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William Scales' 1789 "Mystery of the People Called Shakers"

By David D. Newell

INTRODUCTION

William Scales is an elusive and intriguing figure in the history of early Shakerism. Scales was not a typical Shaker convert – he was a graduate of Harvard University, had been an itinerant Congregational minister, and had published two works prior to his conversion to Shakerism in 1782 or 1783. It is known that he wrote about Shakerism, both when he lived with Mother Ann Lee “and the elders with her” as well as afterwards, but until recently, it was presumed that none of his works about the Shakers had been published or survived in manuscript form. Scales’ “The Mystery of the People Called Shakers Laid Open” has recently come to light. It was published in the June 15, 1789 issue of the *Boston Gazette and Country Journal* and prominently featured on the first page.

It is a remarkable work by an eccentric and controversial genius. It sheds new light on the early years of the Shaker Church – a period not well illuminated for there are few surviving primary sources which document the tumultuous first years following the opening of the Shaker gospel to the World.

The opening of the Shaker testimony had as a powerful catalyst the remarkable “dark day” of May 19, 1780, when banks of unusually dark clouds and heavy atmospheric smoke from western forest fires combined to turn daylight into dark. Many believed it was a providential sign and an indication that the millennium was at hand. The years 1779-1780 were a period of considerable religious revival, particularly among the Baptists throughout the newly settled towns in the highlands of New England and New York.

In the weeks and months following the “dark day,” rumors and accounts were heard in the New York and Massachusetts border country telling of a strange band of religious enthusiasts who lived nine miles northwest of Albany in the newly settled district of Niskayuna. It was said that the dozen or so members of this church had recently arrived from England, and were witnesses to an extraordinary dispensation – several

had attained a state of perfection, and were enabled to converse with the dead. Hundreds flocked to visit them, and after hearing the testimony of their leading characters, including a “woman clothed with the sun,” many confessed their sins, embraced the new gospel and returned home to witness the faith to their neighbors.

This “sun-clothed woman” was Ann Lee, known to “the World” as “the Elect Lady.” To the faithful, she was Mother Ann. Most of these first converts were subsistence farmers and tradesmen of limited economic means and education. Of those who converted to Shakerism during the early 1780’s, almost all were members of Separate Baptist churches or unaffiliated “New Light” separatist churches.

Among the first converts were several church leaders and ministers including Elders Joseph Meacham and Amos Hammond from the Baptist church at New Lebanon, New York, and Valentine Rathbun who served as the principal elder of the Baptist church at nearby Pittsfield, Massachusetts. None of the Baptist elders possessed more than a common school education. Despite this, Meacham would later ascend to the position of first elder in the Shaker church (in 1787) succeeding the English-born James Whittaker who had served in that position following the death of Mother Ann Lee in 1784. Rathbun, on the other hand, left the Shakers in late 1780 and became a zealous opponent of the Shakers, publishing a scathing attack against them the next year.¹

Although there were few Shakers who came from the ranks of “the standing order” or “orthodox church” (i.e., Congregationalists or Presbyterians), two early converts – both who held university degrees – were notable exceptions. Samuel Johnson, who graduated from Yale in 1769, had been called to serve as the first minister of the Presbyterian Church at New Lebanon in 1772. By the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, he had withdrawn and had formed a New Light separatist church in nearby West Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Johnson, and most of the members of his church “went over” to the Shakers during the summer of 1780.²

The other exception was William Scales, who had graduated from Harvard in 1771. Scales was born at Georgetown, Maine in 1741, the only son of William and Mary (Ingersoll) Scales. At the age of fourteen he “was touched deeply in the heart” with thoughts of “eternal life” and several years later became a member of the local Congregational church. The Georgetown Church was seeking a pastor at that time, and by 1766 or

1767 had called a "flaming new-light Preacher, who kindled the flames of religious fire to a considerable vehemency and ardor," and Scales was "for a while taken in with it."³

By all accounts, the youthful William Scales was both bright yet peculiar, inquisitive yet argumentative. He grew increasingly inclined to publicly criticize the stuffiness and formality of the orthodox churches and clergy, and decried the "waggery" of the "Hireling Ministry." He entered Harvard University as a charity scholar in 1767 and waited on tables for his support. He spent a contentious four years there, frequently disputing and arguing with his classmates and tutors, perceiving himself as an erstwhile Christian in the midst of profane and unbelieving "young devils." He graduated in 1771, 55th in a class of 56 scholars.⁴

Following his graduation Scales returned to Maine as an itinerant preacher, and, though it appears he was never settled as a pastor, he did preach for a time at St. Georges, Georgetown, Kittery and Vassalborough. His restlessness and discomfort with the orthodox clergy together with his increasing desire to seek a pure and authentic religion led him toward notions of holiness and an embrace of New Light theological viewpoints.

I had been taught that the extraordinary gift of the Holy Spirit had ceased, and we were to look for the ordinary only. But seeing the formality and impiety of Professors, the vanity and wickedness of the whole world, there appeared to me no less necessity of the extraordinary gift of the Holy Spirit than at the first publication of the Gospel. I often said within myself, that if the extraordinary gift of the Holy Spirit was ceased, I did not in the least desire to be a Minister: For there are ordinary Ministers enough. And I cannot see what good such Ministers can do mankind. Surely they can be no better than burdens of the commonwealth. Whereupon I prayed earnestly unto God that he would furnish me with the extraordinary gift of the Holy Spirit. For my desire to reform the world was great.⁵

By 1780, Scales had drifted toward the Quakers. That year he published a rebuttal to Jeremy Belknap's defense of the Revolution, advocating Christian pacifism and urging readers to "make a Discrimination between the Religion of Jesus and the Religion of the Teachers of the times, who have imprudently jumbled Religion and politicks together."⁶ He had hoped to secure a profit from the publication, but sales of the tract

were few, and the Quakers did not subsidize it. Disappointed, he turned from the sect “saying it consisted of Thees and Thous, flopped hats and smooth coats.”⁷

Scales next encountered the Shakers, though how and where he first discovered them is not known. The only references to him in Shaker texts are found in the 1816 edition of the *Testimonies* – most of which were expunged from later editions.

William Scales, of Lincoln county, in the District of Maine, made a profession of faith in the gospel, sometime in 1782 or 1783. Being a man of liberal education, and of a great self-sufficiency, he had contended with the various denominations of professing Christians, and as he supposed, had refuted and overthrown their systems of religion, and came at length (as he afterwards confessed) to try his theological skill upon Mother and the Elders, but being defeated in his attempts, he embraced their testimony.⁸

Scales appears to have been an influential Believer. Daniel Rathbun, in his 1785 anti-Shaker polemic,⁹ recounts an authoritative letter from Scales suggesting that Scales was deemed to be among the sect’s leaders.¹⁰ It is possible that Scales, given his education and literary talents, had been assigned the task of codifying the faith of the Shaker Church. In the *Testimonies*, Cornelius Thayer recollected:

At Watervliet, in the presence of Cornelius Thayer, William Scales and others, Mother said “I saw William Scales in vision, writing that which was not according to the simplicity of the gospel; and the evil spirits hovered round him, and administered evil to him. They looked like crows.” And Mother reproved William sharply.¹¹

Thomas Brown, who authored an account and history of the Shakers published in 1812,¹² reported that it was Scales, and not Joseph Meacham, who was the author of the first Shaker Publication – *A Concise Statement of the Principles of the Only True Church*. Two editions are known to have been printed prior to 1800 – one at Bennington, Vermont in 1790, and the other, though not including a date or location, likely to have been printed between 1785 and 1790.¹³ Both editions include a second work, “A Letter from James Whittaker, Minister of the Gospel in this Day of Christ’s

Second Appearing – to his Natural Relations in England, Dated October 9th, 1785.” Brown’s comments are intriguing and suggest that Scales also authored Whittaker’s letter:

I had now lost that which had caused me to think favorable of the first elders, particularly of James Whittaker [sic]; namely, that beautiful and comprehensive description of Christian experience, said to have been written by him, as by this time I learnt that the letter which contained it, was not indited by him, but by William Skails [sic], who was then a member of the society, and a man of much reading and education, who, soon after he indited the letter, left the society.¹⁴

Brown reported that Scales was, for several years, “zealous in the cause,” but after several years left the Shakers and “discovered as great zeal against them and their faith; several times he went among them and exclaimed against them. He wrote several pieces concerning the faith and practice for publication, but they never appeared in print.” Brown was the first in a long line of historians of the Shakers who were aware of Scales short-lived connection with the Shakers, had heard he had written about them, and presumed his works were never published.¹⁵

According to the compilers of the *Testimonies*, Scales “contended with Father James [Whittaker] for the priesthood” following the death of Ann Lee in 1784. Shortly before Whittaker died in 1787, he “warned Elder Joseph [Meacham] never to receive William Scales into union again ‘for (said he) he will always be a Judas.’”¹⁶ Scales’ disaffection with and eventual apostasy from the Shakers must have been gradual. Although Scales continued to bitterly contend with Whittaker and Meacham, he was still defending the Shakers as this advertisement in the December 15, 1786 issue of *The Cumberland Gazette* (Portland, Maine) indicates:

Whosoever have a mind to hear an Answer to Daniel Rathbun’s Letter to James Whittacor may hear it at any time by applying to William Scales, or in open street, or in any house they shall appoint. POLUBLEPOS.¹⁷

Daniel Rathbun, brother to Valentine, had published a lengthy and vitriolic attack against the Shakers in 1785. In it, he declared that Scales had informed him in writing that the Shaker leadership had “sealed their

testimony with their blood, whereby it is of force.”¹⁸

The Shakers reported that Scales became a “wandering vagabond” moving from state to state, and often visiting “most, if not all the Churches, from Watervliet to the District of Maine, often begging his bread at their doors.”¹⁹ Scales despised Joseph Meacham and,

was so exasperated against him, that he often threatened his life. He used to walk the streets in New-Lebanon, and yell out the most horrid blasphemies that the human tongue could utter. He was often heard to threaten the vengeance of eternal damnation, against Joseph Meacham and others, with as much apparent authority, as though he possessed all power in Heaven, earth and hell.²⁰

Scales’ article about the Shakers, published in the *Boston Gazette, and the Country Journal* on June 15, 1789 has, heretofore, been unknown to students of American Shakerism. It is a remarkable document, clever in its construction and arrangement, and cunning in its argument. It is mostly in the form of dialogue between Scales and “the Elder of that people” (presumably Joseph Meacham). It furnishes a detailed and informative picture of the early Shaker faith and practice, and arguably ranks as one of the most important works by an early apostate. It is here reprinted without correction of spelling or capitalization.

By 1790, Scales seems to have moved on to other ventures and interests. Sibley reported that “early in 1790 Scales appeared in Boston as the agent for the plantation of Bowdoin, which was trying to keep from being incorporated as a town because of the added expense involved.”²¹ The Reverend William Bentley, of Salem, also encountered Scales the same year:

A Crazy man by the name of William Scales came along, dispersing Advertisements to the virtuously disposed, begging charity for the Town of Bowdoin. He was partly educated at Cambridge, intimately connected with the Shakers, & preaches through the streets. He is decently dressed, has a clear and manly voice & excites public curiosity.²²

By the 1790’s Scales became increasingly eccentric and to some he appeared to be deranged. Sibley reported that during the last two decades

of his life, "Scales the Shaker" spent considerable time in the Harvard College yard, addressing whoever would listen to him. He spent his last winter there in 1806-1807 and when the weather warmed, he traveled to his sister's house in Dresden, Maine. He died there during the summer of 1807.²³

Endnotes

¹Valentine W. Rathbun, *An Account of the Matter, Form, and Manner of a New and Strange Religion, Taught and Propogated by a Number of Europeans, Living in a Place Called Nisqueunia, in the State of New-York* (Providence, R.I., 1781) 23 p. The work was popular and went through a number of editions through 1783.

²Clarke Garrett, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion From the Camisards to the Shakers* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) 164, 167-68.

³William Scales, *Priestcraft Exposed from its Foundation or, Religious Freedom Defended, in Nine Chapters* (Danvers, Mass., 1781) 4, 8.

⁴John L. Sibley and Clifford K. Shipton, *Biographical Sketches of those who attended Harvard College in the Classes 1768-1771*, vol. 17 (Boston, Mass.: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1975) 627.

⁵Scales, *Priestcraft Exposed* 16.

⁶William Scales, *The Confusion of Babel Discovered; or, An Answer to Jeremy Belknap's Discourse upon the Lawfulness of War; or Military Duty*, (America, 1780) [ii].

⁷Sibley and Shipton 628.

⁸Rufus Bishop and Seth Y. Wells, *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines of Our Ever Blessed Mother Ann Lee, and the Elders with Her; through whom the Word of Eternal Life was Opened in this Day of Christ's Second Appearing: Collected from Living Witnesses, by Order of the Ministry in Union with the Church* (Hancock, [Mass.], 1816) 392.

⁹Daniel Rathbun, *A Letter from Daniel Rathbun, of Richmond in the County of Berkshire, to James Whittacor, Chief Elder of the Church, called Shakers* (Springfield, Mass., 1785).

¹⁰Daniel Rathbun 20, 24, 26.

¹¹Bishop and Wells 231.

¹²Thomas Brown, *An Account of the People Called Shakers: Their Faith, Doctrines, and Practice, Exemplified in the Life, Conversations, and Experience of the Author during the Time He Belonged to the Society. To Which is Affixed a History of Their Rise and Progress to the Present Day* (Troy, N.Y., 1812) 372.

¹³*A Concise Statement of the Principles of the Only True Church, according to the Gospel of the Present Appearance of Christ. As Held To and Practiced Upon by the*

True Followers of the Living Saviour, at New Lebanon, &c. Together with a Letter from James Whittaker, Minister of the Gospel in this Day of Christ's Second Appearing to his Natural Relations in England. Dated October 9th, 1785 (Bennington, Vt., 1790) 24 p. The undated edition has a slightly different title: *A Concise Statement of the Principles of the Only True Church, according to the Gospel of the Present Appearance of Christ, as Held To and Practised Upon by the True Followers of the Living Saviour, at New-Labanon [sic], &c. By James Whittaker, Minister of the Gospel in this Day of Christ's Second Appearance (N.p., n.d.) 8 p.* Precedence has not been established, although there is evidence that a printed edition was in use prior to 1790. Most bibliographies attribute authorship to Joseph Meacham. The undated edition seems to attribute authorship to James Whittaker notwithstanding Brown's claim that Scales was the author.

¹⁴Brown 298.

¹⁵Brown 327.

¹⁶Bishop and Wells 394.

¹⁷*The Cumberland Gazette* (Portland, Me., December 15, 1786) 2.

¹⁸Daniel Rathbun 20.

¹⁹Bishop and Wells 395.

²⁰Bishop and Wells 394.

²¹Sibley and Shipton 628.

²²William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley, D. D. Pastor of the East Church, Salem, Massachusetts* (Gloucester, Mass.: P. Smith, 1962) 146.

²³Sibley and Shipton 630.