

Chapter 4

CONVERSION TO MORMONISM

W. W. Phelps's *Ontario Phoenix* was located merely eleven miles from Joseph Smith's family home in Manchester Township, Ontario County, New York. Phelps was barely into his career at the *Phoenix* when Joseph Smith Jr. received the golden plates in September 1827. Phelps's advanced role with the Anti-Masonic Party was at its apex in March 1830, when the Book of Mormon was issued to the public. He was fully aware of the rumors concerning the "gold Bible" and the erstwhile treasure seeker who published it.

SPIRITUAL ROOTS

William and Sally, largely owing to their Puritan upbringing, were devout believers in the Bible and the Savior of the world. William chose not to be a member of any specific denomination. He was a "seeker," one who rejected all specific creeds and went from one church to another seeking a restoration of the ancient biblical order. When in 1831 he joined Mormonism, Phelps discovered that many other new converts were seekers as well.¹

Phelps reminisced in 1835 that he "was not a professor [a professed member of a specific religious denomination] at the time, nor a believer in sectarian religion." He insisted, however, that he was "a believer in God, and the Son of God, *as two distinct characters*." He added, "I had long been searching for the 'old paths,' that I might find the right way and walk in it, and after a suitable time to investigate [each possibility] and prove its truth by corresponding evidence from the old bible, and by the internal witness of the spirit." He described himself as "a humble follower of the meek and adorable Jesus."²

Phelps was willing "to argue up, or down, any church" because, by his own estimation (that later proved to be correct), he knew the Bible better than most. His discussions were often heated with Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists

throughout his young adult life in Homer, Cortland, Trumansburgh, and Canandaigua.³ The Phelps family attended religious services in Canandaigua, likely different denominations at different times. In an 1835 letter to Sally, Phelps wrote, “The congregations of Saints at Kirtland are larger than any we used to have at Canandaigua.”⁴

After joining the Latter-day Saints and becoming one of their leaders, Phelps wrote in the *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* that he had been prepared for the restored gospel. In 1823, the same year Joseph Smith had first gone to Cumorah to see the plates for himself, Phelps said that the Lord had prompted him in a dream to believe readily in the discovery of ancient gold plates. These plates would be the source of “another bible” that contained “more plainness than the one we had, but agreeing with it.” Phelps felt that he would thus be pointed in the right direction to heaven. He explained, though, that when he spoke of his dream in Cortland, he was laughed at. But when he learned in 1830 that the Book of Mormon had been published in nearby Palmyra, he started anew to express his feelings, and this time without fear.⁵

CONVERSION TO THE BOOK OF MORMON

The Book of Mormon was printed in Palmyra in the early months of 1830 by *Wayne Sentinel* editor Egbert B. Grandin. As a fellow newspaperman of that era, Phelps read all that was published in nearby papers and would have seen the notice on March 26, 1830, that copies of the Book of Mormon were for sale in Grandin's office. Furthermore, Phelps was acquainted with his fellow Anti-Mason Martin Harris, who widely touted his advocacy of the new scripture. On April 9 Phelps purchased copies of the Book of Mormon from Grandin and sat up the first night comparing it with the Bible. Soon Sally and he had read the entire volume and were convinced that it contained the word of God. He sold copies of the Book of Mormon in his printshop bookstore.⁶

Since Phelps had stature in his community and in the Anti-Masonic Movement, which he desired to maintain, he chose at this time not to affiliate with the Mormons. State elections were scheduled for November of that year, and Phelps planned to campaign for Anti-Masonic causes and candidates throughout the year. He retained his curiosity, however, and continued to keep his eye on Mormonism. After the November elections, Phelps turned most of his attention to this new religion and his noteworthy new book. “My heart was there from the time I became acquainted with the book of Mormon,” he stated, “and my hope, steadfast like an anchor, and my faith increased like the grass after a refreshing shower.”⁷

Phelps became increasingly aggravated when he noted opposition to the Book of Mormon in various local presses. He was especially appalled when editors labeled the book blasphemous when they were completely unfamiliar with its contents. Still concerned several years later, he wrote, “Alas! whenever I hear a man judge the book of Mormon before he has read it, I fear he will be found spotted at the judgment seat of the holy Judge!”⁸

MORMONISM IN CANANDAIGUA

After once accepting the Book of Mormon as revealed scripture, Phelps often had contact with Latter-day Saints in his own community. Joseph Smith Sr. and his son Samuel, as missionaries, were arrested and placed in Canandaigua's Ontario County Jail in October and November 1830. Joseph Sr. was kept longer than Samuel. Father Smith preached inside the jail each Sunday and succeeded in converting two fellow prisoners (names unknown) and later baptized them.⁹ Serving a sentence in the same jail at the time was Eli Bruce, former sheriff of Niagara County, who as a Mason had allegedly murdered Freemasonry opponent William Morgan in 1827. Bruce became well acquainted with Joseph Smith Sr.¹⁰ W. W. Phelps followed closely the cases of the two Smiths and of Eli Bruce while they were in Canandaigua.

Phelps became acquainted, at least to a small degree, with individuals who had either joined the new Mormon religion or were investigating it. Thomas B. Marsh lived with his family in Canandaigua the latter half of 1830 and had already joined the church. Brigham Young, who was still studying the Book of Mormon, likewise lived in Canandaigua in 1830. Ezra Thayre, an early convert and elder, owned a barn near Canandaigua and invited Joseph Smith to preach in his barn.¹¹ Phelps also knew fellow Anti-Mason Martin Harris from nearby Palmyra, who made numerous business trips to Canandaigua.¹²

Even more significantly, Phelps interacted closely with Sidney Rigdon when the latter came to Canandaigua to preach at the courthouse in December 1830.¹³ Rigdon had just left his prominent position as a pastor of a large congregation of restorationist "Reformed Baptists" in Mendon, Ohio, to join the Mormons. He was immediately employed as Joseph Smith's scribe.¹⁴ Phelps spent numerous hours with Rigdon and then together with him and Joseph Smith Jr. on December 24.¹⁵ Phelps may have spent a few days in discourse with Rigdon or with both him and the Prophet, for, as he wrote to Eber D. Howe two weeks later, he had spent ten hours in discourse with Rigdon.¹⁶ In 1844 Rigdon commented about these discussions involving himself, Joseph Smith, and W. W. Phelps: "Elder Phelps came to see us, and expressed great astonishment, and left us, apparently pondering in his heart."¹⁷

Phelps came away from his encounter with the Prophet and Sidney Rigdon with mixed feelings. On the one hand, he was impressed with Joseph Smith's "godly account" of his experiences, and he felt his "first determination to quit the folly of [his] way, and the fame and fancy of this work [to] seek the Lord and his righteousness."¹⁸ On the other hand, he still felt an obligation to pursue the cause of Anti-Masonry. After all, he was still partly sustained financially by businessmen in that movement. But he learned from Smith and Rigdon that the Saints in New York were soon to depart for Ohio. Thus, Phelps was confused about what action he should take: stay in New York or give up all he had worked for and join the Mormons in Ohio.

A few days after these interviews, Phelps received an inquiring letter from E. D. Howe, the Anti-Masonic editor¹⁹ of the *Painesville Telegraph*. Painesville was only ten miles from Kirtland and Mentor, where many new Mormons had just been baptized. In subsequent years, Howe proved himself to be an ardent anti-Mormon as well as an Anti-Mason. He

was the chief publisher of anti-Mormon material in the early 1830s. Howe was curious to find out more about the Book of Mormon and the originators of Mormonism, in particular Joseph Smith and Martin Harris, the latter being a known Anti-Mason. Howe also wanted to discover what may have attracted the famous Reformed Baptist preacher Sidney Rigdon to Mormonism. Phelps was an obvious choice to receive Howe's inquiry since he was the closest fellow Anti-Masonic newspaper editor to the cradle of Mormonism.

Phelps chose to take neither a pro- nor an anti-Mormon stance in his reply to Howe. He reported, "To be sure, I am acquainted with a number of persons concerned in the publication, called the 'Book of Mormon.'—Joseph Smith is a person of very limited abilities in common learning—but his knowledge of divine things, since the appearance of his book, has astonished many." Regarding Harris, Phelps stated, "[His] name is in the book, [he] is a wealthy farmer, but of small literary acquirements; he is honest, and sincerely declares upon his soul's salvation that the book is true, and was interpreted by Joseph Smith, through a pair of silver spectacles, found with the plates." He added that Harris had taken two lines of the characters on the plates to scholars in Utica, Albany, and New York, and in the latter the characters had been pronounced "ancient short-hand Egyptian" by Professor Charles Anthon. Phelps indicated that he was impressed with Rigdon as "a man of talents, and sincere in his profession." Regarding his own contact with the book, Phelps reported: "I have read the book, and many others have, but we have nothing by which we can positively detect it as an imposition nor have we any thing more than what I have stated and the book itself, to show its genuineness. We doubt—supposing, if it is false, it will fall, and if of God, God will sustain it."²⁰

JAILED FOR INTEREST IN MORMONISM

Phelps stayed on as editor of the *Ontario Phoenix*. But by early spring 1831, his Anti-Masonic colleagues were becoming increasingly unsettled by his attraction to Mormonism. In late April, while he was in Palmyra conducting more research into the beginnings of the new movement, probably to convince himself more surely of Mormonism's veracity, two religiously motivated Anti-Masons from Canandaigua brought charges against Phelps for indebtedness. Just before he was arrested, Phelps learned that his wife and some of his children were ill and needed him. He was anxious to get back and minister to their needs. Nevertheless, he was taken by a local constable to the Wayne County Jail.²¹ Lyons, the county seat, was ten miles east of Palmyra and fifteen miles northeast of Canandaigua. It was still common in New York, although the law would change a year later, to place individuals behind bars for an inability to pay debts. However, it wasn't Phelps's indebtedness that bothered these businessmen. After all, newspapermen like Phelps often operated on credit for some of their printing supplies. These men told Phelps that their real motive in jailing him was to keep him "from joining the Mormons."²²

While in jail (his stay lasted thirty days), Phelps decided to write a public letter to local newspapers decrying those who arrested him. "Is this Religion?" he queried of the Anti-Masons. "Is it Liberty" to jail someone who is investigating to find the truth? "Is this Humanity?" He pointed out that for three years he had "labored for the public good, and

three times have I led the freemen of Old Ontario to victory [for Anti-Masonry in the elections].” He urged public opinion to declare whether he was guilty or not, explaining that the money due him was more than he owed to the debtors who had imprisoned him. Finally, he threatened to help undo the Anti-Masonry cause as a “fire-brand” if he were not properly recompensed.²³

Henry O’Reilly of the *Rochester Republican*, a pro-Masonic newspaper, reported on May 17, 1831, that Phelps “has been scurvily dealt with . . . by some of his anti-masonic brethren.” The report added, “The atlas of Ontario anti-masonry has rested on his shoulders some three years. In November next, he threatens to scatter the party to the winds.”²⁴

Phelps appealed by letter to other Anti-Masons to pay what they owed him and cover his debts. Finally, after a week, his obligations were paid, and he was set free without having to stand trial, but his experience in jail taught him where his true friends would be found—among the Mormons.

Instead of taking on Anti-Masonry as he had threatened, while in jail he resigned his editorship of the *Ontario Phoenix*, testifying to his subscribers as he did so that he had never abandoned the principles of Anti-Masonry or true liberty. “Conscientiously I can say though I have accumulated nothing for the future comforts of life,” he wrote, “I have been a faithful friend, a fearless foe!”²⁵ In his last statement to his readers, Phelps alluded to the new treasures he had discovered in Mormonism: “We live in an eventful day. According to the Psalmist, truth springs out of the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven, and as twin-angels they will sweep through the world like a mighty torrent, till mankind, untrammelled by secret bondage, sing as the sons of glory, ‘we are one—peace on earth—virtue endures forever!’”²⁶

Phelps chose to abandon his editorship while he was still incarcerated. He was put off by the Anti-Masonic arguments that society needed no more prophets, that all it needed were the Bible societies, missionary societies, and temperance societies to bring the world to the Millennium.²⁷

JOINING THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS

Phelps counted the cost of leaving his potentially lucrative printing business. He realized he had nothing to show financially for his first thirty-nine years of life. He discussed solemnly with Sally and the children about their next move—to Ohio to join the Latter-day Saints. A father’s decision was law among religious people in that day, so they all prepared to go to Ohio together. The family gathered its belongings, meager as they were at that point. On June 9 they left Canandaigua and by evening had boarded a canalboat on the Erie Canal bound for Buffalo, on Lake Erie. They then sailed by schooner to Fairport, Ohio, and thence via the “Ohio Trail” to Kirtland, twelve miles away, where they heard Joseph Smith was living. No doubt they had mixed feelings—sorrow for their present plight but hope in Christ for choosing to follow him and his church wholeheartedly.

The *Rochester Republican* sarcastically reported that Phelps, “the patriotic editor of the *Ontario Phoenix*, has left Lyons . . . somewhat appeased in his wrath against his anti-masonic friends.” It added, “He is hotly engaged in the investigation of the most wretched

humbug ever imposed upon the credulity of any tribe of fanatics, the golden bible of Mormon.”²⁸

The Phelps arrived in Kirtland on June 14, 1831.²⁹ Phelps sought out the young twenty-five-year-old Prophet where he was then residing, at the Isaac Morley farm, on the northeast fringe of Kirtland. He announced he was willing “to do the will of the Lord.”³⁰ Phelps asked Joseph to seek the Lord’s will for him. He knew that other men had asked Joseph Smith the same and been rewarded with revelations addressed to them. The revelation (D&C 55) directed to Phelps was indeed solemn. It began, “Behold, thus saith the Lord unto you, my servant William, yea, even the Lord of the whole earth, thou art called and chosen.” The Lord promised Phelps that after he was baptized he would receive a remission of his sins and then the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands.³¹

Phelps was then told he would immediately be ordained an elder by Joseph Smith so that he could preach repentance and baptism. This was a rare procedure in the infant Mormon Church—to ordain a new convert so soon to be an elder. Joseph knew Phelps already, of course, and knew his struggles and preparation. He also knew that Phelps was a prominent man in society and had many talents. He could be put to use right away, such as with the journey planned for Missouri later in the week. The revelation continued: “Verily I say unto you, for this cause you shall take your journey [to Missouri] with my servants Joseph Smith, Jun., and Sidney Rigdon, that you may be planted in the land of your inheritance [in the land of Zion] to do this work.” The work referred to here was Phelps’s assignment to assist Oliver Cowdery, the second elder of the church, in doing the “work of printing” and in “selecting and writing books for schools in this church.” The revelation added that little children should “receive instruction before me as is pleasing unto me.”³²

These special callings to Phelps would mean yet more sacrifice for his family. They would have to stay behind in Kirtland and be cared for by the Saints while he made his long journey to Missouri.

Thus was converted one of the most influential Latter-day Saints in the early days of the church: William W. Phelps. As with countless others in those early days and throughout the history of the Restoration, the Book of Mormon was the chief factor in his conversion. Elder Phelps later related the influence of the Book of Mormon on him. This statement also reveals how deeply Phelps had absorbed the new gospel message:

Whenever I have meditated upon the book of Mormon, and looked ahead at the glory which will be brought to pass by that, and the servants of God, I have been filled with hope; filled with light; filled with joy, and filled with satisfaction. What a wonderful volume! what a glorious treasure! By that book I learned the right way to God; by that book I received the fulness of the everlasting gospel; by that book I found the new covenant; by that book I learned when the Lord would gather scattered Israel; by that book I saw that the Lord had set his hand the second time to gather his people, and place them in their own land; by that book I learned that the poor Indians of America were some of the remnants of Israel; by that book I learned that the new Jerusalem, even Zion was to be built up on this continent; by that book

I found a key to the holy prophets; and by that book began to unfold the mysteries of God, and I was made glad.³³

NOTES

1. See Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), especially chapter 1.
2. W. W. Phelps, "Letter No. 7," *M&A* 1, no. 8 (May 1835): 115; emphasis added.
3. W. W. Phelps, "Letter No. 4," *M&A* 1, no. 5 (February 1835): 65.
4. *WWPL*, June 2, 1835, 553.
5. Phelps, "Letter No. 4," 65.
6. Family stories of the Phelps' conversion were passed on in book of remembrance format in descendants' family histories. Unfortunately, the story also stated that Phelps purchased the copy of the Book of Mormon from Parley P. Pratt, which would have been impossible because Pratt did not visit this region of New York until August 1830. That Phelps sold copies of the Book of Mormon is discussed in an untitled article in the *Ontario Phoenix*, December 29, 1830, 2.
7. W. W. Phelps, "Letter No. 6," *M&A* 1, no. 7 (April 1835): 97.
8. Phelps, "Letter No. 6," 97.
9. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1853), 165.
10. Bruce indicated that he "had a long talk with the father of the Smith (Joseph Smith Jr.) who, according to the old man's account, is the particular favorite of Heaven. To him heaven has vouchsafed to reveal its mysteries; he is the herald of the Latter-day glory." Father Smith also told Bruce that he was commissioned to preach the gospel and to baptize and that the Book of Mormon was a stronger work than the Bible. Bruce's story is found in Rob Morris, *The Masonic Martyr: The Biography of Eli Bruce, Sheriff of Niagara County, New York, Who, for His Attachment to the Principles of Masonry, and His Fidelity to His Trust, Was Imprisoned Twenty-Eight Months in the Canandaigua Jail* (Louisville: Morris and Monsarrat, 1861), and in the journal entry from Canandaigua on pp. 203–4; underlining in original.
11. Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 536, 550.
12. "History of Joseph Smith," *T&S* 4, no. 22 (October 1, 1843): 336, is a continuation of the serialized history of the church. It indicated that in December 1830 there were approximately seventy members of the church spread from Colesville to Canandaigua in New York, thus showing that Canandaigua had adherents.
13. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Natural Born Seer: Joseph Smith—American Prophet, 1805–1830* (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2016), 462.
14. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 49–74.
15. Early documentary evidence exists that Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon went to Canandaigua for a period in December 1830 to work on their "translation" projects—extracts from the Book of Enoch and the writings of Moses that presently appear in chapters 6 and 7 of the Book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price. See "Chapter XXXIX" in the original printed galleys for the Book of Commandments, as reproduced in *JSP*, R2:91, which states that this was "a Revelation to Joseph and Sidney, given in Canandaigua, New-York, December 1830." "Revelation Book I" (located in the CHL) is totally reproduced in *JSP*, MRB and was used

as the manuscript to produce the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants in 1835. See *JSP*, MRB:68–69 for the manuscript of this revelation, which is now identified as D&C 37. Before the actual wording of the revelation, the manuscript reads: “A Revelation to Sidney & Joseph at a time that they went from Fayette to Canandaigua to translate &c given at Canandaigua Ontario County State of New York.” The date of December 24, 1830, was given by Phelps in *M&A* 1, no. 7 (April 1835): 96. Historian Dan Vogel lays out the argument that Phelps’s meeting with Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon could have been in Phelps’s home and office in Canandaigua. See Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 2:416, 5:450. Possibly W. W. Phelps is the person referred to in *The Gem, A Semi-Monthly Literary and Miscellaneous Journal* 2, no. 17 (December 25, 1830): 135: “In Canandaigua, it is also said, that there is a book of Mormon preacher, who is attempting to push his way forward, in spite of all opposition.” The reference could also be to Sidney Rigdon. See Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 3:277, 277n2.

16. Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, OH: by the author, 1834), 274.
17. MHC, vol. E-1, 1952; HC, 6:289.
18. Phelps, “Letter No. 6,” 97.
19. Howe’s participation in the Anti-Masonic Movement is documented in William Preston Vaughn, *The Antimasonic Party in the United States, 1826–1843* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 153–55.
20. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 273–74.
21. “Retribution,” *Geneva Gazette, and Mercantile Advertiser*, May 11, 1831, 2; reprinted in *Wayne Sentinel* (Palmyra, NY), May 13, 1831, 3. Phelps erred in his recounting of the story in the church’s *Messenger and Advocate* when he gave the date of April 1830 as the time of his imprisonment. See Phelps, “Letter No. 6,” 97. Phelps’s arrest and imprisonment are discussed in *JSP*, D1:337, 337n499.
22. Phelps, “Letter No. 6,” 97.
23. *Geneva Gazette, and Mercantile Advertiser*, May 11, 1831, 2.
24. *Rochester Republican*, May 17, 1831.
25. *Ontario Phoenix*, May 11, 1831, 2.
26. *Ontario Phoenix*, May 25, 1831, 2.
27. Phelps, “Letter No. 6,” 97.
28. *Rochester Republican*, May 31, 1831.
29. Phelps, “Letter No. 6,” 97, states that Phelps was baptized on June 10, 1831. However, the revelation to Phelps (D&C 55) is prefaced with the date of June 14, 1831. *JSP*, D1:336.
30. MHC, vol. A-1, 124; *PJS*, 1:355; HC, 1:184–86.
31. D&C 55:1. For original documentation of D&C 55, see *JSP*, MRB:154–55 and *JSP*, D1:337–39.
32. D&C 55:2, 4–5.
33. W. W. Phelps, “Letter No. 10,” *M&A* 1, no. 12 (September 1835): 177–78.