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Conversions

THROUGH THE BOOK OF MORMON

By John Henry Evans

II. TWO OF THE EARLIEST CONVERTS

All down the years, since the first appearance of the Book of Mormon in print, in March, 1830, that volume has been the means of converting more persons to the Mormon faith than perhaps any other single book.

The poor, the rich, the scholar, the unlearned, the religious, and the skeptic, alike, when they have given themselves up to the spirit and atmosphere of the work, have somehow been radically changed in their views and life. It has gripped their very soul as nothing else had been able to do.

Not that they were criminal, or even bad, as was the man of whom we spoke as having been changed by reading the New Testament. These converts to Mormonism were just ordinary folk, sometimes church members, sometimes not, but men and women who lived a decent, normal life, as their associates were living. But a reading of the Book of Mormon put a new purpose into their lives, gave a new direction to their thoughts and activities, energized their faith, if they had any, and planted faith in them, if they did not already have faith.

That is what that book has done for thousands. It has been in the class of books known as the "literature of power," as contradistinguished from the class called the "literature of knowledge."

There was, first of all, the case of Thomas B. Marsh.

Marsh, a native of Massachusetts, was at different times a farmer, a foundryman, a waiter, and a storekeeper. In the spring of 1830, at the age of thirty-one, he was living in Boston, where he owned a small business. Earlier in his life he joined the Methodist Church, but soon left it because he could not reconcile some of its teachings with those of

the Bible, the religious standard of the time.

Then, for some reason, with a companion he took a trip to Lyonstown, in New York State, where he first heard of the new prophet, Joseph Smith. At once his attention was awakened. For he had had an impression for many years now that the true Church was not on the earth, but that it would be restored. Was Joseph Smith the man through whom it would be brought back to earth? He would go to Palmyra, where the prophet was, and make inquiries. And this he did.

At Palmyra he met Martin Harris, the man who financed the publication of the new book. Only the first form had been printed. Harris gave Marsh a copy and talked to him about the golden plates, which Harris said he had seen, about the angel, whom he had also seen and heard, and about the new prophet, with whom he was intimately acquainted. Marsh, when it appeared that he was interested, was taken by Martin to Fayette, to see Joseph Smith. The Prophet was not there at the time, but Marsh talked with Oliver Cowdery, another intimate friend of the Smiths, who, like Harris, had looked upon the plates, had seen and heard Moroni, and been told by "the voice of the Lord," that the ancient record had been correctly translated.

On reaching his home Marsh read the part of the Book of Mormon which had been given him. It converted him to the New Movement. His wife, too, read it, and was convinced of its truth.

Later, when he heard that a new church had been organized by Joseph Smith, he moved, with his family, to Fayette, and there all of them were baptized.

That this conversion was genuine and lasting is evident from Marsh's subsequent history.

When the Twelve Apostles were chosen, in 1835, he was named as one of the group. Indeed, he served as president of the quorum for a number of years. But, in the dark days that fell upon the Mormons in Ohio and Missouri, his faith waned, and he was excommunicated, along with four others of the Twelve. He continued, however, to reside in Missouri, the scene of his disaffection.

In 1857, however, after eating husks for nineteen years, he rejoined the Mormons in Salt Lake City. And there, on being asked to speak publicly, he told the story of his apostasy.

"I frequently wanted to know how my apostasy began," he said, "and I have come to the conclusion that I must have lost the Spirit of the Lord out of my heart. I saw a beam in Brother Joseph's eye, but it was nothing but a mote in my own eye. I meddled with that which was not my business. And let me tell you, brethren and friends, if you do not want to suffer in body and mind, as I have done, if there are any of you that have the seeds of apostasy in you, do not let them make their appearance, but nip that spirit in the bud, for it is misery and affliction in this world and destruction in the world to come."

And concerning his return he had this to say: "For the first four or five years especially I was a very stiff-necked man, and I felt that I would never return to the Church. But towards the latter part of the time I began to wake up and to be sensible that I was being chastened by the Almighty. I felt troubled from that day, and my soul was vexed." It was then that he resolved to rejoin his people.

"After forming this resolution, I tried to get an outfit, and kept trying for two or three years. I did not want to come here sick, lame, decrepit, and dependent, and therefore I kept trying. I then thought to myself, 'I am getting older and weaker [he was then under sixty], and if I do not start, I shall soon die, and then whose fault will it be?' I therefore said, 'I will go now!'

"That was last January. I looked round a few days to see what I could raise, and I raised five dollars and ten cents. Then I said, 'I will go if the Lord will help me.'

I felt that he would. Therefore I started with this amount, to come all the way to this valley. I knew that I could not come here with that small sum, and I did not see how I was to get any more.

"But before I got out of the State [of Missouri] the Lord changed my fortune, and I had fifty-five dollars and five cents. Still I had some hardships, for I traveled on foot in some severely cold weather. I found that my chastisement was not over.

"I have come here to get good society—to get your fellowship. I want your God to be my God, and I want to live with you in time and eternity. I never want to forsake the people of God any more. Had I known as much of the Church and its doctrines before I apostatized as I now know, I think I could not have back-slidden. I have not come here to seek for any office. I only want a place among you as a humble servant of God."

Three years later Thomas B. Marsh passed away in Ogden, Utah, where his remains lie buried with his people, as he had wished.

Even more directly and strongly connected with the Book of Mormon was the conversion of Parley P. Pratt.

By birth and early education Pratt was a New Yorker. At eighteen he went to Ohio, where he pre-empted a piece of the wilderness, built a log cabin on it with his own hands, and undertook to cultivate it. "Some leaves and straw in my cabin," he tells us "served for my lodging, and a good fire kept me warm. A stream near my door quenched my thirst; and fat venison, with a little bread from the settlements, sustained me for food. The storms of winter raged around me; the wind shook the forest, the wolf howled in the distance, and the owl chimed in harshly to complete the doleful music which seemed to soothe me or bid me welcome to this holy retreat." He was a student, too, for among the books which he had brought with him were the Bible, McKenzie's *Travels in the Northwest*, and Lewis and Clark's account of their expedition into the far West.

Strongly religious by nature, though not a member of any church, Pratt read his Bible thoughtfully and understandingly. After a trip to his native town,

where he was married to an old sweet-heart, and after putting up a house more in keeping than the log cabin with his changed circumstances, he and his wife joined the Church of the Disciples (Campbellite), being baptized by Sidney Rigdon, one of the trio who founded the faith.

Pratt was a natural orator. It was only an expression of his bent that he presently turned to preaching to his neighbors, although he acknowledged to himself that he lacked divine authority to do this. Presently the "call" to preach was so urgent that he sold out his holdings, paid all his debts, and, with ten dollars in his pocket, he and his companion went East, with a view to devoting his life to the ministry. He was now twenty-three years old.

At Rochester, New York, he felt that he had a mission to perform in this part of the State. He believed it to be to preach the gospel, and so made three appointments. Meanwhile he sent his wife on to the home town.

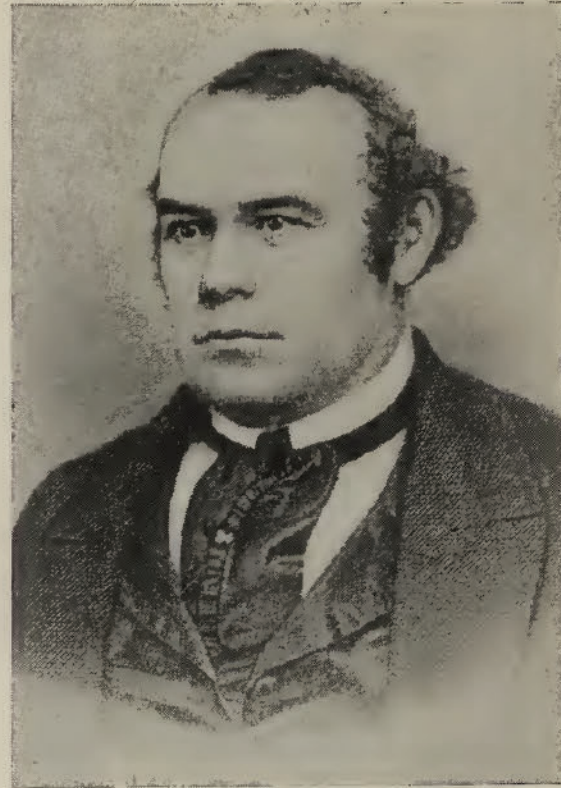
"It was early in the morning," he says, "just at the dawn of day, [that] I walked ten miles into the country, and stopped to breakfast with a Mr. Wells. I proposed to preach in the evening. Mr. Wells readily accompanied me through the neighborhood, to visit the people and circulate the appointment.

"We visited an old Baptist deacon by the name of Hamlin. After hearing of our appointment for evening, he began to tell of a book, a strange book, a very strange book in his possession, which had just been published." And he told his visitors as clearly as he could the story of its origin. He offered to let the preacher read the volume, if he would call the following day. It was the Book of Mormon. The next morning Pratt called. Here is what he says of the incident:

"I opened it with eagerness, and read its title page. I then read the testimony of several witnesses in relation to the manner of its being found and translated. After this I commenced its contents by course. I read all day. Eating was a burden to me. I had no desire for food. Sleep was a burden when the night came, for I preferred reading to sleep.

"As I read, the Spirit of the Lord was

upon me, and I knew that the book was true, as plainly as a man comprehends that he exists. My joy was now full. I determined to see the young man who had been the instrument of its discovery and translation."



PARLEY P. PRATT

At Palmyra he ran upon a young man, of whom he inquired the whereabouts of the new prophet. He was informed that Joseph Smith was now in Pennsylvania, a hundred miles distant. "I inquired for his father or for any of the family. He told me that his father had gone on a journey, but that his residence was a small house before me; and, said he, 'I am his brother'." It was Hyrum Smith. On being informed of his interest in the Book of Mormon, Smith invited Pratt to his home, which was but a short distance away, and here the two spent the night together, talking about the new religion.

Pratt had walked thirty miles to make this visit. Now he walked back, to keep an appointment to preach. On his return journey whenever he sat down to rest, he read the book which Hyrum had given him. After filling a third appoint-

ment, Pratt returned to Palmyra and "demanded baptism at his hands." This ordinance was performed the next day in Fayette, whither the two walked, a distance of twenty-five miles, talking meanwhile. It was Oliver Cowdery, however, who baptized him. Later Pratt was ordained an elder of the Church.

"I now felt that I had authority in the ministry."

Here is what he says, in his *Autobiography*, about the book which had awakened him: "I esteemed the Book, or the information contained in it, more than all the riches of the world. Yes; I verily believe that I would not at that time have exchanged the knowledge I then possessed for a legal title to all the beautiful farms, houses, villages, and property which passed in review before me on my journey through one of the most flourishing settlements of Western New York."

Parley P. Pratt, like Thomas B. Marsh became one of the Twelve Apostles of the new Church, though, unlike his fellow churchman, he kept the faith to the end of his life. At the age of fifty he was murdered while on a mission for the organization, in which he was regarded as

one of its greatest advocates with both tongue and pen.

All his life, after he embraced Mormonism, he showed unusual interest in the natives of America, and this interest he obtained from the Book of Mormon. One of the thirty-eight hymns written by Parley P. Pratt and contained in the *Latter-day Saint Hymns*, is this from his pen:

An angel from on high,
The long, long silence broke;
Descending from the sky,
These gracious words he spoke:
"Lo, in Cumorah's lonely hill,
A sacred record lies concealed.

Sealed by Moroni's hand,
It has for ages lain,
To wait the Lord's command,
From dust to speak again.
It shall again to light come forth,
To usher in Christ's reign on earth.

It speaks of Joseph's seed,
And makes the remnant known
Of nations long since dead,
Who once had dwelt alone.
The fulness of the gospel, too,
Its pages will reveal to view.



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