

**A Non-Mormon View of the Birth of  
Mormonism in Ohio**



# A Non-Mormon View of the Birth of Mormonism in Ohio

Milton V. Backman, Jr.

Josiah Jones, a resident of Kirtland at the time of the introduction of Mormonism in Ohio, wrote in 1831 one of the earliest accounts of the rise of the Restored Church in the Western Reserve. This account was published in *The Evangelist* (June 1841), a Disciple publication edited by Walter Scott. According to Scott, Jones “was one of the faithful few belonging to the church in Kirtland, who refused to follow Rigdon when he made a surrender of himself and his flock to the Mormons.”

There is some discrepancy in Jones’s chronology. He wrote, for example, that the four missionaries arrived in Ohio in the “last part of October, 1830,” which harmonizes with other contemporary accounts, but then in the same paragraph recorded that the Mormons “appeared in the town of Mentor at Elder Sidney Rigdon’s on Thursday evening about the 6th of October.”

Although Jones could not recall the precise timetable of Latter-day Saint preaching in Ohio, he does indicate some of the communities where the missionaries proclaimed the gospel and recalled some of the beliefs originally emphasized by the Mormon elders. He also wrote a brief description of the “Family” which coincides with Lyman Wight’s account of this group. Moreover, Jones recorded his reactions to the introduction of Mormonism in Ohio, which included the recital of various “stories” circulated about the Mormons in the Western Reserve in the fall of 1830 and during the year 1831.

HISTORY OF THE MORMONITES

Kirtland, 1831

Feeling it to be a duty I owe to myself and to the community to take some notice of the transactions of that sect of men known by the name of the Mormons, which has lately sprung up here and in the vicinity, I shall from time to time (living in their midst) commit to writing whatever I already know, and may in future hear about them, in order that the world may know of their rise and their proceedings. What I shall write of their proceedings from the commencement of them until this time, must be mostly from recollection; hereafter, however, it is my intention to note down some things in the form of a diary.

In the last part of October, 1830, four men appeared here by the names of Cowdery, Pratt, Whitmer and Peterson; they stated they were from Palmyra, Ontario county, N.Y. with a book, which they said contained what was engraven on gold plates found in a stone box, in the ground in the town

of Manchester, Ontario Co., N.Y., and was found about three years ago by a man named Joseph Smith Jr. who had translated it by looking into a stone or two stones, when put into a dark place, which stones he said were found in the box with the plates. They affirmed while he looked through the stone spectacles another sat by and wrote what he told them, and thus the book was all written. The doctrines which they taught are contained in the book which the world may have recourse to. These men appeared in the town of Mentor at Elder Sidney Rigdon's on Thursday evening about the 6th of October last. On Sunday following the Elder with two or three of these men attended a meeting at Euclid, I also attended and here I was first informed by I. Morley that such men and such a book had appeared. The next Wednesday evening they held a meeting at the Methodist Meetinghouse in this place, at which time they read some in their new book, and exhorted the people to repent of their pride and priestcraft and all other sins, and be baptized by them for the remission of them, for they said that if they had been baptized it was of no avail, for there was no legal administrator, neither had been for fourteen hundred years, until God had called them to the office, and had sent them into the world to publish it to this generation. The next day we heard that after they went home, or to the family where they put up, they baptized seventeen into the faith which they published.

Perhaps it will be necessary to give some account of the family which I have mentioned. For nearly two years past Isaac Morley had contended that in order to restore the ancient order of things in the church of Christ, it was necessary that there should be a community of goods among the brethren; and accordingly a number of them removed to his house and farm, and built houses, and worked and lived together, and composed what is here called the "Big Family," which at this time consisted of perhaps 50 or 60, old and young. They also had another branch of the family in the town of Mayfield, about eight miles from this, but the number was small at the time. To return—on Friday evening they held meeting at the family, and on Saturday evening also, at which time I attended, and saw Elder Rigdon much affected and shedding tears. The next day, Sunday, Elder Rigdon had an appointment to preach in this place, and attended having these four men with him; he opened the meeting as usual, and arose to address the congregation but was so affected that he could not; he said all that he had to say to us was to repent and humble ourselves before God. After a short exhortation he sat down and the new teachers exhorted us a short time and the meeting closed. In the evening they held another meeting at the school house; at this meeting or in the daytime Elder Rigdon told us that for two years past his preaching had been of no use to us; it was more to please our fancy and tickle our ears, than to affect our hearts.

A few days after these men appeared again, a few of us went to see them and Cowdery was requested to state how the plates were found, which he did. He stated that Smith looked onto or through the transparent stones to translate what was on the plates. I then asked him if he had ever looked through the stones to see what he could see in them; his reply was that he was not permitted to look into them. I asked him who debarred him from looking into them; he remained sometime in silence, then said that he had so much confidence in his friend Smith, who told him that he must not look into them, that he did not presume to do so lest he should tempt God and be struck dead.

On Monday Elder Rigdon was rebaptized, and additions have continued to be made almost daily to them since that time. Sidney Rigdon said in private conversation that no one could tell what virtue there was in Cowdery's hands, for when he took hold of him to baptize him he felt a shock strike through him. They pretend to give the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands; many of them receive it so that it makes them fall prostrate to the ground; some do not receive the spirit until a number of days after the laying on of hand; some have not yet received it at all. They laid hands on the sick, and in the name of Jesus told them to recover. Two cases occurred in this place, one, a man that had fits, by the name of Luke, whom they commanded not to let it be known; but he not receiving any benefit from it told of it. Another boy about twelve years old that had fits daily, whose father and mother had joined them; his father said that he had no more doubt that his son would get well then he had of his existence; but he is no better yet. One other case was in Painesville, on a man by the name of Champney, who is no better; another was a sick woman in Mayfield that has been confined these two or three years and who, they still say, will get well.

About five or six weeks ago some of them began to have visions and Revelation, and to prophesy, as they say. They said a man by the name of Wight, who was ordained their elder with authority to lay on hands, one night in meeting, had what they call "the Power of God," and that his face and hands shone so that it was plain to be seen by all in the room, and that he sung a song which no one ever heard before, and which they said was the most melodious that they ever listened to. It was sung in another tongue. While in these visions they say they are carried away in the spirit to the Lamanites, the natives of this country, which are our Western Indians, which are the lost Jews, and which are now to be brought in with the fulness of the Gentiles. While in these visions they say that they can see the Indians on the banks of the streams at the West waiting to be baptized; and they can hear them sing and see them perform many of the Indian maneuvers, which they try to imitate in various ways; those that have these visions are mostly young men and girls from twelve to twenty years old. They say that they know they have the spirit of prophecy, and this is some of that which was spoken by Joel the prophet, that in the last days it shall come to pass that "I will pour out of my spirit upon all flesh, and they shall prophesy." These young men and women will lay sometimes for hours almost lifeless to appearance, and when they begin to recover, they begin to pray in a low voice or whisper, and after a little time, to act, they say, as the Indians did where they were carried by the spirit.

One girl about thirteen years old, while under the influence of the spirit of prophecy, as they term it, would select passages of prophecy from the Bible both old and new Testament, and also from the Mormon book, and put them all together and make a complete chain or connection of prophecy, which they say "they defy Scott or Campbell to connect with equal perfection." While in these visions, they say they have writing come onto their hands which no one can read but one in the same situation; if any one of their brethren or sisters talk to them in Indian it will so please them that they will laugh and act out many Indian capers and motions.

But of late their prophesying seems to have ceased, and they have taken to running; the young men after falling down and recovering will start and run half a mile, and then get upon a stump and begin to preach and pray as

loud as they can bawl. They have been seen to run to the river or brook and make as though they were baptizing some person. Sometimes they call out in these scenes—"There I have baptized one, then two, then three," and so on. They also have a way of receiving a commission from the Lord to go and preach. They are first warned and called while in a vision that they must go into the world and preach; at another time they receive a commission on a roll of paper handed to them from above in the presence of all in the room; but what is contained on the paper I have not yet learnt; three of the young men that have received their commission in this way have gone to preach; one by the name of Herman Bassett, an Edson Fuller, and Burr Riggs; they have been gone about ten days and I have not yet heard from them. They also see a great many lights in the night; one of their foremost men in this place, while baptizing in the evening, (for they perform this ceremony mostly in the night) said he saw across the river a light as large as the palm of his hand, which stood there while (he) was baptizing, which he knows was a supernatural light; they have now become quite common and they all see the lights; but others standing by do not see them. I. Morley said while in meeting at Mayfield, he saw a ball of fire about the size of a dollar, come into the room and light upon a woman's clothes near her feet, and from her come to him, and then to another person, and so disappeared, to the astonishment of some others that saw it—E. Fuller while lying on the floor has been seen to jump up and cling to a beam for awhile and then drop like a log on the floor;—at other times they will reach up until they touch a certain beam and then fall flat on the floor; these accounts I have received from information a few hours after they transpired, not have been an eye witness of many of them myself. And many other signs and wonders and fanatical exhibitions, truly were done by this people, which are not written, but these are written that you might believe, and that believing you might remain firm in the doctrines of the New Testament and not turn aside to Mormonism.