

Creek." I, of course, bowed as politely as I knew how, and she courtesied, and we then fell into, somewhat familiar conversation. I discovered at once, that she was ready, off hand, and inclined to be witty; also, that her mind took a wider range, than was common for young ladies of her age. This interview, though short, was indeed very enjoyable; and closed with the hope, that she might be the one, whom the Lord had picked for me; and thus it proved to be. I shall not go into all the details of our courtship; suffice it to say, every move I made, seem[ed] to count one, in the right direction. I let Bro. Joseph into the secret—showed him a letter that I had written, designed for her. He seemed to take uncommon interest in the matter, took pains to see her and talk with her about me, telling her that I was just the one for her. A few letters passed between us; I visited her at her home, proposed, was accepted; and, on the 6th day of February 1841, we were married at her father's house—Bro. Robt. B. Thompson performing the ceremony. I will say in this connection; that, what the Prophet said, in regard to the companion which I should soon find, has been fully verified. . . .

TRUMAN COE'S 1836 DESCRIPTION OF MORMONISM

Milton V. Backman, Jr.

One of the most descriptive summaries of the early history of the Restored Church and concise analyses of the distinguishing beliefs of the Latter-day Saints written by a nonmember during the 1830s was prepared by Reverend Truman Coe, a Presbyterian minister who had lived among the Saints in Kirtland for about four years. Published in the 11 August 1836 issue of *The Ohio Observer*, this article aptly reflects the myths, facts, truths, and errors about the Mormons that were being circulated in Kirtland in the mid-1830s.

When Coe wrote this article, Latter-day Saints had not yet published a comprehensive history unfolding the major events which had occurred in the life of the Prophet Joseph Smith nor had he or other members produced an articles of faith to summarize many of the most significant characteristics of their theology. Although Oliver Cowdery had published in *The Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* in 1834 and 1835 accounts of some of the important events in Church history and had included descriptions of many of the distinguishing beliefs of the Latter-day Saints, Coe did not em-

Milton V. Backman, Jr. is professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University.

ploy these articles as the primary source for his work.¹ Instead, his account seems to have been based primarily on his personal observations and on concepts he had learned from others.

Reverend Coe wrote this article while he was serving as pastor of the Old South Church in Kirtland, a congregation that was experiencing a significant decline in membership in the mid-1830s. This religious group had been organized as a Congregational body in 1819. Three and a half years later, these Calvinists decided to unite with the Grand River Presbytery in harmony with the Plan of Union in which Congregationalists and Presbyterians agreed to cooperate rather than compete in western communities. Although they were organized as a Congregational Church, the members remained under the jurisdiction of the Presbyterians until 1847. Reverend Coe began his pastorate in 1833 and continued serving the inhabitants of Kirtland until his retirement from the ministry in 1848.² According to reports submitted to the Grand River Presbytery and the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, one year after Coe assumed leadership of the Calvinists of Kirtland, membership increased from 50 (February 1833) to 140 (February 1834), representing the single largest increase in the early history of that congregation. But membership declined to 116 in 1835 and in February 1837 there were only 75 communicants.³ The loss of almost half of his congregation undoubtedly disturbed Coe. Only a few of his parishioners united with the Latter-day Saints, but undoubtedly many emigrated in search of lands located farther west, partly to escape the constant flow of Saints settling in Kirtland.⁴

¹*The Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1 (1834):13-16, 42-43; 1 (1835):77-80; 2 (1835):193-202.

²Marion A. Crary, "Extracts from 'A Brief History of the Congregational Church of Kirtland, Ohio,'" n.p., n.d., pp. 1-9; Mary B. Sim, "Old South Congregational Church," *The Historical Society Quarterly, Lake County, Ohio* 2 (1960):n.p., reprinted in *The Historical Society Quarterly, Lake County, Ohio, 1959-1975* (Painesville, Ohio: Painesville Publishing Co., 1976), pp. 20-21.

³Minutes of the Presbytery of Grand River, 1814-1836, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio, pp. 184-85, 229, 252-53; Minutes of the Presbytery of Grand River, 1836-1848, Western Reserve Historical Society, pp. 26-27. Microfilm copies of these minutes are located in the Genealogical Society, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah. See also *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1836* (Philadelphia: Lydia R. Bailey, 1836), pp. 358-59; *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1837* (Philadelphia: Lydia R. Bailey, 1837), p. 572.

⁴Oliver Harmon, Jr., a member of the Old South Church in Kirtland, was baptized a member of the Restored Church on 13 July 1836. His name appears on a subscription list of the South Church which is dated November 1832. "Subscription List," Western Reserve Historical Society. See also Sim, "Old South Congregational Church," p. 21.

Aroused because of the decline in his congregation, Coe wrote this article to warn others of what he considered to be an impending problem and submitted it to a newspaper printed in Hudson, Ohio, *The Ohio Observer*, which was allied with the the orthodox Calvinistic movements of America.

"Priest Coe," as he was known, lived in an age of ridicule when many writers employed vicious terms to denounce their religious and political opponents. This slovenly system of propaganda produced innumerable articles in Ohio newspapers which greatly distorted the history and message of the Restoration. Although Coe resorted to the name-calling that was so popular in that decade and reported some incorrect concepts, his work was one of the most accurate articles on the Latter-day Saints written by a non-Mormon in the 1830s. Only by comparing this work with more than 100 other articles which appeared in the Ohio newspapers during the thirties can one fully appreciate Coe's contribution.

There is no mention in his brief historical sketch of Joseph Smith's First Vision, of the restoration of the Aaronic priesthood, or of the testimony of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon plates. Although the Prophet had written at least two short histories prior to 1836 which included a description of the First Vision, an account of this sacred experience had not yet appeared in print, and following the pattern employed by Oliver Cowdery in his short history, Reverend Coe began his sketch with the visions which led to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

Most of Reverend Coe's descriptions of conditions in Kirtland in mid-1836 harmonize with other records. His estimate, for example, of one thousand members in Kirtland is not far different from other accounts⁵ and his analysis of the poverty and sacrifices of the Saints while they were building the temple also coincides with other documents. Coe's statement, however, that some of the wealthy members held three or four thousand acres of land in different parts of the township does not agree with the land and tax records of Geauga County. In 1836 Latter-day Saints paid a property tax on only about one thousand acres, and land records indicate that none of the known Latter-day Saints owned more than 140 acres in Kirtland Township.

⁵Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1932-51), 2:296; "An Account 'About the Mormons,'" B. C. Fowles Papers, Western Reserve Historical Society. This latter manuscript provides the more precise estimate of 800 Latter-day Saints living near the Kirtland Temple in 1836-37.

Of particular interest to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is Reverend Truman Coe's description of the Latter-day Saint concept of God. While considering the most distinguishing characteristics of Mormon theology, he reported in 1836 that members of the Restored Church held that "the true God is a material being, composed of body and parts" and that Adam was formed in the image of his Creator. While many contemporary records reflect that members emphasized such a belief during the Nauvoo period, Coe's narrative discloses that Latter-day Saints taught this concept during the Kirtland phase of Church history.

The account reproduced below is Coe's article as it appeared in the 11 August 1836 issue of *The Ohio Observer* (Hudson), p. 1, col. 6; 2, p. 2, cols. 1-2. This article was reprinted with only a few changes, primarily in punctuation, in *The Cincinnati Journal and Western Luminary*, 25 August 1836, p. 4, cols. 2-4.

For the Ohio Observer.

MORMONISM.

Mr. Editor.

Dear Sir:—Having been for the last four years located in Kirtland, on the Western Reserve, I have thought proper to make some communication to the public in relation to the Mormons, a sect of Religious Fanatics, who are collected in this town. This service I have considered as due to the cause of humanity, as well as to the cause of truth and righteousness. What I have to communicate shall be said in the spirit of candor and christian charity.

Mormonism, it is well known, originated with Joseph Smith* in the town of Manchester, adjoining Palmyra, in the state of New York. Smith had previously been noted among his acquaintances as a kind of Juggler, and had been employed in digging after money. He was believed by the ignorant to possess the power of second sight, by looking through a certain stone in his possession. He relates that when he was 17 years of age, while seeking after the Lord he had a nocturnal vision, and a wonderful display of celestial glory. An angel descended and warned him that God was about to make an astonishing revelation to the world, and then directed him to go to such a place, and after prying up a stone he should find a number of plates of the color of gold inscribed with hieroglyphics, and under them a breastplate, and under that a transparent stone or stones which was the Urim and Thummim mentioned by Moses. The vision and the command were repeated four times that night and once on the following day. He went as directed by the angel, and pried up the stone under which he discovered

*We understand that this same Joseph Smith is now held in bail to appear before the next court for public assault on a respectable citizen in Kirtland. —Ed. Ob.

the plates shining like gold, and when he saw them his cupidity was excited, and he hoped to make himself rich by the discovery, although thus highly favored by the Lord. But for his sordid and unworthy motive, when he attempted to seize hold of the plates, they eluded his grasp and vanished, and he was obliged to go home without them. It was not till four years had elapsed, till he had humbled himself and prayed and cast away his selfishness that he obtained a new revelation and went and obtained the plates.

The manner of translation was as wonderful as the discovery. By putting his finger on one of the characters and imploring divine aid, then looking through the Urim and Thummin, he would see the import written in plain English on a screen placed before him. After delivering this to his emanuensi, he would again proceed in the same manner and obtain the meaning of the next character, and so on till he came to a part of the plates which were sealed up, and there was commanded to desist: and he says he has a promise from God that in due time he will enable him to translate the remainder. This is the relation as given by Smith. A man by the name of Harris, of a vissionary turn of mind, assisted in the translation, and afterwards Oliver Cowdery. By the aid of Harris's property, the book was printed; and it is affirmed by the people of that neighborhood, that at first his motives were entirely mercenary, --a mere money speculation. The book thus produced, is called by them The Book of Mormon; and is pretended to be of the same Divine Inspiration and authority as the Bible. The Mormons came in Kirtland about six years ago; being taught by their leaders that this was one of the stakes of Zion,--the eastern borders of the promised land. Not long after their arrival in Kirtland, a revelation was obtained that the seat and centre of Zion was in Jackson county, in the western part of Missouri; and thither a multitude of them repaired, with Smith at their head. Soon after they were routed and expelled from the county by the infidels, and many of them returned to Kirtland. There they have been gathering their converts from various parts of the United States, until their present number probably amounts to upwards of one thousand: besides the transient companies of pilgrims who come here from the east to inquire the way to Zion, and then pass on to Missouri.

They have built a huge stone temple in this town, fifty feet high, and 60 by 80 on the ground, at an expense of \$40,000. On the front is this inscription, "The House of the Lord, built by the Latter-day Saints." The lower story is the place of worship, the middle for the school of the prophets, and the upper for an academical school; a distinguished professor of Hebrew is their teacher. He is now giving his second course, with about one hundred in each class.

While I am exposing these palpable impositions of the apostles of Mormonism, candor obliges me to say, that many of the common people are industrious, good neighbors, very sincerely deceived, and possibly very sincere christians. They seem to delight in the duty of

prayer, and the services of devotion, and their zeal goes far beyond any thing seen among sober chris-christians. Some are enterprising and intelligent, conversant with the bible, and fond of reading: and here, I apprehend, many who have heard of them only by common report, are mistaken; supposing them all to be ignorant and degraded, and beneath the notice of all respectable people. The prevalence of religious delusion is not to be attributed so much to mere ignorance, as to the structure and prejudices and pernicious habits of the mind,—a pre-disposition to be captivated with any thing that is new or wonderful. It is furthermore proper to notice that this religious sect have been slandered, and belied, and persecuted beyond measure. We entirely disapprove of those violent measures which have been taken with them in Missouri and some other places; 1st, because it is an outrage upon inalienable rights--all men justly claiming to be protected in the enjoyment of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; and 2d, because it is unwise; persecution being the most effectual way to build up fanatics in error and delusion. But since there is a certain class in every community who are predisposed to embrace any wild delusion which chances to meet them, and since many such have already been deceived and lured away to Kirtland and to Zion and have been disappointed and distressed, and reduced to poverty and want; and, moreover, since there are now many converts abroad who are looking to this place with longing eyes, as to a land flowing with milk and honey, and expecting, when they find the means of getting here, to bid farewell to all earthly sorrow, we think the world have a right to know the state of things among them. Many of them live in extreme indigence. They suffer accumulated evils by crowding a multitude of poor people together, when, by a wider distribution, they might have better means of supplying their wants. Some of them are wealthy, and they have purchased 3 or 4000 acres of land in different parts of this town. A grotesque assemblage of hovels and shanties and small houses have been thrown up wherever they could find a footing; but very few of all these cabins would be accounted fit for human habitations.

About the first of May, 1834, a company of armed men from this place, about 100 in number, by command of Joseph, commenced a crusade to Missouri, to expel the infidels of Zion, and to reinstate their brethren into their possessions; at the same time he assured them by a revelation from heaven, that the expedition would succeed and the object be attained. When these gallant knights-errand arrived in Missouri, they were met by some of the constituted authorities and warned to desist; and Joseph very prudently had a revelation that the war was at an end. After spending the hottest part of the season on this long tedious pilgrimage of 2000 miles, having suffered great hardships, and numbers having been swept off by the cholera, they returned in straggling companies to Kirtland. Those of them who remained here during the campaign, were required to work one day in each week on the

temple; and the poor females were instructed to part with even the necessaries of life in aid of the same object. They looked forward to the completion of the Temple as a Grand Era, when Christ would descend and dwell among them, and commence his reign on earth. These burdens are severely felt by the poor people among them, and can only be sustained by the unconquerable strength of their faith. Last summer a man came to Kirtland and brought among the Mormons four Egyptian mummies. The exhibition exactly struck their fancy. All the Mormons flocked to see the wonderful sight; and Joseph deciphered some of the hieroglyphics, and made known in writing the name and character and antiquity of some of the mummies;—this was an additional proof of his divine inspiration. The man continued with them a week; and then a command was given them to purchase the whole, which they did for \$2400. The mummies were soon sent out for exhibition by one of their apostles, but being unsuccessful, he brought them back to Kirtland, and threw them aside. There is reason to believe, that many who come here with high expectations, have met with sore disappointment. They expected to find everything in apostolic order; but instead of this, they have found a whiskey selling tavern, a pugnacious prophet, and an inhospitable people. Some poor, families, after long journeys to see this Promised Land, have met with a cold repulse; have been compelled to sleep out of doors, and to remain in a community the most unfavorable to get a livelihood, and under a spiritual hierarchy, who bind heavy burdens grievous to be borne, but will not touch them with one of their fingers.

The Mormons to a man all abhor priests, and priestcraft, and societies, and the whole system of religious institutions among established churches; and yet they themselves are the most obsequious and abject slaves to the spiritual rule of their leaders. All their affairs, small and great, are directed by special revelation. By a miserable attempt to ape the language and style of scripture, they clothe their commands with the authority of heaven; and the people have nothing to do but to hear and obey. If the prophet demand their money for the Lord's treasury, he can have it by uttering a *Thus saith the Lord.* By these sacrifices, they give what among selfish men would be called a pretty good proof of sincerity at least. Thus it happens, that those who complain loudest of priestcraft, are the most wofully priestridden of all men.

In regard to their religious sentiments, the fundamental principle of Mormonism is, that God continues to hold intercourse with the saints on earth by visions and revelations, as freely and familiarly as he has done in any age of the world. That the true church have the same power to cast out devils, to speak with new tongues, to take up serpents, to drink poison unhurt, and to recover the sick by laying on of hands. They make great use of the declaration of our Savior in Mark xvi. 17, 18, and strenuously contend that the promise applies to all that believe in every age.

They contend that the God worshipped by the Presbyterians and all other sectarians is no better than a wooden god. They believe that the true God is a material being, composed of body and parts; and that when the Creator formed Adam in his own image, he made him about the size and shape of God himself. They believe in the final restoration of all men except apostate Mormons. They blaspheme against the Holy Ghost, and can never have forgiveness, neither in this world, neither in the world to come. Their avowed object is to restore christianity to its primeval purity. In the true style of fanaticism they regard themselves as the exclusive favorites of heaven; and the whole religious world as natural brute beasts that know nothing. After the example of our Savior they have recently ordained and commissioned twelve apostles and seventy elders, to go throughout this heathen country and to give a final call to repent and be baptised and believe in Mormonism before the wicked are cut off. The people of this region are viewed by them as standing in the place of Chorasm and Bethsaida, and Capernaum, unwilling to believe, in spite of all the mighty works they have tried to perform. They are habitually pretending to speak in tongues, and to the working of miracles, but nobody can have any evidence of these wonders but those who have Mormon eyes and Mormon ears. When they first came to Kirtland, Mr. Rigdon joined them, and a few families followed in his train; but otherwise of the former inhabitants, scarce a single conversion has happened since. The fact is that the people are well assured that all their pretensions to miraculous gifts of every kind, are a sheer imposition. But whenever any miracle fails, they have a convenient salve at hand to account for the failure; that is the want of faith: a most impudent and officious intruder, always ready at hand to nullify all their pious efforts, and to render them weak and feeble as other men. Instances frequently occur which may serve as examples of their power of healing. A young man lying on a bed of sickness, sent after Smith and his elders to come and heal him. After praying over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord, he commanded the disease to depart; pronounced him healed, and ordered him to rise and walk. Stimulated by the circumstances and by high expectation, the youth rose up and attempted to walk; but presently becoming faint, by the help of bystanders he betook himself to the bed again, and grew worse. They of course imputed his sudden relapse to the failure of his faith. He then sent for the regular physician, and by faithful means he recovered. Another late instance was a young woman lying at the point of death with the measles. The elders were called to lay hands on her in like manner; and very soon afterwards she was a corpse. The prophet has undergone repeated trials before the church, and has made frequent confessions; and among the faithful, this is accounted as additional proof of his humility and divine inspiration. They only class his failings with those recorded of the ancient prophets. But the faith of many among them has failed, and they have had honesty

enough to confess it. They have opened their eyes—the delusion has vanished, and they have been astonished at their besotted infatuation.--Frequent depredations have happened among them, and it has sometimes required the art and assiduity of all their prophets and priests and elders to keep the whole babel from tumbling down together.

It is difficult to foretell how long it will take this gust of Fanaticism to spend itself, and die away, and sink to the oblivion of the 100 others which have gone before it. Situated as we are, we have need of patience; and we often realize the truth of Solomon, that "Though you should bray a fool in a mortar with a pestle, yet will not his folly depart from him."

On the whole, the vice of Mormonism must be accounted one of the most palpable and wide-spreading delusions which this country has ever seen; and nothing can equal the zeal of their leaders in its propagation. The completion of the temple, according to the pattern shown to Joseph in vision, is a monument of unconquerable zeal. The imposing splendor of the pulpits, the orders of the Melchisedec and the Aaronic priesthoods, and the vails which are let down or drawn by machinery, dividing the place of worship into several apartments, presents before us a strange compound of Jewish antiquity and Roman Catholic mummery. The reproof which the prophet addresses to ancient Israel that they dwelt in ceiled houses while the Temple of God was laid waste, can never be applied to these Mormons.--Stimulated by strong faith and zeal, you will see them muster all their forces for miles around to hear the brethren speak in tongues, and proclaim the wonderful works of God. In this view they give to those who call themselves sober christians a most severe rebuke. If they had half the zeal of these misguided Mormons, the world would tremble, and the millennial day would speedily be ushered in. Yours, in the bonds of the Gospel.

Truman Coe.

MISSIONARIES FOR THE DEAD: THE STORY OF THE GENEALOGICAL MISSIONARIES OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Jessie L. Embry

The Latter-day Saints' enthusiasm for the restoration of the gospel led to many interesting types of missions in the nineteenth century. Members were "called" not only to preach the gospel, but

Jessie L. Embry is an historic preservation intern at the Utah State Historical Society. At the time this article was prepared, she was a research fellow in the Church Historical Department, working on the history of the Genealogical Department.