

# Sidney Rigdon's 1820 Ministry: Preparing the Way for Mormonism in Ohio<sup>1</sup>

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ONE MONTH AFTER SIDNEY RIGDON'S conversion to Mormonism, he visited Joseph Smith in New York, occasioning the following revelation:

I say unto my servant Sidney, I have looked upon thee and thy works. I have heard thy prayers, and prepared thee for a greater work. Thou art blessed, for thou shalt do great things. Behold, thou wast sent forth, even as John, to prepare the way before me. . .and thou knewest it not. (Doctrine and Covenants, hereafter D&C, 35:3-5)

In this remarkable passage, Sidney, a new initiate to Mormonism, is compared to John the Baptist and acknowledged for having unknowingly cried in the Ohio wilderness to prepare the way for Mormonism. In a later revelation, Sidney was appointed "spokesman to this people" with "power to be mighty in testimony" and in "expounding all scriptures" (D&C 100:9-11).

What was it about Sidney Rigdon that made him so valuable to Joseph Smith and Mormonism? This paper examines some of his activities and relationships during the 1820s that "prepared the way" for the Mormons in northern Ohio. It also documents Rigdon's pre-Mormon development of skills that earned him the sobriquet "mighty spokesman."

Sidney Rigdon was familiar with the Baptist ministry from an early age. His three cousins, John, Thomas, and Charles Rigdon, grew up on a neighboring farm near Pittsburgh and became prominent Baptist ministers while Sidney was still a youth. John and Thomas settled in northern Ohio and were active in the Beaver Baptist Association, made up of congregations along the Pennsylva-

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nia/Ohio frontier. Thomas served as an Ohio State Legislator and State Senator between 1813 and 1829.<sup>2</sup> John was overseer to several congregations in the Huron Baptist Association west and south of Cleveland.

In 1815, 1816, and 1817 Charles Rigdon represented Sidney's home congregation at the Conferences of the Redstone Baptist Association<sup>3</sup> of west-central Pennsylvania and what is now West Virginia. He surely told young Sidney of the luminaries gathered there. In 1815, Thomas and Alexander Campbell, the controversial father and son ministers, had been admitted to the Association. These former Presbyterians from Wellsburg, (West) Virginia, west of Pittsburgh, immediately assumed leadership roles, preaching both of the Conference Sunday worship sermons. Thomas wrote the Association circular for 1816, and Alexander wrote the circular for 1817. By the 1817 meeting, charges were already being brought, unsuccessfully, against the Campbells regarding the unorthodox doctrines they championed.<sup>4</sup>

In 1818, Sidney began studying for the Baptist ministry. The next year he moved to Warren, Ohio (about midway between Pittsburgh and Kirtland), where he lived and studied with his future brother-in-law, Adamson Bentley. Sidney attended the 1819 Beaver Association Conference. Adamson Bentley was Moderator, John Rigdon was Clerk, and Thomas Rigdon hosted the Conference and was a member of the Board and of the Missionary Committee. The Conference voted to divide, creating a new Association in Ohio, and to ordain Sidney Rigdon to the ministry, "provided application is made to that amount."<sup>5</sup>

In 1820, Sidney married Adamson Bentley's sister-in-law, Phoebe Brooks. He was ordained and received his own congregation at Bazetta, north of Warren. That August, several congregations around Warren formed the Mahoning Baptist Association, with Adamson Bentley in charge and Sidney Rigdon "second-in-command."<sup>6</sup>

In 1821, the first Mahoning Association Conference was held, representing 13 congregations with 513 members.<sup>7</sup> One of the strongest congregations was comprised of members around Hiram, Ohio, fifteen miles northwest of Warren. Hiram was represented by Oliver Snow, a member of the congregation since

2. Henry K. Shaw, *Buckeye Disciples, a History of the Disciples of Christ in Ohio* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1952), 79.

3. Redstone Baptist Association, "Minutes of the Redstone Baptist Association," 1815, 1816, and 1817, *Western Reserve Historical Society Archives*.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Minutes of the Beaver Baptist Association convened at New Lisbon, Columbiana County, Ohio, 19-22 August 1819, *Western Reserve Historical Society Archives*.

6. Harriett Taylor Upton, *A Twentieth Century History of Trumbull County, Ohio* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1909), 266.

7. "Minutes of the Mahoning Baptist Association convened at Palmyra, Portage County, Ohio, Wednesday and Thursday, the fifth and sixth of September, 1821," *Western Reserve Historical Society Archives*.

1809,<sup>8</sup> a former Justice of the Peace and County Commissioner,<sup>9</sup> and the father of Lorenzo and Eliza R. Snow. By 1821, Sidney was traveling extensively northwest of Warren to preach, form new congregations, and train local leaders. He was assigned as messenger to the Grand River Association, made up of congregations along the Ohio shore of Lake Erie. Sidney was so well accepted there that he was invited to preach the closing sermon of their 1821 Conference.<sup>10</sup> Moderator of the Grand River Association was John Gee, brother of Salmon Gee. Other future Mormons William Cahoon and John Corrill represented the Kirtland and Ashtabula congregations.<sup>11</sup>

Adamson Bentley had been acquainted with Alexander Campbell for many years. They were prominent, liberal Baptist ministers, living less than seventy miles apart, and both were members of the Warren, Ohio, Masonic Lodge<sup>12</sup> at a time when all of northeast Ohio contained only several hundred people. In 1821, Bentley took Sidney Rigdon to Wellsburg to meet Campbell. This meeting was the genesis of what later became the Disciples of Christ Church.

In November of 1821, Campbell used his influence to secure Sidney a position as minister to a congregation in Pittsburgh.<sup>13</sup> Soon thereafter, the minister of the neighboring congregation withdrew (to publish a newsletter, *The Christian Baptist*, with Alexander Campbell), and the two congregations were combined. Rigdon, thus, achieved the status and income of a large congregation. The minister who resigned was Walter Scott, the fourth co-founder of the Disciples of Christ, with Campbell, Bentley, and Rigdon.

By 1823 Alexander Campbell had made enough enemies in the conservative Redstone Association to assure his ouster. He was charged with heresy. However, Campbell and his followers voted to grant themselves "honorable dismissal" from their old congregation. They then formed a new congregation, applied to Bentley and were admitted to the Mahoning Association.<sup>14</sup> When the Redstone Association met to consider Campbell's excommunication, Campbell announced that he was outside their jurisdiction. The Association subsequently turned its attention to Rigdon and his refusal to preach the Baptist dogma of in-

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8. "Garrettsville Ohio Baptist Church" (record book 1808-1860), Western Reserve Historical Society Archives, 4. This is the original record book of the Baptist congregation of Hiram, Mantua, and Nelson.

9. Orrin Harmon, "Facts Appertaining to the Township of Mantua," 1866, typescript, Western Reserve Historical Society Archives, 29.

10. Grand River Baptist Association, *Minutes of the Grand River Baptist Association convened at Jefferson on the twelfth and thirteenth of September, 1821* (Cleveland: Z. Willes and Co., 1821).

11. *Ibid.*

12. *History of Trumbull and Mahoning Counties, with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches*, (H. Z. Williams and Bro., 1882), 1: 295.

13. Shaw, *Buckeye Disciples*, 80.

14. Daryl Chase, "Sidney Rigdon, Early Mormon" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1931), 19.

fant damnation.<sup>15</sup> "Charges were brought against him for not being sound in the faith, [they] brought him to trial, but denied him the liberty of speaking in self-defense and he declared a non-fellowship with them."<sup>16</sup> Sidney remained in Pittsburgh for two years and started a "reformed Baptist" congregation, which met in the courthouse.<sup>17</sup> He also worked in a tannery owned by his brother-in-law, Richard Brooks.

During the winter of 1825-6, Sidney moved his family to a tiny cabin in Bainbridge, Ohio, twenty miles south of Kirtland and five miles northwest of Hiram. He began immediately to proselytize, to build his influence among existing Baptists, to establish new congregations, and to train leaders. His primary center of influence was at Hiram where he preached every month for the rest of the 1820's. This group was already a bellwether of reformation, having challenged even the liberal Mahoning Association on issues of dogma throughout the early 1820s. In 1824 it had renamed itself the "Baptist Church of Christ" and voted "to renounce the Philadelphia Confession of Faith, the (Baptist) Constitution, the Articles, and the Covenant. . .and to take the Word of God for our rule of faith and Practice."<sup>18</sup> Oliver Snow chaired that meeting.<sup>19</sup> Among the future Mormons in this congregation were the families of Noah Packard,<sup>20</sup> Oliver Snow, Lucius Scovil, David Pond and Rufus Edwards.<sup>21</sup> Rigdon was a frequent guest at the Snow home, where young Eliza R. Snow was his protégée.

Until 1828, the leader of the Hiram congregation was Zeb Rudolph, whose wife was a daughter in the family that raised Symonds Ryder. Ryder joined the Disciples in 1828. "He was by far the most influential man in Hiram and his accession gave the infant church new strength and standing."<sup>22</sup> Ryder became the presiding elder at Hiram and most of his large extended family followed him into the Disciple fold. Symonds and his brother Jason were both neighbors of John Johnson, whose daughter Fanny was married to Jason.

The leadership of the Mahoning Association was now clearly established. Alexander Campbell was the scholar and writer; Adamson Bentley was Bishop to several congregations near Warren. Walter Scott was Bishop southwest of

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15. Karl Keller, ed., "I Never Knew a Time When I Did Not Know Joseph Smith," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 4 (Winter 1966): 20.

16. Chase, *Rigdon, Early Mormon*, 14.

17. *Ibid.*, 21.

18. B. A. Hinsdale, *A History of the Disciples in Hiram, Portage County, Ohio* (Cleveland: Robison, Savage and Co., 1876), 14. This group is referred to as "Hiram" for ease of reference. It included members from several communities, primarily Hiram, Mantua and Nelson. Its meetings rotated among these three towns. It ultimately divided into several congregations.

19. *Ibid.*, 12.

20. "Garrettsville" record book, 64.

21. Elmer F. Pfaff, Esq., *Rediscovering Mantua* (Mantua, Ohio: The Image in Nation Co., Inc., 1985), 35.

22. Mary Bosworth Treudley, *Prelude to the Future: The First Hundred Years of Hiram College* (New York: Association Press, 1950), 35.

Warren; Sidney Rigdon was Bishop northwest of Warren. One Disciple historian describes Sidney as "a winning speaker, one who used copious language, fluent, eloquent, enthusiastic, and of great personal influence. . .the orator of the Mahoning Association, and declared by many to be superior to Campbell as a preacher."<sup>23</sup>

The Disciples remained a "renegade Baptist association" until early 1830 when the Philadelphia Baptist Confession finally excommunicated Campbell, Bentley, Rigdon, Scott, the entire Mahoning Association, the congregations and even the meetinghouses.<sup>24</sup> However, much earlier the members of the Mahoning Association had rejected the Baptist Articles and begun referring to themselves as Disciples, Church of Christ, Reformed, Freewill, Campbellite, or Rigdonite rather than Baptist.

In June of 1826, the Baptist minister in Mentor, just north of Kirtland, died and Sidney was invited to preach the funeral sermon. That fall, Orris Clapp offered to build Sidney a home if he would assume the Mentor pastorate. Rigdon seized the opportunity, and within a short time, the congregation at Mentor and another at Chardon had embraced the reformation. Mentor exchanged its Baptist "articles for the new covenant. . .choosing to be known simply as the disciples of Christ."<sup>25</sup> Mentor and Chardon joined the Mahoning Association when the Grand River Association voted "to withdraw fellowship" from both congregations because they "had departed from the faith of the gospel, by embracing the novel notions of Alexander Campbell."<sup>26</sup>

Judge Orris Clapp was a prominent citizen of Mentor and the leading member of the Mentor Baptists. He and Sidney became close friends and his family became wholly immersed in the reformation. Four younger Clapp children, Harriet, Phebe, Thomas, and Matthew, studied with Sidney Rigdon and Thomas Campbell. Harriet married Darwin Atwater, a Disciple Minister in Mantua. Phebe married Alexander Campbell's brother Archibald, also a Disciple Minister. Thomas and Matthew became Disciple ministers and Rigdon protégés. Thomas married Sidney's niece Lorinda Bentley, and Matthew married Alexander Campbell's sister Alicia.

The oldest Clapp daughter Julia was married to John Murdock, already a Rigdon lieutenant, who presided over the Disciples at Orange. This is the same Julia who later died giving birth to the famous Murdock twins given to Joseph and Emma Smith. No Disciple membership records exist from Orange, but the congregation probably included the families of future Mormons Sirenes Burnett, Caleb Baldwin, and Benjamin Covey.

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23. Shaw, *Buckeye Disciples*, 79.

24. Thomas W. Grafton, *Alexander Campbell, Leader of the Great Reformation of the Nineteenth Century* (St. Louis: Christian Publishing Co., 1897), 125-26.

25. A. S. Hayden, *Early Years of the Disciples in the Western Reserve, Ohio* (Cincinnati: Chase and Hall, 1875), 193-94.

26. Grand River, "Minutes" 1828, 1830.

The reformation movement was incredibly energetic during these years. At the 1827 Mahoning Association Conference, Campbell reported: "Bishops Scott, Rigdon and Bentley, in Ohio, within the last six months have immersed about eight hundred persons."<sup>27</sup> During 1828 and 1829, Rigdon organized nine new congregations.

In 1829, the Huron Baptist Association, west of Cleveland, suspended Sidney's cousin, John Rigdon, "on a charge of heresy in embracing certain teachings of the Disciples and Alexander Campbell."<sup>28</sup> John reorganized his followers as non-associated Freewill Baptists. Sidney immediately organized a supportive mission into John's territory. Sidney and Matthew Clapp were accompanied on this 1829 mission to Amherst and Florence by a young protégé who lived and studied in the Rigdon and Clapp homes—Orson Hyde. Hyde returned in the spring of 1830 to serve as Disciple Minister to these two congregations. Other future Mormons in those congregations included Milo Andrus, Orson and Parley Pratt, and Parley's neighbors, Warren and Amanda Barnes Smith. Other neighbors included the families of Simeon Carter, Joel Hills Johnson, Sylvester Smith, and Royal Barney although no record exists indicating whether they were Disciples.

Much attention has been given Sidney's congregation at Kirtland. Mormons are fond of citing its wholesale conversion while Disciples point to its radicalism, claiming it along with Rigdon's position on communalism caused a split between him and Campbell before Sidney's defection to Mormonism. How much of the Kirtland congregation actually joined the Morley commune is difficult to ascertain. However, Rigdon did not "withdraw" to Kirtland as some Disciples have implied. After the formation of the Morley commune and after Rigdon's confrontation with Campbell on communalism, Rigdon continued to live in and preach regularly at Mentor. He did not move to the Morley commune,<sup>29</sup> nor does he appear to have supported the Morley group with a tannery he allegedly owned near the Morley farm.<sup>30</sup> It is significant that Sidney introduced the Mormon missionaries to his Mentor congregation before sending them to Kirtland and that Kirtland was only one of several stops on their itinerary of Disciple congregations.

The Kirtland congregation was perhaps more subject to Sidney's personal influence than any other group. It was certainly the most fully "prepared" for the coming of Mormonism and included the families of such Mormon notables as Titus Billings, Isaac Morley, Newell K. Whitney, Lyman Wight, and Frederick

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27. Alexander Campbell, "Christian Baptist," June 2, 1828, 5;263.

28. A. J. Baughman, *History of Ashland County, Ohio* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1909), 237.

29. Mark McKiernan, *A Voice of One Crying the Wilderness: Sidney Rigdon, Religious Reformer 1793-1876* (Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1971), 29.

30. Elizabeth G. Hitchcock, "Houses Along the East Branch," *The Historical Society Quarterly, Lake County, Ohio* 18, no. 1 (February, 1976): 3.

G. Williams. Wight was literally in the act of loading his wagon to move to Mayfield to organize a new Disciple congregation when the Mormon missionaries met him.<sup>31</sup> (Another prominent Disciple, Edward Partridge, is sometimes listed among the Kirtlanders. His hattery was in nearby Painesville, which had no Disciple congregation, but his farm was east of Painesville, and he probably belonged to the Disciple congregation in Perry.)

As the 1820's ended, Rigdon's territory included seventeen congregations.<sup>32</sup> Disciple records mention seven lieutenants who traveled with Sidney and preached to congregations other than their own: William Collins of the Chardon congregation, Matthew Clapp of Mentor, Symonds Ryder and Zeb Rudolph of Hiram, John Murdock of Orange, Lyman Wight of Kirtland, and Orson Hyde of Florence. After Rigdon's conversion to Mormonism, Murdock, Wight, and Hyde followed him with many from their congregations. Collins, Clapp, and Rudolph became some of Mormonism's most bitter critics. Symonds Ryder did both. Much of Ryder's extended family joined the Mormon church with him. "Numerous conversions took place in Hiram, Mantua, and adjoining towns. Especially did the south part of Hiram run after Mormonism. . . for the time it seemed that the [Disciple] Church would be broken up." When Symonds Ryder left the Mormons, the Hiramites "left the Mormonites faster than they ever joined."<sup>33</sup> Many of them participated in the tar-and-feathering of Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon, which one Disciple historian referred to as a "conflict between Disciples and Mormons."<sup>34</sup>

Sidney's first meeting with the Mormon missionaries lasted through the night. When it ended, Sidney ran to his neighbor Judge Clapp and interrupted breakfast to tell about the Mormons.<sup>35</sup> The family had recently celebrated the marriage of Phebe to Archibald Campbell, and his father, Thomas Campbell, was still a guest in the house. Clapp and Campbell viewed the meeting as a top-level defection and a declaration of war. Campbell remained several months to personally lead the Disciple battle against Rigdon and the Mormons. He and Judge Clapp were assisted by Matthew Clapp and by William Collins from Chardon. Alexander Campbell rushed to Hiram to preach against Mormonism with the help of Zeb Rudolph and Darwin Atwater. They focused their efforts around Hiram at the same time the "Ravenna Star" was publishing Ezra Booth's anti-Mormon letters near there. The battle there climaxed with the tar-and-feathering, in which Symonds Ryder was instrumental.

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31. *Saints Herald* RLDS 29:12 (June 6, 1882).

32. Birmingham, Chardon, Elyria, Euclid, Farmington, Freedom, Hambden, Hiram, Huntsburg, Kirtland, Mantua, Mentor, Nelson, Orange, Perry, Shalersville, Warrensville—extracted by the author from various Disciple histories.

33. Hinsdale, *Disciples in Hiram*, 15-16.

34. Winfred Ernest Garrison, *Religion Follows the Frontier—A History of the Disciples of Christ* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1931), 206.

35. Hayden, *Early Years of Disciples*, 210.

Sidney's three cousins and his brother-in-law, Richard Brooks, had all become Disciple Ministers, and they vigorously attacked Rigdon and the Mormons. Adamson Bentley moved his family from Warren to a spot not far from Sidney's old cabin in Bainbridge, founding the town of Bentleyville. He "frequently denounced [Rigdon] in public and succeeded in influencing Mrs. Rigdon's father to exclude her from a share in the family estate."<sup>36</sup> The Disciples, of course, went on to be very successful. By 1847, their membership had passed 150,000.<sup>37</sup>

Rigdon and his associates were equally active. "The Mormon movement struck the entire Western Reserve like a roaring storm," according to one local history.<sup>38</sup> Early missionary efforts were directed at those areas in which Rigdon's prestige and contacts would provide an entree. Sidney and Luke Johnson began one mission with the baptism of 50 or 60 at the Disciple stronghold of New Portage. They worked their way through the Disciple territories of Walter Scott and Adamson Bentley all the way to Pittsburgh where they organized a branch and baptized Sidney's mother and brother.<sup>39</sup> "One of (Sidney's) most powerful exhortations" was given while standing waist deep in the Chagrin River at Mayfield and performing thirty baptisms "with no intermission of the discourse on the part of Rigdon."<sup>40</sup>

John Murdock, who had led the Disciples at Orange, organized a Mormon branch there and "baptized 70 or 80 members in about 3 or 4 months."<sup>41</sup> After being ordained a High Priest at the Orange Conference, Orson Hyde took Hyrum Smith as a missionary companion to Amherst and Florence where Orson had previously been the Disciple pastor. He reports, "baptizing many of my old Campbellite friends."<sup>42</sup> Gideon Carter and Levi Ward Hancock served missions in the same area. Hancock "baptized and confirmed seventy-one at one meeting under my own hand" with the result that they "had nearly broken up the [Disciples] Church."<sup>43</sup> A local history claims Sidney was also active west of Cleveland, where he "held meetings quite frequently. . .aroused a considerable excitement, and. . .gained 40-50 adherents."<sup>44</sup>

36. McKiernan, *Voice in the Wilderness*, 28.

37. Robert E. Chaddock, *Ohio Before 1850, A Study of the Early Influence of Pennsylvania and Southern Populations in Ohio* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1967), 125.

38. *Pioneer and General History of Geauga County, with Sketches of Some of the Pioneers and Prominent Men* (n.p.: Historical Society of Geauga County, 1880).

39. Andrew Jensen, *LDS Biographical Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jensen History Company, 1901), 85.

40. Judge John Barr, "Early Days of Mormonism, Statement of Judge John Barr" (September 10, 1874), manuscript, Western Reserve Historical Society Archives.

41. *LDS Biographical Encyclopedia*, 362.

42. Orson Hyde, "Orson Hyde Autobiography," *Millennial Star* 26 (1864): 775.

43. Levi Ward Hancock, "Autobiography of Levi Ward Hancock," manuscript, Brigham Young University Archives, 31.

44. *History of Lorain County, Ohio* (Philadelphia: Williams Brothers, 1879), 332.

Unfortunately, there was little record kept of who these converts were. Still, at least 106 heads of household were baptized into the Mormon church in north-east Ohio in 1830 and 1831. Of these 23% were from the Kirtland area; 22% from Hiram; 17% from Orange; and 12% from Amherst.<sup>45</sup>

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Given this context of Sidney's activities along the frontier of the 1820s, a clearer picture begins to emerge—a picture of the role he unknowingly played to "prepare the way" for Mormonism, a picture of his suitability to serve as "spokesman" and a picture of his gift of being "mighty in expounding:"

First, Sidney was one of the most influential religious figures in northern Ohio. His reputation, visibility, and prestige created instant credibility for the fledgling Mormon church.

Second, Sidney's skill and fame as a religious orator provided ready audiences throughout northern Ohio.

Third, Sidney brought with him a vast network of acquaintances—former Baptist and Disciple converts, followers, admirers, and others simply curious to learn how Sidney had been "snared" by the Mormons. This provided ready contacts for the many novice Mormon missionaries sent out in Ohio without purse, scrip or experience. Included in this pool of acquaintances were several groups who joined the church. It is no coincidence that the early conferences of the church were held at the Rigdon strongholds of Kirtland, Orange, Amherst, and Hiram.

Fourth, Sidney's experience as a religious organizer, trainer, minister, missionary, biblical scholar, and scriptioner far exceeded that of any other early convert.

Fifth, Sidney had spent years grooming a number of individuals for the ministry: administrators like Edward Partridge, Newell K. Whitney, Isaac Morley, and Frederick G. Williams; missionaries like Parley P. Pratt, John Murdock, and Orson Hyde; and scholars like Eliza R. Snow and Orson Pratt, all of whom would play significant roles in the fledgling church.

As the 1830s unfolded, Sidney Rigdon and Joseph Smith must have often pondered, and marveled at those words spoken to a new convert and stranger in December of 1830: "Thou wast sent forth, even as John to prepare the way before me. . .and thou knewest it not."<sup>46</sup>

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45. Susan Easton Black, *Membership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints 1830-1848* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Department of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, 1989), from a data base extraction made by the author in 1992.

46. D&C 35:3-5.