many of the same reasons it did to others; but, by contrast, Covell likely found such stances as the necessity of baptism by immersion offensive, Mormonism's mode of missionary work familiar but ultimately unsuitable to his own situation, and the authority possessed by a twenty-six-year-old prophet simultaneously powerful and imprudent. To understand why, we must first examine Covell's lengthy career as a Methodist that almost led him into Mormonism.

**“I have looked upon thy works and I know thee”:
James Covell's Preaching Career, 1791–1831**

As noted above, James Covell's career as a Methodist preacher began in 1791, when he was admitted on trial and assigned to the Methodist Episcopal Church's Litchfield circuit (Connecticut) under the leadership of Jesse Lee,

“Historical Headnotes and the Index of Contents in the Book of Commandments and Revelations,” *BYU Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 61, where he credits Farnes.

10. While I have heretofore used the spelling of his last name presented in LDS records (“Covill”), I have chosen to use “Covell” from this point on, in keeping with the spelling most common in Methodist records and which Covell himself used. It should be noted, though, that the name is alternately spelled “Covell,” “Covall,” “Covill,” and “Covill” in Methodist records, and when quoting such sources, I maintain the original spelling.

a pioneer of Methodism in eighteenth-century New England.¹¹ Covell was born in Chatham, Barnstable County, Massachusetts, the son of a Baptist minister and a Methodist mother. Although little is known of Covell's early life and religious wanderings, his entrance into the Methodist ministry at the age of twenty-two follows the pattern of many other energetic young converts to the Methodist faith in that region. The first Methodist Episcopal preachers had entered New England only a few years earlier, and Covell was among the earliest Methodist preachers born and raised in the area. As recently detailed by historian Glen Messer, these native New England itinerants were typically "young men on the threshold of manhood who were not completely devoid of prospects, but not endowed with great wealth either." They generally came from religious upbringings and saw a career in the Methodist itinerancy as both a response to a divine call to preach and an opportunity "to make modest advancements in their own economic status."¹² Covell's conversion and call to the ministry seems to have followed this pattern. So, too, did his subsequent advancement in the Methodist ministry.

In 1792, Covell remained on trial but was transferred to the Otsego circuit (New York), where the elder in charge of his district was yet another eminent Methodist in early America, Freeborn Garretson. Such transfers, which relocated itinerant preachers on a year-to-year basis and often took them across state lines, were standard procedure in Methodism. Many spent time in both the North and the South, and some even ventured into Canada and the West Indies.¹³ While Covell was never assigned to such distant locales, his early years as an itinerant preacher did take him throughout New England and New York State; after one more transfer to another circuit in New York, he was reassigned to his initial circuit in Litchfield and then to the Marblehead and Lynn circuits in Massachusetts. As was typical among Methodist preachers, Covell completed his two-year probationary period and was admitted into full connection in 1793, then constituted a deacon in 1794, and finally elected and ordained an elder in 1796.¹⁴ By that point, Covell had relocated to Marblehead, Massachusetts, where

11. *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for the Years 1773–1828. Volume 1* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), 39, 42. See also Payne Kenyon Kilbourne, *Sketches and Chronicles of the Town of Litchfield, Connecticut, Historical, Biographical, and Statistical: Together with a Complete Official Register of the Town* (Hartford, Conn.: Case, Lockwood, and Co., 1859), 183.

12. Glen Alton Messer II, "Restless for Zion: New England Methodism, Holiness, and the Abolitionist Struggle, circa 1789–1845" (ThD diss., Boston University School of Theology, 2006), 92–94.

13. See Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind, 1770–1810* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 15.

14. Methodist Episcopal Church, *A Form of Discipline, for the Ministers, Preachers, and Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. Considered and*

he married Sarah Gould in October 1795. After another year spent as a traveling minister, Covell “located”—that is, became a local instead of an itinerant preacher—in 1797 and pursued a career in medicine. His short career as an itinerant preacher was by all accounts typical of many Methodists.¹⁵

Interestingly, Covell’s experience as a traveling preacher prompted his future career path. In an 1808 letter, he recalled having anticipated that at the time of his marriage to Sarah “the time would come, when his family concerns would be such as to prevent his traveling in his ministerial vocation.” After the birth of James and Sarah’s first son, James Jr., on September 4, 1796, that time had apparently arrived. As early as 1792, Covell began “the study of physic . . . with a view to obtain a more general knowledge of men and things.” During his time as an itinerant minister, Covell became sensitive to “the distresses of many of the poor among whom he travelled,” which “induced him to obtain all the knowledge in the healing art he could.” He thus “formed a friendly acquaintance with several gentlemen in the medical line” and from them “obtained not only books but advice and instruction.” By the time he and Sarah moved to Eden, Hancock County, Maine, in 1799, Covell felt satisfied that he had adequately “applied himself . . . to the study of physic, surgery and midwifery” and “commenced the practice.” Over the next seven years, he worked as a family physician and established a reputation “in that part of the country as a skilful and judicious practitioner.”¹⁶

James Covell’s time as a Methodist preacher did not end when he pursued a career in medicine, though. Methodists often relied on “located” preachers to administer the sacraments of baptism and marriage and to work with itinerant preachers in ministering to local classes and societies.¹⁷ In addition to Covell’s continued activity in Methodist affairs, his older brother and two of his sons followed his example and became Methodist preachers themselves. Zenas Covell, three years James’s senior, was admitted on trial in 1801 and assigned to the Saratoga circuit, just north of Albany, New York.

Approved at a Conference Held at Baltimore, in the State of Maryland, On Monday the 27th of December, 1784, in Which the Reverend Thomas Coke, L.L.D. and the Reverend Francis Asbury, Presided. Arranged under Proper Heads and Methodised in a More Acceptable and Easy Manner. With Some Other Useful Pieces Annexed (Elizabeth-Town, N.J.: Shepard Kollock, 1788), 7–13.

15. For details of Covell’s preaching career, see *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1:44, 47–48, 51, 53, 56, 59, 62, 65, 70, 72–73. See also Abel Stevens, *Memorials of the Introduction of Methodism into the Eastern States: Comprising Biographical Notices of Its Early Preachers, Sketches of Its First Churches, and Reminiscences of Its Early Struggles and Successes* (Boston: Charles H. Peirce, 1848), 119.

16. James Covell, “Communication,” *Poughkeepsie Journal*, February 10, 1808, 3.

17. On “located” preachers, see Messer, “Restless for Zion,” 59–61.

He accelerated through the ranks of Methodist preachers, being admitted into full connection and ordained an elder after just two years, traveling several circuits throughout New York State in his decade-long career as an itinerant. In 1805, Zenas was assigned to the Newburg circuit (New York); the following summer, James and Sarah moved just twenty miles north of Newburg, settling in Poughkeepsie. Four years later, Zenas located and settled in Dutchess County, New York, where he had been assigned the previous year, and took up work as a private tutor and teacher to a family there.¹⁸ In addition to Zenas, other Covels lived in the area, including James and Zenas's father, who passed away while living there in 1814.¹⁹

James Covel's activities in Poughkeepsie are relatively well documented. By the time he and Sarah moved again in 1819, James had apparently established himself in the community. He purchased property, practiced medicine, performed marriages, and occasionally preached. But he initially got off to a rough start. On May 11, 1807, the Dutchess County Medical Society charged Covel with "practicing Physic and Surgery contrary to a requisition of a law of this state." After the notice was published in the local newspaper, Covel sent a letter in his defense, rehearsing his qualifications and attaching letters of recommendation from patients in Maine.²⁰ How the dispute was eventually resolved is not entirely clear, but in December of that year Covel opened a store with one Jonathan Ward selling "genuine Drugs and Medicine" as "physicians and druggists." In time, Covel became a member of the Dutchess County Medical Society.²¹ In addition to his medical career, James also remained busy with clerical responsibilities, marrying couples, and preaching. Interestingly, though, the extent of his involvement with the Methodist church in Poughkeepsie is not clear. His name does not appear in the few surviving contemporary Methodist records in Poughkeepsie, and reports of

18. For details of Zenas Covel's ministry in the Methodist Episcopal Church, see *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1:95, 100–101, 105, 108, 112, 124, 136, 177, 178. See also Janet Rohrabaker, "Update: Note on Rev. Mr. Zenas Covel and Rev. Dr. James Covel, Brothers and Ministers," *The Dutchess* 29 (Spring 2002): 108.

19. See "1810 Census Records: Village of Poughkeepsie, Town of Poughkeepsie," *The Dutchess* 4, no. 2 (December 1976): 23. The March 16, 1814, issue of the *Poughkeepsie Journal* contained a notice that "the good and chattels, lands and tenements of James Covel, Jun." were for sale. This is likely Doctor Covel's father, who had passed away in January. See *Poughkeepsie Journal*, March 16, 1814, 4.

20. *Poughkeepsie Journal*, February 10, 1808, 2–3.

21. *Poughkeepsie Journal*, December 20, 1807, 3; Covel's name is recorded in the list of members of the Medical Society in James H. Smith, *History of Dutchess County, New York, with Illustrations and Sketches of Some of Its Prominent Men and Pioneers* (Syracuse, N.Y.: D. Mason and Co., 1882), 109.

his preaching that made it into the local newspaper note him preaching at the Episcopal—not Methodist—church. In the summer of 1818, for instance, “the Rev. Doct. Covell” delivered a discourse as part of the celebration of the Festival of St. John the Baptist.²² None of the notices of marriage performed by James Covell mention a denominational affiliation, and in the 1808 letter in which he defended his medical credentials, Covell describes his “ministerial vocation” in a way entirely omitting any mention of Methodism. He referred to his time as “an itinerant preacher” without noting his connection to the Methodist Episcopal Church.²³ Furthermore, in 1809, James and Sarah purchased and lived in the Glebe House, which formerly housed the Rector of the Episcopal Church in Poughkeepsie. They remained there until 1812 or 1813 when they sold the property and moved within the community.²⁴

22. *Poughkeepsie Journal*, June 24, 1818, 3. The celebration was apparently a civic affair, and in addition to Episcopalians, Masons participated in and sponsored the event. The Festival of St. John the Baptist celebrated the arrival of the midsummer solstice each year and featured into both Masonic and Christian liturgical calendars. John Henry Hobart, Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in New York State, who was stationed in Poughkeepsie at the same time Covell lived there, spent several pages discussing the festival in his *Companion for the Festivals and Fasts of the Protestant Episcopal Church*. See John Henry Hobart, *A Companion for the Festivals and Fasts of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, Principally Selected and Altered from Nelson's Companion for the Festivals and Fasts of the Church of England, with Forms of Devotion*, 2d ed. (New York: T. and J. Swords, 1817), 229–34. In addition to the 1818 discourse, the July 7, 1813, issue of the *Poughkeepsie Journal* summarized the community's Fourth of July celebration, noting that it began at “the Episcopal Church, where the exercises of the day were opened by a highly impressive address to the throne of grace by the Rev. Mr. Covell.” See *Poughkeepsie Journal*, July 7, 1813, 3. This, however, appears to refer to Zenas Covell, not James, who was identified as “Rev. Dr. Covell.” See Rohrabaker, “Note on Rev. Mr. Zenas Covell and Rev. Dr. James Covell,” 108.

23. *Poughkeepsie Journal*, February 10, 1808, 3. For marriages performed by Covell, see *Poughkeepsie Journal*, March 4, 1812, 3. Additionally, the paper contains ads for “COVEL AND PATTEN, BOOKSELLERS IN POUGHKEEPSIE” peddling among other volumes a book written by Methodist minister Billy Hibbard, who entered the ministry in 1798 and preached mostly in the New York Conference. It is unclear whether this Covell is James or Zenas, but it seems likely that it was Zenas, who, in addition to his responsibilities as a teacher and tutor, worked as publisher around this time. See *Poughkeepsie Journal*, June 3, 1812, 1; and *Poughkeepsie Journal*, June 10, 1812, 1. In 1813, Zenas Covell published the memoirs of noted New Light Presbyterian preacher William Tennent Jr. See Elias Boudinot, *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. William Tennent, Late Pastor of the Presbyterian Church at Freehold, in New-Jersey: With an Account of His Views While in a Trance, Which Continued Three Days* (Kingston, N.Y.: Zenas Covell, 1813).

24. See “Sales by Mortgage,” *Poughkeepsie Journal*, July 8, 1812, 2. The Covells are the only non-Episcopalians I have been able to find who lived in the Glebe house.

What are we to make of Covell's relationship with the Episcopal Church during this time? Had he left Methodism? The answer to the latter question appears to be no; there is no mention of the Covells in the detailed records of Poughkeepsie's Episcopal Church. Instead, Covell's actions may be seen as a conscious attempt to elevate his social standing and advance his professional career. While there remained some lingering anti-British sentiment toward the Protestant Episcopal Church in the early nineteenth century, in Poughkeepsie the Episcopalians' Christ Church was the ecclesiastical home of several of the town's most prominent citizens, including Samuel Bard, president of the Dutchess County Medical Society, and James Livingston Van Kleeck, the Society's secretary, who had penned the notice charging Covell with practicing medicine illegally.²⁵

Yet while Covell may have consciously sought to be included in the civic and professional society dominated by Episcopalians, he never severed ties with Methodism, as did some other Methodist ministers who grew weary of the physical rigor and low pay.²⁶ Covell's wife, Sarah, and his brother's wife, Mary, are both listed as members on the Methodist class list kept by class leader Charles Duncomb from 1805 to 1812. In 1811, James Covell's medical and religious careers overlapped when itinerant Methodist preacher Landford Whiting contracted smallpox while traveling along the Hudson River. Methodist leaders stopped off in Poughkeepsie and "committed [Landford] to the care of Doctor James Covell."²⁷ The Covells' continued activity in the Meth-

25. The Bards and Van Kleecks not only rented pews at Christ Church but also donated generous amounts to pay for the church's first steeple and, later, its organ. It is also possible that Jonathan Ward, with whom Covell went into business, was Episcopalian, too. There is listed among pew renters during this period a "Ward," whose first name is not mentioned. See Helen Wilkinson Reynolds, ed., *The Records of Christ Church, Poughkeepsie, New York* (Poughkeepsie, N.Y.: Frank B. Howard, 1911), 42, 95, 128, 171.

26. Because of the historical relationship between the two groups (Methodism began as a revival movement within the Church of England, and Methodists in America formally separated in 1784), movement between Methodism and Episcopalianism was not entirely uncommon in the early Republic, and cultural connections between many members of each group remained strong in spite of the institutional separation. See Kyle Bulthuis, "Four Steeples over the City Streets: Trinity Episcopal, St. Philip's Episcopal, John Street Methodist, and African Methodist Episcopal Zion Churches in New York City, 1760-1840" (PhD diss., University of California, Davis, 2006), 30-31.

27. Class Meetings list in L. M. Vincent, *Methodism in Poughkeepsie and Vicinity: Its Rise and Progress from 1780 to 1892, with Sketches and Incidents, a Brief Summary of Other Religious Denominations* (Poughkeepsie, N.Y.: A. V. Haight, 1892), 62. "Sarah Covell" is the eighth individual listed and "Mary Covell" is the eighteenth. Methodist preachers belonged not to local congregations or classes but rather to

odist Episcopal Church is further evidenced in the lives of their two oldest sons—James Jr. and Samuel—who each entered the Methodist itinerancy as well. After experiencing conversion at age sixteen, James Jr. began preaching in 1815, was admitted on trial in the New York Conference in 1816, and took up as his first assignment his father’s old circuit in Pittsfield. In 1818, he was admitted into full connection and ordained a deacon, and then, in 1820, he became an elder. The following year, Samuel was admitted on trial and sent to Charlotte in western New York.²⁸ It was during this time—perhaps because the two eldest sons had left home, perhaps because their father was looking for opportunities to advance his medical career—that James and his family relocated to New York City. It is not clear exactly when they moved. In late 1818, Covell performed the marriage of “Mr. Thomas Burrows, to Miss Ann Warren,” and his name was listed on the membership roll of the Dutchess County Medical Society as late as May 1819.²⁹ As early as October of that year, though, the Covells had moved to New York City. On the 23rd of that month, “Rev. Dr. Covell” performed the marriage of “Mr. Abraham F. Rush, to Miss Ann Blauvelt, both of Greenwich Village.”³⁰ In September 1820, the Covells were settled in their new home, and James applied for membership in the Medical Society of the County of New York.³¹ Their arrival in New York coincided with a point of

ministerial conferences, perhaps explaining the absence of James’s name from this list. For more on the relationship between local Methodist societies and clerical conferences, see Russell E. Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America: A History* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1996). For the Lansford Whiting incident, see *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1:207.

28. For James Jr., see *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1:269, 285, 288, 301, 304, 317, 321, 336, 340, 351. For Samuel, see *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1:354, 375, 390, 395, 416, 440–42, 465–66, 495, 497; John M’Clintock and James Strong, *Cyclopædia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, 12 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1884), 12:140. James would go on to gain some notoriety with the Methodist Episcopal Church as an author and educator, publishing in 1843 *A Concise Dictionary of the Holy Bible, Designed for the Use of Sunday School Teachers and Families, with Maps and Numerous Fine Engravings* (New York: G. Lane and P. P. Sandford, 1843). See Stephen Parks, *Troy Conference Miscellany, Containing a Historical Sketch of Methodism within the Bounds of the Troy Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, with Reminiscences of Its Deceased, and Contributions by Its Living Ministers, with an Appendix* (Albany: J. Lord, 1854), 185–93.

29. *Poughkeepsie Journal*, December 2, 1818, 3; Smith, *History of Dutchess County*, 109.

30. “October 30, 1819,” in *The Ladies’ Literary Cabinet, Being a Miscellaneous Repository of Literary Productions, in Prose and Verse*, ed. S. Woodworth, vol. 1 (New York: Woodworth and Heustis, 1819), 200.

31. *Minutes of the So-Called Medical Society of the State of New York* (New York: Medical Society of New York, 1878), 231. In the January 1823 list of the “Members

transition in American Methodism, one that proved particularly disruptive for New York City's Methodists. Though he did not know it at the time, this disruption would also signal a transition in James Covell's own religious identity.

The first two decades of the nineteenth century saw Methodists in America grow from a small sect to one of the country's largest Protestant denominations. With growth came influence, and with influence some measure of respectability. The overtly emotional worship and radical social positions that had characterized the Methodists in America gradually gave way to a more refined and moderate religious experience and a cultured clergy increasingly at peace with American social norms. In response, some Methodists began calling for reform. In New York City, these debates took on explicitly class- and race-laden tones, as the city's predominantly working-class uptown Methodists decried the influence exerted by the merchant-class congregants who worshipped at the downtown John Street chapel. Tensions boiled over in 1818, when rumors began to spread that John Street's wealthy members convinced Methodist city trustees to build a more ornate building with pews for rent instead of simply repairing the aging structure in place. Wary of displays of worldliness at odds with the Wesleyan tradition and fearing that the Methodist community's few assets were being disproportionately handled and distributed by a select few in collusion with church leaders, many working-class Methodists at uptown churches left in protest, accusing local leaders of "popery." Led by recently ordained itinerant Elder William Stilwell, the dissenters formally organized themselves under the name of the Methodist Society of New York in 1820.³²

While class tensions were at the heart of the Stilwellite schism, they were inseparable from broader debates over church government and the episcopacy in Methodism during this period. Following the death of beloved Bishop Francis Asbury in 1816, these debates came to a head in local conflicts over the concentrated power exerted by both bishops and presiding elders. In New York City, these were accompanied by calls for greater lay representation and voice in church affairs, attempting to claim in both their actions and their chosen name a more primitive and pure Methodism.

of Medical Society of the county of New York," Covell was listed among "Legal Practitioners, not Members." See *The National Advocate for the Country*, January 31, 1823.

32. I have drawn heavily from Kyle Bulthuis's excellent analysis of this and other ecclesiastical schisms in New York City during this period. See Kyle T. Bulthuis, "Preacher Politics and People Power: Congregational Conflicts in New York City, 1810–1830," *Church History* 78, no. 2 (June 2009): 261–82. See also Elizabeth A. Georgian, "A Church in Crisis? Paradoxes in the Rise of American Methodism, 1777–1835" (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 2010), 110–23. Stilwell entered the itinerancy in 1814 and was ordained an elder in 1818. See *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1:235, 305.

It is not clear how James Covell first came into contact with Stilwell—there was a William Stillwell who was prominent in the affairs of the city’s medical community, though there is no discernable relationship between the doctor and the dissenting preacher.³³ If the site of the marriage performed by Covell in October 1819 is any indication of where he lived and worshipped in the city, then he resided near the uptown Methodists who followed Stilwell out of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Covell, listed as a local preacher in Methodist records during this period, withdrew from the Methodist Episcopal Church on January 12, 1821, and had united with the Stilwellites by July. On July 16, 1821, Stilwell recorded with satisfaction that “a number of other preachers have joined the Society; and among the number Doctor Covell, who was an Elder in the Methodist Episcopal Church at the time he withdrew and joined the Methodist Society.”³⁴

Covell’s reasons for uniting with Stilwell’s society are not clear. Perhaps he felt the Stilwellites represented something closer to the Methodism of the late eighteenth century, when he was first converted and began preaching. Perhaps he rediscovered his commitment to the poor and working classes after tiring of trying to impress the upper class Episcopalians in Poughkeepsie. But whatever his reasons, he was not alone in his actions. The Methodist Society grew rapidly, attracting as many as six hundred new members in their first year of existence.³⁵ Probably because of his age and experience, Covell immediately became a leader in the new religious society, working closely with William Stilwell and his uncle Samuel Stilwell. When black Methodists in New York City sought and were denied ordination at the hands of Methodist Episcopal leaders, they turned to William Stilwell, who had previously been assigned as the white leader of the city’s two black Methodist congregations. Christopher Rush, who would later be elected bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, recalled the episode. After having their request denied by Methodist Episcopal Bishop William McKendree,

the committee, thus authorized, promptly went forward, and shortly after obtained the consent of Doctor James Covell, Silvester Hutchinson and William M. Stilwell, all regularly ordained Elders of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and members of the Methodist church lately established in this city, (having recently withdrawn from the old connexion, for reasons

33. *Minutes of the So-Called Medical Society of the State of New York*, 4, 23, 316.

34. Methodist Episcopal Church Records, vol. 79, New York Public Library; Samuel Stilwell, *Historical Sketches of the Rise and Progress of the Methodist Society in the City of New York* (New York: Bolmore, 1821), 45. I am indebted to Kyle Bulthuis for providing the reference in the manuscript record of the Methodist Episcopal Church held at the New York Public Library.

35. Bulthuis, “Four Steeples over the City Streets,” 126.

mentioned in the foregoing part of this work,) and on Monday night, June 17th, 1822, they attended the appointed meeting in Zion Church, and after an appropriate and solemn sermon, delivered by Doctor Covell, they ordained Abraham Thompson, James Varick and Leven Smith, Elders in the church of God, in the presence of a large and respectable audience. Thus, after twenty-one months struggling through a kind of spiritual wilderness, Zion Church obtained three ordained Elders.³⁶

In addition to Covell's participation in this historic ordination of African American ministers, in 1822 he and William Stilwell were named to the board of directors for the newly-established New York Society for Promoting Communities—an interdenominational organization headed by Quaker doctor Cornelius Blatchly and dedicated to social justice and biblical communitarianism. "James Covell, [Minister] and Physician" signed his name to a statement declaring the society's aim "to convince the pious of all denominations, that their duty is to institute and establish in every religious congregation, a system of social, equal, and inclusive rights, interests, liberties, and privileges to all real and personal property" in imitation of the "community of goods among the Apostles and first Christians."³⁷ Both of these actions lend credence to the suggestion that Covell had renewed his commitment to uplifting and assisting the poor. He also remained active in his ecclesiastical responsibilities, developing a reputation as "a man of ability, excellent character, and gentleness of temper," while preaching sermons, performing marriages, and ordaining others as deacons and elders.³⁸

By 1825, over 2,500 had joined the Methodist Society, both within and beyond New York City, including Lorenzo Dow, the famed revivalist whose own journey in and out of the Methodist Episcopal Church roughly paralleled that of Covell.³⁹ But as the group of Methodist dissenters grew in size, dissension within their own ranks eventually occurred as well. In 1824,

36. Christopher Rush, *A Short Account of the Rise and Progress of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in America, Written by Christopher Rush, Superintendent of the Connexion, with the Aid of George Collins: Also, a Concise View of Church Order or Government, from Scripture and from Some of the Best Authors on the Subject of Church Government, Relative to Episcopacy* (New York: By the author, 1843), 84.

37. "Preamble to the Constitution of the New-York Society for Promoting Communities," in Cornelius Blatchly, *An Essay on Commonwealths* (New York: The New-York Society for Promoting Communities, 1822), 3–4.

38. Samuel Stilwell Doughty, *The Life of Samuel Stilwell, with Notices of Some of His Contemporaries* (New York: Brown and Wilson, 1877), 44. For Covell performing marriages, see *New-York Spectator*, December 9, 1823, col. A; for other activities, see T. H. Colhouer, *Sketches of the Founders of the Methodist Protestant Church, and Its Bibliography* (Pittsburgh: Methodist Protestant Book Concern, 1880), 366–67.

39. Bulthuis, "Four Steeples over the City Streets," 126.

William Stilwell published an updated edition of the group's *Discipline*, apparently without the consent of the society's voting members and ministers—a potentially explosive move in a group predicated on representation and voting rights. Additionally, disagreements broke out over union with other dissenting Methodist groups along the eastern seaboard. In November 1826, a majority of the society's members, regarding themselves as the rightful heirs of the movement Stilwell had started six years earlier, met in conference. Consisting of representatives from not only New York, but also Connecticut, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, the conference dismissed William Stilwell and others from the society and drafted a resolution charging William Stilwell with “maladministration” and “despotism.”⁴⁰ They also formed a union that year with other dissenting Methodists throughout the United States, attracting Congregational Methodists, Independent Methodists, Wesleyan Methodists, and Reformed Methodists (from whose church came several early Mormons, including Brigham Young and his brothers). The president of the New York Conference elected to represent this newly united Methodist Society was James Covell.⁴¹ Covell's tenure as president lasted one year—this Methodist Society was adamant that no individual should remain in a position of authority too long.⁴²

40. *Extracts from the Minutes, &c. of the Sixth Yearly Conference, and the First Annual State Conference of the Methodist Society, Held in the City of New-York, in November, 1826, and June, 1827* (New York: Aaron G. Brewer, 1827), 3–5, 22–24. For a comparison of the changes Stilwell made to the Society's *Discipline*, see *The Discipline of the Methodist Society, as Adopted in the City of New-York, 16th July, 1821* (New York: Bolmore, 1821); and *The Discipline of the Methodist Society, as Adopted in the City of New-York, 16th July, 1821*, 2d ed. (New York: John C. Totten, 1824). Stilwell maintained that he was right and continued leading the Methodist Society of New York until his death in 1851. See Samuel A. Seaman, *Annals of New York Methodism: Being a History of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the City of New York from A.D. 1766 to A.D. 1890* (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1892), 215–31; and Emory Stevens Bucke, ed., *The History of American Methodism, in Three Volumes* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964) 1:625–29.

41. *The Declaration, Constitution, and Bill of Rights; Together with the Articles of Religion, and Form of Government of the Methodist Societies, as Adopted by a Convention of Delegates, Held in the City of New-York, June, 1826* (New York: S. Budd, 1826), xix–xxi. In 1824, James's brother Zenas had helped organize a conference of the Methodist Society in Rochester, which maintained regular contact with the New York Conference, and in 1825, James Covell presided at their annual conference. See minutes of “The Rochester Conference of Methodist Societies,” in *The Methodist Protestant Church in Central New York State to 1930*, ed. Gilbert T. Smith (New York State: Commission on Archives and History, North Central New York Annual Conference, United Methodist Church, 1999), 3.

42. *Extracts from the Minutes of the Sixth Yearly Conference*, 3–7.

The year 1827 witnessed further expansion and union between dissenting Methodists throughout the United States, with additional conferences formed in upstate New York, Baltimore, Georgia, Ohio, and Kentucky. And then, in 1828, the several conferences of the Methodist Society sent representatives to a general convention of Methodist reformers in Baltimore. Led by a group of prominent ministers from the Methodist Episcopal Church who had been agitating for reform within Methodism's main body for a decade, the convention organized many of the disparate Methodist dissenters in America under the name of the Associated Methodist Churches. Along with Aaron G. Brewer, Covell was called upon to travel to Maryland and attend the convention, which he did. The minutes from that convention noted that "Dr. James Covell, from the Methodist Society, having been requested, stated the causes which led to the establishment of said Society, and their progress to the present time. And, on motion of Brother Hill, the thanks of the Convention were voted."⁴³

Over the course of the next two years, the Methodist Society considered the proposed measures, and in the early months of 1830, the New York Conference and the Rochester Conference both joined several other bodies of reform-minded Methodists in approving and adopting the Associated Articles of the 1828 convention. Covell was active in bringing these endeavors to fruition, serving as a book agent in New York City for literature published by Methodist reformers, traveling between Rochester and New York, and coordinating efforts in both locales.⁴⁴ He was present in Ontario, Wayne County, New York, on February 13, 1830, when the Rochester Conference formally adopted the Associated Articles and became the Genesee Conference of the Associated Methodist Churches. He then assisted two months later in New York City with the organization of the New York Conference of the same body on April 21, 1830.⁴⁵ Seven months later, representatives from the Associated Churches met in Baltimore and established the Methodist Protestant Church. Covell was recognized as "a duly elected member" but was not present.⁴⁶

It was in 1830 that James Covell moved north to assist the newly formed Genesee Conference, where yet another one of his sons—this one

43. *Mutual Rights and Christian Intelligencer*, December 5, 1828, 26.

44. *Mutual Rights and Christian Intelligencer*, February 20, 1829, 48.

45. For Rochester Conference, see Edward J. Drinkhouse, *History of Methodist Reform, Synoptical of General Methodist, 1703 to 1898, with Special and Comprehensive Reference to Its Most Salient Exhibition in the History of the Methodist Protestant Church*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: The Board of Publication of the Methodist Protestant Church, 1899), 2:243–44; Ancel H. Bassett, *A Concise History of the Methodist Protestant Church* (Pittsburgh: Charles A. Scott, 1877), 82. For New York Conference, see Smith, *Methodist Protestant Church in Central New York State*, 11, 25–26.

46. Drinkhouse, *History of Methodist Reform*, 2:252. Only two of the eight elected representatives from New York were apparently present in Baltimore.

named Zenas, presumably after his uncle—had followed his father into the Methodist ministry. In what was apparently intended as a temporary relocation, James Covell was assigned to the Richmond circuit.⁴⁷ Writing in December 1831, he recalled, “One year ago I made this place my stand, among a people as regardless (with few exceptions) of religion, as I ever saw. The providence of God having cast my lot among them, I determined to labour faithfully for four months for their good. If I saw no fruits of my labour in that time, to return to the city of New York.”⁴⁸

It is not entirely clear where Covell first heard about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Nor is it clear what he was doing in Fayette—roughly forty-five miles east of Richmond—in January 1831 when he attended the Mormons’ conference there. Methodist records provide no additional evidence or context to the scant mentions of his attendance by Mormon scribes, but Covell’s duties as conference president might very well have had him visiting a Methodist class in the area at that exact time. It is also possible that he was drawn by curiosity or a desire to evangelize the upstart sect. It is certain, though, that among Methodists, Covell was not alone in feeling drawn to Mormonism.

**“He received the word with gladness”:
The Appeal of Mormonism to Methodists**

Historians have long noted the connections between Methodism and Mormonism. Joseph Smith himself remembered as a youth being “somewhat partial to the Methodist sect” and later told Methodist preacher Peter Cartwright that “we Latter-day Saints are Methodists, as far as they have gone, only we have advanced further.”⁴⁹ Many others attracted to the Mormon message on both sides of the Atlantic came from Methodist backgrounds—perhaps more than any other religion—including the Church’s first three presidents and eight of the original twelve Apostles.⁵⁰ Nor were early Latter-day Saints

47. Smith, *Methodist Protestant Church in Central New York State*, 26. The 1830 census, taken during the summer, lists Covell as living in Canadice, Ontario, New York, approximately six miles south of Richmond. See *1830 US Census: Canadice, Ontario, New York*, 263; National Archives and Records Administration Roll: M19–101; Family History Film: 0017161.

48. James Covell, letter dated December 26, 1831, in *Mutual Rights and Methodist Protestant*, January 13, 1832, 9.

49. Joseph Smith, “History, 1839,” in Jesse, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:270; Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright*, with an introduction by Charles L. Wallis (Nashville: Abingdon Press reprint, 1984), 225–26.

50. For statistics of early Mormons’ religious backgrounds, see Stephen Fleming, “John Wesley: A Methodist Foundation for the Restoration,” *Religious Educator* 9 (Summer 2008): 141–42. For a helpful compilation of biographical sketches that identifies

shy about noting the connections they sensed between Methodism and Mormonism. In addition to Joseph Smith's comments to Peter Cartwright, Parley P. Pratt declared "John Wesley a Latter-Day Saint, in regard to the spiritual gifts and the apostasy of the church" in an 1841 editorial; and British convert Edward Tullidge noted that "there are no people so much like John Wesley and his early followers in spirit, faith and missionary energy, and almost every other distinctive feature, as the Mormons."⁵¹

Pratt's and Tullidge's comments highlight some of the reasons Methodists were attracted to Mormonism. Methodists and many other evangelicals in early America emphasized the centrality of enthusiastic religious experience to Christian worship, promoting the importance of spiritual gifts and accepting dreams and visions as legitimate manifestations from God to an individual. While these practices were closely guarded by clerical defenders of orthodoxy wary of competing claims to revelation, according to historian David Holland, "the explosive experimentalism of revival ran the risk of blowing holes in the canonical threshold," and Shakers, Mormons, and others did just that in claiming direct revelation and producing supplemental scripture.⁵² Indeed, it was likely Joseph Smith's flirtation with Methodism that led him to believe that God would answer his question regarding which church to join in a visionary and miraculous way, and the experiences of other Methodists certainly influenced the way Smith understood his first vision.⁵³ Steven Harper thus concluded that it was "the empirical and revelatory blend by which [Mormonism] simultaneously catered to the metaphysical, rationalistic, and democratic" that attracted early converts like John P. Greene, Brigham Young's

many early Latter-day Saint leaders' prior religious affiliation(s), see "Appendix 6: Biographical Sketches of General Officers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–47," in D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 533–613; and "Appendix 2: Biographical Sketches of General Officers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Appointed 1839–1932," in D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 641–725. See also Christopher C. Jones, "'We Latter-day Saints Are Methodists': The Influence of Methodism on Early Mormon Religiosity" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 2009), 13–40, for an analysis of how Methodist converts to Mormonism understood and discussed the relationship between the two.

51. "John Wesley a Latter-Day Saint," *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 2 (June 1841): 23, capitalization modernized; Edward Tullidge, "The Mormon Commonwealth," *Galaxy* 2 (October 15, 1866): 356.

52. David F. Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 129.

53. Christopher C. Jones, "The Power and Form of Godliness: Methodist Conversion Narratives and Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Journal of Mormon History* 37 (Spring 2011): 88–114.

brother-in-law who briefly joined James Covel in the Genesee Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church in 1831 before converting to Mormonism the following year.⁵⁴ Stephen Fleming likewise argued that “Mormonism spoke . . . to those with a worldview imbibed through certain cultural and religious inheritances,” including an embrace of charismatic religious experience that especially appealed to “enthusiastic Methodists.”⁵⁵

And many of those Methodists attracted to Mormonism had left the Methodist Episcopal Church of their childhood at the time of their conversion, affiliating instead, like James Covel, with one of the several reformist Methodist branches in America, Canada, or Great Britain. In addition to Covel and John P. Greene, Brigham Young and his brothers, Solomon Chamberlain, and John Taylor, to name just a few, each left mainstream Methodism and united with smaller schismatic Wesleyan groups in their search for truth in the years leading up to their introduction to Mormonism. Many of these reformist groups that decried the consolidated authority of the Methodist Episcopacy and championed the rights of church laity also actively campaigned for greater egalitarianism within the church, denouncing racism and slavery, empowering women as class leaders and exhorters, and striving to lift the poor. When James Covel attended the Mormon conference on January 2, 1831, in Fayette, he probably heard a message that resonated with him. A revelation received that day by Joseph Smith, intended as “a Commandment to the Church in New York,” explained that the Lord had “heard your prayers & the poor have complained before me, & the rich have I made, & all flesh is mine, & I am no respecter to persons,” and then entreated all present to “esteem his brother as himself & practice Virtue and Holyness before me,” reminding them that they were to “be one & if ye are not one ye are not mine.” It further outlined the need for “certain men among them [to] be appointed” to “look to the poor & the needy, & administer to their relief, that they shall not suffer.”⁵⁶ As a Methodist minister who had previously ordained the first black Methodist elders in 1822 and thereafter united himself with an effort dedicated to socioeconomic equality, Covel

54. Steven C. Harper, “Infallible Proofs, Both Human and Divine: The Persuasiveness of Mormonism for Early Converts,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 10, no. 1 (2000): 112.

55. Stephen J. Fleming, “‘Congenial to Almost Every Shade of Radicalism’: The Delaware Valley and the Success of Early Mormonism,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 17, no. 2 (2007): 132. See also Stephen J. Fleming, “The Religious Heritage of the British Northwest and the Rise of Mormonism,” *Church History* 77 (March 2008): 73–104.

56. “Revelation, 2 January 1831,” in Jensen, Woodford, and Harper, *Manuscript Revelation Books*, 74–75.

would certainly have found the ideals of this revelation appealing, especially given the other connections between Methodism and Mormonism.

While there were thus many similarities between Methodism and Mormonism, and while several converts to Mormonism praised their former affiliation with Methodism as a stepping-stone in their religious journeys, there were also sticking points and stark differences between the two religions. James Covell's ultimate rejection of Mormonism speaks to these differences emphatically, and the new knowledge that he was a Methodist and not a Baptist makes sense of the revelations directed to him in January 1831.

**“Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins”:
Debates Over Baptism in Antebellum America**

Perhaps most notably, Methodist and Mormon views of baptism diverged sharply—a point commented on by several early converts to the Church. While it is not known whether James Covell received baptism before deciding to reject Mormonism, it is likely that Mormonism's rejection of infant baptism and insistence on adult immersion would have caused the Methodist elder some consternation.⁵⁷ While Mormons today may read the command to “arise and be baptized” in section 39 as commonplace and uncontroversial, baptism has a long, complicated, and at times contentious history within the Christian tradition.⁵⁸ To Christians in early America, baptism meant different things (depending on the denomination), and different groups adhered to various modes of baptism.

Baptists, of course, insisted upon baptism by immersion, reflecting their credobaptist stance that baptism was a reflection of one's profession of faith as an adult, and Mormons agreed with them on this point, drawing upon both Joseph Smith's revelations and the preference of a number of early converts. Early Methodists, meanwhile, were more flexible regarding the

57. Deidrich Willers, a German Reformed preacher in Fayette, New York, who felt contempt toward the “Mormonites” in the area, apparently reported that Covell was baptized, though Willers is the only source to make such a claim, and as such should be treated with some caution. See Larry C. Porter, *A Study of the Origins of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the States of New York and Pennsylvania* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 2000), 103–4.

58. For an insightful analysis of the history of baptism within the reformed tradition, see Bryan D. Spinks, *Reformation and Modern Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From Luther to Contemporary Practices* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006). For the history of baptism in American Methodism, see Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 82–117. See also Bernard G. Holland's useful *Baptism in Early Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1970), which focuses primarily on British Methodism.

proper mode of baptism. John Wesley took a largely pragmatic stance on the proper mode of baptism, allowing adult converts to choose between immersion, affusion (pouring), and aspersion (sprinkling) in attempting to provide a sensible solution to what had proved a controversial issue within the Anglican Church. Yet while maintaining an accommodating stance, in time Wesley came to prefer affusion or aspersion, prompted in part by antagonistic Baptists who insisted on immersion and also by Wesley's study of scripture, which convinced him that "the manner (whether by dipping or sprinkling) is not determined in Scripture," and that "there is no example from which [we] can conclude for dipping rather than sprinkling."⁵⁹ Methodists in America followed Wesley's example, including in *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America* the following instructions: "Let every adult person, and the parents of every child, to be baptized, have the choice either of immersion, sprinkling, or pouring."⁶⁰ Early Methodist preachers generally adhered to these instructions, offering choices to converted souls based on personal preference.

As they had in England, Baptists in America ridiculed the Methodist stance and, together with other upstart groups like the Campbellites, maintained that only adult baptism by immersion was valid in God's eyes. Often-times these groups would utilize the very New Testament passages alluded to in the revelation to James Covell—Acts 22:16 ("Arise and be baptized")—in their defense of immersion.⁶¹ This constant badgering of Methodists, who not only regularly baptized by affusion or aspersion but also baptized infants, provoked intense debates between these several evangelical groups and were often the source of great contention.⁶² The resulting rhetorical battles in the competition for converts eventually caused many Methodists to prefer alternate forms of baptism to immersion more adamantly than Wesley ever had. As Karen Westerfield Tucker has noted, Methodist attitudes toward baptism were generally formulated not at an official level but rather "in reaction to local and more widespread controversies," and "relentless antagonism from the exclusive immersionists created antipathy

59. As quoted in Holland, *Baptism in Early Methodism*, 98. See also 181–88.

60. *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, with Explanatory Notes by Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury* (Philadelphia: Methodist Episcopal Church, 1798), 118.

61. See, for example, "Letter from an Independent Baptist," *Christian Baptist*, July 3, 1826, 283; and Alexander Campbell, "The Extra Defended," *Millennial Harbinger*, October 10, 1831, 18.

62. See Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1997), 153–54; and Lester Ruth, *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality: A Reader* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2005), 223–23.

toward that mode.”⁶³ An early nineteenth-century Methodist hymnist in Kentucky captured the debate in a bit of humorous verse:

You say: “Go read the scriptures / And in them we shall find / The ordinance immersion / Upon us all enjoined.” / How can you be immersed? / The word we cannot find. / And if it’s in your bible / I’m sure it’s not in mine. . . . But when you do immerse them / Which we do think is wrong, / It makes my heart to tremble / They think the work is done. / You say my Lord’s a Baptist. / How do you realize / For there never was a Baptist / But one who did baptize? . . . Your charity is scanty / And that the world can see. / If you do not quit immersion / We cannot all agree.⁶⁴

Such attitudes were expressed closer to Covell’s home in New York, too. George Coles, a Methodist Episcopal preacher who spent time stationed in two of Covell’s old circuits—Poughkeepsie and New York City, recorded in his journal in 1832 that following a baptismal service, he “preached against immersion.”⁶⁵ The other Methodist groups to which Covell belonged in the 1820s and 1830s largely followed suit. William Stilwell’s Methodist Society of New York, for example, instructed that when baptizing, the minister “shall sprinkle or pour water upon him, (or if he shall desire it, shall immerse him in water) saying, I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”⁶⁶ Yet they, too, occasionally found themselves defending their practices of sprinkling and pouring, as well as infant baptism, to competing Christian groups.⁶⁷ Methodist Protestants seem to have echoed the official stances of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Society on the issue of the proper form of baptism. But it also appears that, like other Methodists, some Protestant Methodists were driven to defend sprinkling and pouring as acceptable (and even preferred) forms of baptism in opposition to Baptist ministers. George Brown, who, like Covell, was among the original members of the Methodist Protestant Church, accused both Baptists and Campbellites of doing “all [they] could to indoctrinate the converts, whom God had given [to the Methodists] . . . into the belief that infant baptism was wrong, and that immersion was the only

63. Tucker, *American Methodist Worship*, 98.

64. *Collection of Spiritual Songs* (Winchester, Ky.: n.p., n.d.), 15–16, as cited in Ruth, *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality*, 223–24.

65. George Coles, Journal, November 4, 1832, George Coles Collection, Methodist Collection, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey. I first discovered this reference in Tucker, *American Methodist Worship*, 98.

66. *The Discipline of the Methodist Society* (1821), 50.

67. See, for example, “A Short Method with the Anti-Paedo Baptists,” *Friendly Visitor*, September 9, 1825, 291; and “To Prove that Water Baptism is a Christian Institution,” *Friendly Visitor*, October 5, 1825, 315.

Scriptural mode of baptism for adult believers.” Countering the claims of Baptist ministers that “‘bapto’ . . . and ‘baptizo’ in the New Testament meant immersion only,” Brown related that “it became necessary for me to vindicate our position on the subject of baptism” by showing “from some very learned authorities, that the two Greek words in question had sundry other shades of meaning beside immersion, all favoring our view of the matter.”⁶⁸

Other early investigators of Mormonism found themselves similarly caught up in these debates. Edward Tullidge, who maintained that the Latter-day Saints “differ very little, excepting in a few peculiarities . . . from the ancient Wesleyans,” nevertheless conceded that, by insisting on immersion, Mormons “are Baptists” and ultimately concluded that they were “Wesleyan Baptists.”⁶⁹ Others similarly found in Mormonism the spirit of Methodism with what they saw as the proper form of baptism. Henry Boyle, who converted to Methodism during his youth in Tazewell County, Virginia, nevertheless “had always believed in baptism by immersion”; and since “the Methodists never would immerse me, because I had been sprinkled when a child,” he finally left Methodism and was baptized (by immersion) a Campbellite before joining Mormonism six months later.⁷⁰ John Lowe Butler, who converted to Mormonism in 1835, came down on the side of baptism by immersion as well. After joining a Methodist class “on trial” in 1828 following a conviction of his sins, Butler grew dissatisfied when he solicited baptism. “Baptism by immersion seemed right to me though I had been christened when a child,” he wrote, but “the Methodist would not baptize the second time.” After his Methodist father tracked down “a Methodist priest” whom he believed “would immerse some five or six that desired it,” Butler was frustrated to hear that the Methodist minister not only refused to baptize by immersion but also mocked Butler and the others. “When it was attended to, the Methodist came to see it and made all manner of fun and game of us possible.” “That hurt my feelings to see those professing to be saints make light of the commandments of God,” concluded Butler, who proceeded to be baptized by a Baptist minister despite his misgivings about Baptist theology.⁷¹

Butler’s account reveals yet another layer of these debates, this one centered on rebaptism for adult converts. As Karen Westerfield summarized,

68. George Brown, *Recollections of Itinerant Life: Including Early Reminiscences* (Cincinnati: R. W. Carroll, 1866), 340.

69. Tullidge, “Mormon Commonwealth,” 356.

70. Henry G. Boyle, *Autobiography*, typescript of original, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

71. John Lowe Butler, *Autobiography*, typescript of original, Perry Special Collections.

even when Methodists maintained an open stance on the proper form of baptism, they often opposed being baptized as an adult if they had been baptized as an infant, because they felt “that to rebaptize was to concede the necessity of a particular mode or the illegitimacy of infant baptism.”⁷² Methodists of all persuasions similarly criticized those who claimed that baptism by anything other than immersion was invalid in God’s eyes. An 1825 editorial in the Stilwellite periodical *The Friendly Visitor* took aim at the “Antipaedo-Baptists” for refusing to accept infant baptism as valid: “Thus we see how *they* think on the subject of baptism, and how they make it valid only, when they perform it; and disturb the consciences of weak believers without cause,” concluding that “for this, and the like reasons, I never wished to attach myself nor my children to the Baptist church, in form, doctrine, nor order.”⁷³

Mormonism, of course, recognized as valid only baptism by immersion performed by one ordained to the LDS priesthood. Deidrich Willers, a German Reformed preacher in Fayette, noted in 1830 that Mormonism was “winning over many members of the Baptist Church, . . . first because of their teachings about the universal grace of God and lastly because of their agreement in attitude toward the proper subject of holy baptism.”⁷⁴ Indeed, an April 1830 revelation received by Joseph Smith spoke to those who “*were anxious to Join the Church without Rebaptism,*” equating their previous baptisms in various Protestant sects with the Law of Moses. “Behold I say unto you that all old covenants have I caused to be done away in this thing & this is a New & an everlasting covenant. . . . Wherefore, enter ye in at the gate as I have commanded.” In Mormonism, there would be no compromise on this issue, and the revelation concluded with the ominous warning, “seek not to counsel your God. Amen.”⁷⁵ While Methodism’s stance on baptism pushed individuals like Henry Boyle and John Butler into Baptist and Campbellite churches and then ultimately into Mormonism, Mormonism’s strict adherence to immersion and the necessity of being baptized again could also work the other way, as it appears to have in the case of James Covell. While Covell may not have categorically rejected immersion as an acceptable form of baptism, he likely would have been resistant to the idea that it was the *only* acceptable and authorized form and that he was in need of receiving it at the hands of Mormon elders.

72. Tucker, *American Methodist Worship*, 101.

73. “A Short Method with the Anti-Paedo Baptists,” 291.

74. D. Michael Quinn, trans. and ed., “The First Months of Mormonism: A Contemporary View by Rev. Diedrich Willers,” *New York History* 54 (July 1973): 331.

75. “Revelation, 16 April 1830,” in Jensen, Woodford, and Harper, *Manuscript Revelation Books*, 35.

**“Thou art not called to go into the eastern countries,
but thou art called to go to the Ohio”:
Itinerant Missionaries and Debates over Church Government**

While Methodists and Mormons may have diverged sharply on the question of baptism, they did share a similar outlook and approach to missionary work and preaching. Both groups relied on a band of generally untrained itinerant preachers traveling the countryside, soliciting appointments, and preaching to anyone willing to listen. As Nathan Hatch summarized, both groups possessed “a relentless drive to spread their message as widely as possible” and did so “by a strategy of transforming earnest converts into preachers with unprecedented speed and urging them to sustain a relentless pace of engagements in order to confront people with preaching everywhere, at any hour of the day or night.”⁷⁶

Thus, when the veteran itinerant preacher James Covell was called by the Lord “to labor in my vineyard, and to build up my church, and to bring forth Zion,” he clearly understood the difficulties such a call to the ministry might entail, certainly in a way that few Baptists would, whose preachers were typically more localized and whose assignments were less physically demanding.⁷⁷ As Richard Bushman noted, for many early Mormon converts called on missions, “the Methodist precedent probably helped [them] understand what was expected.”⁷⁸ Yet knowing what was expected might ultimately have swayed Covell from accepting the call. In January 1831, James Covell was sixty years old and had been a Methodist minister of some sort for forty years. It seems entirely reasonable that he did not have the energy or desire to take up a new assignment and relive the hardships of an itinerant lifestyle.

While he had initially located in 1797, his subsequent decision to unite with the Methodist Society and then the Methodist Episcopal Church required him to again take up the itinerancy. But the circuits he rode were all located in the same general area. In Joseph Smith’s revelation, though,

76. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 140. See also Jones, “We Latter-day Saints Are Methodists,” 76–83.

77. See John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 60.

78. Richard Lyman Bushman with Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2005), 153. See also Marie Mackey, “Priesthood and Ecclesiastical Structure in Early Nineteenth-Century Methodism and Mormonism,” in *Archive of Restoration Culture: Summer Fellows’ Papers, 1997–1999* (Provo, Utah: Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, 2000), 49, which makes the same point.

Covel was explicitly notified that he was “not called to go unto the Eastern Countries” (where he already lived and labored), but instead was “called to go to the Ohio.”⁷⁹ Not only did Covel likely not have much desire to trek more than two hundred miles to northern Ohio, where the Latter-day Saints had begun to gather, but he also appears to have not intended to stay long in upstate New York. As noted above, after arriving in the area in late 1830, he intended only “to labour faithfully for four months” before “return[ing] to the city of New York.”⁸⁰

In addition to the specific location to which he was called, Covel was probably wary of the authority vested in Joseph Smith to assign recently converted preachers anywhere he felt inspired. Ecclesiastical authority consolidated in the hands of either one person or a select few was the precise reason Covel and other Methodists initially left the Methodist Episcopal Church. In opposing what they perceived as the autocratic tendency of Methodist bishops and presiding elders, these reformers argued for the importance of listening to the laity and promoted a more democratic system of church government. In particularly charged language, the authors of the Methodist Society of New York’s Articles of Faith specifically lamented the tendency of presiding elders in the Methodist Episcopal Church “to hold the rod over the heads of his brethren; to keep them in slavish bondage, to dictate oftentimes to men their superiors in age, talents, and judgment, as ministers of Christ.” They further maintained that “no minister is stationed or compelled to travel where he thinks he is not called to preach, or where he has no reason to believe his labours would be useful.”⁸¹ When Covel and others felt that William Stilwell had overreached his own authority, they immediately rejected his leadership and separated from Stilwell’s congregation. And while the Methodist Protestant Church was more moderate in its stance on these issues—investing the president of each annual conference with the authority to assign ministers to their stations, for example—it also maintained the emphasis on the right of members and ministers to vote on such matters and limited the tenure of conference presidents to no more than “three years in succession.” Their constitution argued that “the members of a community, who place themselves under the exclusive control of a few irresponsible persons, as their sole masters, in matters of government, thus tamely depriving themselves of the right of representation . . . betray a criminal negligence of their best interests.”

79. “Revelation, 5 January 1831,” in Jensen, Woodford, and Harper, *Manuscript Revelation Books*, 89.

80. *Mutual Rights and Methodist Protestant*, January 13, 1832, 9.

81. Stilwell, *Historical Sketches*, 42, 53.

While Mormonism opened its priesthood to all males in good standing and promised each of its adherents the right to spiritual gifts and personal revelation, it also located authority in the hands of its “First Elder” and prophet, Joseph Smith—authority that was only gradually spread out among a system of conferences and councils in the coming years.⁸² It would likely have been difficult, then, for Covell to accept the authority that came along with the twenty-six-year-old’s prophetic claims—especially the right to speak for God and the ability to assign preachers wherever he felt inspired.

“[He] returned to his former people and principles”:

James Covell, 1831–1850

On January 6, 1831, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon received another revelation, this one explaining “why James obeyed not the Command which he Received.” “Behold, verily I say unto you, that his heart was right before me . . . & he Received the word with Gladness, but Straitway Satan tempted him; & the fear of persecutions & cares of the world, caused him to reject the word.” The revelation ominously concluded, “& it Remaineth with me to do with him as seemeth me good.”⁸³ It is unclear what any of that meant specifically, aside from the reasonable assumption that Covell decided against Mormonism because of the stigma attached to joining the young Mormon movement, which had already gained a reputation among Christian ministers in the region as a “religious monstrosity” that only attracted “gullible” and “unstable, spineless men.”⁸⁴ But in addition to whatever fears may have influenced Covell’s decision, it appears that he also found key aspects of the Mormon message foreign to his own desires, carefully conditioned over his forty years in the Methodist ministry.

While Covell determined to “return to his former people and principles,” it appears that the Methodist Protestant Church was less anxious to accept him back. At the next meeting of the Genesee Conference, held on February 5, 1831, in Ogden, Munroe County, New York, a new president was elected, along with a new secretary—Covell’s son Zenas. Several ministers received new appointments, but James Covell was not among them. The minutes of the conference published in the *Mutual Rights and Methodist*

82. See “Ecclesiastical Organization Charts,” in Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, vol. 1 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 452–60.

83. “Revelation, 6 January 1831,” in Jensen, Woodford, and Harper, *Manuscript Revelation Books*, 91.

84. Willers, quoted in Quinn, “First Months of Mormonism,” 331, 333.

Protestant mention Covell only once: immediately following the “list of the stationed and unstationed preachers within the bounds of this Conference,” and without further explanation, it reads, “*Removed*: Dr. James Covell, Elder.” The manuscript minutes offer little more, simply noting, “J. Covell removed from Conference.”⁸⁵

It is not entirely clear what exactly “removed” meant. Some ministers were listed as “removed” when they transferred to another conference; for others it meant that they had been expelled from the church entirely. In the case of Covell, it appears to have equated to a temporary suspension from the ministry. From February to July, several letters were written and published in the *Mutual Rights and Methodist Protestant* from preachers in upstate New York. None of them mentioned James Covell. Then, in a letter dated July 25, 1831, Orren Miller, president of the Genesee Conference, sent in a “tour of a district in New York State.” Among other things, it noted that “the venerable Dr. J. Covell had been preaching to a large congregation, organized under his labours, for a few months past, and the minds of the people were evidently prepared by his preaching, for the work of reformation. . . . We expect our Brother Covell will soon gather an abundant harvest in this neighborhood.” It was followed by another shorter letter, this one written by Zenas Covell. “I have just returned from a visit to my father, and do rejoice to say the Lord is graciously visiting the people of his charge.”⁸⁶ James Covell’s removal from ministry appears to have only lasted a couple of months, and he again took up preaching as a Methodist Protestant.

In fact, Covell seems to have increased his preaching activity. In August, Orren Miller noted that “the Rev. Dr. Covell attended” another of his meetings “and favoured us with a number of sermons, and at the close of our Sabbath exercises, he gave a history of the rise, progress, and present state of reform, and contrasted our system of government with that of the M.E. Church.” Another minister similarly recorded that at his own service “we were favored with a visit from Dr. James Covell, who preached with much zeal, to the great satisfaction of all that heard.”⁸⁷ Covell himself described his renewed commitment in a letter dated December 26, 1831:

85. “Genesee Conference,” *Mutual Rights and Methodist Protestant*, February 25, 1831, 61; for a typescript of 1831 minutes, see Smith, *Methodist Protestant Church in Central New York State*, 11.

86. “Tour of a District in New York State,” and “Letter from Zenas Covell,” *Mutual Rights and Methodist Protestant*, July 29, 1831, 61.

87. Both letters published in *Mutual Rights and Methodist Protestant*, September 30, 1831, 308.

I therefore determined to take the Bible, and select such parts as were best adapted to bring the great truths therein immediately before the people, that sinners might become acquainted with their true character in view of a holy God and a day of judgment. Disregarding method, I read, expounded, preached, applied, and enforced gospel truth. The effect was apparent. The congregations were large, attentive, and serious.—Some, awakened to a sense of their danger, began to weep and cry for mercy. Delivering grace was bestowed, and scores have been born into the kingdom in this region. . . . The blessed work still goes on. Convictions, conversions, and accessions are numerous and frequent.⁸⁸

After yet another series of successful preaching appointments “under the pastoral charge of Dr. James Covell,” Orren Miller concluded, with an ironic twist he probably did not recognize, “I think I never knew Dr. Covell so much engaged in the work as at this meeting: *It seemed as though he had renewed his age, and was anointed anew with a divine unction from on high.*”⁸⁹ Instead of going on to do great things as a Mormon missionary, as promised in the revelation received on his behalf through Joseph Smith, Covell became motivated to take up the cause of Methodism with more devotion and energy than ever before.

By 1832, Covell’s removal from the Methodist ministry had come full circle: he was again elected president of the Genesee Conference in February of that year. Yet his interaction with Mormonism was not entirely complete. John P. Greene, a Methodist reformer who had moved between smaller Methodist sects, joined the Methodist Protestant Church in 1831 and in 1832 was assigned to the Hannibal Circuit in the Genesee Conference, which covered the region bordering Lake Ontario from Hannibal north to the Canadian border. For the year and a half prior to this, though, Greene had been investigating Mormonism. After receiving a Book of Mormon from Samuel H. Smith in July 1830, Greene and his wife Rhoda—together with her brothers Phinehas, John, Joseph, Lorenzo, and Brigham Young—read and studied the book.⁹⁰ Phinehas, Joseph, and John Young,

88. *Mutual Rights and Methodist Protestant*, January 13, 1832, 9.

89. “Tour of a District,” *Mutual Rights and Methodist Protestant*, December 16, 1831, 309; italics added.

90. See Evan Molbourne Green, “Biographical Sketch of John P. Greene, 1857,” Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, which suggests Greene was a preacher in the Methodist Reformed Church until 1828, when he “united and formed the Methodist Protestant Church and continued a traveling preacher in that connection” before finally converting to Mormonism. Methodist records, however, place him as a preacher in the Congregational Methodist Church since 1826, where he was ordained an elder in August 1830 and finally joined the Methodist Protestant Church in 1831 or 1832. See Smith,

like their brother-in-law John Greene, were all Methodist reformers who, in the words of Phinehas, “continued to preach, trying to tie Mormonism to Methodism, for more than a year,” before finally concluding that they “must leave one and cleave to the other.”⁹¹ Greene apparently reached a similar conclusion, and, in spite of his recent decision to unite with the Methodist Protestant Church and accept an assignment to preach in February, by April he became convinced of the Book of Mormon’s truth and was baptized.⁹² At a special session of the Genesee Conference in October, Greene’s defection to Mormonism was characterized thusly: “John P. Green left the church illegally.” The published minutes of the conference similarly noted that “John P. Green having left the connexion in an irregular manner, therefore resolved, that we withdraw the hand of fellowship from him.”⁹³ As president of the Genesee Conference leading up to that meeting, James Covell certainly played some part in that decision, though the details of his feelings toward Greene and his decision are unfortunately not discernable from the scant historical record.

Covell stepped down as president at the conference but remained in the Genesee Conference for another four years, traveling various circuits until finally returning to New York City in 1836. The plausible reasons for his not uniting with Mormonism continued to crop up in his preaching activities. While he and his fellow Methodists occasionally worked across denominational lines, joining with Presbyterians and Baptists in promoting revival, they also remained firmly committed to Methodist doctrine. Orren Miller described one such instance: “The Baptists have just closed a four days meeting in this place: brother Covell, myself, and a Presbyterian minister, attended and assisted in the labours of the meeting.” He then made sure to add, “This is truly a day of wonders; and it is really astonishing to see the Presbyterians and Baptists falling into the wake of Methodism, both as

Methodist Protestant Church in Central New York State, 11, which incorrectly calls him “John T. Green”; and “Genessee Conference,” *Mutual Rights and Methodist Protestant*, February 24, 1832, 60.

91. Phinehas Young, “Life of Phinehas Howe Young—Written by Himself,” Perry Special Collections. See also Larry C. Porter, “The Brigham Young Family: Transition between Reformed Methodism and Mormonism,” in *A Witness for the Restoration: Essays in Honor of Robert J. Matthews*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Andrew C. Skinner (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2007), 249–80.

92. Green, “Biographical Sketch of John P. Greene, 1857.”

93. Smith, *Methodist Protestant Church in Central New York State*, 13; and “Minutes of the Genesee Annual Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church,” *Mutual Rights and Methodist Protestant*, December 21, 1832, 401.

to doctrine and as to the measures used to promote these revivals.”⁹⁴ Nor was Covell’s call to Ohio as a Mormon missionary the last assignment he refused. He was elected a delegate to the general conference of 1834, held in Georgetown, Washington, D.C., but did not attend.⁹⁵ The following year was Covell’s last in the Genesee Conference, and by 1836 he was back in New York City, where he continued preaching and practicing medicine until his death in February 1850.⁹⁶

Conclusion

At the time of his death, Covell was seventy-nine years old and had spent fifty-nine of those years as a Methodist preacher. In light of such a long and, in many respects, illustrious career, it is striking that he is not better known or remembered among Methodists today.⁹⁷ This may be in part because he left behind no known collections of papers and appears to have never written a memoir, as so many other Methodist preachers did. But those who knew him remembered him kindly, as “an efficient preacher” and “a notable man” who was “not afraid of hunger, poverty, nor the devil.”⁹⁸ After his death, his son Samuel continued to peddle his father’s medical pills in Poughkeepsie; among those in the Genesee Conference, he was affectionately called “Father Covell” by the younger preachers.⁹⁹ One of the only twentieth-century historians to comment on Covell described him as “the most prominent member of the [Genesee] Conference,” who, for his earliest itinerant efforts, was “appreciated and loved by those noble men who shook New England with their eloquence and power,” and as a “champion

94. *Mutual Rights and Methodist Protestant*, December 16, 1831, 399.

95. See Smith, *Methodist Protestant Church in Central New York State*, 13; and Drinkhouse, *History of Methodist Reform*, 2:295.

96. See *Mutual Rights and Methodist Protestant*, May 4, 1836, 39. For references to Covell’s medical practice, see *New York Herald*, June 16, 1845, col. B. He was also listed in the *New York Mercantile Union Business Directory* (New York: S. French, L. C., and H. L. Pratt, 1850), 125.

97. Covell passed away on February 2, 1850. A funeral was held the following day at the Attorney Street Methodist Protestant Church, where his son Zenas was minister. See *New York Evening Post*, February 2, 1850, 3. Edward Drinkhouse incorrectly identified the date of death as June 8 of that year. See Drinkhouse, *History of Methodist Reform*, 2:373.

98. *Northern (Auburn, N.Y.) Christian Advocate*, October 22, 1845; *Northern Christian Advocate*, November 12, 1856, 182.

99. *Poughkeepsie Journal*, January 8, 1853, 4; *Poughkeepsie Journal*, June 11, 1853, 4; and *Mutual Rights and Methodist Protestant*, February 7, 1834, 41. Covell’s pills were also sold in the New York City area as well. See *Rockland County Journal*, October 22, 1853.

of ‘Mutual Rights’” from his time in the Methodist Episcopal Church, Methodist Society of New York, and Methodist Protestant Church.¹⁰⁰

James Covell’s lengthy career as a Methodist minister, during which he developed a reputation as an able preacher and established himself as a leader of Methodist reform, makes him an important and fascinating figure. His career as a self-taught physician, his sons’ preaching careers in divergent strains of Methodism, and his brief investigation of Mormonism suggest that his life and his family intersected with a number of crosscurrents in the early Republic and antebellum America, from the democratization of American Christianity to the development of the medical profession. For our purposes, reading the revelations directed to James Covell in January 1831 within the broader context of his Methodist preaching career highlights the yields to be gained from closer historical readings of Joseph Smith’s early revelations. Such researched reading reveals the specific ways that Mormonism spoke to the religious world it entered in the 1830s. In the single example of James Covell, understanding that he was a Methodist and not a Baptist not only changes our understanding of the revelations directed to him but also underscores the place of Mormonism within larger debates over baptism, missionary work, and church government in nineteenth-century America.

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100. Smith, *Methodist Protestant Church in Central New York State*, 24–25. Smith suggested that Covell’s eyes were first opened “to the enormous power of Bishops and the ecclesiastical despotism of the Methodist Episcopal Church” following a disagreement with Francis Asbury over Covell’s decision in 1797 to locate; Covell apparently “asked the Bishop to allow him six months to attend to his financial affairs,” but “the Bishop was inexorable and with-held his consent.” This seems plausible—Asbury discouraged ministers from locating and continually advocated itinerancy as crucial to Methodism’s success—but I have found no other source confirming this story.