

Methodism as Context for Joseph Smith's First Vision

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When I started looking at early American Methodism thirty years ago, the first thing that struck me was how full of vibrant supernaturalism it was. Early American Methodists lived in a world where visions, prophetic dreams, and supernatural impressions were everywhere. God spoke to them directly. They talked about these things openly, without embarrassment. Supernaturalism was a part of everyday life and central to their connection to one another.

The second thing that struck me about this supernaturalism, often denounced as enthusiasm, was that it had a trajectory. It was more central to the Methodist Episcopal Church in the eighteenth century and first decades of the nineteenth than it was after 1820. It declined as Methodism became more respectable and trended toward the emerging middle class. In general, it faded first in wealthier, urban congregations, though it was by no means ever limited to the frontier or camp meetings. It would eventually be linked to the divide between the Holiness movement and mainline Methodism, and more strongly to the divide with Pentecostalism. The Methodism of Bishop Francis Asbury, who died in 1816, looked and felt much different than the Methodism of Matthew Simpson, who served as a bishop from 1852 to 1884 and was a close friend of Abraham Lincoln's.¹

1. Darius L. Salter, *God Cannot Do without America: Matthew Simpson and the Apotheosis of Protestant Nationalism* (Wilmore, Ky.: First Fruits Press, 2017), 1, 309–15, 368–69, 391–403, 607. On the myth of the frontier camp meeting, see John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 318–26.

Joseph Smith and his family had considerable contact with Methodism in the years surrounding his first vision, as Richard Bushman has described. Lucy and Joseph Sr. attended Methodist meetings while the family lived in Vermont. In Palmyra, Joseph Jr. reportedly attended Methodist camp meetings, where he experienced “a spark of Methodism,” and joined a class meeting of the Palmyra Methodist Church. Willard Chase, one of Joseph’s treasure-hunting associates in Palmyra, was also a Methodist class leader. Later, Chase hired a “conjuror,” and he and his sister Sally used her “green glass” in an attempt to find where Joseph had hidden the gold plates, which apparently did not violate his Methodist scruples. During the time that Joseph translated the plates into the Book of Mormon, he and his wife, Emma, attended Methodist meetings, and Joseph reportedly joined a class.²

Joining a class meeting was significant. It defined one as a member of a Methodist society. Anyone could attend public meetings, but joining a class implied a deeper level of commitment. Classes met once a week, usually in someone’s home. They were supposed to include about a dozen members, a size thought best to promote intimacy, openness, and discipline, though they often ballooned to two or three times that number. Class meetings were not preaching occasions. After singing and prayer, the leader would usually examine each member in turn, asking them to reveal their troubles and triumphs in front of their neighbors. The leader recorded attendance and contributions weekly. Attending a class meeting would have given Joseph Smith an inside look at all that it meant to be a Methodist.³

The Smiths were of course not the only Mormons with Methodist roots. Brigham Young joined the Methodist Episcopal Church at age twenty-three, though he later made light of his connection, as John Turner notes, and a number of his siblings joined the Reformed Methodist Church, a small splinter group established in Vermont in 1814.

2. Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 25, 37, 48–50, 60, 69. According to Bushman, Emma had an uncle who was a Methodist “lay minister” and a brother-in-law who was a class leader in Harmony, Pennsylvania. See Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 69. Scholars have debated the date of Joseph’s first vision for more than fifty years, ranging from Wesley P. Walters, “New Light on Mormon Origins from Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 10, no. 4 (Fall 1967): 227–44, to Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

3. John Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; paperback, University of Illinois Press, 2001), 80–87.

The Reformed Methodists fully embraced Methodism's supernaturalist impulse. Christopher Jones estimates that roughly "one-third" of the first generation of converts to Mormonism "came from Methodist backgrounds," as did the Church's first three presidents and eight of the original twelve Apostles. Methodist preacher Peter Cartwright recorded a conversation he had with Joseph Smith in Illinois, after Smith fled Missouri. "He believed that among all the Churches in the world the Methodist was the nearest right," recounts Cartwright. According to Cartwright, Smith told him, "We Latter-day Saints are Methodists, as far as they have gone, only we have advanced further."⁴

The Methodism that the Smith family experienced during the years surrounding Joseph's first vision was in the midst of a deep and enduring transition, a contest over the core identity of the church. Differences between the two sides would eventually lead to a division between Old School and New School Methodism, as B. T. Roberts, one of the founders of the Free Methodist Church, put it in a famous 1857 essay that got him expelled from the Genesee Conference in western New York. The divide was part of the context in which Joseph Smith's first vision took place. He could see Methodism turning away from the path that appealed most to him, and he in turn turned away from Methodism, but probably not before absorbing some of the possibilities that had been so much a part of the church. Richard Bushman has written that Joseph Smith's "natural constituency" consisted of "thousands of kindred spirits among unsophisticated Christians, who longed for visions, visitations, inspired dreams, revelations, and every other outpouring of the Spirit." The same had been true for early Methodists and still was in parts of western New York in the 1810s and 1820s.⁵

From the start, Methodist supernaturalism knew no geographical boundaries. It was central to the church's development north and south,

4. John G. Turner, *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 15–19, 24–25, 27; Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, the Backwoods Preacher*, ed. W. P. Strickland (Cincinnati: Cranston and Curts, 1856), 342; Christopher Jones, "'It's Like Methodism, Only More': Mormon Conversion and Narratives of the Great Apostasy," Patheos, February 4, 2013, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/peculiarpeople/2013/02/its-like-methodism-only-more-mormon-conversion-and-narratives-of-the-great-apostasy/>; Christopher C. Jones, "Mormonism in the Methodist Marketplace: James Covel and the Historical Background of Doctrine and Covenants 39–40," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (2012): 67–98.

5. Kevin M. Watson, *Old or New School Methodism? The Fragmentation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 163–82; Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 6.

east and west. In October 1789, Thomas Wallcut, who was from Massachusetts, took a journey of twenty-five days from Baltimore, Maryland, to Muskingum, Ohio. Everywhere he went, one topic dominated conversation: the growth of Methodism. “I found that the spread of Methodism in Virginia & Maryland is unparalleled and astonishing—some go so far as to say that full half the People are Methodists already & that Methodism will be the established Religion of Virginia in a few years,” Wallcut wrote to a friend in Boston. Wallcut was no fan of Methodism, noting that its “influence is principally felt among the Negroes & poorer & lower classes of the People.” What really bothered Wallcut about Methodism was its enthusiasm. He attended several “evening meetings,” reporting that they were “attended with all that confusion, violence and distortion of the body, voice & gestures that characterizes such a boiling hot religion . . . no Jack Tar in his cups [i.e., no drunken sailor] appears to me more irreverent in professing the name of the Deity than these noisy bellowers when they call upon him.” So far as Wallcut could tell, only the Shakers exceeded the Methodists in their intemperate zeal. Even after we make allowances for Wallcut’s bias, it is clear that the ecstatic intensity of Methodism was one of its defining characteristics.⁶

What Wallcut observed in his journey from Maryland to Ohio was equally evident in New England and New York. To direct her life, Fanny Newell relied on dreams, visions, and impressions, some so powerful that it seemed that God was speaking to her in an audible voice. Born in 1793 in Sidney, Maine, about two hundred miles from where Joseph Smith was born, Newell experienced conversion in 1808 after a series of dramatic visions. Shortly afterward, she had an impression that the preacher who had led her to Christ, Henry Martin, would soon die, which in fact he did a few weeks later. Later, in another dream, a woman who had died sometime before appeared to Newell, telling her that she was to take up Martin’s mantle and preach, much as Elisha had taken up the mantle of Elijah, which she did. Newell explained God’s “special dealings” with her through dreams, writing, “That which I cannot comprehend when awake, as Job said, he revealeth to me, when deep sleep locks up the mental faculties.” Newell married a Methodist preacher, and the two traveled together for several years, with Fanny often exhorting after her husband’s sermons.⁷

6. Thomas Wallcut to James Freeman, October 31, 1789, Thomas Wallcut papers, box 2, folder 1, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.

7. Fanny Newell, *Memoirs of Fanny Newell; Written by Herself, and Published by the Desire and Request of Numerous Friends, Third Edition, with Corrections and*

On one occasion in 1811, Newell had a dream in which a “tall slender man” revealed to her that the child of an acquaintance would soon die. The next day, she found the child’s mother sewing her a gown. “You are making a garment for that child, but she will never put it on,” Newell said. When the woman asked her what she meant, Newell replied, “Your child will not live long.” That night the girl took sick, and twelve days later she died. Newell’s preaching and prophetic gifts were so well known that at least ten thousand copies of her autobiography were sold after her death, making it the equivalent of a best seller at that time.⁸

New York proved even more fertile ground for Methodist supernaturalism than New England, where the influence of proper Congregationalism was still more evident. In 1795, a Methodist society was formed at Troy, New York, and included at least one black family. When Phebe Curtis and her family rented a house in Troy in 1802, their landlords were a “German” couple. Soon after they moved in, the woman “warned my mother against Methodism, saying that it was a dangerous religion, that Methodists were witches, and that if a person were to go among them he could not get away from them until he had joined them.” When Curtis’s mother told their landlord that they were, in fact, Methodists, she was “terrified by this unexpected information” and “hurried out of the house without ceremony lest a spell might be put upon her before she could take her leave.”⁹

Perhaps no one demonstrated the persistence of Methodist supernaturalism in New York better than James P. Horton. Horton was born in 1769 in Fishkill, sixty-five miles up the Hudson River from New York City. His mother died when he was young. When his father remarried, Horton was apprenticed at age eleven, eventually becoming a

Improvements (Springfield, Mass.: G. and C. Merriam, 1833), 22, 23, 30, 31, 40, 41, 55–56, 64–65, 108–9, 110, quotation on p. 42. From 1810 to 1818, Ebenezer Newell was appointed to circuits in Vermont and Maine. He quit itinerant preaching and settled down in 1819. See Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for the Years 1773–1828* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), 188, 202, 215, 233, 250, 264, 286, 301, 317, 322.

8. Newell, *Memoirs*, 103–4. Newell died in 1824. An advertisement accompanying the 1833 third edition of Newell’s memoirs says that ten thousand copies had been sold “within a few months.” Nancy Caldwell (b. 1781) was another New Englander whose life was guided by dreams, visions, and impressions. See Nancy Caldwell, *Walking with God: Leaves from the Journal of Mrs. Nancy Caldwell*, ed. James O. Thompson (Keyser, W.V.: Mountain Echo, 1886).

9. Joseph Hillman, *History of Methodism in Troy, N.Y.* (Troy, N.Y.: Joseph Hillman, 1888), 12, 13–14, 16. This account was evidently based on an earlier history of Methodism in Troy written by Phebe Curtis. See pp. 12–13.

shoemaker. As a young man, he spent fifteen months in jail, the result of a drunken brawl. His conversion and call to preaching involved a series of dreams, impressions, and what sound like visions. Once, after eating and sleeping but little for three weeks, he stole away to pray in the woods, where “words seemed to be spoken to me” by God. “Whether in the body or out of the body, the Lord knows, but it appeared to me [as] if I had been taken right up into glory,” Horton later recounted. During another visionary experience, as he later recalled, “it appeared to me that I was taken up into heaven, and there I saw the Lord upon his great white throne, and he spoke to me in melting language.” He also believed that he had been divinely healed on at least two occasions.¹⁰

For more than thirty years, Horton divided his time between preaching as an unpaid local Methodist preacher and working at his trade just enough for his family to survive. Horton married at age twenty-one and had thirteen children, all but one of whom lived to maturity, but his wife and children are barely mentioned in his autobiography. He spent weeks at a time away from home preaching, setting his itinerary spontaneously based on dreams and impressions he received from the Lord. When one of his converts offered him a horse, Horton declined. “I found it more convenient to be on foot, for I could visit all the houses I saw from the road, without the trouble of letting down bars, and opening gates,” he later wrote. “I thought but little of traveling forty or fifty miles on foot in the course of one day, and stopping a dozen or twenty times at different houses along the road to sing a hymn, and pray in each, and sometimes give an exhortation to the people.” He preached among blacks as easily as whites. On one occasion, he left home to preach, intending to be gone only for the weekend, but ended up staying away for five weeks.¹¹

Horton built up a following among New York Methodists. He traveled and preached with Lorenzo Dow. The prominent Methodist preacher Freeborn Garrettson supported him financially and gave Horton land on his estate that he could farm to support his family. Garrettson and his wife, Catherine Livingston Garrettson, were wealthy by virtue of Catherine’s share in the Livingston family fortune and owned a large estate near Rhinebeck, New York, but they too were Old School Methodists, for whom dreams and visions formed the core of their religion. Freeborn was the son of a Maryland planter and one of the first

10. James P. Horton, *A Narrative of the Early Life, Remarkable Conversion, and Spiritual Labors of James P. Horton, Who Has Been a Member of the Methodist Episcopal Church Upwards of Forty Years* (n.p.: Printed for the Author, 1839), 3, 10, 23, 85, 135–36.

11. Horton, *Narrative*, 47, 60, 83, 102, 165, 193.

Methodist preachers to free his slaves, which he did in June 1775, shortly after his conversion. Garretson defended looking to dreams and visions for guidance, writing, “I know, that both sleeping and waking, things of a divine nature have been revealed to me.” His dreams were graphic, and he took great care to record them in his journal. Likewise, after describing one particularly vivid vision in her autobiography, Catherine added, “Many would say it was the power of imagination, enthusiasm, wild-fire, but no, it was wonderful, yet true, and I shall ever think it a most gracious display of mercy, love, and power.” Her marriage to a penniless Methodist preacher scandalized her mother, but the bonds of a shared piety held Catherine and Freeborn together.¹²

Despite these connections, or perhaps because of them, Horton increasingly became an embarrassment to Methodism’s emerging respectable middle class, among whom he was known as Crazy Horton. As Horton himself wrote, “I made such a dreadful time of it, according to their notions, whenever I prayed, or exercised. I hallooed so loud it would frighten the devil’s children. They felt ashamed of me; and some were afraid the cause of God would be injured rather than receive advantage by my public exercises.” But he “knew I was powerfully operated upon by some supernatural influence.” People shouted and fell to the ground when he preached, “like men slain in battle.”¹³

More respectable Methodists tried a number of strategies to rein in Horton and others like him. They set a ten o’clock curfew at camp meetings, after which there was to be “no singing, no praying, unless in silence.” When this did not work, they tried holding invitation-only prayer meetings. The “handsome prayers” offered in these meetings did little good, as far as Horton could tell, except to “quiet the mischievous by putting them to sleep.”¹⁴

Despite the suspicions of fashionable Methodists, Horton had his supporters, among whom he became known as Uncle Jimmy. In 1838 a group of his New York friends urged him to write an autobiography and commissioned a portrait to accompany the volume, which was published the following year.¹⁵

12. Horton, *Narrative*, 27–31, 73, 86, 105, 111–12; Wigger, *American Saint*, 177–81; Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 135, 106–7, 167; Catherine Livingston Garretson, untitled autobiography, TMs, Drew University Library, Madison, N.J.

13. Horton, *Narrative*, 25, 31, 43, 52, 75.

14. Horton, *Narrative*, 93, 137, 144–45, 195.

15. Horton, *Narrative*, 118, 165–66, 173–74. On Horton, also see Billy Hibbard, *Memoirs of the Life and Travels of B. Hibbard, Minister of the Gospel, Containing an Account of His Experience of Religion; and of His Call to the Ministry for Nearly Thirty Years*

Horton's memoir was among the first in a genre of circuit-rider autobiographies designed to call the church back to the zeal of its earlier, less refined days. So common were complaints about Methodism's lost zeal that dissidents became known by the widely recognized label of "croakers." Though mostly written after 1840, almost all these accounts focus on the period before 1820. Unlike the earlier Puritan jeremiads, Methodist croakers were not reacting against a loss of prestige or respect. Just the opposite. They were also more likely to blame their fellow preachers than the people for what they clearly perceived as a loss of real spiritual power. The preacher James Quinn liked to tell the story from Methodism's early days of a man whose chickens "took fright and ran into the weeds" whenever a preacher rode up. But in later years, the chickens lost their fear because "the preachers appear so much like lawyers that the chickens don't know them." Like most jokes, this one was funny because it contained a grain of truth.¹⁶

No one had more credibility among New York Methodists than Free-born Garretson, who had begun circuit preaching in 1776 when there were less than five thousand Methodists in America. Writing in 1826, at the age of seventy-three, Garretson affirmed his loyalty to Wesley's theology but wondered "what his people will be a hundred years hence." "They may be a numerous and a learned people, but it is possible that by slow degrees they may retrograde, until they have very little of the spirit of old Methodism." Garretson, who was by this time wealthy, nevertheless worried that Methodists were trading the power of the Spirit for a comfortable respectability. This was particularly true of the preachers. "The fall of the primitive church began with the clergy, and should we fall, our declension will begin here," wrote Garretson.¹⁷

The Methodist itinerant preacher Billy Hibbard (never William or Bill) was born in Norwich, Connecticut, in 1771. His father was a tanner and a shoemaker. From his childhood on, Hibbard's life was filled with

(New York: J. C. Totten, 1825), 249. Sampson Maynard was another New York Methodist whose life was guided by an endless series of dreams, visions, and impressions. See Sampson Maynard, *The Experience of Sampson Maynard, Local Preacher of the Methodist E. Church (Written by Himself) to Which Is Prefixed an Allegorical Address to the Christian World, or, a Thimble Full of Truth, to Blow Up the World of Error* (New York: Printed for the Author by Wm. C. Taylor, 1828).

16. Quinn, *Sketches*, 183–84. On the croakers, see Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 180–88; Wigger, *American Saint*, 402–3, 410.

17. MEC, *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 7; Richard E. Herrmann, *American Methodist Pioneer: The Life and Journals of the Rev. Freeborn Garretson, 1752–1826*, ed. Robert Drew Simpson (Rutland, Vt.: Academy Books, 1985), 30–31.

dreams and supernatural impressions, some so vivid that they appeared more like visions. At age twelve, Hibbard had a series of these visionary experiences that he remembered for the rest of his life. In one of these, though he had never heard of Methodism at this point, God revealed to him that there was a people from England that “teach clearly from the scriptures” and who “did not consider a college education, as the essential qualification for a minister.” God also revealed to him that he would become a traveling preacher until, at age thirty-six, “I should meet with something like death that year.” God also told him that one day he would preach in the house of “deacon K.” and that “Mr. P. Watkins,” who was “wicked and intemperate,” would be converted as he preached. Years later, all of this came true. Of course, Hibbard’s wife knew all about his visions. When he reached age thirty-six, she “began to feel uneasy respecting the event that was to take place this year.” But instead of Hibbard, it was his son John who died.¹⁸

When Methodist preachers began preaching at his father’s house, Hibbard resisted falling in with them. “I wanted to be a Congregationalist, and to be respectable. But I wanted the love and seriousness of the Methodists,” he later wrote in his 1825 autobiography. After a period of intense spiritual struggle, Hibbard suddenly realized that the Methodists were the people from England revealed to him in his vision at age twelve. Soon after, he joined a class meeting.¹⁹

Hibbard’s brand of Methodism knew no social boundaries. Once, after a gathering in a cold meetinghouse, Hibbard ducked into a tavern to get warm. There, a “gentleman” was “strutting” through the room, “in ruffles and gloves, and swearing profanely, seemingly to the full approbation of all present,” according to Hibbard. When the gentleman walked past, Hibbard tapped him on the shoulder and asked him to stop swearing. “Why Hibbard,” the gentleman replied, “you used to be a likely, bright young man, till you met with these Methodists; but they have made a d--n fool of you.” As everyone laughed, he advised Hibbard not to “reprove gentlemen.” Hibbard bowed in response, saying, “Mister, I ask your pardon, I believe I have crowded a little upon that rule of Scripture, where it says, cast not your pearls before swine, lest they turn

18. Billy Hibbard, *Memoirs of the Life and Travels of B. Hibbard, Minister of the Gospel, Containing an Account of His Experience of Religion, and of His Call and Labours in the Ministry, for Nearly Thirty Years: In Which Are Recorded Many Important, Curious and Interesting Events, Illustrative of the Providence and Grace of God* (New York: J. C. Totten, 1825), 5, 39, 42–43, 123–25, 260–63, 337.

19. Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 66, 81–82.

again and rend you; but I have done it ignorantly, for I did not know that you were a hog.”²⁰

For a few years, Hibbard farmed and preached as an unpaid local preacher. Then, in 1798, he was admitted to the traveling connection of itinerant preachers and assigned to the Dutchess circuit in New York. For the next twenty-five years, Hibbard rode circuits in the New York Conference. When he preached, his listeners sometimes “fell as one shot down in battle, and would lay without strength from half an hour, to two hours,” before they recovered their ability to speak and move. On one occasion, as Hibbard preached on the terrors of hell, his audience began to cry out, and Hibbard had to shout to be heard over the uproar. Those outside the meetinghouse later said that he could be heard half a mile away. Even so, his voice was soon “lost in the out-cry.” When the tumult reached a fevered pitch, “those in the gallery took fright, and ran down stairs so fast, that many fell at the foot of the stairs.” As the fallen lay in a “heap,” others trampled them in their rush to escape. Despite the chaos, Hibbard could not have been more pleased. This was what the real power of the Spirit looked like.²¹

Like all Methodist itinerant preachers, Hibbard’s base salary was \$64 a year before 1800, when it was raised to \$80 a year. In fact, preachers often got a good deal less once the offerings from each circuit were divided among them. For one quarter in 1811 or 1812, Hibbard received just eight cents. One of his first circuits, the Cambridge circuit, was five hundred miles around. He was expected to complete the circuit every four weeks, with sixty-three preaching appointments per round. Though he had little formal education, he was a voracious reader, which eventually led him to conclude that a college education did not guarantee wisdom. “I often thought that if a man entered College a blockhead, he would come out a blockhead,” wrote Hibbard. He finally retired in 1824, when he could no longer take the physical stress of constantly traveling and preaching, and sat down to record his experiences.²²

20. Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 100.

21. Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 140, 153, 226–27.

22. Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 129, 143, 186, 310, 341, 367. For Hibbard’s conference appointments from 1798 to 1823, see MEC, *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 77, 83, 88, 94, 100, 106, 113, 121, 133, 141, 151, 163, 174, 186, 201, 214, 233, 249, 263, 285, 300, 316, 335, 350, 371, 390, 398. Hibbard’s wife worked to support the family by spinning and weaving and, during one three-year stretch, running a school with thirty students, which earned her three hundred dollars. See Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 161, 236. Freeborn and Catherine Garretson supported Hibbard financially, including offering to pay up to one thousand dollars to send Hibbard’s son, John, to college. See Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 258.

Like his fellow croakers, Hibbard was inspired to write his autobiography by the widening chasm between the Old and New School Methodists. “Some are religious for the Lord’s sake, and some for their own sake.—Some to repair a lost reputation, and some to save their souls. Some to get money; and some to serve God,” wrote Hibbard. For many, religion had become a vehicle for social advancement. “How solemn they appear, how plain they dress, and yet how they will lie or equivocate to get a good bargain.”²³

The divide between the brand of Methodism practiced by Newell, the Garretts, Horton, and Hibbard and that of their more refined counterparts became a source of growing contentiousness in western New York during the 1810s and 1820s. Ithaca is a good example. The village, which is only seventy miles from Palmyra, was settled in the late eighteenth century. The Methodist itinerant William Colbert, who was appointed to the Northumberland circuit in Pennsylvania, preached there in 1793. A year or so later, a group of converts formed a class meeting with eighteen members. But the vine withered, and by 1800 the Ithaca Methodists had disbanded.²⁴

In 1817 David Ayres moved to Ithaca from New York City. Ayers, who was twenty-three years old at the time, arrived in Ithaca with a letter of introduction from Nathan Bangs, the most prominent Methodist preacher in New York City and an advocate for the refinement of the church. Ayres had been converted to Methodism four years earlier and was “full of ambition.” Ambitious, but also decidedly respectable.²⁵

Ayres partnered with a Methodist local preacher, Jesse Merritt, to form a class meeting and society in Ithaca. From the start, Ayres was determined that Ithaca Methodists would be as respectable as the Presbyterians. So, despite only modest growth in membership, he set out

23. Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 273. Charles Giles was another croaker with New York connections. See Charles Giles, *Pioneer: A Narrative of the Nativity, Experience, Travels, and Ministerial Labors of Rev. Charles Giles, with Incidents, Observations, and Reflections*. (New York: G. Lane & P. P. Sandford, 1844), 301–2, 324–25.

24. C. D. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Andrus, Gauntlett and Co., 1852), 14–26; Methodist Episcopal Church [MEC], *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for the Years 1773–1828* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), 51. On Colbert, see Wigger, *American Saint*, 254, 345–49. William Colbert’s ten-volume manuscript journal is housed at Garrett Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois.

25. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca*, 31–32. On Nathan Bangs, see Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 201–4; Wigger, *American Saint*, 407; Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 189–90.

to construct an impressive church building. As the nineteenth-century historian of Ithaca Methodism put it, Ayres and the church board concluded that “unless they could erect as good and respectable a church as the Presbyterians, they could not secure a respectable congregation.” The building they had in mind would have galleries and a steeple, at a cost of five thousand dollars.²⁶

Ayres began collecting subscriptions, accosting everyone he met, and recording the results in a red morocco blank book. The book itself became an object of local fascination. It was said that “men feared to encounter it.” When local resources ran dry, Ayres and his associates branched out to Albany and New York City. Governor DeWitt Clinton gave ten dollars, as did Daniel D. Tompkins, the current vice president of the United States under James Monroe. It took more than two years before the building was finally completed in 1820 and its steeple bell rang out.²⁷

And yet Methodism in Ithaca remained sluggish. No sooner had they dedicated the new building than Ayres and Merritt had a falling out, with the result that Ayres was actually expelled from the church. The choir became involved in the dispute, and attendance “dwindled down to a mere handful” as “the citizens turned away with disgust from the scene of bitterness.” Ayres was eventually reinstated, but the church remained mired in contentiousness.²⁸

Then something unexpected happened, unexpected at least to David Ayres. Ithaca Methodism experienced a revival of a most disreputable nature. At the 1826 annual conference, Benjamin Sabin was appointed to the circuit that included Ithaca. Sabin was an Old School Methodist preacher, with little formal education, whose “theme in every place was experimental religion,” the kind of religion that connected the believer directly to God, without mediation, and led to shouting, weeping, and falling, slain in the spirit.²⁹

Under Sabin’s influence, Ithaca Methodists partnered with the Presbyterians, and to some extent the Baptists, to hold joint meetings. A black class meeting formed, which met independently. A camp meeting was scheduled for August near the Asbury meetinghouse.³⁰

26. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca*, 39, 41–42.

27. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca*, 42, 46, 51.

28. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca*, 56.

29. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca*, 63–64; MEC, *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 502.

30. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca*, 64–65, 67–68, 69.

The prospect of a camp meeting did not please Ayres. Up to that point, as the historian of Ithaca Methodism wrote in 1852, Ayres “had courted the smiles of the world, and thought nothing so desirable as a society wealthy and respectable, in an earthly sense.” Among Ayres and his allies, even “to respond Amen, in the meetings, or speak out the praises of God, was decidedly objected to.” They were in for a rude awakening.³¹

Since he could not prevent the camp meeting, Ayres decided that the Ithaca Methodists would attend, but that they would hold separate, private prayer meetings, where everything would be done “decently and in order.” That way, according to Ayres, “if the Methodists from the country become disorderly, we will not suffer, as the public can see the difference between the Ithaca Methodists, and the ranting Methodists from the country.” Alas, there was one problem with Ayres’s plan. He did not anticipate becoming one of the ranters himself, which is exactly what happened.³²

At one of his own prayer meetings, Ayres was overcome and fell to the ground, unable to move or to speak, next to a black worshipper who was similarly slain in the spirit. The news spread like a prairie fire before the wind, such that “hundreds, who knew his sentiments with reference to that very thing, ran to gaze upon the sight.” They stared at him in wonder, as he lay unable to respond. When he finally did recover the ability to move and speak, Ayres was reportedly a changed man, acknowledging his “pride of heart” and thanking God “that he had deeply humbled him.”³³

This “pento-costal outpouring of the Holy Ghost” continued intermittently for several months, filling believers with “new wine” and causing them to “shout aloud for joy.” Methodist membership in Ithaca increased from 96 to 349 over the course of the conference year. Between them, the Methodists and Presbyterians counted more than 700 converts. The revival became so noteworthy that the 1828 Genesee annual conference, which by that time included nearly 32,000 members in western New York and northeast Pennsylvania, was held in Ithaca. In 1831, Ithaca Methodism was again rocked by controversy when a female itinerant Baptist prophet, aided by a group of Methodist supporters, seized the church pulpit for an hour and a half, preaching on Revelation 12:1: “And there appeared a great

31. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca*, 68–69.

32. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca*, 70.

33. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca*, 72–74.

wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.”³⁴

The 1826–1827 revival at Ithaca described here was not an isolated incident, particularly in western New York. The divide between respectable and ranting Methodists had been conspicuous for more than a decade. Nothing would have seemed more unattractive to someone like Joseph Smith than the divisions and contentious formality of pre-revival Ithaca Methodism. What came after would have been far more appealing. To hold off the one and recapture the other required something radical, perhaps an entirely new beginning. For Methodists, that new beginning was the Holiness movement and eventually Pentecostalism. For Joseph Smith, it was Mormonism.

What was at the heart of the division between the ranting and refined Methodists? Perhaps no one provided a better answer to this question than the African American Methodist Jarena Lee. Born in Cape May, New Jersey, in 1783, Lee left her parents at age seven to become a domestic servant. She was converted in part by Joseph Pilmore, one of the first preachers John Wesley sent to America, and attended Richard Allen’s Bethel church in Philadelphia, which he had established as an independent black church within the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1794 with Francis Asbury’s backing. Lee was bold and persistent, describing herself as “naturally of a lively turn of disposition.”³⁵

In her autobiography (there were two, the first published in 1836 and a second, expanded edition in 1849), Lee wrote that she was called to preach by an audible voice. “To my utter surprise there seemed to sound a voice which I thought I distinctly heard, and most certainly understood, which said to me, ‘Go preach the Gospel!’” But when she related her

34. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca*, 83, 90, 96, 98, 103–4; MEC, *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 501, 536, 572.

35. Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Printed and Published for the Author, 1849), 4, 5. Also see Jarena Lee, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Printed and Published for the Author, 1836), in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). On the establishment of Bethel church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), see Richard Allen, *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen: To Which Is Annexed the Rise and Progress of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America* (1793, reprint, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 31–35; Wigger, *American Saint*, 244–52. Allen broke away from the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816, after Asbury died, to form the AME.

calling to Richard Allen two days later, he turned her aside, telling her that the Methodist church did not allow for female preachers. Lee was not convinced. “If a man may preach, because the Saviour died for him, why not the woman? seeing he died for her also. Is he not a whole Saviour, instead of a half one?” she later wrote. She nevertheless relented, married, and had two children.³⁶

Eight years later, after her husband had died, Lee was again in Allen’s Philadelphia church, listening to the Rev. Richard Williams stumble through a sermon on Jonah 2:9 (the passage is part of Jonah’s prayer while in the belly of the great fish), during which “he seemed to have lost the spirit.” In an instant, without thinking about what she was doing, as Lee later wrote, “I sprang, as by an altogether supernatural impulse, to my feet, when I was aided from above to give an exhortation on the very text which my brother Williams had taken.” She told the stunned congregation that for eight years she had been like Jonah and had “delayed to go at the bidding of the Lord” to preach to those who were “as guilty as were the people of Ninevah.”³⁷

When she finally sat down, “scarcely knowing what I had done,” she was sure she would be expelled from the church. Instead, Allen rose and told the congregation how he had met with Lee eight years earlier but had put her off, telling her that women were not permitted to preach. What he had just seen changed his mind, and he now believed that Lee was as called to preach as any of the men present.³⁸

What followed for Lee was a ministry full of visions, impressions, people shouting and falling to the floor, and other “signs and wonders,” by which “God’s spirit was poured out in a miraculous manner.” Lee preached fearlessly before slave holders and slaves, in the free North and the slave South. During one four-year stretch she traveled 1,600 miles preaching the gospel, 211 of which she walked on foot. During another year, she traveled 2,325 miles and preached 178 sermons. On one occasion, while walking alone to a preaching appointment, she decided to give up and turn around. She got about three miles before she heard a voice saying, “If thou goest home thou will die.” She paused for a moment before continuing toward home anyway, only to feel a tapping on her shoulder. When she turned around, there was no one there. It

36. Lee, *Religious Experience* (1849), 10–11. Lee is not specific about the timing of this call, saying only that it occurred “between four and five years after my sanctification.”

37. Lee, *Religious Experience* (1849), 17.

38. Lee, *Religious Experience* (1849), 17.

brought to her mind the story of Balaam and his talking donkey, which saved him from death by the sword of the angel of the Lord. This time she got the message and headed back the other way.³⁹

By the time she wrote her autobiography, Lee understood that many would scoff at the supernaturalism in her account. She saved her final page to answer their objections. “As to the nature of uncommon impressions, which the reader cannot but have noticed, and possibly sneered at in the course of these pages, they may be accounted for in this way,” wrote Lee. The blind, she observed, have a “sense of feeling [that] is exceedingly fine, and is found to detect any roughness on the smoothest of surface, where those who can see find none. So it may be with such as I am, who has never had more than three months schooling; and wishing to know much of the way and law of God, have therefore watched the more closely the operations of the Spirit, and have in consequence been led thereby.” She could not see, because of her lack of education, so God gave her the ability to feel for the Spirit.⁴⁰

This analogy perfectly captures the tension between the Old and New School Methodists as it existed by the 1820s. The relatively uneducated and unsophisticated Old School Methodists had learned to feel the leading of the Spirit through dreams, visions, and impressions because they lacked the advantages of education and social privilege that would have allowed them to see. The New School Methodists rejected this reliance on feeling as backward and a hinderance to the necessities of progress.

Was it possible to both see and feel? The division between the Old and New School Methodists seemed to suggest that the answer was no. As Methodists learned to see, they steadily lost their ability to feel. Supernaturalism and modernity have never been an easy fit. Joseph Smith’s first vision occurred just as this divide was becoming readily apparent in western New York.

This is not the same as saying that Methodist supernaturalism led directly to Smith’s first vision. Correlation does not imply causation. But correlation can demonstrate context, and movements need a receptive context in which to take root. The divide between the supernaturalism of early Methodism and the respectability of middle-class Methodism formed a backdrop against which Smith’s audience could situate his visions and revelations. Whether they believed him or not, they would

39. Lee, *Religious Experience* (1849), 33, 36, 45, 48, 51, 63. The story of Balaam and his ass is told in Numbers 22:21–33.

40. Lee, *Religious Experience* (1849), 97.

have understood that he stood in a long line of visionaries who also had their critics.

The trajectory of Methodist supernaturalism provides a context not only for the career of Joseph Smith but also for the path that the broader Mormon church followed. Methodism had its beginnings in America about sixty years before Smith launched Mormonism. The Methodist turn toward middle-class respectability also seems to have preceded a similar shift in Mormonism by about sixty years. The number is imprecise, given the unevenness of the process, but the general trend seems clear.

What does this say about the two movements? In part, it reflects both churches' success in their cultural setting. They succeeded in moving from ranting to respectability, from feeling to seeing, though there were those who saw the process more as decline than progress. Along the way, both churches' constituencies moved from the margins to the center of American society. The Methodists began building colleges and universities in earnest during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Brigham Young University was established in 1875. Whether this transition from enthusiasm to refinement has been an entirely good thing or not is beyond the scope of this essay. What is clear is that it provided a backdrop for Joseph Smith's first vision and subsequent revelations during the church's New York sojourn.⁴¹

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41. On Protestantism and the establishment of American universities, see George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).