

The Prophet of Palmyra

Charles Skinner

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It was at Palmyra, New York, that the principles of Mormonism were first enunciated by Joseph Smith, who claimed to have found the golden plates of the Book of Mormon in a hill-side in neighboring Manchester,—the “Hill of Cumorah,”—to which he was led by angels. The plates were written in characters similar to the masonic cabala, and he translated them by divine aid, giving to the world the result of his discovery. The Hebrew prophet Mormon was the alleged author of the record, and his son Moroni buried it. The basis of Mormonism was, however, an unpublished novel, called “The Manuscript Found,” that was read to Sidney Rigdon (afterwards a Mormon elder) by its author, a clergyman, and that formulated a creed for a hypothetical church. Smith had a slight local celebrity, for he and his father were operators with the divining-rod, and when he appropriated this creed a harmless and beneficent one, for polygamy was a later “inspiration” of Brigham Young—and began to preach it, in 1844, it gained many converts. His arrogation of the presidency of the “Church of Latter Day Saints” and other rash performances won for him the enmity of the Gentiles, who imprisoned and killed him at Carthage, Missouri, leaving Brigham Young to lead the people across the deserts to Salt Lake, where they prospered through thrift and industry.

It was claimed that in the van of this army, on the march to Utah, was often seen a venerable man with silver beard, who never spoke, but who would point the way whenever the pilgrims were faint or discouraged. When they reached the spot where the temple was afterwards built, he struck his staff into the earth and vanished.

At Hydesville, near Palmyra, spiritualism, as it is commonly called, came into being on March 31, 1849, when certain of the departed announced themselves by thumping on doors and tables in the house of the Fox family, the survivors of which confessed the fraud nearly forty years after. It is of interest to note that the ground whence these new religions sprang was peopled by the Onondagas, the sacerdotal class of the Algonquin tribe, who have preserved the ancient religious rites of that great family until this day.

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