

ZIBA PETERSON: FROM MISSIONARY TO HANGING SHERIFF

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As the Church of Christ (LDS Church) moved from New York to Kirtland and then on to Missouri, some of the early converts remained faithful and continued affiliating with the Church until their death while others fell into apostasy and left the Church. One person who fell by the wayside is Ziba Peterson. Through studying the scant historical records of Peterson's life as an early convert to Mormonism, as a missionary to the Lamanites, as a resident of Missouri, and as a sheriff in Hangtown, California, we can gain a better understanding of the influences that shaped his life.

One of the first recorded events of Ziba Peterson's life was his baptism into the Church of Christ in Seneca Lake, New York, 18 April 1830, by Oliver Cowdery.¹ Not much is known of his life before his baptism. No identifiable sources of his birth, parentage, or his early childhood have been discovered. However, some references record that his full name was Richard Ziba Peterson or Richard B. Peterson.² Apparently, he was a young man in his late teens or young adulthood when he was baptized. By June of 1830, Ziba Peterson was ordained an elder in the Melchizedek Priesthood. He was one of six elders present at the first conference of the Church that was held 9 June 1830 when several had a special spiritual experience as the "Holy Ghost was poured upon us in a miraculous manner—many of our number prophesied whilst others had the heavens opened to their view, and were so overcome that we had to lay on beds or other convenient places."³

After being a member of the Church for only six months, in October 1830, Ziba received a mission call to the Lamanites. Oliver Cowdery was first called to travel to the Lamanites to introduce the gospel to them (D&C 28:8) with Peter Whitmer Jr. as his companion (D&C 30:5-7). A month later, two other missionaries, Parley P.

Pratt and Ziba Peterson, were called to go on this important, ground-breaking mission (D&C 32).

The Lamanite mission was the first long-distance mission in the Church. So important was this mission that Oliver Cowdery wrote a statement dated 17 October 1830 in which he declared:

I, Oliver, being commanded by the Lord God, to go forth unto the Lamanites, to proclaim glad tidings of great joy unto them, by presenting unto them the fullness of the Gospel, of the only begotten Son of God; and also, to rear up a pillar as a witness where the temple of God shall be built, in the glorious new Jerusalem; and having certain brothers with me, who are called of GOD TO ASSIST ME, whose names are Parley, and Peter and Ziba, do therefore most solemnly covenant with God that I will walk humbly before him, and do this business, and this glorious work according as he shall direct me by the Holy Ghost; ever praying for mine and their prosperity, and deliverance from bonds, and from imprisonment, and whatsoever may befall us, with all patience and faith. Amen.⁴

An addendum was written and signed by the other three missionaries:

We the undersigned, being called and commanded by the Lord God, to accompany our brother Oliver Cowdery to go to the Lamanites and to assist him faithfully in this thing, by giving heed to all his words and advice, which is, or shall be given him by the spirit of truth, ever praying with all prayer and supplication for our and his prosperity, and our deliverance from bonds, and imprisonments, and whatsoever may come upon us, with all patience and

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faith. Amen.⁵

These missionaries had special qualifications for their assignment to preach the gospel to the Lamanites. Oliver Cowdery was the second elder of the Church (D&C 20:3). He had stood in the presence of an angel and had heard a voice from heaven bearing witness of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. Thus, he became a special witness as one of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon (see D&C 17). Peter Whitmer was shown the plates by Joseph Smith and became one of the Eight Witnesses to the Book of Mormon. Records show that when the missionaries entered a community, Pratt or Peterson would preach a sermon concerning the Restoration and the Book of Mormon. Following the sermon, one of the special witnesses would stand and bear eyewitness testimony of the truthfulness of the Restoration. Obviously, this was no ordinary mission.

Ziba Peterson and his companions left Fayette, New York, about 17 October to begin the thousand-mile journey. The Prophet Joseph recorded: "They bade adieu to their brethren and friends, and commenced their journey, preaching by the way, and leaving a sealing testimony behind them, lifting up their voice like a trump in the different villages through which they passed."⁶ They preached to the Indians near Buffalo and then traveled to Kirtland, Ohio, where they achieved great success among the followers of Sidney Rigdon and their neighbors. Parley P. Pratt was an earlier acquaintance of Sidney Rigdon. Sidney had previously visited the wooded area near Lake Erie where Pratt had settled with his new wife. Rigdon had introduced Pratt and others to the Reformed Baptist doctrine, and now Pratt returned to introduce Sidney to the restored gospel.⁷ In addition, Pratt and the other missionaries taught several of Rigdon's congregations. As a result of their work, they baptized "one hundred and twenty-seven souls, and this number soon increased to one thousand."⁸

A further example of Ziba's involvement in the success of the missionary work in Ohio occurred on the evening of 13 November. The missionaries arrived in Warrenville, Ohio, and Ziba conducted a meeting at the home of the newly converted John Murdock. Several baptisms resulted from this meeting, including the baptism of John Murdock's wife.

About fifty miles west of Kirtland, the missionaries

ran into some problems. At the home of Simeon Carter, another new convert, Parley P. Pratt, was arrested on a warrant and taken before a judge who insisted on Pratt's paying a fine or going to jail. During a long night of hassle before the judge, Parley invited Ziba to sing a hymn, "O How Happy Are They." Unfortunately, the hymn did not seem to brighten the night. The next day, Pratt escaped from the sheriff and caught up with his companions as they made their way out of Ohio.⁹

When the missionaries left Ohio, they took with them another companion, Frederick G. Williams, who was one of their recent converts. They traveled through a very wintery countryside to Cincinnati, down the Ohio River to Illinois, and across to St. Louis where they waited out a severe storm for several days. They were finally able to cross the Mississippi River and walk hundreds of miles across the wilds of Missouri to the small border town of Independence. Independence, their final destination, was located on the line separating the state of Missouri from the Indian lands.

The missionaries immediately began preparing to preach the gospel to the Lamanites. Oliver Cowdery, Parley P. Pratt, and Frederick G. Williams went across the line to preach to the Delaware Tribe of Indians. The three missionaries met with several Indian chiefs of the Delaware Tribe, including the venerable Chief Anderson, who received them with interest. Because the missionaries were traveling without purse or scrip, they needed to earn money to buy provisions. Thus, Peter Whitmer remained in Independence and worked as a tailor while Peterson also remained and did some teaching.

The ministers of the other religions who had been establishing schools among the Indians were not happy about the new missionary work among the Indians. Specifically, Minister Isaac McCoy felt it was his calling and role to establish missions and schools to educate Delaware Indians. Minister McCoy did not want anyone or any other religion interfering with his calling.¹⁰ Thus, opposition arose and pressure was placed upon the Indian agent to remove the Mormon missionaries from the territory. Their removal was aided by the fact that the LDS missionaries did not realize they had to get permission from the Indian agent before entering the territory. When they were rejected from the Indian lands, the missionaries realized that one of them needed to return to St. Louis to gain permission from William Clark, the super-

intendent of Indian Affairs, to teach among the Delawares. On 14 February 1831, the missionaries met in council to decide who would take the long, lonely trek across the cold wilderness of Missouri. The missionaries selected Parley P. Pratt to return to St. Louis while the other four missionaries would await his return in Independence. However, permission was not granted in St. Louis, and Pratt continued on to Kirtland to consult with Joseph Smith.

While the missionaries were waiting for the return of Pratt, they continued to preach the gospel. The first converts in the Independence area were the Joshua Lewis family, with others being baptized soon thereafter. As spring came, the missionaries became more active in preaching the gospel. Oliver Cowdery and Ziba Peterson traveled east into Lafayette County to preach the gospel. In a letter to Joseph Smith, Oliver reported: "Brother Ziba and myself went into the county east, which is Lafayette, about forty miles; and in the name of Jesus, we called on the people to repent, many of whom are, I believe, earnestly searching for truth."¹¹

The missionaries continued their work in Lafayette, and by summer, they had baptized forty to fifty new members. The Charles Hopper extended family made up many of these converts. Some of those baptized lived in the western part of the county near the Jackson County line. Across the line in Jackson County was a small community named Lone Jack. The citizens of Lone Jack invited Peterson to move to Lone Jack and to establish a school where he taught the children of the area. While there, he preached the gospel; and, as a result, Joshua and Jesse Hitchcock were baptized. They would later marry Hopper sisters and become Ziba's brothers-in-law.

Other Saints soon began to arrive in Jackson County. On 7 June 1831, Joseph Smith and others were called to go to Missouri (D&C 52:22-44). They arrived in Jackson County on 20 July 1831. In answer to the question of "When will Zion be built up?" the Lord revealed to the Prophet that Jackson County was to be the latter-day Zion and that Independence was to be the center place with a temple to be built on a spot near the courthouse (D&C 57:2-3).

During the Prophet's visit, he received a revelation in which the Lord reprimanded Ziba for conduct that was unspecified in the historical record. The Lord command-

ed: "Let that which has been bestowed upon Ziba Peterson be taken from him; and let him stand as a member in the church, and labor with his own hands, with the brethren, until he is sufficiently chastened for all his sins; for he confesseth them not, and he thinketh to hide them" (D&C 58:60). Four days after this revelation, Ziba was reprimanded publicly at a conference of the Church, and he subsequently confessed in a satisfactory manner.¹² Although the nature of his sins and what was removed from him were not recorded, the apostate Ezra Booth, upon his return to Kirtland wrote: "And thus by commandment poor Ziba, one of the twelve Apostles is thrust down, while Oliver the scribe, also an Apostle, who had been guilty of similar conduct is set on high."¹³ However, Booth did not identify what Oliver was guilty of, and was not correct in stating that Peterson was one of the Twelve Apostles.

On 11 August 1831, Ziba married Rebecca Hopper, the daughter of Thomas and Rebecca Hopper. As mentioned earlier, the Hopper family and some of their sons-in-law were converted to the Church by the earlier visits of the missionaries, and now Ziba became a member of that family. Because the marriage came so soon after the reprimand, some wondered if the two events were related; however, there is no historical evidence to support this relationship.

Ziba's activity in the Church diminished after his marriage. When Joseph Smith and the missionaries traveling with him returned to Kirtland, Oliver Cowdery, Peter Whitmer, and Frederick G. Williams also returned to Kirtland. Peterson, however, remained in Jackson County. Members of the Thompson Branch near Kirtland began to move to Zion and to establish a community in the Independence area. Although the Church organization was active in Jackson County, there is no reference of Ziba's attending any of the conferences that were held during the next year. He continued to live in the Lone Jack and Lexington areas, where he and Rebecca had at least eight children. On 2 October 1832, he was reordained an elder by Lyman Wight at a conference of the Church.¹⁴ However, it appears that he again became dissatisfied with the Church, and in May 1833, he left the Church. In a letter to Bishop Edward Partridge dated 25 June 1833, Joseph Smith wrote: "We deliver Brother Ziba Peterson over to the buffetings of Satan, in the name of the Lord, that he may learn not to transgress the commandments of God."¹⁵

As troubles developed between the Mormons and the old settlers in Jackson County, the record is silent concerning the activities of Ziba and his family. When the Mormons were being driven out of Jackson County, Peterson and some members of the Hopper family, still dissatisfied with the Church, remained in Lafayette and Jackson Counties. Consequently, the Church moved on without them.

Little is known about Ziba and his family after the Saints left Jackson County. Evidence suggests that he lived in Lone Jack, Jackson County, Missouri, and perhaps continued to teach school there.¹⁶ The census of 1840 indicates that he was living next door to his in-laws in Lexington, Lafayette County.

Ziba Peterson and his family, however, did not permanently reside in Lafayette County. The movement west was in full swing, and many of Missouri's old settlers were expanding there. For example, former governor Lilburn W. Boggs took his family to California in the summer of 1846 and settled in the Napa, Sonoma, area. Charles Hopper, Rebecca's brother, traveled to California in the early 1840s and returned to the family with glowing tales of the opportunities that awaited them in the Golden State. Similarly, on 3 May 1848, the Peterson family set out on their trek to California.

After suffering the grueling and difficult experiences along the California trail, the Peterson family arrived in Dry Diggins, California, in October 1848. If they had taken the trail that Charles Hopper took with the Bartleson Party in 1841, they would have passed by the Great Salt Lake. But no record or mention can be found of Peterson and his family interacting with the Mormons. Consequently, most historians assume they took the Fort Hall cut-off and traveled to California via the northern route.

Dry Diggins, California, was a mining town infected with gold fever. Soon after his arrival there, Ziba was elected sheriff of the community. One recorded event is the arrest of four thieves. The local press reported:

On the night of the 18th of January, four men named Montraeuil, a Canadian Frenchman; Pepi, an Italian; Antoine, a Spaniard, and Tehal, a Frenchman, went to a house owned and kept by two Frenchman, where they amused themselves with gambling and

drinking. They staid late, and the proprietors of the establishment finally retired, leaving the four men still gambling and drinking. In a short time one of the proprietors fell asleep, and the four men then seized the other proprietor, telling him that if he made the least outcry or resistance they would murder him. Then they placed two of the party as sentinels over the proprietors of the house, whilst the other two robbed it of about \$600 and then they all decamped.

Pursued by citizens who arrested them at their house—three judges selected—twelve juryman were drawn by ballot—jury returned verdict of guilty—sentenced to receive thirty-nine lashes and banished—sentence executed on the 21st—citizens learned that two of these robbers had been concerned in a murder on Weaver's creek and on the North and Middle fork, in the course of last summer, and that recently two of them had attempted to murder a man near Weaver's creek.¹⁷

When the citizens realized the past crimes of the thieves, the townspeople began their own hunt for them. Ziba, as sheriff, found three outlaws, Pepi, Antoine, and Tehal, and carried out the sentence of death by hanging. Consequently, Dry Diggins became known as Hangtown (now known as Placerville).

Ziba Peterson did not serve very long as sheriff. He died sometime between January and June 1849 from unrecorded causes and was buried in the area of Hangtown. Several months later, Rebecca and the children moved across the state to Napa Valley, where her brother Charles lived. She purchased land in the Sonoma area in June 1849, with the deed signed by Lilburn W. Boggs.

Rebecca lived in Napa Valley for forty-seven years. She raised her children there and lived to enjoy relationships with her grandchildren. She died in 1896 and was buried in the Napa Cemetery, where former Governor Boggs was also buried.

Thus, Ziba Peterson's life had many different facets. As a convert, he became a firm believer. He served his God in missionary work and traveled though difficult country and bore powerful testimony to many who were converted and baptized. Eventually, Ziba apostatized and

left the Church. He settled in Missouri and, according to the land records, made a living by farming. He later moved to Dry Diggins, California, where he became the local sheriff. From New York to California and from missionary to hanging sheriff, Peterson lived a varied life. He had the opportunity to bear witness of the truthfulness of the restored gospel; sadly, however, he died a long way from the truth and without the association of the Saints.

Notes

1. Andrew Jensen, *Journal History*, LDS Church Archives. There appears to be a disagreement over the date of his baptism. For instance, without adding any reference, Daniel Ludlow lists the date of Peterson's baptism as 11 April 1830. See Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Doctrine and Covenants*, vol. 2: Appendixes (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 367.
2. Lyndon W. Cook, *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo: Seventy's Mission Bookstore, 1978), 128, section 32, note 5.
3. *Journal History*, 9 June 1830.
4. *Ibid.*, 17 October 1830.
5. *Journal History*.
6. *History of the Church*, 1:120.
7. Parley P. Pratt, ed., *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 31.
8. *Ibid.*, 50.
9. *Ibid.*, 49.
10. See Ronald E. Romig, "The Lamanite Mission," *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 4 (1994): 24-33.
11. "Dearly Beloved Brethren," 7 May 1831.
12. Missouri Manuscript History, 4 August 1831, LDS Church Archives.
13. *Painesville Telegraph*, 6 December 1831.
14. Missouri Manuscript History, LDS Church Archives.
15. *History of the Church*, 1:367.
16. W. Z. Hickman, *History of Jackson County, Missouri* (Greenville, South Carolina: Southern Historical Press, 1990), 330.
17. *Alta California*, 8 February 1849, as reported by Irene Johnson and Kahile Mehr, "The Other Missionary: Ziba Peterson," n.p., Mormon History Association, 1991.