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VAST PRAIRIES AND TRACKLESS WILDS OF SNOW: A GOOD TEST OF SINCERITY

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *Embarking roughly six months after the organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the 1830–1831 “mission to the Lamanites” faced challenges that we pampered moderns can scarcely imagine. Oliver Cowdery, Peter Whitmer Jr., Parley P. Pratt, Ziba Peterson, and, eventually, Frederick G. Williams demonstrated beyond reasonable dispute the depth of their commitment to the Restoration and to the promises extended by the Book of Mormon to the surviving children of Lehi. Given that Cowdery and Whitmer were witnesses of the golden plates, this demonstration of their genuine belief seems significant.*

In an early revelation given at Harmony, Pennsylvania, well before The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had been established and even before the translation of the Book of Mormon had been completed, Joseph Smith was told that the plates from which he was translating the Book of Mormon had been preserved for particular purposes. One of them was in order “that the Lamanites might come to the knowledge of their fathers, and that they might know the promises of the Lord, and that they may believe the gospel and rely upon the merits of Jesus Christ” (D&C 3:19–20).

But the Book of Mormon itself prophesied at numerous places that, before that day came, the remnant of Lehi’s descendants would be scourged and scattered and would suffer greatly at the hands of the Gentiles.¹ Some of that was occurring at the very time the book was published (March 1830) and the Church established (6 April 1830).

For example, the United States federal government had already been removing eastern Native Americans to the American frontier,

1. See, for example, 1 Nephi 15:17; 2 Nephi 10:18; 26:15–19; 3 Nephi 20:27–28.

west of the organized states, in the early 1800s. Then, on 28 May 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act into law. Somewhat controversial even then and broadly condemned today, it authorized the president of the United States to negotiate with Native American tribes in order to make way for white settlers to occupy their ancestral lands. In exchange, they were to be allocated federal lands lying west of the Mississippi River — e.g., in what would eventually become the Territory and then the State of Kansas, which had been acquired in the 1803 Louisiana Purchase. That “persuasion” was very effective; the law was vigorously enforced — eventually creating, among other things, the famous (or more aptly, the infamous) “Trail of Tears.”

In an entry referring to late September 1830 — that is, dating to just a few months after the Indian Removal Act became law and less than a year before the forced removal began — the *History of the Church*, compiled by B. H. Roberts, cites the Prophet Joseph Smith as saying that

At this time a great desire was manifested by several of the Elders respecting the remnants of the house of Joseph, the Lamanites, residing in the west — knowing that the purposes of God were great respecting that people, and hoping that the time had come when the promises of the Almighty in regard to them were about to be accomplished, and that they would receive the Gospel, and enjoy its blessings. The desire being so great, it was agreed that we should inquire of the Lord respecting the propriety of sending some of the Elders among them.²

That very month, Joseph Smith received a revelation at Fayette, New York, that was directed to Oliver Cowdery. In it, Cowdery was told that “you shall go unto the Lamanites and preach my gospel unto them” (D&C 28:8).

Why was Oliver Cowdery chosen for this mission? We can’t be certain. However, as the principal scribe for the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon and as the man who recopied the entire text into the printer’s manuscript, he was certainly aware of the book’s title page, which declared that it had been

Written to the Lamanites, who are a remnant of the house of Israel; and also to Jew and Gentile ... Which is to show unto the remnant of the house of Israel what great things the

2. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 1:118.

Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever.³

It would scarcely be surprising, in that light, that Cowdery might have been prominent among those who felt “a great desire” respecting the evangelization of Native Americans.

During the 6 April 1830 conference in which the Church was organized, Oliver Cowdery had been designated “an elder unto this church of Christ, bearing my name — and the first preacher of this church unto the church, and before the world” (D&C 21:11–12). Days before, he had been termed “the second elder of this church,” second only to Joseph Smith himself (D&C 20:3).

Subsequently, but also during that same month of September 1830, Peter Whitmer Jr. was called to accompany Cowdery on his mission to the Lamanites, under Cowdery’s leadership:

Behold, I say unto you, Peter, that you shall take your journey with your brother Oliver; for the time has come that it is expedient in me that you shall open your mouth to declare my gospel; therefore, fear not, but give heed unto the words and advice of your brother, which he shall give you. And be you afflicted in all his afflictions, ever lifting up your heart unto me in prayer and faith, for his and your deliverance; for I have given unto him power to build up my church among the Lamanites. (D&C 30:5–6)

Oliver Cowdery was also, of course, one of the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon, and Peter Whitmer Jr. was one of the Eight Witnesses.

In early October 1830, Parley Pratt and Ziba Peterson were added to the company by a revelation given at Manchester, New York (D&C 32:1–3). Brother Pratt had harbored an ambition “to try and teach the red man” already several years before his baptism.⁴ The four men set out almost immediately. It had been approximately six months since the organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and slightly longer since the first appearance of the Book of Mormon from the press.⁵ They carried a number of copies of the Book of Mormon with them.

3. Title Page of the Book of Mormon.

4. The phrase comes from Parley P. Pratt, ed., *Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt*, 6th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 29.

5. For the basic history of this first “mission to the Lamanites,” I’m relying upon Marlene C. Kettley, Arnold K. Garr, and Craig C. Manscill, *Mormon*

This was a clear illustration of the Church’s genuine commitment to sharing the message of the Book of Mormon with people whom Joseph Smith and his early converts believed to be descendants of the nations described on the golden plates.

To reach their destination — at what a June 1831 revelation would soon term “the borders of the Lamanites” — they would need to travel approximately 1,500 miles, a significant portion of it on foot (D&C 54:8).

After their first few days on the journey, the party met briefly with a group of Native Americans on the Cattaraugus Reservation, near Buffalo, New York. They then continued on to Ohio, where they visited with the Wyandot tribe near Sandusky and then preached for a time in Cincinnati.

On roughly 20 December 1830, they boarded a steamboat on the Ohio River, bound for St. Louis. However, after just a few days the steamer was obliged to stop because the river was “blocked with ice.”⁶ So they continued on foot, entering into Illinois near what has been known since 1839 as the town of Cairo. They walked approximately 200 miles from there, crossing the Mississippi River to St. Louis.

Unfortunately, the frozen Ohio River would prove a harbinger of weather to come. The end of 1830 and the beginning of 1831 would become known as “The Winter of the Deep Snow” or “The Year of the Deep Snow.”⁷

The first storm of that memorable winter actually began the very day on which the missionaries set out on that steamboat from Cincinnati, on 20 December. According to one contemporary,

Cold rain began to fall ... occasionally changing to snow or sleet, until the earth was saturated and frozen. ... The wildest

Thoroughfare: A History of the Church in Illinois, 1830–1839 (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2006), 1–11, <https://rsc.byu.edu/mormon-thoroughfare/mission-lamanites>; as well as upon Richard Dilworth Rust, “A Mission to the Lamanites,” in *Revelations in Context*, eds. Matthew McBride and James Goldberg (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/revelations-in-context/a-mission-to-the-lamanites>; and Max H. Parkin, “Lamanite Mission of 1830–1831,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 802–804, https://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Lamanite_Mission_of_1830-1831.

6. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 51.

7. Eleanor Atkinson, “The Year of the Deep Snow,” in *The Prairie State: A Documentary History of Illinois, Colonial Years to 1860*, ed. Roberts P. Sutton (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 217–25, https://rsc.byu.edu/mormon-thoroughfare/mission-lamanites#_ednref12.

imagination could not have dreamed that this first fall of snow was merely the overture to a winter of continuous storm.⁸

Ten days later, on 30 December — presumably while Elders Cowdery, Whitmer, Pratt, and Peterson, along with a new addition to their number by the name of Frederick G. Williams, were making their way on foot toward St. Louis — a violent downpour hit the region. As one who experienced it recalled, a “bitter cold, a blinding, swirling blur of snow ... combined to make this storm a thing to paralyze that prairie country.” One writer described it as “a wonder, at first, then a terror ... as it became a menace to life of men and animals.” How long did it last? “In one sense it did not end at all; it merely changed in character, from time to time, for the next sixty days.”⁹

Several local Illinois histories describe the exceptionally severe weather conditions. *The History of White County, Illinois* explains that “It was definitely one of the hardest winters ever experienced here. Snow was deep, and a crust was formed upon its surface so strong a man could walk on it without breaking through.”¹⁰ *The History of Adams County, Illinois* tells the story of a farmer who lived on the Illinois River and who nearly died simply trying to haul in some corn from his own cornfield.¹¹ A Pottawatomie Indian chief named Senogewone is quoted as saying,

Big heap snow came early and no thaw until late spring. Snow, snow, snow everywhere. Blow into hollows and make all level. Deer could not travel. Indian wigwam all covered.

Continuing, he said:

Turkey got nothing to eat, prairie chicken starve, deer starve and die. Wolf not die, he run on top of snow crust, kill and eat plenty deer. Deer break through snow and no could run. Poor Indian hungry and almost starve.¹²

The elders were passing through country often very sparsely populated. The terrain varied from open prairie to swamps, from rather rugged hills

8. Ibid., 217–18.

9. Ibid., 218.

10. *The History of White County, Illinois* (Chicago: Inter-state Publishing Company, 1883), 285–86, https://rsc.byu.edu/mormon-thoroughfare/mission-lamanites#_ednref14.

11. *The History of Adams County, Illinois* (Chicago: Murray, Williamson and Phelps, 1879), 271, https://rsc.byu.edu/mormon-thoroughfare/mission-lamanites#_ednref15.

12. Jean L. Herath, *Indians and Pioneers: A Prelude to Plainfield, Illinois* (Hinckley, IL: Hinckley Review, 1975), 78, https://rsc.byu.edu/mormon-thoroughfare/mission-lamanites#_ednref16.

interlaced with sandstone, chert, and limestone to heavily forested woodland and deep ravines and canyons. Sometimes they were on a primitive frontier mail route. When it wasn't frozen, it was muddy. They often may have been making their own path. Sometimes the timber and grass were so thick that just walking through them was extremely difficult.¹³

"We halted for a few days in Illinois," recalled Parley Pratt,

about twenty miles from St. Louis, on account of a dreadful storm of rain and snow, which lasted for a week or more, during which the snow fell in some places near three feet deep.¹⁴

They reached St. Louis and St. Charles, Missouri, at the very beginning of 1831 — which, as the *Missouri Intelligencer* of Columbia noted on 8 January 1831, was another period of terrible winter weather:

We are informed that the snow in the upper countries of Missouri is 41 inches deep, and, what is very remarkable, the falling was accompanied by frequent and tremendous peals of thunder and vivid blue streaks of lightening. It was an awful scene, indeed.¹⁵

But the small missionary group had not yet reached its intended destination, which was on or just beyond the western border of Missouri — in other words, strictly speaking, beyond the western border of the United States of America altogether. Missouri had been admitted to the Union as a state in 1821, under the famous Missouri Compromise.

As Parley Pratt next recorded in his well-known *Autobiography*,

We travelled on foot for three hundred miles through vast prairies and through trackless wilds of snow — no beaten road; houses few and far between; and the bleak northwest wind always blowing in our faces with a keenness which would almost take the skin off the face. We travelled for whole days, from morning till night, without a house or fire, wading in snow to the knees at every step, and the cold so intense that the snow did not melt on the south side of the houses, even in the mid-day sun, for nearly six weeks. We carried on our backs our changes of clothing, several books, and corn bread and raw pork. We often ate our frozen bread and pork by the

13. Kettley, Garr, and Manscill, *Mormon Thoroughfare*, 5–8; set out the party's likely route.

14. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 52.

15. Atkinson, "The Year of the Deep Snow," 224.

way, when the bread would be so frozen that we could not bite or penetrate any part of it but the outside crust.

After much fatigue and some suffering we all arrived in Independence, in the county of Jackson, on the extreme western frontiers of Missouri, and of the United States.

This was about fifteen hundred miles from where we started, and we had performed most of the journey on foot, through a wilderness country, in the worst season of the year, occupying about four months, during which we had preached the gospel to tens of thousands of Gentiles and two nations of Indians; baptizing, confirming and organizing many hundreds of people into churches of Latter-day Saints.¹⁶

Oliver Cowdery, Parley Pratt, and Frederick G. Williams actually went over into Indian Territory, preaching first to the Shawnees and then, crossing the frozen Kansas River, to the Delawares. Peter Whitmer Jr. and Ziba Peterson set up a tailor's shop in Independence in order to earn some much-needed funds.

With reference to the story thus far, my simple point is this: Many critics would dismiss people like Parley Pratt, Ziba Peterson, and Frederick G. Williams as naïvely trusting, zealous dupes of Joseph Smith. Many would happily dismiss the Three Witnesses and the Eight Witnesses in the same fashion, however contrary to fact that seems to people like me. Others, though, claim that some or all of the Eight Witnesses and the Three Witnesses — most especially among them Oliver Cowdery — were co-conspirators with Joseph Smith, conscious frauds, deliberate deceivers. The 1830–1831 mission to the Lamanites, however, seems to me to offer a very powerful argument (one of many) against that notion. I, for one, would not be willing to put up with what Peter Whitmer Jr. and Oliver Cowdery endured during that difficult and dangerous winter journey of 1,500 miles for the sake of something I knew to be a hoax.

Would you?

The story of the Lamanite mission, in my judgment — even taken alone and by itself — makes it very difficult for me to imagine either Oliver Cowdery or Peter Whitmer Jr. as having been knowingly involved in a scam regarding forged or even nonexistent Book of Mormon plates. The notion isn't plausible. The ratio of palpable costs to hypothetical (and never realized) tangible or earthly benefits is simply too high.

16. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 52.

To bring the story to a suitable close, however, it must be noted that while some of the Native Americans to whom the missionaries preached in late 1830 and early 1831 were reportedly pleased to listen to them regarding the Book of Mormon and reasonably receptive to the message, the missionaries' effort did not, in fact, establish the Church among the Lamanites. Whereas the elders had hoped to found a permanent school among the Delawares and to teach and baptize Lamanite converts, the local federal Indian agents in the area ordered them to desist (perhaps urged on in that action by local Protestant ministers) and even threatened them with arrest if they continued.

As presiding officer, Oliver Cowdery dispatched Parley Pratt to the East to deliver a report to Joseph Smith. Meanwhile, he and the other elders of the Lamanite mission remained in the Independence area, preaching to white settlers there.

Nonetheless, the mission was anything but a failure. Very importantly, for instance, it brought the message of the Restoration to the area of Kirtland, in northeastern Ohio, where Parley Pratt had settled about four years earlier. While visiting the nearby town of Mentor en route to the "borders of the Lamanites," Elders Cowdery and Pratt called upon a charismatic Reformed Baptist minister by the name of Sidney Rigdon, who was not only a friend of Elder Pratt but also his former pastor. Rigdon was an eloquent advocate of restoring true New Testament Christianity. He allowed the missionaries to preach in his church, and he accepted their challenge to read the Book of Mormon.

Shortly thereafter, many members of Rigdon's congregation, including Rigdon himself, were received into the Church of Jesus Christ by baptism. (Rigdon would later serve as a counselor in the First Presidency of the Church from 1832 until Joseph Smith's martyrdom in the summer of 1844.) Within four weeks, the elders baptized approximately 130 converts in the greater Kirtland area, including, beyond Sidney Rigdon, such future leaders as Levi Hancock, Isaac Morley, John Murdock, Newel K. Whitney, and Lyman Wight. Frederick G. Williams, another convert from the Kirtland area, actually joined the four original missionaries on their trek to and beyond Missouri. He, too, would eventually serve as a member of the First Presidency of the Church, from 1833 to 1837.

The conversions continued after the elders resumed their journey, leaving Kirtland. Edward Partridge and Orson Hyde, for example, joined shortly after the missionaries had moved on. By the end of 1830, Latter-day Saints in Ohio numbered approximately 300, nearly three times as many as in New York itself. In December, Joseph Smith received a revelation

near Fayette, New York, commanding the Church to gather “at the Ohio” (D&C 37:1, 3). Joseph responded quickly; the first of his many recorded revelations to have been received in Kirtland is dated 4 February 1831.

Another important result of the Lamanite mission is that it marked the first Latter-day Saint involvement with Jackson County, Missouri, a place eventually designated as the future location of Zion, or the New Jerusalem (D&C 57:1–2). On 6 June 1831, during a conference in Kirtland, the Church was told to convene its next conference in Missouri (D&C 52:1–6). On 20 July 1831, having himself come to the western border of the state, Joseph Smith designated the place for the great millennial temple in Jackson County (D&C 57:3).

Kirtland, Ohio, and Jackson County, Missouri, were the two principal centers of the Church throughout much of the 1830s.

Like Parley Pratt, Ziba Peterson, and Frederick G. Williams, the witnesses Oliver Cowdery and Peter Whitmer were, clearly, genuinely convinced of the truth of the Restoration in general and of the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon in particular. Their actions under grueling conditions persuasively attest to their commitment. As that September 1830 revelation had foreshadowed, Peter was indeed “afflicted in all [of Oliver’s] afflictions.”

Something not altogether dissimilar can be said of those who have contributed time, effort, and money to the work of the Interpreter Foundation. In their own less-dramatic fashion, they likewise testify by their actions of their deep commitment to the scriptures and truths of the Restoration.

I am profoundly grateful to them. I particularly wish to thank the authors, copy editors, source checkers, and others who have created this volume — in particular, Allen Wyatt and Jeff Lindsay. For no financial or other material compensation, they not only devotedly oversee and steer the effort but are themselves deeply involved in it. Their dedication and that of many others like them is essential to the success of the Interpreter Foundation. Such devoted service is at its very core.

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