

AWAKENINGS IN THE BURNED- OVER DISTRICT: NEW LIGHT ON THE HISTORICAL SETTING OF THE FIRST VISION



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The six decades preceding the Civil War were years of intense religious activity in many sections of the United States. During this second great awakening, sporadic spiritual quickenings erupted throughout the new nation; and many Americans living in the rugged frontier communities, in the rapidly growing urban areas, and in the villages and towns of the northern and southern United States turned their attention to organized religion. Subsequently, church membership and religious zeal soared. Although in 1800 there were fewer church members in this country than in any other Christian land and active church membership had dropped to about 7 percent of the population, the lowest in the history of this land, this decline was arrested; and in 1850, 17 percent of Americans were churched. By 1860, membership

in religious societies increased to about 23 percent of the rapidly expanding American population.¹

One of the regions in the new nation that was in an almost constant state of revivalism was western New York. During the first half of the nineteenth century, revivals were so habitual and powerful in the area west of the Catskill and Adirondack Mountains that historians have labeled this ecclesiastical storm center the “Burned-Over District.”²

As in Kentucky, the winter of 1799–1800 was the era of a “Great Revival” in western New York. Since an innumerable series of spiritual quickenings followed this first major wave of enthusiasm, this powerful awakening initiated a new religious epoch in that region of America. Although one can locate evidence of spiritual enlivenment in a number of New York communities every year of the early 1800s, peak periods occurred when revivals erupted in more than the customary number of towns and villages and unprecedented numbers joined the popular churches of that age. One of these apexes of religious fervor followed the low ebb which occurred during the War of 1812. Between 1816 and 1821, revivals were reported in more towns, and a greater number of settlers joined churches than in any previous period of New York history.³ After a brief calm in which awakenings continued in a less spectacular manner, the grand climax in the “series of crests in religious zeal” occurred between 1825 and 1837.⁴

JOSEPH SMITH IN THE BURNED-OVER DISTRICT

One who was spiritually quickened while living in the Burned-Over District was Joseph Smith the Prophet. Joseph became keenly interested in organized religion during one of the higher waves of revivalism which swept across western New York. Approximately eighteen years after witnessing this spiritual

phenomenon, Joseph recalled his experience from a distant vantage point. The Prophet asserted that in the second year after his removal to Manchester (a town, or sometimes called township in some states, which in the period immediately preceding the spring of 1820 had not been separated from the town of Farmington),⁵ an “unusual excitement on the subject of religion” occurred in “the place” where he lived. “It commenced,” he said, “with the Methodists, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country.” Then probably placing this religious quickening in an enlarged historical setting, Joseph declared, “Indeed, the whole district of country seemed affected by it, and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties.”⁶

Although the tools of a historian cannot be employed to either verify or challenge Joseph’s testimony concerning the remarkable vision which occurred during this awakening,

ON WESLEY WALTERS

While I was teaching at BYU, Truman Madsen invited me into his office and said that a number of people were concerned because Wesley Walters, a Presbyterian minister, had published a pamphlet saying that Joseph did not write an accurate or reliable account of the background of the First Vision—that there was no evidence of a great revival in Palmyra in 1819 or 1820, that the great revival took place a few years later. We didn’t really have an answer to that question because no one had done serious research on the historical setting of Mormonism or on events that took place in the Palmyra area at the time of the First Vision. So I was invited to be one of five individuals to gather information on conditions that existed at the time of the First Vision. . . . I decided that I would spend my time in the Palmyra area going from library to library, from historical society to historical society, checking all of the churches, gathering everything I could about conditions that existed there—the churches, membership of the churches, revivals. The result was the publication of my first book on LDS Church history—*Joseph Smith’s First Vision*. As a result of that research, I found out that Joseph was a very reliable historian. He wrote a very accurate account of the historical setting of the First Vision. (Milton V. Backman Jr., interview by Samuel Alonzo Dodge, August 12, 2009, Provo, UT)

records of the past can be examined to determine the reliability of Joseph’s description regarding the historical setting of the First Vision.

Joseph Smith stated that the Methodists initiated the religious excitement which took place in the neighborhood where he lived during the months preceding the First Vision. At that

The Towns of Palmyra and Farmington 1820



In 1821 Farmington Town was divided. One approximate six-mile square area retained the name Farmington Town, and the other section was called Burt Town and was renamed Manchester Town in 1822.

In 1823 Macedon Town was formed from the western section of Palmyra Town.

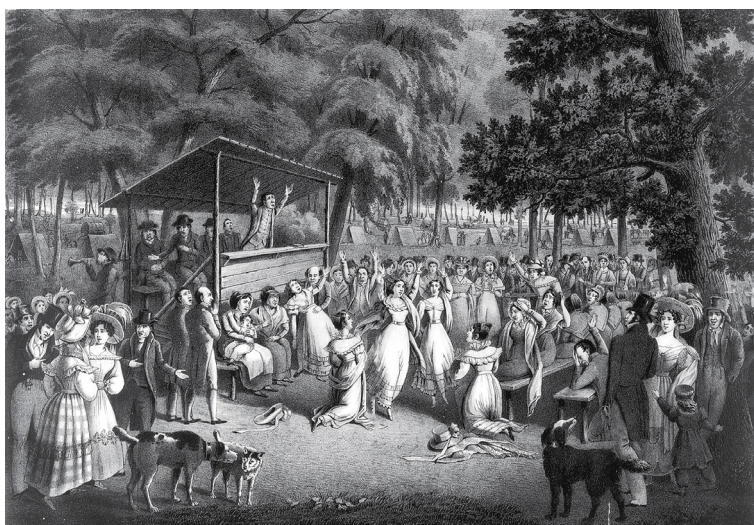
time, Methodism was replacing the Baptist faith as the largest religious society in America, numerically speaking, and was the fastest-growing religion in the early republic. These ambitious Protestants had initiated the most effective missionary program existent in the young nation. They, in part, solved the problem of the shortage of ministers by not requiring their preachers to be college graduates, and a great many dedicated Americans sacrificed many comforts of life to serve as Methodist itinerants. The Methodists, moreover, divided the country into conferences and districts and then subdivided the districts into stations and circuits. In areas where there was a Methodist meetinghouse, stationed preachers were appointed who in most instances derived much of their support from their own industry. But most communities, such as the towns of Palmyra and Farmington, were served by traveling ministers who had no secular employment. Preaching locations were determined within the circuits, and itinerant ministers were appointed to preach regularly in the designated places of worship. The circuits were called two-week circuits, three-week circuits, or four-week circuits depending on the period required to preach at each location. Ministers were usually assigned to a circuit for only one or at the most two years, and the presiding elders of each district were usually assigned to a region for no longer than four years. By this ingenious system, vast numbers of Americans living in rural communities received regular spiritual edification.⁷

PALMYRA METHODISTS UNTIL 1823

Since there were no Methodist meetinghouses in the towns of Palmyra and Farmington prior to 1823, Methodists residing in the neighborhood where Joseph lived worshiped in the homes of the settlers, in school buildings, and in and near the beautiful virgin groves.⁸ About every two weeks, a Methodist

itinerant would contact the settlers in the towns of Palmyra and Farmington and would preach, exhort, and counsel those who gathered. The Smith farm was located near the border of the Ontario and Lyons Circuits (probably within the Ontario Circuit) of the Ontario District of the Genesee Conference, and from the summer of 1819 to the summer of 1820 these circuits were served by two active itinerants; William Snow and Andrew Peck visited the people residing in the Ontario Circuit, and Ralph Lanning and Isaac Grant traveled the Lyons Circuit.⁹ Since Joseph Smith considered joining the Methodist Church, he probably listened to one or more of these ministers preach and was impressed by the message of salvation which they proclaimed.

One of the most effective missionary programs adopted by the Methodists to promulgate their faith was the camp meeting. Although Baptists, Presbyterians, and members of other



Camp meetings and other types of religious services were conducted regularly by Methodists in the community where Joseph Smith lived during the era of the First Vision. (Lithograph of a ca. 1829 religious camp meeting, Library of Congress)

religious societies also sponsored such meetings and while Christians of various faiths participated in these gatherings, the Methodists in western New York conducted more camp meetings in the early nineteenth century than did members of any other denomination. These meetings were usually held on the edge of a beautiful grove of trees or in a small clearing in the midst of a forest. After traveling many miles along dusty or waterlogged roads, the settlers would locate their wagons and pitch their tents on the outskirts of the encampment. Farmers' markets and grog or liquor shops often sprung up near the campgrounds, thereby providing some farmers with unusual economic opportunities. The meetings frequently continued for several days, and sometimes one session would last nearly all day and into the night. Ministers would rotate preaching assignments so that one minister would immediately be followed by another, and at times two or three ministers would preach simultaneously in different parts of the campground. Ministers not only preached lengthy sermons but devoted much of their time in counseling and directing prayer circles and group singing.¹⁰

The numbers who attended camp meetings held in New York about 1820 varied considerably. There were times when only a few hundred gathered, and on other occasions thousands witnessed the proceedings.¹¹ In a camp meeting held in Palmyra in 1826, one reporter estimated that ten thousand people gathered on the grounds to behold the spiritual drama.¹²

In some sections of early America, camp meetings frequently erupted into exciting spectacles in which enthusiasts demonstrated their emotional aspirations with a variety of physical demonstrations. During these exuberant meetings, people went into trances, jerked, rolled and crawled on the ground, barked like dogs, and fell to the ground as though they had been hit by a piercing cannonball, remaining unconscious

for minutes or even sometimes for hours. In western New York, however, at the time of the First Vision, physical demonstrations were rarely manifest, except for the occasional practice of falling to the ground and crying out for mercy. Nevertheless, some settlers who were attending these New York meetings for the first time were alarmed by the piercing, dissonant commotions that would occasionally erupt. Some viewed with mixed emotions the weeping, the crying, the mourning, and the sighing which created loud noises in the encampment.¹³

Camp meetings and other types of religious services were conducted regularly by Methodists in the community where Joseph Smith lived during the era of the First Vision, and many of these meetings undoubtedly could have been considered by an attender such as Joseph Smith as the beginning or the continuation of an unusual religious excitement. On June 19, 1818, for example, a camp meeting was held near Palmyra which, according to one report, resulted in twenty baptisms and forty conversions to the Methodist society.¹⁴ The following summer, many memorable Methodist services were held in Phelps, a town located near Manchester. These meetings precipitated a powerful spiritual awakening in that section of western New York.

The historic gatherings which led to a great revival and created such an impression on the settlers in the town of Phelps began in July 1819, when the Methodists of the Genesee Conference held their annual meetings in Phelps Village, which was then called Vienna. Approximately one hundred Methodist ministers gathered in this small village during that summer to deliberate, to develop programs, to resolve controversies, and to receive edification, instruction, and annual appointments. The sessions of this conference were held in a yellow clapboard meetinghouse, a newly completed Methodist church which was painted with yellow ochre and crowned with a diminutive cupola. Although this building contained no classrooms, carpets,

or cushions, fairly comfortable seats with backs were installed shortly before the conference began.¹⁵

In addition to the special services which were held in connection with this conference, camp meetings were conducted following the deliberations; and during the ensuing twelve months (from the summer of 1819 to the summer of 1820), a “flaming spiritual advance” occurred in that region. In the 1880s, one convert of that impressive revival, Mrs. Sarepta Marsh Baker, described this momentous awakening in a manner that resembled Joseph’s testimony. The revival, she observed, was a “religious cyclone which swept over the whole region round about and the kingdom of darkness was terribly shaken.”¹⁶

Since the boundaries of the Genesee Conference stretched from the Catskill Mountains in the east to Detroit in the west, a distance of about five hundred miles, and from Upper Canada in the north to central Pennsylvania in the south, a distance of about three hundred miles, many itinerant preachers—from western New York, northwestern Pennsylvania, portions of Canada, Ohio, and other western regions—traveled through or near Palmyra and Farmington in the summer of 1819. It was common for those ministers to preach and participate in camp meetings while they were traveling to and from their annual conferences. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to assume that Joseph Smith might have attended meetings convoked by ministers of this conference held immediately before, during, or shortly after the deliberations which took place in Phelps; and it might have been in connection with this event that Joseph Smith turned his attention to organized religion.

A contemporary of Joseph Smith, Orsamus Turner, concluded that the Mormon Prophet became excited about religion while he was attending a camp meeting held “away down in the woods, on the Vienna road,” a road that led from Phelps Village.¹⁷ This report of Joseph’s catching a “spark of Methodist fire” while

attending a camp meeting near Phelps has been repeated by several town and county historians and interpreted as a meeting held in and near Phelps and in Oaks Corners, a small community located southeast of Phelps Village in the town of Phelps.¹⁸

In the neighborhood where Joseph lived, camp meetings and other services conducted by Methodists were held so frequently at the time of the First Vision that notices of such gatherings seldom appeared in the local newspapers except when an unusual event occurred in connection with a particular meeting. In June 1820, the *Palmyra Register* reported on a Methodist camp meeting in the vicinity of Palmyra because an Irishman, James Couser, died the day after attending the gathering, at which he became intoxicated. "It is supposed," the editor commented, that Couser "obtained his liquor, which was no doubt the cause of his death, at the Camp-ground, where it is a notorious fact, the intemperate, the lewd and dissolute part of community too frequently resort for no better object, than to gratify their base propensities."¹⁹ A quasi-apologetic clarification of this report was printed in a later edition of this paper in which the editor stated that when he wrote that Couser "obtained his liquor at the Camp-ground," he did not mean that the Irishman "obtained it within the enclosure of their [Methodist] place of worship, or that he procured it of them, but at the grog-shops which were established at, or *near* if you please, their camp-ground."²⁰

RECORDS REVEAL RELIGIOUS EXCITEMENT

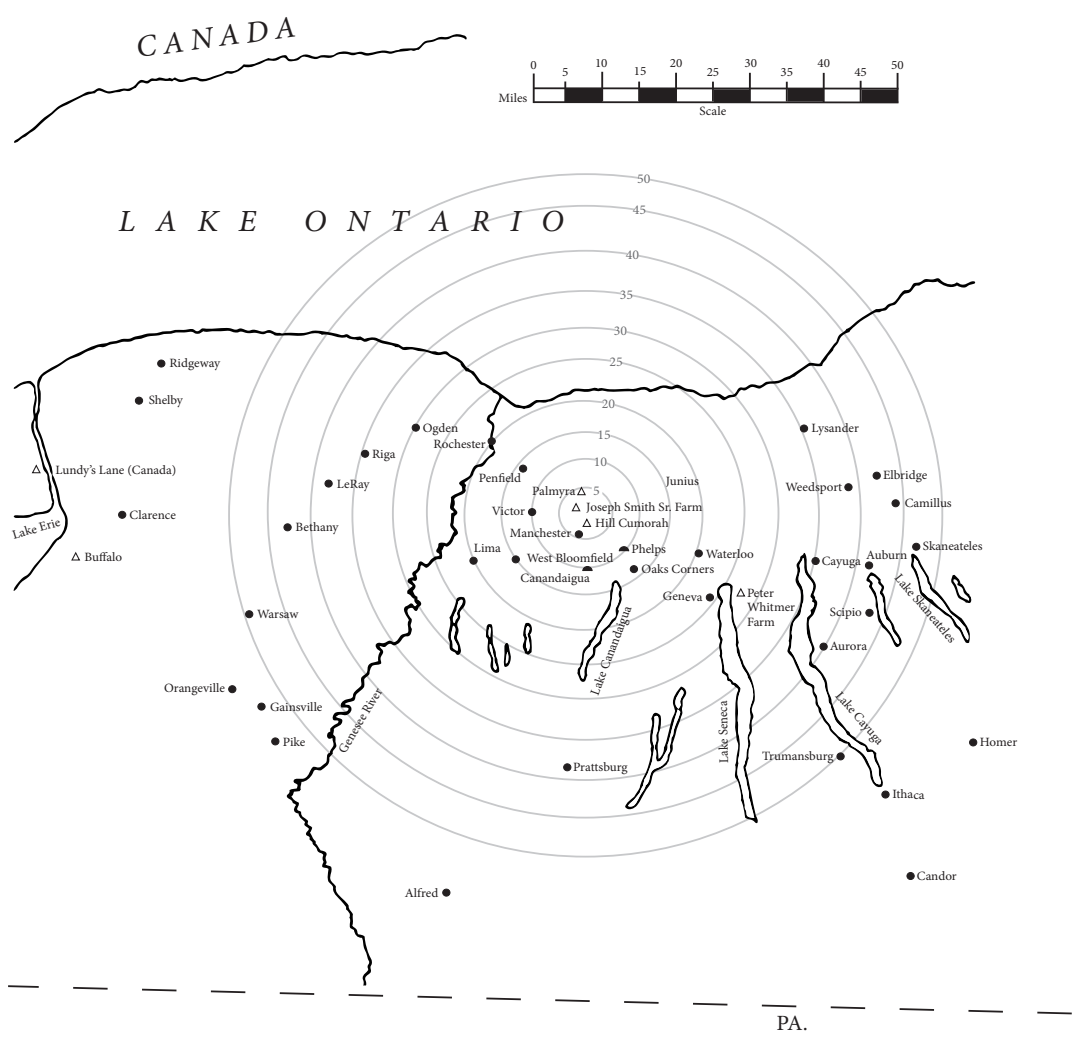
Not only is historical evidence available to support Joseph Smith's testimony that an unusual excitement on the subject of religion commenced with the Methodists in the vicinity where he lived, but many records also reveal that the excitement "soon became general among all the sects in that region of country." There were three Presbyterian churches in the towns

of Farmington and Palmyra in 1820: one located in or near the village of Farmington, one in East Palmyra, and another in Palmyra Village. The Western Presbyterian Church was the only meetinghouse located in the village of Palmyra at the time of the First Vision and was the congregation with which Lucy, Samuel, Hyrum, and Sophronia were affiliated until shortly before The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized.²¹ There were also two Baptist meetinghouses in that area in 1820: one was located two miles west of Palmyra Village (the Palmyra Baptist Church) and one near Manchester Village (the Farmington Baptist Church). Members of the Society of Friends had erected three meetinghouses, one north of Palmyra Village and two near the village of Farmington. The Methodists had one house of worship, a church which they purchased from the Episcopalians in the village of Clifton Springs, and Methodist classes were being held in or near Palmyra and Manchester villages at that time. In adjoining towns, other Protestant denominations such as the Freewill Baptists, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and Eastern Christians were worshipping.²²

An examination of Presbyterian church records reveals that between the summer of 1819 and the summer of 1820, its members participated in the upsurge of spiritual fervor which took place in the region of country where the Smith family lived. In the fall of 1819, a great awakening erupted in the village of Geneva, a community located near Phelps and adjacent to Seneca Lake. Whereas the average increase in membership of the Presbyterian Church in Geneva by examination (admission of new converts) had been only nine annually from 1812 to 1819, the increase in membership by examination from July 1819 to July 1820 was eighty. In September 1819, twenty-three adults were baptized, and in October 1819, approximately fifty new members (who had not previously been Presbyterians) were received into this church.²³

The Great Revival of 1819–20 in Western, Central, and Upstate New York

- Towns or villages where there were reports of “unusual religious excitement” and/or significant increases in church membership in 1819–20.
- ▲ Towns or villages located near the Smith farm where there were reports of “prospects of revivals” in 1819–20.
- △ Indicates location of other landmarks of New York.



An examination of the session records of the Presbyterian Church located at Oaks Corners provides further evidence that an unusual awakening was occurring in the region where Joseph lived during the months immediately preceding the First Vision. The average annual increase in membership of this church between 1806 and 1819 had been only five, with no more than nine new members being admitted by profession in any single year prior to 1820. In 1820, however, seven were admitted by profession in January, fifteen in April, six in August, and two in November, making a total of thirty additions to this small congregation.²⁴

Not only did revivals among Presbyterians erupt in the village of Geneva and the town of Phelps in 1819 and 1820, but during these years awakenings occurred in Penfield, Rochester, Lima, West Bloomfield, and Junius, towns or villages located within a radius of twenty-five miles of the Smith farm. Within a radius of forty-five miles of Joseph's log cabin home, other significant "ingatherings" of Presbyterians occurred in Cayuga, Auburn, Aurora, Trumansburg (Ulysses), Ogden, East and West Riga, Bergen, and Le Roy; and prospects of revivals were reported in Waterloo and Canandaigua, meaning that in these areas there was probably an unusual religious excitement.²⁵

Although membership records of the Presbyterian church of Farmington and Palmyra Villages dating back to 1820 have not been preserved and membership figures are not available for the Methodist classes held in the neighborhood where Joseph lived, presbytery records and reports of growth in Methodist circuits are available. When representatives of the Presbyterian churches assembled in Phelps in February 1820, members of the presbytery of Geneva reported that "during the past year more have been received into the communion of the Churches than perhaps in any former year," and the word "perhaps" has been crossed out in the original record. At this meeting it was

“WHICH CHURCH SHOULD I JOIN?”

Thousands asked the question “Which church should I join?” And they were joining many churches. Probably more people joined the Methodist Church than any other church at this time. But they were joining the Presbyterian Church, they were joining the Baptist Church. Consequently, it was interesting not only to identify the churches and their possible growth but also to locate the areas where there was the greatest religious excitement. The result was finding that one of the areas of greatest revivalism in the United States at that time was upstate New York. . . . As I continued to search the area of revivalism in upstate New York, I continued to return to Joseph Smith’s account where he said that in the second year after he moved to Manchester, “there was in the place where we lived” unusual religious excitement that began with the Methodist “but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country.” In fact in the whole region of country “great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties” (Joseph Smith—History 1:5). And I noticed that the Reverend Wesley Walters had misrepresented Joseph Smith. Joseph Smith never wrote that there was a great revival in Palmyra. He was living in Manchester and he said that the revival was in the whole region of country. I found the local newspapers that described hundreds of people joining churches in upstate New York. The name of the churches were identified, the number of people who were joining the church in 1820 were identified. So Joseph became aware of many, many people joining churches throughout the area where he lived. . . .

In fact, on one occasion I was at Phelps doing research and reading their newspapers when one of the directors invited my wife and me to her home for lunch. So we went to the home and had a nice lunch, and then while I was in her home I saw a picture. It had a grove, and in the picture it said, “Where Joseph got religion.” And I asked the lady, “Well, what does this mean? Here you have a picture in your home of a grove where Joseph got religion.” And she said, “That’s my backyard. Tradition says that Joseph Smith came here, attended these revivals, then became all excited, and then went back home and claimed to have had a vision.” (Milton V. Backman Jr., interview by Samuel Alonzo Dodge, August 12, 2009, Provo, UT)

also reported that two hundred were added to the churches by examination and eighty-five by certificate (transfer of membership); and only sixteen of the twenty-three churches in

this presbytery reported, Palmyra and Farmington being two of the seven churches which failed to report.²⁶ Even though Methodist records indicate that there was no increase in the Ontario Circuit in 1820, in that year membership in the Lyons Circuit doubled, increasing from 374 to 654.²⁷

Evidence that Baptists in the region of country where Joseph lived prospered from the religious stirrings is found in the membership reports of the Baptist Church of Farmington located a few miles south of the Smith farm. Baptist Church membership figures indicate that twenty-two converts were added to this congregation in 1819, which was a significant growth for a church consisting of only 87 members in 1818.²⁸

Freewill Baptists also reported an advancement of spiritual sensitivity in the vicinity of New York where Joseph lived at the time of the First Vision. A quarterly meeting of members of this society was held in Phelps in July 1819, at which time "a profitable season was enjoyed" and five were added to their society. A few months later, Freewill Baptists in Junius, a town located east of Phelps, reported a revival in their community; and in the autumn of 1820, fifteen were added to their society. Strife and contention, however, erupted among these Protestants; and some of the newly awakened souls were dismissed from the Baptist society, forming a nondenominational church in Junius and "taking the Scriptures for their only rule of faith and practice."²⁹

In the fall of 1819, Bishop John Henry Hobart, an Episcopalian bishop, visited western New York and received "encouraging reports" from missionaries laboring in Phelps, Waterloo, Bergen, Le Roy, and many other towns of western New York.³⁰

Eastern Christians also benefited from the increased religious fervor which excited many settlers in western New York following the War of 1812. One of the leaders of this

restorationist movement, David Millard, preached frequently in West Bloomfield and organized a church in that village in October 1818 with sixteen members. A few months after the inception of this religious society, membership increased to about fifty.³¹

REVIVAL IS CONVERSION FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT

Although membership records provide one indication of religious activity in a community, occasionally an unusual religious excitement occurred in a neighborhood without resulting in an immediate increase in church membership. Periodically, there was a renewal of religious fervor among church members. Sometimes many seekers were converted to the basic teachings of Christianity but postponed uniting with one of the religious societies located near their homes, and some converts never discovered what they regarded as God's true church. Some "outpourings of the Spirit" have vanished from mankind's memory because a contemporary failed to record the "extension of the power of godliness" or because the primary source was not preserved. As one American of the early Republic asserted, a "revival of religion" is "the translation" of a considerable number of souls in the same congregation or neighborhood "from darkness to light, and from bondage of iniquity to the glorious liberty of the sons of God," which is "attended with an awakening sense of sin and with a change of temper and conduct, which cannot be easily concealed."³²

Many valuable ecclesiastical records dating back to the early nineteenth century have also been preserved that vindicate Joseph Smith's testimony concerning the "whole district of country" being affected by the spiritual awakening of 1819–20 and "great multitudes" uniting "themselves to the different religious parties." A careful reading of the Prophet's account

“THY SINS ARE FORGIVEN THEE”

I have two favorite accounts—the 1832 and the 1838. You cannot fully understand what happened without combining those two major accounts. But in the 1835 and the 1842 there is information that’s not available in others. I especially like what Joseph included in his 1842 account regarding the churches. . . .

One reason I like the 1832 account is that it talks about Joseph’s long quest for religious truth. He didn’t just read James 1:5 and go into the grove. For three years he was seeking and searching and investigating. And then his big concern was that he was a sinner. He would have been asking ministers not which church to join, but what is the means of salvation? He was looking for the minister that could tell him the true path toward securing a forgiveness of sins. He wanted to be saved. Then he went to the grove, and that’s the account that said, “Joseph thy sins are forgiven thee. . . . Behold I am the Lord of glory I was crucified for the world that all those who believe on my name may have Eternal life.” *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, comp. and ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 11. That’s just beautiful. . . .

The 1838 account is officially written for the history of the Church, so that includes probably more details than any other accounts. It’s one of the most complete accounts, and there it says the Father appeared. It’s the only account where Joseph identifies the Father. I just love that one personage said to him, “Joseph, this is my Beloved Son. Hear him.” (Milton V. Backman Jr., interview by Samuel Alonzo Dodge, August 12, 2009, Provo, UT)

indicates that the great increase in membership occurred in “the whole district of country,” meaning possibly western New York or eastern and western New York and not necessarily Palmyra, Farmington, or just the neighborhood where he lived. Joseph undoubtedly learned that many revivals were occurring in New York in 1819 and 1820. Accounts of the most impressive and productive religious quickenings were widely circulated by preachers, traveling merchants, and newspapers. In the summer and early fall of 1820, for example, descriptive accounts of awakenings occurring in central and upstate New York were published

in the *Palmyra Register*, a paper which, according to Orsamus Turner, the Smith family obtained regularly.³³ The June 7, 1820, issue carried a brief report of “Great Revivals in Religion” in the eastern part of the state. This revival was more fully reported on in a later issue. In this later report, the Palmyra paper announced that “the face of the country has been wonderfully changed of late.” Last summer, as a result of a powerful revival, 40 were added to the church at Saratoga Springs. Shortly thereafter, an awakening kindled the settlers of Malta and Stillwater, where in the latter town about 200 were converted. At Ballston, 118 were added to the church during two communion services. At East Galway, within two months, at least 150 were “hopefully” converted; at Amsterdam, 50 members had been added recently to the church; and, the report concluded, at Nassau, 30 settlers had been converted in less than three weeks.³⁴ And in still a different article, the readers of the *Palmyra Register* learned that more than 200 people had been converted since the first of the year during a great spiritual vitalization which was animating the settlers of Homer.³⁵

Presbyterian church records provide one of the most valuable insights into the extent and numerical consequences of the great awakening which transformed New York into an ecclesiastical storm center during the years following the termination of the War of 1812, including the years 1819 and 1820. After delegates from Presbyterian churches located throughout the United States gathered in Philadelphia in May 1820, they prepared their annual report on the state of religion for the preceding year. “It is with gratitude and heart-felt joy,” the delegates asserted, that “the past has been a year of signal and almost unprecedented mercy” as far as “genuine religious revivals” are concerned. When the committee enumerated the areas where “the most copious of these effusions of the Spirit” had been experienced, they specified eight presbyteries, six of which were located in New York.

Then they described the congregations where the most significant revivals were occurring. Twenty-two congregations were listed, nineteen of which were located in New York, including Geneva, Homer, Smithfield, Utica, Whitesboro, New Hartford, Clinton, Cooperstown, Sherburne, Pleasant Valley, Stillwater, Malta, Ballstown, Galway, Schenectady, Amsterdam, Marlboro, and Hopewell.³⁶

REVIVAL "FRUITS" IN 1820

The report of the General Assembly for the year ending 1820 indicates that the great New York revival continued during the year of the First Vision. In fact, the "fruits" of the 1820 revivals were considered more "numerous, extensive, and blessed" than in any previous year. Awakenings occurring in fifty-four congregations in New York were specifically mentioned, and this enumeration did not include a special report on the revivals in the presbytery of Albany, where "one thousand four hundred" were added to the Presbyterian churches.³⁷

Presbyterian church membership figures compiled by the General Assembly also reveal not only that there was a significant increase in membership in New York in 1819 but that there was a greater increase there than in any other state. During the year preceding the First Vision, the national increase in Presbyterian Church membership was approximately 6,500, and the increase in New York State alone was 2,250, representing 35 percent of the national total. But what is most significant here is the fact that more than 67 percent or 1,513 of the 2,250 New York converts came from the Burned-Over District. This is 23 percent of the national total.³⁸

Membership summaries for the Presbyterian Church in western New York for 1820 indicate a decline in membership; the decline is probably due to failure of many Presbyterian

churches to report. Although Methodist reports for the region show a decline in 1819, probably because of the reorganization of the Methodist circuits, Methodist membership figures for 1820 indicate that during the year of the First Vision there was an increase of 2,256 members in western New York. This was the largest annual increase reported by this group for that region of America.³⁹

The Baptists were also increasing rapidly in membership in western New York at the time Joseph beheld his remarkable vision. At a triennial meeting of the Baptists held in Philadelphia in 1820, 83 of the 145 associations reported baptisms for the year 1819. Although only ten associations or 12 percent of the alliances of churches which reported were located in New York, these groups recorded 26 percent of the baptisms. In the Empire State, the most significant increases were noted by associations located west of the Catskill Mountains. Madison disclosed 506 baptisms (more than any other Baptist association); Cayuga, 474; Holland Purchase, 262; Franklin, 183; and Genesee, 147. Consequently, in five western New York Baptist associations, there was an increase of more than 1,500 for the year 1819.⁴⁰

When Calvinist Baptists described the region where some of the most powerful revivals occurred in 1820, they reported a profound enhancement of religious sensitivity in Madison, Onandaga, Cortland, and Chenango counties, where Baptists of central New York had formed the Madison Association. About January 1, a spiritual enlivenment commenced in Homer and continued during much of the year. By August, more than one hundred converts had joined the Baptist society in Homer, about one hundred had united with the Baptists in Truxton, and other significant additions were made in the societies located in Nelson, Virgil, Preble, and Scipio. Another "extensive revival" which reached a peak in the spring of 1820 took place in the town of Smithfield, where eighty-four joined the Baptist

society in Peterboro and fifty-four in Siloam. The Baptists also reported that many converts were joining Congregational and Presbyterian churches located in central New York. The Seventh-day Baptists noted that great numbers were joining their society in Alfred, a community located southwest of Joseph's home.⁴¹

One witness of the great awakening which erupted in Homer wrote a colorful description of this movement in which he testified that all classes in society were affected by the great and powerful work which had broken forth. Some, he said, who had previously made a confession of religion again searched their hearts, resulting in second rebirth. Others for the first time "fell under the power of truth and exclaimed, 'What shall we do?' Of this class," he observed, "were a great company of the youth of both sexes. The principal means of awakening," he continued, were the "exhortations of the pious, the pathetic expostulations of young converts, and the preaching of the Gospel." The revival, he added, was distinguished by its great solemnity and order, for there was "scarce a feature of enthusiasm or blind zeal visible. . . . It ought to be recorded," this witness concluded, "to the honor of Divine grace, that in many instances prayer" was "most signally and speedily answered; whether it was for the conversion of a sinner, or the comfort of a saint under peculiar trials. It has been fully manifested, that those who asketh, receiveth."⁴²

Church records, newspapers, religious journals, and other contemporary sources clearly reveal that great awakenings occurred in more than fifty western New York towns or villages during the revival of 1819–20. Primary sources also specify that great multitudes joined the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Calvinist Baptist societies in the region of country where Joseph Smith lived; and significant additions were also made in western New York communities by the Congregational Church, the

Christian denomination, the Freewill and Seventh-day Baptist societies, and other Protestant faiths.⁴³

SUMMARY

While summarizing the spiritual quickenings that awakened America into a new reality of the divinity of Christ, one editor declared in 1820 that there were currently more reports of revivals in religious publications than in any previous era.⁴⁴ Although this spiritual phenomenon was certainly not limited to New York, this state, especially the area stretching from Albany to Buffalo, was the ecclesiastical storm center of America at the time one of the most remarkable visions was unfolded to mankind.

The most reliable sources of the early nineteenth century show that Joseph Smith's brief description of the historical setting of the First Vision is in harmony with other contemporary accounts of the religious excitement which took place in the area where he lived and of the great revival which continued in New York in 1819 and 1820. Indeed, the Mormon Prophet penned a reliable description of an awakening which occurred in the Burned-Over District at the time he launched his quest for religious truth.

NOTES

1. Milton V. Backman Jr., *American Religions and the Rise of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), 283, 308–9.
2. Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1950), 3–4.
3. Cross, *Burned-Over District*, 9–11; P. H. Fowler, *Historical Sketch of Presbyterianism within the Bounds of the Synod of Central New York* (Utica, NY: Curtiss & Childs, 1877), 167–68. Presbyterian church membership in western New York (based on the

membership reports of the Geneva, Cayuga, Oneida, Onondaga, Ontario, Niagara, Rochester, Genesee, and Bath presbyteries) increased slowly from 1812 to 1816, the average annual increase being about five hundred members per year. In 1816, Presbyterian membership in western New York increased by 1,050; in 1817, the increase was 1,989; in 1818, 1,516; and in 1819, 1,513. Since the report for 1819 did not include the membership of the Genesee presbytery, the increase in 1819 was probably greater than any previous year except for 1817. Methodist increase in membership in approximately the same region (based on membership reports of the Chenango, Oneida, and Genesee districts and the districts formed from these bodies) indicates that there was an increase in membership of 1,873 in 1816; of 1,613 in 1817; and of 2,154 in 1818. After a major realignment occurred in the districts in 1819, membership reports reveal that during the year 1820 another significant increase in membership took place, there being an increase of 2,256. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from its Organization, A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1820 Inclusive* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1847), 516, 574–75, 634–35, 667, 696, 742; *Minutes Taken at the Several Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Methodist Episcopal Church, 1816), 34, hereafter referred to as *Methodist Minutes*; *Methodist Minutes* (1817), 29; *Methodist Minutes* (1818), 30; *Methodist Minutes* (1819), 36; *Methodist Minutes* (1820), 27; *Methodist Minutes* (1821), 27–28.

4. Cross, *Burned-Over District*, 13.

5. The town of Manchester was formed from Farmington on March 31, 1821. It was originally named “Burt,” but the name was changed to Manchester on April 16, 1822. Horatio Gates Spafford, *A Gazetteer of the State of New York* (Albany, NY: B. D. Packard and Troy, 1824), 302–3; Hamilton Child, *Gazetteer and Business Directory of Ontario County, New York, for 1867–8* (Syracuse, NY: printed by author, 1867), 49.

6. Joseph Smith—History 1:5.

7. An excellent description of the Methodist circuit-rider system is found in an article relating the history of Methodism in

Connecticut. The program adopted in Connecticut was similar to the system existent in New York at the time of the First Vision. See William Thacher, "A Sketch of the History and Present State of Methodism in Connecticut," *Methodist Magazine*, January 1822, 33–38.

8. *Palmyra Courier*, August 17, 1866; *Palmyra: Wayne County* (Rochester, NY: Herald Press, 1907), 51; G. A. Tuttle, "Historical Sketch of the Palmyra Methodist Episcopal Church," copy located in the Palmyra King's Daughters Free Library; Files of the Shortsville Enterprise Press, November 24, 1883; December 19, 1902, located in Shortsville, NY.

9. *Methodist Minutes* (1819), 51. From July 1820 to July 1821, the Ontario Circuit was supplied by Thomas Wright and Elihu Nash. *Methodist Minutes* (1820), 44.

10. Charles Giles, *Pioneer: A Narrative of the Nativity, Experiences, Travels, and Ministerial Labours of Rev. Charles Giles* (New York: G. Lane & P. P. Stanford, 1844), 266–70; "Religious and Missionary Intelligence," *Methodist Magazine*, December 1819, 474–76; Eben Smith, "Progress of the Work of God on Hudson-River District," *Methodist Magazine*, December 1822, 474–75; *Palmyra Register*, June 28, 1820; July 5, 1820.

11. Theophilus Armenius, "Account of the Rise and Progress of the Work of God in the Western Country," *Methodist Magazine*, July 1819, 272; Thomas Madden, "Good Effects of Campmeetings," *Methodist Magazine*, June 1818, 152–53.

12. "Genesee Conference," *Methodist Magazine*, August 1826, 313.

13. Giles, *Pioneer*, 268; R. Smith, *Recollections of Nettleton, and the Great Revival of 1820* (Albany, NY: E. H. Pease, 1848), 31–33, 71, 74, 123; T. Spicer, "A Short Sketch of the Revival of Religion in the City of Troy, A.D. 1816," *Methodist Magazine*, June 1818, 152–53.

14. M. P. Blakeslee, "Notes for a History of Methodism in Phelps, 1886," 7, copy located in the Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.

15. Blakeslee, "History of Methodism in Phelps," 6–7; "Journal of the Genesee Conference, 1810 to 1828," 76–84, copy located in the Harold B. Lee Library; Helen Post Ridley, *When Phelps Was Young*

(Phelps, NY: Phelps Echo, 1939), 55; [W. H. McIntosh], *History of Ontario Co., New York* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1876), 170.

16. Blakeslee, "History of Methodism in Phelps," 7–8.

17. O. Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase, and Morris' Reserve* (Rochester, NY: W. Alling, 1852), 214.

18. Child, *Gazetteer*, 52; Mabel E. Oaks, *History of Oaks Corners Church and Community* (Phelps, NY: Wilson, 1954), 11.

19. *Palmyra Register*, June 28, 1820.

20. *Palmyra Register*, July 5, 1820.

21. "Records of the Session of the Presbyterian Church in Palmyra," 2:11–12, located in the Western Presbyterian Church, Palmyra, NY; Pearl of Great Price, 47; [Sarah Lines], *One Hundred and Twenty-Five Years of the Western Presbyterian Church* (Palmyra, NY, 1942), 1–2; McIntosh, *History of Ontario County*, 195.

22. *Minutes of the Fifty-Eighth Anniversary of the Ontario Baptist Association* (Canandaigua, NY, 1871), 13–16; *Wayne County Journal*, June 6, 1872; Fred G. Reynolds, *One Hundred Years' History of the First Baptist Church of Macedon, N. Y.* (Macedon, NY, n.d.), 4–5; McIntosh, *History of Ontario County*, 111–13, 176, 180–82, 194, 221, 264; Marilla Marks, ed., *Memoirs of the Life of David Marks* (Dover, NH: Free-will Baptist, 1846), 26.

23. "Records of the Church of Christ in Geneva, State of New York," 136–38, 146–56, 158–59, located in the First Presbyterian Church, Geneva, NY; "Minutes of the Session, 1819–26," 260–86, located in the First Presbyterian Church, Geneva, NY.

24. "Session Book of the First Presbyterian Church in Phelps," book 2, 11–19, located in the Presbyterian Church, Oaks Corners, New York.

25. *Extracts from the Minutes of the General Assembly, of the Presbyterian Church, in the United States of America* (Philadelphia, 1821), 22; "Records of the Synod of Geneva (1812–1835)," 183, 220–21, copy located in the Harold B. Lee Library; "Records of the Presbytery of Geneva," Book C, 37, copy located in the Harold B. Lee Library; John Jermain Porter, *History of the Presbytery of Geneva, 1805–1889* (Geneva: Courier Job Department, 1889), 25.

26. "Records of the Presbytery of Geneva," book C, 37–38.
27. *Methodist Minutes* (1820), 27; *Methodist Minutes* (1821), 27.
28. *Minutes of the Ontario Baptist Association* (Canandaigua, NY: Messenger Office, 1818), 3; *Minutes of the Ontario Baptist Association* (New York: Messenger Office, 1819), 2.
29. Marks, *Memoirs of the Life of David Marks*, 26.
30. Charles Wells Hayes, *The Diocese of Western New York* (Rochester, NY: Scrantom, Wetmore, 1904), 53.
31. McIntosh, *History of Ontario County*, 221.
32. William Neill, "Thoughts on Revivals of Religion," *Christian Herald*, April 7, 1821, 708–11.
33. Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement*, 214.
34. *Palmyra Register*, September 13, 1820.
35. *Palmyra Register*, August 16, 1820.
36. *Extracts from the Minutes of the General Assembly* (1820), 321–22.
37. *Extracts from the Minutes of the General Assembly* (1821), 22–23.
38. *Minutes of the General Assembly* (1820), 742–43.
39. Although there were significant increases in 1820 in the Onondaga and Oneida presbyteries, the report of the General Assembly for that year indicates a combined decline of more than 2,584 in the Cayuga and Geneva presbyteries with only a reduction of two churches in these presbyteries, indicating that many churches in these presbyteries failed to submit reports in 1821; and two presbyteries, Genesee and Niagara, failed to report. *Minutes of the General Assembly* (1820), 742; *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., from A.D. 1821 to A.D. 1835 Inclusive*, 4; *Methodist Minutes* (1821), 27–28.
40. *Proceedings of the Baptist General Convention in the United States, at their Second Triennial Meeting, and the Sixth Annual Report of the Board of Managers* (Philadelphia, 1820), 308–9.
41. "Revivals of Religion," *Western New York Baptist Magazine*, August 1820, 60, 90–94, 119–23; *Minutes of the Seventh-day Baptist General Conference* (New Brunswick, 1820), 5; "Revivals of

Religion," *Religious Intelligencer*, February–May 1820, 570, 668, 699, 717, 751, 770, 822–23; September 1820, 218, 222.

42. Alfred Bennet, "Revival of Religion in Homer," *Western New York Baptist Magazine*, November 1820, 119–21.

43. For additional information on the Great Revival of 1819–20 in New York, see R. Smith, *Recollections of Nettleton*; P. H. Fowler, *Historical Sketch of Presbyterianism*; Joshua Bradley, *Accounts of Religious Revivals in Many Parts of the United States from 1815 to 1818* (Albany, NY: G. J. Loomis, 1819); and James H. Hotchkin, *History of the Purchase and Settlement of Western New York* (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1848).

44. "Revivals of Religion," *Western New York Baptist Magazine*, August 1820, 91.



Like Joseph, many asked the question "Which church should I join?" And they were joining many churches. (Sandra B. Rast, Ask of God, www.sandrarastart.com, rast_sandra@hotmail.com)