

HOW JOSEPH SMITH SUCCEEDED.

BY BENSON M. LEWIS.

JUDGING by the extent of his contribution to history and taking into account his lack of education, Joseph Smith, Jr., was one of the most remarkable men in that group of Americans who were born in the first decade of the nineteenth century. That group included Emerson, Longfellow, Lincoln and Whittier.

Uncle Sam has not yet found the exact quantity that will eliminate Mormonism as a factor from the national equation. Smith did not organize a sect; he founded a new religion. Renan says: "Islamism is the last religious creation of humanity." But Mormonism is a distinct religion as well as Islamism. Many sects have sprung up within historic times; but a sect is only a division from some established belief. It is easy to form a sect. Let a dispute over some doctrine or ceremony arise and stubbornness will do the rest. Mohammed and Smith each brought out a new Bible and professed a divine commission.

There is a similarity in the announcements of the prophets of new revelations. Moses, we are told, received two tablets of stone written upon by the finger of God. Zoroaster claimed to have received the Zendavesta direct from heaven. Mohammed, while dozing in a cave on Mt. Hira, was visited by Gabriel and told to go and teach. Joseph Smith said he had visions and was directed to the place where he found a box containing plates engraved with a sacred record of the early inhabitants of America. This was the Book of Mormon. The publication of this book was opportune. At that time the theory that the aborigines of America were descendants of the lost tribes of Israel was widely discussed and seemed plausible. It was a stroke of genius to fit the story of Mormon into this niche in history, for none could contradict the narrative however much they might suspect the man who brought it out. What else could have been selected as the basis of a new sacred

history that did not cross the path of some known records. The promoters of Mormonism should be given full credit for the originality of their scheme in bringing out a new Bible with America as its holy land.

The Book of Mormon has no standing in literature, yet it would be impossible to convince a quarter of a million of Latter Day Saints that it is fiction and a crude imitation of the Old Testament. It is their sacred book.

In regard to Smith's claims there are three opinions: That they are true; that they are entirely false; that there is some truth in them.

The latter view seems reasonable. Knowing from the family history that Joseph's ancestors on both sides were believers in dreams, saw visions and heard voices which they regarded as supernatural, and that they were superstitious to an extraordinary degree, it may be granted that he did dream, or imagine that he had dreamed, the things that he claimed and that he believed they were divine revelations. There is no boundary to dreamland, and the dreamer's word is the sole evidence. That Joseph dreamed about religion is probable, for he says the religious excitement of the time set him to thinking. That buried plates should have appeared in his visions was in keeping with his occupation as a money-digger or searcher for hidden treasure.

The secrecy with which he guarded the plates and their early and final disappearance is presumptive evidence that if he ever had any plates they were either manufactured for the purpose or were a few fragments he found somewhere, and that they would not bear inspection by competent investigators.

Joseph's school days were brief and the facilities such as obtained in country districts in those days. He was not an apt scholar. The family did not stand well in the community, and they owned nothing. Such was this new prophet's equipment, and now, three-quarters of a century after he organized the first society, the number of Latter-Day Saints is given at 300,000, and they hold the balance of political power over a large section of the Far West.

Smith succeeded beyond his wildest dream, no doubt. How did he do it? Lack of education did not hinder him. Among the founders of religions how many were educated to any considerable degree? Renan says: "Religions are not founded on reason, nor can they be overthrown by reasoning."

Several things were required to launch the Mormon craft. Spaulding's unpublished novel supplied the hull, a mortgage on the

farm of Martin Harris served for ballast, while Sidney Rigdon's eloquence filled the sails. Smith stood at the helm and boldly plowed out upon the sea of popular credulity. His claim to divine inspiration met such a storm of criticism from all sides that the attention of the people was drawn to this persecuted prophet.

An altar fire once kindled is hard to extinguish. Persecution only fans the flame and scatters the fire-brands.

Public baptism by immersion brought many converts. People who would not enter a church building will help to swell the crowd to witness an outdoor religious-exercise. It was so in the days of John the Baptist. "John did baptize in the wilderness, and there went out unto him all the land of Judea and they of Jerusalem and were baptized in the river of Jordan."

The effect of a fervent exhortation delivered at the creek side, the minister standing in the water, and the evident sincerity of the first candidates who submitted to be immersed without change of clothing, moved many others to take the step at the psychological moment.

While it is true that the popular interest in religion which existed in those days contributed to the success of the new belief, the claim that it would not have been possible to establish such a church at any other time since is refuted by history. Spiritualism took form twenty years later, Christian Science began in the last quarter of the century and Dowieism came later.

No injustice need be done to the Sage of Concord, if we compare his public life with that of the Prophet of Palmyra. Ralph Waldo Emerson was two years older than Joseph Smith, Jr. Emerson was graduated from Harvard in his nineteenth year and became pastor of a Boston church in his twenty-sixth year. In the following year (1830) the Book of Mormon was published and the church of the Latter-Day Saints founded by Smith who was then in the first half of his twenty-fourth year. His education was such as an indolent boy could acquire in a few months' attendance at a backwoods district school. The grammatical blunders which appeared on nearly every page of the Book of Mormon testify to his illiteracy. Smith was killed by a mob in 1844, while in his thirty-ninth year, so that his active period as a prophet was about fourteen years. Several years before his death Mormonism had assumed the position of a political problem of large proportions, and its membership was increasing rapidly. Mr. Emerson died at seventy-nine after fifty years of public life. There is no easy method of comparing the results of their work; for while Emerson made a wide and

deep impression on the intellectual world, he left no organized following. Smith left a completely organized hierarchy and a large body of zealous followers, and has made a large and indelible mark upon the history of our country.

While many things contributed to the success of Mormonism, it is clear that Smith's audacity was an essential element. A man with more education or less nerve would not have attempted to establish such claims as his. Psychologically he was the man to do such a thing.

The success of these new beliefs proves that among the masses a large number are always ready to accept any novelty in religion that comes out, and the bolder the claims of the prophet, the greater will be the following.