

# The Waning of Mormon Kirtland

DAVIS BITTON\*

On the night of 12 January 1838, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon made their escape from Kirtland, riding sixty miles on swift horses before stopping to rest. The collapse of the bank, desertion by trusted friends, angry denunciations and threats, a relentless buildup of lawsuits—all this seemed to leave the Prophet little choice but to leave Kirtland to its own fate.<sup>1</sup>

Many of his followers had already left Kirtland, of course, or had gathered to Missouri without stopping in Ohio. Others, including his immediate family, followed during the early months of 1838. Soon a revelation came that seemed to ring the death knell of Kirtland as a Mormon center: "Kirtland is and will be scourged."<sup>2</sup> Sensing the impending doom, scores of families worked feverishly, selling property, buying teams and wagons, sometimes borrowing from friends or family, and packing in preparation for the organized evacuation planned for the summer. Finally, on 6 July 1838, a string of teams and wagons more than a mile long moved out along the old Chillicothe road and headed toward Chester.<sup>3</sup>

---

\*Dr. Bitton is assistant Church historian and professor of history at the University of Utah. He has published widely in journals in his field and is the author of two books, *The French Nobility in Crisis, 1560-1640* (1969) and *The Reminiscences and Civil War Letters of Levi Lamoni Wight* (1970).

<sup>1</sup>For general treatments of the Kirtland troubles, see Robert Kent Fielding, "The Growth of the Mormon Church in Kirtland, Ohio" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Indiana, 1957); and Max H. Parkin, "Conflict at Kirtland: A Study of the Nature and Causes of External and Internal Conflict of the Mormons in Ohio between 1830 and 1838" (M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1966).

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 Vols. (Salt Lake City, 1948), 3:45. (Hereafter referred to as *H.C.*)

It is customary to end the history of Mormonism in Kirtland with the departure of this company (usually known as "Kirtland Camp"), and in a sense it is true that its central role was over.<sup>4</sup> But it is surprising how long it took for Mormonism in Kirtland to fade away.

In November 1839, Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball stopped in Kirtland on their return from the British Mission and found "a good many friends and brethren who were glad to see us." Young explained that many of these brethren "lacked the energy to move to Missouri last season, and some lacked the disposition." The Kirtland Temple was still available for use, for Brigham Young preached a sermon there and "anoointed" John Taylor in an evening ceremony.<sup>5</sup>

In spring of the following year, there were encouraging signs that the latter-day work still had a future in Kirtland. Hiram Kellogg wrote: "The Lord is reviving his work in this place; there is more or less baptised here every week. We have about 125 members in the society here, and more going to be baptised next Thursday. Many of the old inhabitants of this place, have been standing and looking on until they are convinced that this is the work of the Lord, and are willing to embrace it."<sup>6</sup> Although letters from Joseph Smith express disappointment with the spirit of contention there, he expressed a desire to see Kirtland "flourish."<sup>7</sup> In October 1840, Almon W. Babbitt was named to preside in Kirtland, that it might be built up and serve as a gathering place for brethren from the east.<sup>8</sup> At conference in May 1841 the Kirtland Stake was said to consist of between 300 and 400 members.<sup>9</sup>

The latter-day work seemed to prosper under Babbitt's direction. In October 1841, he was sustained as president by the Kirtland Saints. Babbitt wrote to the Prophet: "There is now about 500 members in this place and a good many churches adjacent to this stake. We have got the House of the Lord in mideling good repair. We are now about

<sup>3</sup>Fielding, p. 306.

<sup>4</sup>On Kirtland Camp, see *H.C.*, 3:87-148.

<sup>5</sup>*Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 1801-1884*, ed. E. J. Watson (Salt Lake City, 1968), pp. 56-58.

<sup>6</sup>Journal History, 27 April 1849, compilation in scrapbook form in Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

<sup>7</sup>Journal History, 22 July 1840.

<sup>8</sup>*H.C.*, 4:204, 225-26.

<sup>9</sup>*Times and Seasons*, 2(July 1841):458-60, containing minutes of the Kirtland conference of 22 May 1841.



lying a new bell deck. We have made provisions for the poor.”<sup>10</sup> These poor included 100 English Saints who did not have the resources to get all the way to Nauvoo. The Kirtland Saints had bought some good farm land, according to Babbitt, and were converting the old steam mill into a furnace.

While optimistic about events in Kirtland, Babbitt complained of rumors from Nauvoo that Kirtland was to be abandoned: “There is so mutch writen from your place that it would require more than the influence of an angel to keep down the excitement.” Clear directions were needed. Should they plan to stay or not? What should be done with the Temple and other property? He had reason to be concerned, for at October conference in Nauvoo he had been disfellowshipped for teaching false doctrine, although this could not have been known to him at the time he wrote the letter.<sup>11</sup> And at the end of October, Hyrum Smith wrote without ambiguity: “All the Saints that dwell in that land are commanded to come away. . . .”<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, Mormonism did not quickly disappear from the Kirtland scene. Financial problems undoubtedly prevented immediate migration for some. Moreover, Almon Babbitt was insisting that “the scourge will fall on Nauvoo before it falls on Kirtland.”<sup>13</sup> At a conference in October 1842, Lyman Wight still found many Saints, 75 of whom heard him preach in the temple in the morning; in the afternoon, he reported, the congregation contained about 150 “with cheerful countenances.” The next day 500 to 700 people were in attendance, and several baptisms were performed in the Chagrin River. During this conference, Wight reported 30 elders ordained and 203 baptisms. “We are now holding meetings every night,” he reported, “and shall do so as long as there is from three to ten coming forward a day, which is now the case.”<sup>14</sup>

Justin Brooks, who took over as presiding elder in Kirtland, reported that “many smart intelligent young men have been ordained Elders,” and that “such an anxiety to learn the doctrines of this church, has never before been manifest

---

<sup>10</sup>Journal History, 19 October 1841.

<sup>11</sup>H.C., 4:424.

<sup>12</sup>H.C., 4:443-44.

<sup>13</sup>Journal History, 10 August 1842. Babbitt was specifically discouraging people from going to Nauvoo, saying that Kirtland was the place for him.

<sup>14</sup>Journal History, 28 October 1842; 29 October 1842; 31 October 1842.

since the commencement of the church."<sup>15</sup> The following April, in 1843, with Lyman Wight again representing the authorities, "about one hundred apostates and a few new members were baptised during the Conference."<sup>16</sup> In some respects, this was a last vigorous push before departure, for a resolution was passed at the same conference "for the removal of all the Saints in that place to Nauvoo."<sup>17</sup> Before the end of the month, Lyman Wight and Justin Brooks were in Pittsburgh trying to buy a steamboat "to convey the Kirtland Saints to Nauvoo."<sup>18</sup>

Some Saints undoubtedly moved. On 9 June 1844 Brigham Young preached in the Kirtland Temple on the subject of Nauvoo. He found the Kirtland Saints "dead and cold to the things of God."<sup>19</sup> But at the end of 1844, L. Hollister wrote asking for someone to help manage affairs in Kirtland, "if you think us worth saving."<sup>20</sup> Phineas Young summarized the situation:

Here we are called Josephites, and at Nauvoo apostates; the first we glory in, the latter we are willing to bear till our brethren shall have proven us faithful by seeing our faith and good works. There are at this time some 40 or 50 good brethren in this place, which constitutes a majority of the Church here . . . we are favored with the house [the temple] and the control of it.<sup>21</sup>

Young said he was willing to stay or go as directed.<sup>22</sup> Apparently the earlier instruction had not been carried out. Again the Kirtland Saints received word to come to Nauvoo, "leaving neither man, woman or child behind that desires to come up here with a pure heart, leaving Kirtland to the owls and the bats for a season. . . ."<sup>23</sup> The general willingness to gather to Nauvoo was reaffirmed at a Kirtland conference in April 1845 as it had been two years earlier.<sup>24</sup> Sacrament was administered to about one hundred Saints.

From the spring of 1845, it becomes difficult to keep track

<sup>15</sup>Brooks to Joseph Smith in Journal History, 7 November 1842.

<sup>16</sup>Journal History, 7 April 1843. Minutes in *Times and Seasons*, 4:282-86.

<sup>17</sup>Journal History, 7 April 1843. Minutes in *Times and Seasons*, 4:282-86.

<sup>18</sup>Journal History, 25 April 1843.

<sup>19</sup>*Manuscript History of Brigham Young*, p. 169.

<sup>20</sup>Journal History, 15 November 1844.

<sup>21</sup>Journal History, 31 December 1844.

<sup>22</sup>Journal History, 26 November 1844.

<sup>23</sup>Journal History, 21 January 1845.

<sup>24</sup>*Times and Seasons*, 6(1845-46):871-72.



of the Saints in Kirtland. Many must have responded to the decision to "gather" that was agreed upon at April conference. No October conference at Kirtland was reported in the Church periodicals; by the fall, the main topic of discussion was the forthcoming departure from Nauvoo and the preparations for it. At the end of 1845, it was reported that a group of "rioters" had seized control of the Kirtland Temple—a report that indicates both the declining strength of the Kirtland "loyalists" and their continued existence.<sup>25</sup>

By this time, there were many families in Kirtland, once Mormon, who had decided to have nothing more to do with the movement. Others were Mormon in a general sense, still susceptible to being "reactivated," but content to lie low until firm leadership was provided. And by this time, too, several splinter groups had sprung into existence; it is not surprising that some of them sought to promote their cause in Kirtland.

One such schismatic preacher hoping to pick up the pieces in Kirtland was William E. McLellin, who arrived in late 1846. He soon won the support of such men as Leonard Rich and Jacob Bump. At a conference in January 1847 they officially adopted the name Church of Christ.<sup>26</sup> Two of the guiding principles of the movement were: (1) to accept David Whitmer as the proper presiding authority of the Church; and (2) to declare Kirtland to be once again the proper center for the Church. The group was estimated variously at 42 and "about one hundred" members. At the end of 1847 in the *Ensign of Liberty* we read: "Our members continue to increase steadily, yet but slowly." Partially because of David Whitmer's refusal to move to Kirtland, the movement began to break up, apparently fizzling out in late 1849.<sup>27</sup>

By this time, another group calling itself the Church of Christ had appeared. Looking to young James C. Brewster as leader, this group was later known as Brewsterites. In August 1848 they began publication of a newspaper, *The Olive Branch*, and on 23 June 1849, held a "General Assembly" in

<sup>25</sup>H.C., 7:484.

<sup>26</sup>*Ensign of Liberty*, (no. 1) (March 1847), reporting on a conference held 23 January 1847. For a valuable introduction to this periodical and other Whitmerite works, see Dale L. Morgan, "Churches of the Dispersion," *Western Humanities Review*, 7, (no. 3) (Summer 1953):162-75.

<sup>27</sup>See the brief survey in Russell R. Rich, *Those Who Would be Leaders: Offshoots of Mormonism* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 1967), pp. 35-37.

the Kirtland Temple.<sup>28</sup> Moving spirits behind the movement in Kirtland were Hazen Aldrich and Austin Cowles. Brewster himself lived in Springfield, Illinois, and by July 1849 the publication of the newspaper had changed to Springfield. In October an article entitled "The Gathering at Kirtland" explained that Kirtland could serve as a temporary gathering place but that ultimately the loyal Brewsterite Saints were expected to gather to California. Some indication of the size of the Brewsterite congregation can be gained from the fact that only six of those attending the June 1849 assembly passed the "test" of accepting young Brewster's "revelations." Compared to its earlier "boom" period, Mormonism in Kirtland, even including schismatic factions, had decidedly diminished in importance. No longer did it occupy the center of the stage.

One of the best glimpses into life at Kirtland at mid-century is the diary of Patience Cowdery.<sup>29</sup> Wife of Warren A. Cowdery (Oliver's brother), she had been closely involved with Mormonism at Kirtland during the 1830s. Her husband, a prominent doctor who had practiced medicine in Freedom, New York, became editor of the *Latter-day Saints Messenger and Advocate* published in Kirtland. They became disaffected in 1837 and 1838, but continued to live in Kirtland.<sup>30</sup>

In 1849, when she began keeping her record, Patience Cowdery turned 55 years old. Perhaps the "depressed" economy of Kirtland is reflected in the fact that her husband and sons were under the necessity of seeking work in nearby towns. At times only she and her two daughters were living at the Kirtland home, but usually her husband and one or more of the four sons were also there.

Life was busy in the Cowdery household. They operated something of a weaving establishment. Yarn was twisted for stockings and for carpeting. The girls did a good deal of sew-

---

<sup>28</sup>*The Olive Branch* (Kirtland, Ohio), August 1848 and March 1849. Cf. Rich, pp. 31-33; and Morgan, pp. 141-46.

<sup>29</sup>Patience Simonds Cowdery, *Diary, 1849-1851*, in Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

<sup>30</sup>Warren A. Cowdery, born in Poultney, Vermont, in 1788, practiced medicine and conducted an apothecary's business in Freedom, New York, from 1815 to 1830. He built the first brick house in 1828 and was the first postmaster in the town. He moved to Kirtland at the end of 1835 or beginning of 1836 and was soon editing the *Messenger and Advocate*; in the September 1837 issue he states that he had actually edited the paper for sixteen months, even though he was not nominally editor. He was one of the group associated with Warren Parrish and was excommunicated in 1837.



ing. And at candle-dipping time the house was transformed into a veritable workshop; twenty-five dozen candles were dipped in one day. Other chores included preparing husks for beds and picking apples and blackberries.

Besides the long hours of work suggested by such activities, the Cowderys found time for reading the scriptures, various periodicals, and such books as a life of Washington. A certain zeal for self-improvement is noticed in such entries as the following:

We have had quite a school this evening among ourselves in reading and spelling.

We have commenced a school in our large room in hopes to continue it through the winter for the benefit of our own family. It has gone on very pleasant thus far. We have attended to spelling and defining this evening.

Nor was it all hard work. Probably spelling bees were common, and such games as checkers occupied some of the evening hours.

The Cowdery family seemed very much involved in community affairs. Earlier, in 1841 and 1842, Warren A. Cowdery had served as an election judge and was still sufficiently interested in politics at age 62 to travel to Painesville to attend a political convention. Lectures at either the temple (now serving as a community hall) or the Western Reserve Teachers' Seminary were a common occasion for entertainment and instruction. Patience herself was sufficiently part of the reform enthusiasm of the day to belong to a Moral Reform Society, attending its meetings and subscribing to its periodicals. In 1850 she heard an antislavery sermon on Sunday and attended at least one meeting of an antislavery female sewing society. Nor surprisingly, too, there were such small-town activities as weddings, funerals, quilting bees, and "donation" parties.

The Cowderys were not without religion, although by this time they were not Mormons. In 1849 Patience often attended church and made notes on the sermons. This may have been the Baptist Church. At least a small donation was made toward the construction of a new Baptist meeting house in 1850. As time went on, she more usually stayed at home on Sundays while the children attended church. She did read the Bible regularly, noting in her diary the completion of chapters and books.

What about Mormonism? About all the notice given to their former religion was prompted by visits from individuals. In 1849, for example, Martin Harris "called here this morning and warned us of our danger if we did not imbrace the gospel and says he has now cleared his skirts whether we give heed or not." A few days later, Harris came "to see about selling us some land and staid some little time and conversed upon things that he said he knew." She mentions reading six issues of *The Olive Branch*—this was the Brewsterite newspaper—that Austin Cowles left for their perusal. One detects a note of detachment if not scepticism in the references to the preaching of these zealots. In 1850, the family was visited by a Mr. Mclenithan who "considered [it] to be his duty . . . to warn the people to flee the wrath to come. He considered the judgments to be near at hand."

Perhaps the enthusiasm for Mormonism of the 1830s had been "burned out" by the bitter recrimination of 1837 and 1838. Still, there was sufficient interest that one of the Cowdery daughters read the Book of Mormon. And such men as Harris still obtained a hearing when they called on the family. While not in close contact with Warren's brother Oliver, apparently they did receive the news of his death in 1850 and must have heard of his return to the Church.

The Warren Cowdery family was hard-working and interested in the affairs of the day. Patience was a devout reader of the Bible. She had an almost transcendentalist feeling toward nature, as expressed in a beautiful passage on 16 June 1850:

The weather is calm and serene. The air seems pure and wholesome. All nature seems to have put on a lively green since the reviving rain. I do take sweet comfort in viewing the beauties of nature. The lively green woods that looks so beautiful and happy while all is calm and peaceful at home. Ought we not to possess hearts of gratitude that we have been thus highly favored, with kind children that ever ready to sooth and wait on us in sickness, . . . they are kind and good. Truly this makes home pleasant and seems to give everything around us a pleasing aspect.

There was much goodness in the life of this family.

In 1851 Elder James W. Bay found a few signs of spiritual life in Kirtland. As he reported in a letter to Brigham Young:



There have been all kinds of false prophets here in Kirtland, but I have found a few that begin to feel that west is the place, and the authority is there. Bro. Isaac Bullock and I succeeded in getting an organization here, and they begin to have the gifts, and are blessed, and calculate to gather west to the valley.<sup>31</sup>

Although there was a branch organization, it cannot have been large. Elder Bay said that he had baptized thirteen during the year, but all of these may not have been at Kirtland. At nearby Cleveland there was a branch of 30 members. The emphasis of Bay's preaching was not to build up permanent branches but to encourage gathering: "I have been hunting up the saints, and encouraging them to go to the valleys of Ephraim to be hid up while the indignation be overpast, and I feel that this land is to be pruned with a mighty pruning."

Four years later, when Thomas Colburn visited Kirtland, he found a "few that called themselves Saints, but very weak, many apostates, who have mostly joined the rappers."<sup>32</sup> Those who now had possession of the temple he denounced as "no better than thieves and robbers." The single encouraging conversation, as far as we can gather, was with Martin Harris, who was on the verge of deciding to move to Utah.

Population figures do not support the contention that Kirtland had become nearly deserted. But it did decline and gave an impression of lethargy.<sup>33</sup> A generation later, in 1882, Richard W. Young visited "the now feeble village of Kirtland."<sup>34</sup> The general mood evoked by his description is one of decay and sadness. He and his companion called on a family who had once been Saints, now blind and decrepit. They looked for the former house of Brigham Young but found only some broken pieces of pottery. The temple could be seen only from the outside, since the elders of the Reorganized Church had left town with the keys.<sup>35</sup> "The building is in poor repair," Young said; "much of the interior wood

---

<sup>31</sup>Letter dated 7 August 1851, in *Deseret News*, 13 December 1852.

<sup>32</sup>Two letters published in the St. Louis *Luminary*, 17 February 1855 and 2 May 1855.

<sup>33</sup>For some discussion of population decline, see Artel Ricks, "Hyrum's Prophecy," *Improvement Era*, 59(1956):305ff.

<sup>34</sup>Richard W. Young, "In the Wake of the Church," *Contributor*, 4(1833): 105-8.

<sup>35</sup>Young could not resist scoring a point at the expense of the Reorganized Church elders, who "had gone off with the keys—the door keys, I mean; the other keys, those to the doors of eternal truth, were taken from the Kirtland Temple forty-five years before." Richard W. Young, p. 107.

work has been taken away for fire wood, and the sashes contain more broken than undamaged panes of glass. Paint it has not seen for a generation at least."

The days when crowds of newly arrived converts thronged the streets of Kirtland, when the air rang with shouts and the hammer blows of construction, when reports of divine manifestations in the temple were communicated in excited whispers—all of this was part of the past. As Richard W. Young said of the temple, "Its chief glory is of course in the past, and to a Latter-day Saint the brightness of that glory was sufficient to cause it even now to shine with its retained splendor."