

"So Much They have Got For Their Folly": Shaker Apostates and the Tale of Woe¹

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Introduction: Persecution and Community

Sectarian groups and their detractors exist in symbiotic fashion, each feeding off the other as both construct the social world around them. While in recent years the study of apostasy has gained increased recognition, especially from social scientists, research has focused on the causes of or steps leading up to defection. And while some studies have addressed the post-apostate experience, few have looked at the ramifications of apostasy from the perspective of the sect from which apostates emerged. Yet, defectors turned persecutors play an integral role in building and maintaining sectarian community. For example, Rosabeth Kanter's analysis of the process of building community illustrated how enduring continual persecution reinforces group cohesiveness and social identity. Acts of persecution, argued Kanter, work as a "social vaccination," building up the strength of persecuted groups who can then better withstand future potentially destructive actions. Public attacks can strengthen the faithful, relieve tension and warn leaders of potential problems.²

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2. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Community & Commitment: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 102-03. Kanter found that groups which endured persecution events were strengthened and more present in successful nineteenth-century communities, the Shakers included. See her Table 4 (pp. 104-05). Both social scientists and historians have investigated the consequences of apostasy. See, for example, the essays in David G. Bromley, ed., *Falling From the Faith*:

22 COMMUNAL SOCIETIES

The Shakers' interactions with and responses to their persecutors formed a vital component of the continued growth and complexity of Shakerism.³ Stephen Stein, for example, observed how it was in part the anti-Shaker publications of apostates that pushed the Shakers to enter print culture, a decision which in turn helped Shakers codify their faith, defend their practices, and attract new members.⁴ Carol Wiesbrod illustrated how disputes between the Shakers and the World in the legal system, actions often apostate-initiated, ultimately worked to legitimize Shakerism.⁵ This paper examines how Shakers appropriated the fate of their apostates and other persecutors and made it part of the Shaker drama of life in the millennium. When Shakers shared "tales of woe," stories about the dismal fate of their oppressors, they gained confidence in their future, united distant communities, and enhanced self-identity. Tales of Woe can be understood as one mechanism by which the Shakers dealt with continued persecution and built community.

The use of tales of apostate woe has not been limited to Shakerism. In a study of former members from a wide variety of groups, many participants reported that they had left "with the group prophecies of doom ringing in their ears. In the first months after departing, they watched anxiously for signs that these things are coming to pass."⁶ In her study of apostates from the Unification Church, Eileen Barker identified three member-defined categories of people: those who had heard and accepted the Divine Principle; those who had not yet heard

Causes and Consequences of Religious Apostasy (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1988); Roger Launius and Linda Thatcher, eds., *Differing Visions: Dissenters in Mormon History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); and Stuart A. Wright, *Leaving Cults: The Dynamics of Defection* (Washington, D.C.: Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1987). A literary analysis of apostasy is found in John D. Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994). In the latter work, see especially Chapter 9 "Cults and Deprogramming," pp. 169-85.

3. Shakerism is a Protestant, sectarian faith whose members practice celibacy, communalism, and confession of sin. Founded in 1784, Shakerism reached a peak in the 1840s with roughly 4,000 members in eighteen communities spread throughout New England, New York, Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio. Early Shaker communities were unwelcome and were the focus of often violent confrontations. By the mid-nineteenth century, most interpreted Shakerism as a curious but accepted part of American Society and praised Shakers for their superior agricultural and craft products. Shakerism underwent a decline in membership during the late-nineteenth and into the twentieth century. The Shaker community at Sabbathday Lake, Maine, remains active today.

4. Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 9.

5. Carol Weisbrod, *The Boundaries of Utopia* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 208-11.

6. Susan Rothbaum, "Between Two Worlds: Issues of Separation and Identity After Leaving a Religious Community," in Bromley, *Falling From the Faith*, 212.

it; and those who had heard it, but had chosen not to follow. Apostates told her that "it was bad enough when people rejected the movement after attending the workshops, but if they had actually been a member and then left, they were more likely to be defined as Satanic. . . . [S]tories were frequently circulated in hushed tones about some awful tragedy that had befallen an apostate. There was, for example, the ex-brother who had fallen down a cliff and been severely injured only a week after he had walked out of his center."⁷

In dramatic fashion, the apostate subjects of a tale of woe lost their businesses, health, family, and friends. Represented as truth, stories of apostate fate provided concrete examples of the consequences of falling from the faith.

The actual veracity of such stories is moot. Telling (and believing) tales of woe constructed a particular version of Shaker social reality in which God ultimately judged all actions. The power of tales of woe lay in their drama and extreme consequences for past transgressions. David Bromley presents a similar argument regarding the veracity of atrocity tales told by apostates from the Unification Church. Atrocity tales detail alleged abuse and corruption experienced or witnessed by apostates while still participants. Recanting the atrocity tale becomes a central feature of anti-cult campaigns against the Unification Church as well as other contemporary groups. Bromley argues that such stories "gain their persuasiveness and motivating power from their larger than life quality."⁸ Atrocity tales speak of the consequences of joining a particular group; the tales of apostate woe relate the consequences of leaving. Both narrative structures attempt to construct a social reality that enhances the tellers' legitimacy while simultaneously stigmatizing its opponent.⁹

Represented as truth, stories of the fate of Shaker apostates provided concrete examples of the consequences of falling from the faith. For example, Willie Jones, who felt he had a special revelation greater than that of Shakerism founder Ann Lee, drifted away from Shakerism only to discover that "God has forsaken me. I have no faith, I am damned, I am miserable, I am in hell, I am wrought in burning flames!" Shakers at South Union, Kentucky, reported Jones' dismal destiny to the Ministry at New Lebanon concluding "But what his own revelations & his ways & his own lead brought him to was a powerful

7. Eileen Barker, "Defection From the Unification Church: Some Statistics and Distinctions," in Bromley, *Falling From the Faith*, 178.

8. David G. Bromley, Anson D. Shupe, and J.C. Ventimiglia, "Atrocity Tales, The Unification Church, and the Social Construction of Evil," *Journal of Communication* 29 (Summer 1979): 44.

9. *Ibid.*, 43-44.

24 COMMUNAL SOCIETIES

& very instructive lesson to the young believers."¹⁰ The tale of woe, shared orally within communities and distributed in correspondence between communities, prompted the leadership to make an example of Jones' fate and motivated young believers to adhere closely to the tenets of Shakerism lest Jones' fate become theirs. A tale of woe, put forth in words, actuated Shaker action.

In addition to their didactic purposes, tales of woe helped connect geographically distant communities into a united Shaker front. A concluding refrain appended to many of these stories focused Shaker attention on the inevitable positive outcome of conflict noting that, despite persistent attack, "there is no cause of fear or discouragement, *'For no weapon formed against Zion shall prosper.'*"¹¹ Tales of woe thus documented that individual enemy weapons in the form of mobs, anti-Shaker books, restrictive legislation, and other aggressive acts did not and would not succeed. As apostate after apostate met a grim fate, the tale of woe emboldened the Shakers (as Zion) and reinforced the optimistic view of ultimate success for the movement as a whole.

Shaker-told tales of woe acted as a dynamic element in the maintenance of the faith. More than simply words to fill up correspondence, tales of woe called for action. Two sources reveal tales of woe. Shaker ministry correspondence often shared news of the consequences of specific apostasies. Performing a written ritual, Shaker correspondents passed the formulaic tale of woe from community to community. A second source extends the Shakers' use of this convention in Shakerism to the earliest days of the faith. The final two chapters of *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations, and Doctrines of Our Ever Blessed Mother Ann Lee* (1816) highlighted the fate of numerous persecutors and apostates.¹² Drawn from oral tradition, *Testimonies* was intended as a private book for community leaders. Including tales of woe in this work suggests their importance in Shaker history and culture. Whether included in correspondence or in *Testimonies*, tales of woe were also redistributed via oral culture, passed down from the

10. Ministry South Union, KY to Ministry New Lebanon, 7 March 1814, Ms. 351b, Shaker Collection, Library of Congress (hereafter cited as DLC).

11. Ministry New Lebanon to Ministry Union Village, 27 March 1819, Shaker Collection, Western Reserve Historical Society IV:A-33 (hereafter cited as OCIWHI), emphasis in original.

12. Rufus Bishop and Seth Y. Wells, eds., *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* (Hancock, Mass.: J. Tallcott and J. Deming, 1816) (hereafter cited as Bishop and Wells, eds., *Testimonies*).

leadership as examples and warnings, and passed from Shaker to Shaker as a personal check on behavior.¹³

Shaker Comments on Apostasy

Throughout their voluminous correspondence, Shaker leaders often commented on the actions and whereabouts of apostates, individuals who had forsaken the Shaker faith and removed themselves from the community. These comments took a number of forms. The Shakers interpreted the loss of some members as a blessing, a winnowing out of the weak leaving only the most faithful. A letter from the Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, community expressed this idea with a biblical allusion: "but on gospel principles we regret no loss of sheep, as the garbling hypocrite says— '*There are many here who know the shepherd's voice and will follow no other.*' "¹⁴ In 1860, a New Lebanon Shaker recorded the same sentiment in more colloquial terms: "James Long finds the times a little too stormy and concludes to vamoose the ranch. 'Good riddance' say all—one less humbug in town."¹⁵

In several letters, particularly in the 1810s and 1820s, Shaker leaders exchanged information on legal actions brought by apostates, shared defensive strategies, and offered assistance. Communities exchanged petitions, briefs, and judicial decisions with the information travelling from eastern to western communities and back again. The legal maneuvers of apostates against one community had implications for all of Shakerdom since restrictive legislation passed in one state could be adopted elsewhere. Writing to distant Pleasant Hill, Seth Wells, from New Lebanon, commented that

the lawsuits we have had among us are strong confirmations of Mother Ann's prediction when Believers were harassed by persecuting mobs in her day. She said the time would come when the wicked, instead of raising persecuting mobs, would make laws to afflict & persecute the people of God, & would proceed in their wicked schemes under the cover of unjust laws.¹⁶

Interpreting legal attacks as part of the continuing Shaker drama prophesied by Mother Ann reinforced Shaker confidence in their faith

13. The public, oral use of *Testimonies* is discussed by Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America*, 83.

14. Ministry, Pleasant Hill to Brother Charles [?], 22 July [no year], Ms. 349c, DLC, italics in original.

15. New Lebanon Herb House Account Book, 20 November 1860, Ms. 839, The Edward Deming Andrews Shaker Collection, Henry Francis Du Pont Winterthur Library (hereafter cited as DeWint).

16. Seth Wells to Eleazar Wright, 21 October 1830, Ms. 347c, DLC.

and future. Prompting the exchange of information on apostate actions and Shaker defensive strategy, attacks via the courts served as a catalyst for Shaker communication which ultimately enhanced Shaker cohesiveness.

Another type of Shaker commentary shared information on the location and activities of apostates who could potentially bring action, legal or otherwise, against the Shakers. Notable in this case were Shaker observations on apostate Mary Marshall Dyer who maintained an anti-Shaker campaign for well over forty years. Following her departure from the Enfield, New Hampshire, Shaker community in 1815, Dyer displayed her disaffiliation from the Shakers in a number of ways. She sought legislative interference to resolve her dispute; she published anti-Shaker books and travelled throughout New England to sell them; she participated in a mob action against the Enfield community; and she assisted other apostates in similar activities. Dyer was a highly visible, and unpredictable, player in apostate-Shaker confrontation and the Shakers kept careful reconnaissance of her movements and activities. For example, in 1818, following Dyer's unsuccessful legislative petition, the New Hampshire Ministry reported that "Mary Dyer was around [Canterbury, N. H.] calling meetings and preaching. She is after all the carrion that she can find to prepare the minds of the public against next session. She expects to have another pull."¹⁷ And in 1826, with similar raptorial imagery, the Shakers at Hancock told the Harvard community that

"Mary Dyer the Abominable, is in these parts, she has crept over into Lebanon hollow and like a sitting goose or turkey-buzzard is brooding over her nest of lies, and generating them into life by her lasivious [sic] pen. She is still now, and probably will be during her incubation."¹⁸

Twenty-five years later, the Enfield Shakers continued to note Dyer's actions. But in the following passage, instead of describing the fecund possibilities of a young and active woman, the Shakers dismissed Dyer:

Old Mary Marshall [Dyer] is alive yet and is smart, having spent the past winter in her master's service, lecturing in Vermont and New Hampshire about her poor little childrens being torn from their mother, and procuring sales for her books. She has also been getting signers to a petition similar to her former ones to be presented to the New Hampshire legislature the coming June session but we think it will not amount to much. Most of the respectable [sic] part of state are growing tired of the old crazy woman.¹⁹

17. Ministry Enfield, NH to Ministry Watervliet, NY, 30 July 1818, Ms. 115, DLC.

18. Ministry Hancock to Ministry Harvard, 27 March 1826, OCIWHI, IV:A-19.

19. Ministry New Hampshire to Ministry New Lebanon, 26 April 1850, OCIWHI IV:A-6.

The Shakers, although still cautiously aware of their long-time adversary's potential, concluded that Dyer had weakened to harmlessness since she was no longer young, no longer sane, and, as a woman, was without effective power. Shaker commentary on Dyer's life-long anti-Shaker campaign acted as a social vaccination. It prepared communities for her next attack and acted as an empowering strategy by dismissing Dyer's potential and enhancing the Shakers'. Most apostates, however, did not engage the Shakers in such a visible campaign. Nonetheless, their post-Shaker experiences became a tool in strengthening the faith of the Believers.

Tales of Woe

Along with general news of weather and community members Shaker correspondence contained updates on the whereabouts and activities of seceders. The tales of woe were not like the reports of the most visible and troublesome apostates, like Mary Dyer, but were often stories of less known apostates—the ones who left the Shaker community and disappeared into the world. Only a few of the many, many Shaker apostates wrote books following their experiences and thus, these tales of woe provide important information on a greater number of apostates and how the Shakers recollected them. This form of apostate commentary was edifying, with each tale reflecting the same conclusion—weapons against Zion would not prosper.

One typical tale described the outcome of leaving Shakerism: "James says he has lain and cried many a night after he went away and could not sleep[;] so much they have got for their folly."²⁰ Other apostates met a worse fate than sleepless nights. Peter Foster, for example, died in Florida of excessive heat and "passed away a poor and disapointed [sic] man having lost all he possessed of this worlds treasures by fraudulent dealing of a knave, who died a few days prior to Peter's demise."²¹

This letter also carried news of the fate of Myra Sanborn Peters who had left the Shakers several years prior. Following her departure, Peters worked in a cotton factory, made some money, and set herself up in business in Florida. However, the letter writer reported, she had returned to New England "pennyless [sic], a poor emaciated, fallow, forlorn, and almost demented being" who was taken in by a cousin "out of sympathy." Myra recovered from typhoid and left her cousin's, but was so confused she could neither remember how she arrived at

20. Union Village, OH to New Lebanon, 21 September 1816, Letter 29, MS. 1048, DeWint.

21. Henry Campbell to Henry Blinn, undated, OCIWhi IV:A-11.

28 COMMUNAL SOCIETIES

her destination nor recall to where her luggage had been shipped.²² For Myra Peters, her apostasy led to both the loss of Shaker community and the loss of her mind.

In some cases, the apostate's own words voiced a warning to stay with Shakerism. Initially as part of a private letter to his sister, one apostate's fate became more widely known. The Watervliet, New York, ministry recopied his narrative and sent it embedded within their own correspondence to several Shaker communities, appropriating the apostate's words for Shaker use. In his letter, the young man described his post-apostasy realization that his refusal to confess his sins led to his current position on "the awful precipice which leads to the gulf of wretchedness, misery, and despair."²³ "With a trembling hand" he concluded his letter with some straightforward advice: "Confess and forsake your sins & I am sure you never will be sorry for it."²⁴ Like other tales of woe, this letter indicated an emotional penalty for apostasy. However, unlike other stories, this letter focused not on how one enacted apostasy, but rather, on how one should enact Shakerism by confessing sins. Reinforced by the fate of one who did not act the Shaker part, this private drama provided a powerful script for current Shakers.

The *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines of Mother Ann Lee* illustrates the didactic power of tales of woe. Testimonies contained a vivid oral history of the earliest days of the Shaker movement gathered from those who participated in it. The book related the struggle to establish a foothold in New England and Mother Ann's inspired mission to gather converts. Travelling through southern New England from 1781 to 1783, the early Shaker leaders endured violent attacks, arrests, and other abuse. Compiled thirty years after the events, *Testimonies* provided proof of the struggle the early leaders overcame.²⁵

Including tales of woe at the end of *Testimonies* served many purposes. The compilation itself represented tangible material evidence that Shakerism had survived persecution and oppression to reach a point of reflection on their own history. The oral histories

22. Ibid.

23. Letter from an anonymous man to his Shaker sister 24 February 1861 copied into a letter from the Ministry Watervliet to Ministry Groveland, 6 March 1861, Ms. 87, Shaker Collection, New York Public Library.

24. Ibid.

25. *Testimonies* was withdrawn shortly after its publication for fear that some of its more controversial passages would become known and incite the world's people against the Shakers. The book was edited and republished Albany, N.Y.: Weed, Parsons & Co., Printers, 1888). The final chapter from the 1816 edition, which focused on the judgment of apostates, was omitted from the 1888 edition. All references to *Testimonies* in this paper are to the 1816 edition unless otherwise noted.

connected a new generation of Shaker leaders with the faith's founders, maintaining continuity by encoding Shaker oral tradition. The inclusion of the fate of persecutors and apostates illustrated the wider time frame of the Shaker perception of history. Although a particular persecutor's intersection with Shakerism was decades in the past, their ultimate fate, meted out by God, was captured by the Shakers, recorded, and made part of the Shaker drama of success. Thus, although persecutors and apostates may have bragged of having won a battle, tales of woe in *Testimonies* illustrated that it was the Shakers who won the war between good and evil.

The penultimate chapter focused on God's judgment of persecutors—individuals who violently opposed the Shaker missionaries during their eighteenth-century New England tour. Typical was the fate of Thomas Law

who was so maliciously abusive in the mob at New Lebanon, afterward lived as a vagabond upon the earth, destitute of property, and universally despised, by all who knew him; his very name became a proverb of reproach and destation; and after living a miserable life, he died without warning of his approaching end. He was apparently well, at night, but before morning he was a corpse.²⁶

His fate illustrates the irony Shakers found in so many of their opposers' destinies. For example, although his name was Law, he came to be known not as a civil, ordered, or just man, but rather the opposite. His uncivil, disordered, and lawless participation in the mob condemned him to public scorn just as he had scorned the Shakers. His sudden death ended his "miserable life," a fate seen as particularly troublesome in a Christian culture which believed it necessary to fervently prepare for death during one's life.

The Shakers inevitably noted unusual facets of a persecutor's death. Selah Abbott, Jr., for example, also a participant in the New Lebanon mob, died "in an awful manner, with his eyes wide open, nor was it in the power of his friends to close them; this appeared very striking to beholders."²⁷

The power of God, greater than the power of Abbott's friends, denied Abbott eternal sleep by keeping his eyes open. Similarly, poor Ephraim Brown, who at one time was a "likely young man," became a drunk, a vagabond, and a despised wretch and "at length, after about thirty years of judgment, he died in a most deplorable state; not even a friend to close his eyes, or lay him out."²⁸

26. Bishop and Wells, eds., *Testimonies*, 382.

27. *Ibid.*, 382-383.

28. *Ibid.*, 383.

The Shakers described persecutors' deaths as remarkable, sudden, strange, unexpected, and lonely. Persecutors ended their lives as vagabonds and drunks; they were destitute and without friends, with their property wasted away, and their inheritance, interests, and temporal circumstances "run out" and "come to nothing." Asa Houghton and his wife, persecutors from Harvard, Massachusetts, suffered marital discord and fought with such intensity that their "son was obliged to interpose, to keep them from killing each other."²⁹ The penance of persecutors threw into sharp contrast the life of Believers. Where Shakers eschewed private possessions, persecutors' material interests were stripped away; as Shakers realized the Utopian family, the opposers found themselves alone. As Shakers disavowed marital bonds, persecutors' marriages fell apart.

Shakers also traced property damage to divine retribution. Jonathan Hunter's home was "consumed by fire," leaving him in poverty. Doctor Bridge, who had been a "bold persecutor," it was reported, "undertook to build a large house, and having got the frame up, there came a violent whirlwind and rent it from the foundation, and broke and scattered the timber in such a manner, that scarcely two sticks of it were left joined together."³⁰

After the destruction of his house, Bridge became a drunkard and died in poverty. The contrast between the growth and solidity of Shaker villages and the destruction of persecutors' homes was not overlooked.

In the town of Petersham, Massachusetts, eight individuals and "several of the Winslows" met various unpleasant fates. In fact, the editors of *Testimonies* related

There appeared, indeed, to be a blast, and a curse upon the town, for a number of years, some hanging and drowning themselves; others, in various ways suffering great misfortunes, so that the whole town seemed to be in a continual perplexity and vexation; and it has never appeared to be in a flourishing condition, since.³¹

Like Lot in the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah, God spared only those Petersham inhabitants who did not persecute the Shakers.

The final chapter of the *Testimonies* concerned the destiny of apostates who had walked away from Shakerism despite prophetic warnings of their fates. Similar to the persecutors, these apostates suffered losses in business, failing health, and unexpected death. Apparently apostates suffered to a greater degree than the persecutors

29. Ibid., 385.

30. Ibid., 386. The 1888 edition of *Testimonies* added the sentence "He had been a bold persecutor" (p. 301).

31. Bishop and Wells, eds., *Testimonies*, 386.

of the previous chapter. The apostates tempted their own fate by first rejecting what they had previously acknowledged to be the truth and then openly speaking against the Shakers, their beliefs, and their prophecies.³² Unlike the actions of persecutors, the apostates' anti-Shaker activities were not limited to a singular event at a particular place and time; their antipathy continued in a life-long anti-Shaker stance. For example, in June, 1780, Timothy Johnson and his wife visited the Shakers at Watervliet. After a short time Mother Ann appeared, looked at Johnson and said "Judas is come! Judas is come!" Nonetheless, Johnson joined the Shakers and remained very zealous for about five years, then fell away. When Shaker leader James Whittaker learned of Johnson's apostasy, he prophesied that "Timothy Johnson will not die the common death of all men." Johnson prospered in the world and boasted of it. When asked about Father James' prophecy, Johnson called him a false prophet and "a damned liar; he told me I should not prosper; but there never was a man prospered more; and I defy him and the power he spoke by."

Johnson spoke too soon. Shortly afterwards he inexplicably fell from his horse, fracturing his skull "in such a manner that he remained senseless till he expired." In this incident the Shakers distinguished two poles of power, good and evil, as put forth in true words and falsehoods. This passage concluded with a familiar moral. "Thus Father James was proved to be a true prophet of the Lord and Timothy Johnson a presumptuous blasphemer."³³

Like the persecutors of Petersham, the Rathbun family was singled out for divine retribution. Several members of the extended Rathbun family joined the Shakers in 1780, and many apostatized over the following twenty years. Notable among them was Valentine Rathbun, Sr., a well-known Baptist preacher. In 1781, Rathbun published the first of several editions of his apostate account, the first work of its kind. Rathbun led many anti-Shaker activities including a mob and an attempt to enforce restrictive laws to prevent the Shakers from gaining a foothold in the Pittsfield, Massachusetts, area. Valentine's brother Daniel left the Shakers around 1784 and subsequently published an anti-Shaker work. In 1799, Reuben Rathbun, Valentine's son, apostatized following a bitter leadership dispute and the following year published an anti-Shaker text to which Valentine Rathbun provided a

32. The Shakers had particular dislike for those who had turned their backs on the faith. In a recent study of apostates from the Unification Church, Eileen Barker found comparable dislike; see note seven.

33. Bishop and Wells, eds., *Testimonies*, 388-89. Regarding Johnson's manner of death, it is tempting to remark that the power of God was sufficient to remove Johnson from his "high horse."

32 COMMUNAL SOCIETIES

lengthy introduction. Similar to Timothy Johnson, what singled out the Rathbuns for divine punishment was not simply their apostasy but their highly public anti-Shaker campaign and in particular their challenge to Shaker prophecy and power. Testimonies highlighted the fate of Daniel Rathbun.

While he was still a zealous Believer, Daniel was the subject of a prophecy which stated he would become an enemy of the Shakers. The prophecy also contained a warning that if he turned away from God, "His judgments would follow him." Daniel remained a Shaker for a few more years but eventually did secede and spoke contemptuously about the Shakers and their power.

Rathbun moved his family to New York state and there began building a large house. He bragged that when the house was completed, he would host two of the greatest balls that were ever held. The Shakers saw the judgment of God again at work in Daniel Rathbun's fate:

Soon after [his bragging], he was suddenly caught in his sawmill, and had his knee crushed, and his thigh and leg broken, in such a manner, that, after languishing in the utmost agony and distress, for two weeks, he was seized with the lockjaw, and expired.³⁴

And so, for someone who spent a good part of his life speaking out against the Shakers, ultimately his fate was to have his mouth locked shut.

The judgment on Daniel carried over to his family. At the time of his death, Daniel's daughter was pregnant. So alarmed was she at the horror of his fate that she went into labor "and both mother and child expired." In addition, another Rathbun child was scalded to death. And thus the apostate Rathbun's own prophecy was realized. As Daniel was a well-known and important man, "his funeral was celebrated with great pomp: so that his two great balls proved to be two great funerals, and were both celebrated in one week."³⁵

The apostate actions of Timothy Johnson, the Rathbuns, Mary Dyer, and others challenged the faith and prophecy of those who chose to remain Shakers. The Shakers described this audacious behavior as "heaven-daring," a phrase that described both attitude and action. Heaven-daring reprobates challenged not just Shaker leadership, but also confronted God. At mid-nineteenth century we find a particularly apt example of such heaven-daring behavior and the Shakers' observations on the fate of those who engaged in it.

In the 1840s, several groups of apostates travelled the country as

34. Ibid., 390.

35. Ibid.

performing troupes. In various cities these apostates performed Shaker dances and marches in Shaker dress. Advertisements beckoned the curious public to come see the woman who would "whirl round like a top, fifteen hundred times."³⁶ The Shakers were appalled at such a bold public display of their sacred worship. The New Hampshire ministry described an apostate group from Canterbury, performing in Boston.

What audacity! What blasphemy! and what Heaven daring rebels!³⁷

Paralleling the false prophet/true prophet dichotomy, these performers claimed an authenticity of behavior, but not of belief. In making Shaker worship an entertainment commodity, the apostate performers mocked the Shakers. What was sacred had now become secular. One Shaker letter described the consequences for apostate performers who acted "in that heaven daring & soul damning employ."³⁸ Seeking to financially profit from a sacred practice marked the downfall of the apostate performers. One troupe's manager embezzled their earnings and abandoned the apostates. The group from the Canterbury Shaker community, described above in Boston, had travelled to Rochester, New York, where they were forced to back out of their contract when two of the women became pregnant. The manager extracted \$300 in damages and left the apostates penniless. A third troupe was travelling by train outside Albany when another Shaker apostate verbally assaulted them and "this chastisement from a brother Apostate was so amusing to the passengers, that the cars were detained a while for their gratification."³⁹ This example in particular offered a contrast between the spiritual wealth of communal living and the spiritual poverty of apostasy where ill-gotten money was lost and there was no union even among fellow seceders.

Conclusion

Apostate actions were an important force in the evolution of Shakerism. Apostasy winnowed out the less faithful, removed potential troublemakers, and reinforced the commitment of those who chose to remain. Moreover, apostate-led anti-Shaker actions, although negative in a microanalysis, when viewed over the span of Shaker history were ultimately a positive force in the survival of Shakerism. Apostates prompted the Shaker move to print culture which provided a means of

36. See Mary Richmond, *Shaker Literature* (Hancock, Mass.: Shaker Community Inc., 1977), nos. 728-29.

37. Ministry Enfield to Ministry New Lebanon, 14 April 1846, OCIWHi IV:A-13.

38. Ministry New Hampshire to Ministry, Harvard, 31 March 1847, OCIWHi IV:A-39.

39. Ibid.

34 COMMUNAL SOCIETIES

defense and dissemination of information about the faith. Apostate texts drew attention to the sect, which in turn brought visitors and eventually converts. Legal actions brought about by seceders ultimately enhanced state recognition of the Shakers' right to self-government. Similarly, the fate of apostates and persecutors provided the material for the Shakers to construct a social reality in which God punished persecutors and rewarded the faithful.

Although used to build community, the tales of woe, reordered to support Shakerism, highlights a weakness within. When Shakers could not retain individuals as members and as examples of Shaker righteousness, they appropriated or constructed their fates and made them examples of non-Shaker righteousness. The Shaker focus on the fate of their seceders displays a decidedly unchristian glee in watching former members meet their doom. Sociologist John Hall suggested that atrocity tales reflect the feelings of those who created them, the "deep and emotional revulsion fueled by moral outrage." Likewise, the tale of woe tells us less about the actual fate of a Shaker apostate than it does about the attitudes and fears of the Shakers who remained. In discrediting apostates through the tales of woe and in vigorous anti-apostate campaigns (such as attacks on Mary Dyer), the Shakers ignored a valuable source of feedback. The later apostates especially (for example apostate authors David Lamson, C.C. Hodgdon, and Hervey Elkins) mixed their accusations with praise and constructive criticism, a critique that ultimately could have proven valuable to the survival of the movement. Ignoring this critique weakened Shakerism as much as the tale of woe strengthened it.

Nonetheless, the Shakers neither buried nor forgot the actions of persecutors and apostates. By telling tales of apostate woe and enshrining the fate of those who challenged the faith, the Shakers asserted the truth of their prophecy, reaffirmed their calling, and measured the strength of Zion. A poignant letter from New Lebanon discussed the 1845 purchase of Eleazar Grant's house. Grant had been a persecutor in the early years of Shakerism. The *Testimonies* vividly described his fate which included

a strange disorder; first his fingers, his hands and arms began to perish. He confessed, to some of the brethren, that he did not know but Mother's words were coming to pass upon him, and that he was getting into the "cockle-shell." He said he was obliged to be a Shaker, for he was taken, every day, with an irresistible shaking, in the manner the Believers used to shake, which would continue an hour or two; that his head would shake with such violence as to cause him to make a noise with his mouth, and he could not help it.⁴⁰

40. Bishop and Wells, eds., *Testimonies*, 383-384.

Fate made Grant a "Shaker" against his will: his house, the site of a vicious attack on the early Shakers, decades later became the center of a Shaker celebration. The author of this letter noted the importance of this acquisition, not so much for the property, but for the spiritual victory. He reflected on earlier days, sixty years ago when "Mother & the first Elders had it as were no resting place, or were driven or dragged from place to place by their merciless persecutors," so that near Grant's house was

"confusion and uproar—outdoors & in: Believers were shamefully abused by the gang by kicks & blows, abusive language, & every insult they could well devise."

How far the Shakers had travelled, reflected the author, where before you could scarcely tell by his dress a Shaker from a wicked non-believer:

Now turn your eyes again & behold the scene—how changed! Mother's gospel was then just planted & has grown—1000's of believers exist, well established in peaceful habitations. And on this day behold a happy band, dressed in uniform, marching on to the music of heavenly songs, no cruel foe to disturb our peace.⁴¹

Shakers used tales of woe as powerful tools in the wider drama of Shaker history. Authors and orators turned episodes of persecution and opposition into ultimate victories. Utilizing the convention of a tale of woe, the Shakers reordered the actions and fates of persecutors and apostates as proof positive that "no weapon formed against Zion shall prosper."

41. Isaac [Youngs?] at New Lebanon to Hervey L. Eads, 2 November 1845, OCIWHI IV:A-39.