

## A House Divided

by Keith Perkins

Joseph and Emma Smith were living with the John Johnson family in Hiram, Ohio, when a mob of apostates and anti-Mormons dragged the Prophet from his bed and tarred and feathered him. In a desperate attempt to save the Prophet and Sidney Rigdon, Brother Johnson rushed out into the field where the mobbers were. When he knocked down one man with a club, part of the mob turned its fury on him. Running back to his house, he was mistaken for a mobster by Brother John Poorman, who struck him on the left shoulder, breaking his collar bone. Later, he was healed immediately when administered to by David Whitmer. (See History of the Church, 1:263–64.)

This incident was one of many that placed the Johnson family at the center of dramatic, historic events in the early days of the Church. At their home the prophet Joseph received the great vision of the three degrees of glory and the tragedy of perdition (D&C 76). Here he received about fifteen other revelations and held several important conferences of the Church. At the Johnson home ten witnesses, including Luke and Lyman Johnson and Orson Hyde, bore witness of the “Book of the Lord’s Commandments” and testified that the revelations and commandments contained therein “were given by inspiration of God, and are profitable for all men, and are verily true!” (History of the Church, 1:226ff; D&C, p. iv). Today these revelations and commandments are in our Doctrine and Covenants. Yet, when we examine the lives of the Johnson family, they reflect both the glory and the tragedy of these early Church experiences.

Before a copy of the Book of Mormon came into their hands, the Johnsons seemed destined to live out their days uneventfully in the quiet little town of Hiram. John Johnson, born 11 April 1779, in Chesterfield, New Hampshire, was the son of prosperous farmers, Israel and Abrial Higgins Johnson. He married Mary Elsa Jacobs, daughter of Joseph Jacobs and Hannah Beal. The young couple made their home in Pomfret, a small town a few miles from the Prophet’s birthplace of Sharon, Vermont. There Elsa gave birth to seven of their nine children. By 1818 the family had moved to Hiram, Ohio, where they prospered, building a beautiful home on their large farm.

Upon hearing of the Book of Mormon some members of the family were so impressed that they travelled



### Call On Your God

by Casey Lynn Childs

the thirty miles to Kirtland for further investigation. Lyman E. Johnson, the fourth son of John and Elsa, arrived in Kirtland in February 1831, and was baptized by Sidney Rigdon. In May the second son, Luke S., was baptized by Joseph Smith.

In that year John and Elsa also went to Kirtland to see the Prophet and to find out more about the new religion. During the visit a healing occurred which caused a great stir in the area. Elsa Johnson had been afflicted for many years with a rheumatic arm. She experienced so much pain and difficulty in movement that for two years she hadn’t been able to raise her hand to her head. As the Johnsons and others from the Hiram area visited with Joseph Smith in the Newel K. Whitney home, they discussed the gifts of the Spirit as held in the early Church. Someone asked whether God had given power to men today to heal people like Elsa Johnson. After the conversation had turned to another subject, the Prophet walked up to Elsa and said, “Woman, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ I command thee to be whole,” and then he walked out of the room. Elsa was instantly healed, and the next day she did her washing “without difficulty or pain.” (See History of the Church, 1:215–16.) This experience was instrumental in the conversion of a number of people, including Father and Mother Johnson (as they were affectionately called by the Saints), and their children John, Jr., and Marinda.

Great joy came with their acceptance of the gospel, but there was also the sorrow of disobedience. By March 1832, John Johnson, Jr. had apostatized, and another

## A House Divided

by Keith Perkins

brother, Olmstead, refused the gospel message. This refusal caused the Prophet to predict that his rejecting of the restoration would lead to his destruction. (See History of the Church, 1:260.)

In time, many people were converted in Hiram and it appeared that Hiram might become an important center of the Church. Thus, the Johnsons invited Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon to take up residence with them, hoping that the Prophet could continue his translation of the Bible in peace.

From this home in November 1831, Luke and Lyman Johnson were called to fulfill missions. This occupied much of their time for the next six years. On one of these first missions, Luke accompanied Sidney Rigdon to Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, where Luke baptized, among many other people, Sidney Rigdon's mother. Lyman, serving with Orson Pratt in New England, baptized Amasa Lyman, later a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. Apparently Lyman Johnson invited the new convert to travel to Hiram to live and work with his family. There Amasa Lyman was kindly received, and after resting for a week he started working for the Johnsons at the rate of ten dollars a month. He continued his labors until the Prophet called him on a mission. As the Church grew, the Johnson home became a haven for many other new converts.

After Joseph was tarred and feathered, however, continual harassment by the mobs forced the Johnsons to leave Hiram and move to Kirtland. In Kirtland they were given opportunities to mature spiritually and to give leadership and financial help to the growing Church.

When the first high council of the Church was organized at Kirtland on 17 February 1834, John Johnson, his son Luke, and a future son-in-law, Orson Hyde, were selected to be members of it. After the Prophet had set them all apart, John Johnson gave his son Luke a father's blessing, establishing a pattern that fathers still follow. It was a simple but meaningful blessing: "My Father in heaven, I ask Thee to bless this my son, according to the blessings of his forefathers; that he may be strengthened in his ministry, according to his holy calling. Amen." (History of the Church, 2:32)

In 1834 Joseph Smith organized Zion's Camp, and Luke departed from Kirtland with a group. In a few



**The Johnson farm in Hiram, Ohio, from which Joseph Smith was dragged by a mob and tarred and feathered.**

days, Lyman and others joined them, and the two brothers marched, learned, and grew under the tutelage of the Prophet of God. They learned their lessons well and proved themselves worthy to be called, in February 1835, to be two of the original members of the Quorum of the Twelve. Orson Hyde, who later that year married Marinda Johnson, sister of Luke and Lyman, was also selected a member of the original Twelve. Lyman had the privilege of being the first apostle to be ordained and set apart as member of that quorum in this dispensation. (See History of the Church, 2:187–88.)

Three months later the Twelve Apostles left on missions, departing from John Johnson's inn in Kirtland. As members of the Twelve, Luke, Lyman, and Orson spent much of their time on missions, bringing many into the Church. But the seed of apostasy was sprouting in Kirtland. The Lord had said that where one's treasure is, there would his heart be also (Luke 12:34); sadly, many who had once given liberally of their means to build up the kingdom began to seek for personal wealth. Many who had once defended the Prophet now became his accusers. This spirit affected almost all of the Johnson family, including son-in-law Orson Hyde.

Both Luke and Lyman accused Joseph Smith of speaking disrespectfully of and to members of the Church. (See statements of Lyman E. Johnson, Orson Pratt, and Luke Johnson, 29 May 1837, Whitney Collection, Brigham Young University Special Collections Library, box 2, fd. 1.) On one occasion during the passing of the sacrament in the Kirtland Temple, Lyman stood and cursed the Prophet, who was on the stand. When the bread was passed to him "he reached out his hand for a piece of bread and flung it into his mouth

## A House Divided

by Keith Perkins



**While with a party of fellow investigators, Elsa Johnson was “made whole” by the Prophet Joseph Smith, who healed her of painful rheumatism.**

**Illustrated by Craig Poppleton**

like a mad dog.” His face turned black “with rage and with the power of the devil.” (Millennial Star, 57:340) Joseph Smith later pinpointed such faultfinding with the Church leadership as the cause of apostasy.

Affairs in Kirtland continued to worsen. Luke Johnson and other dissidents organized for the overthrow of the Church, claiming they were the “old standard,” and calling themselves the “Church of Christ.” Luke described those dark days: “Having partaken of the spirit of speculation, which at that time was possessed by many of the saints and Elders, my mind became darkened, and I was left to pursue my own course. I lost the spirit of God, and neglected my duty.” (“History of Luke Johnson by Himself,” Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, p. 7)

Father John Johnson was also affected by this apostasy and was dropped from the high council and excommunicated. (See History of the Church, 2:510 and The Historical Record, Andrew Jenson, ed, and pub., vol. 5, Salt Lake City, 1889, p. 32.)

It is both sad and inspiring to follow the lives of Lyman and Luke Johnson and of Orson and Marinda Johnson Hyde and to see the effect that apostasy and, in turn, personal righteousness had on their lives.

Upon being ordained the first apostle in this dispensation, Lyman received a powerful blessing. He was told that his faith would be like Enoch’s and that he would

“be called great among all the living; and Satan shall tremble before him.” (History of the Church, 2:188) Yet in only three years his obedience and his faith had failed, and Satan, rather than trembling before him, had conquered him.

After apostatizing, Lyman remained friendly to his former associates, making occasional visits to Nauvoo. On one such visit he related his present feelings, as reported by Brigham Young:

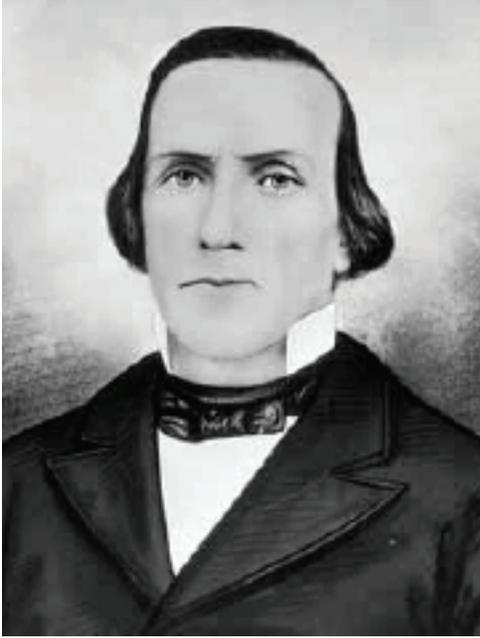
“If I could believe ‘Mormonism’ as I did when I traveled with you and preached, if I possessed the world I would give it. I would give anything, I would suffer my right hand to be cut off, if I could believe it again. Then I was full of joy and gladness. My dreams were pleasant. When I awoke in the morning my spirit was cheerful. I was happy by day and by night, full of peace and joy and thanksgiving. But now it is darkness, pain, sorrow, misery in the extreme. I have never since seen a happy moment.” (Journal of Discourses, 19:41)

It is little wonder his death was tragic. According to Wilford Woodruff, “he did not go and hang himself [like Judas], but he did go and drown himself, and the river went over his body while his spirit was cast into the pit, where he ceased to have the power to curse either God or His Prophet in time or in eternity.” (Millennial Star, 57:340; see also Andrew Jenson, Latter-Day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia, Vol. 1, Salt Lake City: The Andrew Jenson History Co., 1901, p. 92.)

As Lyman’s brother Luke was ordained and set apart as a member of the Twelve, he was promised that if he were cast into prison he would be a comfort to the hearts of his comrades. (See History of the Church, 2:190.) In three years, however, he was an apostate. But his blessing still came about: he was a comfort to the hearts of his comrades in prison, but as a constable instead of as a fellow prisoner. Remaining friendly to the Church, he assisted the Prophet to legally escape from those who were pressing him with lawsuits. (See “History of Luke Johnson by Himself,” Church Archives, p. 6.)

Luke was also able to help Joseph Smith, Sr., to escape imprisonment on charges “instigated through malice.” Luke took Father Smith to court for trial, but since the court was not ready to convene, he took him into an adjoining room to wait. While in the room, Luke removed a nail which secured the window, and then left,

## A House Divided by Keith Perkins



**Luke Johnson**  
**Zion's Camp Veteran**  
**Quorum of Twelve Apostle (1835-1837)**  
**Excommunicated 1838**  
**Rebaptised 1846**  
**Entered the Salt Lake Valley July 1847**  
**The only man to serve as Bishop**  
**after having served as an Apostle.**



**Lyman E. Johnson**  
**Zion's Camp Veteran**  
**Quorum of Twelve Apostle (1835-1837)**  
**Excommunicated 1838**  
**Never returned to the Church**

locking the door behind him. Back in the courtroom, he started telling funny stories so laughter would cover Father Smith's escape. When the prisoner was called by the court, Luke entered the room where Father Smith had been kept, replaced the nail in the window, and came out reporting the escape of the prisoner. Members of the court rushed in. Upon finding the window fastened, they declared it another Mormon miracle.

Luke met Eliza R. Snow the following day and asked her how his escaped prisoner was faring at the Snow house. He then commented, "Father Smith will bless me for it, all the days of his life." Upon returning home, Eliza repeated Luke's words to Patriarch Smith, who affirmed the truth of the statement. (See "History of Luke Johnson by Himself," Church Archives, pp. 6-7, and Eliza R. Snow Smith, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow*, Salt Lake City: Deseret News Co., 1884, pp. 22-24.)

But Luke did not die an apostate like his brother Lyman did. Before the Saints left Nauvoo, he rose and spoke to an assembled group, telling of his apostasy, but declaring that his heart was with the Saints and that now he wanted to "go with them into the wilderness, and continue with them to the end." His brother-in-law, Orson Hyde, rebaptized him. (See *Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 1846-47*. Elden Jay Watson, ed. and pub., Salt Lake City, 1971, p. 72.) Luke then went back to Kirtland to pick up his family.

Luke's newly-restored faith was tried by fire as he started West with his family. His wife, Susan Poteet, died as they traveled to Council Bluffs. After burying her in St. Joseph, Missouri, Luke continued on with his six motherless children. The Church leaders seemed to feel concern that this trial might be too much for the newly rebaptized Luke; however, it was recorded that he was "yet apparently feeling well and enjoying himself." (Watson, p. 494)

On his arrival in Council Bluffs, Luke was comforted by a poem written for him by Eliza R. Snow, his neighbor for many years in Ohio, which in part read:

## A House Divided

by Keith Perkins



**Orson Hyde**

**Brother-in-Law to Luke Johnson**

Mourn not o'er your long-beloved Susan,  
Love her still—she's gone above,  
To fulfil a heavenly mission,  
To perform a work of love.

(A History of Clover, Centennial Year, 1856–1956, rev. ed., Tooele, Utah: Transcript-Bulletin, 1960, p. 41)

At Council Bluffs, Luke married America M. Clark, by whom he had eight children. Selected as captain of ten men in the original pioneer company, he had to leave his family at Council Bluffs while he found a home for them in the valley of the Great Salt Lake. When his first trek was over, he returned to Council Bluffs to get his family, and together they reached Utah in 1853, settling in Rush Valley, near Tooele, Utah, in 1856.

He was appointed by Wilford Woodruff to be the first presiding elder over the little Utah settlement which later was called Clover, Utah. Luke also served as the first and only probate judge of Shambip [Rush] County, now a part of Tooele County, and he became a friend of the Indians. He was the first doctor in the area, and his wife, America, served as midwife. He served faithfully both his Church and community until his death at

the home of his brother-in-law Orson Hyde in Salt Lake City in 1861.

Luke's family has continued to serve the little town of Clover. His son, Orson A. Johnson, served as a counselor to three bishops. A grandson, Edwin H. Johnson, served as a ward clerk to two bishops, and three great-grandsons, Merlin M. Johnson, Joseph William Russell, Jr., and Orson Albert Johnson, have all served as bishops of the Clover Ward. Merlin M. Johnson also served as a county commissioner for Tooele County.

Records aren't complete concerning the fate of all the members of the Johnson family, but much mention is made of Marinda Johnson and her husband, Orson Hyde. During the Kirtland days, Orson became temporarily sympathetic with the apostate faction, but within a very short time, he had repented and returned to the Church. He walked into a meeting where Heber C. Kimball was being set apart to open England to the preaching of the gospel and to preside over the mission. Overwhelmed by the words of the blessing, Orson asked for forgiveness and for permission to accompany Heber to England as a missionary. His repentance was accepted, and he too was set apart. (See History of the Church, 2:489–90.)

When Orson left for England, Marinda was left with a three-week-old baby. Many years later, it was said of her that she experienced "what so many 'Mormon' women have since felt, the cares and anxieties of the wife and mother when the husband is on a mission in a foreign land, and the sustaining influence of the Holy Spirit that enabled her to bear cheerfully—even happily—the many scenes of hardship and persecution that all the old members of the Church have endured." (Journal History, 24 Mar. 1886, p. 3) This was one of many times Marinda was asked to wait for her husband as he traveled the globe in Church service.

Marinda was the only one of the Johnson family known to have moved to Nauvoo. There she experienced joy in living the gospel and sorrow as she bade farewell to her husband on his frequent missions for the Church. Undoubtedly one of her greatest trials came when Orson fulfilled a mission to Palestine, traveling approximately twenty thousand miles. In his dedicatory prayer on the Mount of Olives he particularly remembered his family at home:

## A House Divided

by Keith Perkins

“Though Thy servant is now far from his home ... yet he remembers, O Lord, his ... family, whom for Thy sake he has left ... The hands that have fed, clothed, or shown favor unto the family of Thy servant in his absence, or that shall hereafter do so, let them not lose their reward, but let a special blessing rest upon them, and in Thy kingdom let them have an inheritance when Thou shalt come to be glorified in this society.” (History of the Church, 4:458)

This prayer was heard, and the answer given only nine days later in a revelation to the Prophet Joseph. The Lord instructed Joseph Smith that Marinda should have a better place to live, “in order that her life may be spared.” Joseph was further directed to importune the Ebenezer Robinson family to provide for her and her children until Orson returned from his mission. The Robinsons were promised that as they provided for Marinda ungrudgingly, she would be a blessing to them. Finally, Marinda was charged to follow the living prophet “in all things whatsoever he shall teach unto her,” and promised that this would prove to be a blessing to her. (History of the Church, 4:467.)

Marinda experienced the anguish of being driven from her home again as the Saints left Nauvoo. Her sorrow was offset somewhat by the joy of being one of the first to receive her endowment in the Nauvoo Temple. Another cause for great rejoicing before leaving Nauvoo was the return of her prodigal brother, Luke, to the Church.

Orson and Marinda Hyde lived at Council Bluffs until 1852, with Orson presiding over the Church there. During that time, Marinda received a letter from Sarah M. Kimball, a dear friend in Nauvoo:

*“Nothing affords me more pleasure than to be assured that I am not forgotten by one whom I so dearly love as yourself. I was sorry to hear that yr [your] family have been sick dear Sister H. You must have had yr heart & hands full but you say, you had strength given according to yr day, inasmuch as you have not been overcome it is all right for your husband said when here that we must overcome all things in order to become pillars in the Temple of God.”*

(Sarah M. Kimball to Marinda Hyde, dated 2 Jan. 1848, Church Archives.)

Much of Marinda is revealed in this letter: her suffering, her patience in affliction, and her faithfulness to the kingdom.

Like her brother Luke, Marinda Johnson Hyde made a lasting contribution in the establishment of Utah. After coming to Utah in 1852, she and her husband settled in the Seventeenth Ward. In 1868 she became the ward’s Relief Society president, serving in that position until her death. She also was a member of the board of directors of the Deseret Hospital in Salt Lake. She sought the rights of Mormon women at a time when much of the nation was attempting to destroy the rights of all Latter-day Saints and was selected as a member of a committee which drafted a resolution against some of the vicious antipolygamy legislation being considered in Congress. (See *Millennial Star*, vol. 32, p. 113.) She also was one of fourteen women who drafted a resolution thanking the acting governor of Utah, S. A. Mann, for signing the act that gave the women in Utah the right to vote, the second such act in the United States.

(See *Journal History*, 19 Feb. 1870, p. 4; also see Russell R. Rich, *Ensign to the Nations*, Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Publications, 1972, pp. 372–73. Utah women were, the first to vote but the second to get the franchise.)

The year before her death, Marinda was honored on her seventieth birthday as being one of the oldest living members of the Church, having been baptized in 1831. She died 23 March 1886 in Salt Lake City. Her husband, Orson, had died previously on 28 November 1878.

Marinda’s death ended the earthly career of the original John Johnson family, a family who left a lasting impression on the Church and all those who knew them. Like Lehi’s family, their disobedience resulted in unhappiness and tragedy, and their faithfulness resulted in the blessings and happiness of the gospel.

*Keith W. Perkins, was associate professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University and the father of four children. He served as assistant chairman on the 1980–81 Gospel Doctrine writing committee for the Church at the time this article was written in 1979.*

Source: <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1979/02/a-house-divided-the-john-johnson-family?lang=eng>