
James Covill

D&C 39, 40

James Covill is the only individual mentioned in the Doctrine and Covenants that has two back-to-back sections devoted to him, yet little is known about the man. All that can be said for sure is that on January 5, 1831, three days after the third conference of the Church was held in the Peter Whitmer log home at Fayette, New York, the Prophet Joseph Smith received the first of two revelations directed to him.

The introduction to Section 39 informs the reader that by 1831 James had been a Baptist minister for about forty years. This is where confusion on who James Covill was begins. His father was a Baptist minister. James was a Methodist priest. At the time of the revelations given to the Prophet Joseph Smith, James was a Methodist priest stationed near Fayette.

In the first revelation, James was told that the Lord was aware of good works and—

Thine heart is now right before me at this time. . . .

Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on my name, and you shall receive my Spirit, and a blessing so great as you never have known.

And if thou do this, I have prepared thee for a greater work. Thou shalt preach the fulness of my gospel. . . .

Thou art called to go to the Ohio. (D&C 39:7, 8, 10–11, 14)

The following day when the second revelation was received, the Lord told Joseph Smith that the “fear of persecution and the cares of the world caused [James] to reject the word” and return to his “former principles and people” (D&C 39: Introduction; D&C 40: Introduction). The Lord concludes this revelation with “Wherefore he broke my covenant, and it remaineth with me to do with him as seemeth me good” (D&C 40:3).

If Latter-day Saint scholar Christopher C. Jones is correct, the Methodist church was not anxious to accept James Covill back into their Western New York congregation. He was temporarily suspended from the ministry. By 1832 he had returned to the ministry and was elected president of the Methodist Genesee conference.¹

¹ See Larry C. Porter, "A Study of the Origins of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints in the States of New York and Pennsylvania, 1816–1831," Ph.D. dissertation, Brigham Young University, August 1971, 266–267; see Diedrich Willers Notebook #1, Seneca Falls Historical Society, Seneca Falls, NY; see Christopher C. Jones, "Mormonism in the Methodist Marketplace: James Covell and the Historical Background of Doctrine and Covenants 39–40," *BYU Studies* 51, no. 1 (2012).