

A Shaker View of a Mormon Mission

A Shaker View of a Mormon Mission

Lawrence R. Flake

“You’re not the first Mormon missionaries to visit the Shakers,” declared the crusty old curator of the Shaker Museum in Old Chatham, N. Y. The two elders were laboring in the Albany district of the Eastern States Mission, where I was serving as their supervising elder in the fall of 1961. I listened with great interest as they enthusiastically related how the old man had gone into another room for a few minutes and emerged clutching a timeworn volume handwritten by one of the early Shakers.

The missionaries told me that the curator read to them with considerable relish an account of Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, Lemam Copley, and Parley P. Pratt’s visits to the Shaker village of North Union near Kirtland, Ohio. The elders could not recall many details of the story, except that the brethren had carried with them a revelation from the Lord to be read to the Shakers and that when their message was rejected the missionaries shook off the dust of their coats as a testimony against the villagers.¹

My curiosity was stirred and I determined to examine the volume for myself. My desire was not realized until ten years later when I returned to New York state as the director of the Institute of Religion at Cornell University. The book in question turned out to be Elisha D. Blakeman’s Journal and contained the interesting account which follows.

A MORMON INTERVIEW

Copied from Brother Ashbel Kitchell’s²
Pocket Journal.—(By E.D.B.) [Elisha D. Blakeman]³

Some time in the year 1829 the new religion, (if so it may be called,) of the Mormons began to make a stir in a town not far from North Union.⁴ It created a good deal of excitement among the people. They stated they had received a New Revelation, had seen an angel, & had been instructed into many things in relation to the history of America, that was not known before.

Late in the fall a number of them came to visit the Believers. One by the name of Oliver Lowdree [Cowdery], who stated that he had been one who had been an assistant in the translation of the *golden Bible*, and had also seen the Angel, and had been commissioned by him to go out & bear testimony, that God would destroy this generation.

We gave him liberty to bear his testimony in our meeting; but finding he had nothing for us, we treated them kindly, and labored to find out what manner of spirit they were of.—They appeared meek and mild; but as for light, or knowledge of the way of God, I considered them very ignorant of Christ or his work; therefore I treated them with the tenderness of children.

They tarried with us two nights & one day, and when they were ready to start they proposed to leave some of their Books among us, to which we consented, and they left seven, which we distributed among the people; but they were soon returned as not interesting enough to keep them awake while reading. After some months they called for them & took them away, except one which was given me a present.—They appeared to have full faith in the virtue of their Books, that whoever would read them, would feel so thoroughly convinced of the truth of what they contained, that they would be unable to resist, and finally would be obliged to unite with them. They thot [*sic*] it prudent to wait on us a while for the leaven to work, so that things moved on smoothly for some-time, and we had time for reflection. I believed that I should one day have to meet them and decide the matter; and least I should do any thing that should injure the cause of God, or bring weakness on myself I wrote home for council [*sic*]; but could obtain none, for the case was new and none were acquainted with it in the Church, therefore they could give no council, and they left me to exercise my judgment.—For some time I felt some straitened, not knowing what course to take. At length I concluded that I was dedicated and entirely devoted to God, & desired to do what was right; that if God had any hand in that work, he would inform me by some means, that I might know what to do, either by letting me have an interview with the angel, or by some other means give me knowledge of my duty.

In this situation, I remained for a long time, occasionally hearing that they expected to come after a while and lead us into the water. We continued on friendly terms in the way of trade and other Acts of good neighborship untill [*sic*] the spring of 1831 when we were visited on saturday evening by Sidney Rigdon and Leman Copley,⁵ the latter of whom had been among us; but not likeing [*sic*] the cross⁶ any to [*sic*] well, had taken up with Mormonism as the easier plan and had been appointed by them as one of the missionaries to convert us.

They tarried all night, and in the course of the evening, the doctrines of the cross and the Mormon faith were both investigated; and we found that the life of self-denial corresponded better with the life of Christ, than Mormonism, the said Rigdon frankly acknowledged, but said he did not bear that cross, and did not expect to.—At this assertion I set him without the paling of the Church, and told him I could not look on him as a Christian.—Thus the matter stood and we retired to rest, not knowing that they had then in possession what they called a revelation or message from Jesus Christ to us, which they intended to deliver to day (sabbath.) and which they supposed would bring us to terms.

Sabbath morning, matters moved on pleasantly in sociable chat with the Brethren, until I felt to give them all some council, which was for neither to force their doctrine on the other at this time; but let the time be spent in feeling of the spirit, as it was Rigdon's first visit, for it might be possible that he would yet see that the foundation he was now on, was sandy, as well as those he had been on, while professing the various doctrines of the day; and if he should, he might desire to find a resting place—something substantial to place his feet on, where he would be safe; therefore I wished him to know what we had, and by what spirit we were moved, &c.

He said he would subject himself to the order of the place, and I left them. A little before meeting, another one came from the Mormon camp as an assistant, by the name of Parley Pratt. He called them out, and enquired [*sic*] how they had got along? and was informed by Rigdon and Leman, that I had bound them to silence, and nothing could be done. Parley told them to pay no attention to me, for they had come with the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the people must hear it, &c.

They came into meeting and sat quietly until the meeting was through, and the people dismissed; when Sidney Rigdon arose and stated that he had a message from the Lord Jesus Christ to this people; could he have the privilege of delivering it? He was answered, he could. He then said it was in writing; could he read it? He was told he might. He then read the following Message. [The text of D & C, section 49, is here quoted with only a few minor wording changes from the way it appears in the Book of Commandments, chapter 52.]

At the close of the reading, he asked if they could be permitted to go forth in the exercise of their gift and office.—I told him that the piece he had read, bore on its face, the image of its author; that the Christ that dictated that, I was well acquainted with, and had been, from a boy; that I had been much troubled to get rid of his influence, and I wished to have nothing more to do with him; and as for any gift he had authorized them to exercise among us, I would release them & their Christ from any further burden about us, and take all the responsibility on myself.

Sidney made answer—This you cannot do; I wish to hear the people speak. I told him if he desired it, they could speak for themselves, and stepped [*sic*] back and told them to let the man know how they felt; which they did in something like these words; that they were fully satisfied with what they had, and wished to have nothing to do with either them or their Christ. On hearing this Rigdon professed to be satisfied, and put his paper by; but Parley Pratt arose and commenced shakeing [*sic*] his coattail; he said he shook the dust from his garments as a testimony against us, that we had rejected the word of the Lord Jesus.

Before the words were out of his mouth, I was to him, and said;—You filthy Beast, dare you presume to come in here, and try to imitate a man of God by shaking your filthy tail; confess your sins and purge your soul from your lusts, and your other abominations before you ever presume to do the like again, &c. While I was ministering this reproof, he settled trembling into his seat, and covered his face; and I then turned to Leman who had been crying while the message was reading, and said to him, you hypocrite, you knew better;—you knew where the living work of God was; but for the sake of indulgence, you could consent to deceive yourself and them, but you shall reap the fruit of your own doings, &c.—This struck him dead also, and dried up his tears;—I then turned to the Believers and said, now we will go home and started.—Sidney had been looking on all this time without saying a word; as he had done all he did only by liberty nothing was said to him, and he looked on with a smile to see the fix the others were in, but they all followed us to the house.—Parley's horse had not been put away, as he came too late; he mounted and started for home without waiting for any one.—Sidney stayed for supper, and acknowledged that we were the purest people he had ever been acquainted with but he was not prepared to live such a life.

He was treated kindly and let go after supper.—But Leman tarried all night and started for home in the morning.

He had a large farm, and about 100 Mormons were living with him, on it. When he got home, he found the Mormons had rejected him, & could not own him for one of them, because he had deceived them with the idea of converting us. He felt very bad;—was not able to rest;—came back to us and begged for union.

After some consultation we concluded to give him union, and help him through; and to accomplish this, I went home with him, and held a meeting in the dooryard, among the Mormons; but few of them attended. They appeared to be struck with terror and fear lest some of them might get converted; but they could not get out of hearing,

without leaving the place, so that I found that they understood the subject.—I stayed over night, and in the morning I had conversation with the Elder, whose name was Knight [Newel K. Knight].

In the course of the conversation, I stirred the feelings of an old man, that proved to be the Elder's Father [Joseph Knight, Sr.], which so raised the indignation of the Elder that he let on me his heaviest mettels [*sic*]; he poured it on at the top of his voice, and wound up by informing me that unless I repented I should go to *Hell!* I waited with patience until he was thro', and then asked him if he would hear me;—to which he consented.

I told him if the words he had spoken had come from a man of God they would have caused my knees to have smote together like Belshazers, but coming as they did from a man that lived in his lusts—who gratified a beastly propensity, and often in a manner that was far bellow the beasts, and at the same time professing to be a follower of Christ, his words had no weight, but passed by me without making [*sic*] any impression.

I then gave him a lecture on the subject of the cross, and a life of self denial [*sic*] which was fully satisfying to all present, who had the right end of the story.—I stayed all day, and assisted them to settle their affairs.—I wrote for them two or three hours; and after I was thro' I took hold of the Elder and walked the floor, amusing [*sic*] him with a number of pleasant things; and lastly I repeated part of a verse of an old hymn, which reads thus,

“But now as I close
One thing I'll propose
To the man that salvation would find
No longer put your trust,
In a man that lives in lust,
For how can the blind lead the blind.”

At the recital of these words, he loosened his hold and made for the door, and here ended my labors for the Mormons for that time.

Ashbel Kitchel.

Lawrence R. Flake, former coordinator of the Eastern Division of the Church Department of Seminaries and Institutes, is presently serving as president of the Missouri Independence Mission.

1. See D&C 49:1–4.

2. Ashbel Kitchell was the organizer of the North Union community and “first elder” of the Shaker group from 1826 to 1831. He was apparently an imposing man as gathered from this description of him:

[Ashbel Kitchell] . . . was above medium height, large head, self esteem quite prominent, veneration large, large ears and eyes, deep and broad across the chest and shoulders, corpulent, weighing about two hundred and fifty pounds, and of a dignified and commanding appearance. . . . Under his administration the community was organized and greatly prospered. . . . This growth was largely due to his practical business methods and indomitable will. Decision being a prominent feature of his mind, he never faltered. His word was law, and when he willed to do a thing, it was done without question. . . . In his discourse his favorite theme was a Mother in Deity, which he

handled with power, and at times was carried beyond himself. Although he reproved sin and disorder with severity, yet he was tender-hearted, sympathetic and easily touched by the sorrows and griefs of those around him. In all his dealings with mankind he was no flatterer, but open, frank, generous, and candid. (Quoted in J. P. MacLean, *Shakers of Ohio* [Cincinnati: F. J. Heer, 1907], pp. 171–172.)

3. Elisha D. Blakeman, a Shaker of Mt. Lebanon, Ohio, copied Ashbel Kitchell's Pocket Journal in August 1856. Blakeman later left the Shaker movement. (Robert F. W. Meader, director of the Shaker Museum, Old Chatham, N. Y., to Richard L. Anderson, 26 August 1968.)

4. The year 1829 should probably be 1830 because in the fall of that year Oliver Cowdery, Parley P. Pratt, Peter Whitmer, and Ziba Peterson undertook the first extended mission of this dispensation. As they passed through Northern Ohio, they preached to the Campbellites (including Sidney Rigdon) at Kirtland near North Union, Ohio. This proselytizing is undoubtedly the "stir" to which Kitchell was referring.

5. Leman Copley, who joined the Church in March 1831, was formerly a member of the Shakers—so named because of their demonstrative form of worship. Founded in England, this sect, to avoid persecution, made its way to America, under the leadership of their spiritual "mother," Ann Lee, who they believed was Christ in his second appearance. Once baptized, Leman desired to return to the Shakers and preach the restored gospel. (John Whitmer, *The Book of John Whitmer*, microfilm of holograph, Church Archives, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, p. 39.) Of this conversion and proposed mission, the Prophet Joseph Smith wrote the following:

At about this time came Leman Copley, one of the sect called Shaking Quakers, and embraced the fulness of the everlasting Gospel, apparently honest-hearted, but still retaining the idea that the Shakers were right in some particulars of their faith. In order to have more perfect understanding on the subject, I inquired of the Lord. (Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev., 7 vols. [Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1932–1951], 1:167; hereafter cited as *HC*.)

As a result of this inquiry, Joseph Smith received the revelation recorded in section 49 of the Doctrine and Covenants, wherein the Lord directed Sidney Rigdon, Parley P. Pratt, and Leman Copley to preach the gospel to the Shakers. John Whitmer reported:

The above-named brethren went and proclaimed [the gospel] according to the revelation given them, for they are bound in tradition and priestcraft; and thus they are led away with foolish and vain imaginations (Whitmer, *Book of John Whitmer*, p. 20).

Parley P. Pratt's autobiography confirms the outcome of this encounter:

Some time in March, I was commanded of the Lord, in connection with S. Rigdon and L. Copley, to visit a people called the Shakers, and preach the gospel unto them.

We fulfilled this mission, as we were commanded, in a settlement of this strange people, near Cleveland, Ohio; but they utterly refused to hear or obey the gospel. (Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt*, ed. Parley P. Pratt, Jr. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1938], p. 61.)

Shortly after the gospel message was rejected by the Shakers, Lemam Copley returned to their Society and asked for fellowship. In June of that same year, Brother Copoley caused a great stir among the Saints in Thompson, Ohio, where he lived. These Saints had been instructed to enter the law of consecration. Brother Copley, who owned a large tract of land there, had agreed to follow this counsel but broke the covenant. As a consequence of this contention, the revelation in section 54 of the Doctrine and Covenants was given, directing the Saints of Thompson to move to Missouri.

In his history, Brother Whitmer wrote: "At this time the Church at Thompson, Ohio, was involved in difficulty because of the rebellion of Lemam Copley, who would not do as he had previously agreed, which thing confused the whole church" (Whitmer, Book of John Whitmer, ch. 8). Sometime between 1831 and 1836, Copley was excommunicated from the Church, as the Prophet Joseph's journal entry for 1 April 1836 reveals:

Many brethren called to see me, . . . among the number was Lemam Copley, who testified against me in a suit I brought against Dr. Philastus Hurlburt for threatening my life. He confessed that he bore a false testimony against me in that suit . . . and asked my forgiveness, which was readily granted. He also wished to be received into the Church again, by baptism, and was received according to his desire. (*HC*, 2:433.)

6. In Shaker parlance, the "cross" referred to their practice of celibacy.