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| The Prophet and His Mystic |
| A Look into Tenskwatawas’ Revolution |
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The Mystic of The Prophet: Tenskwatawa’s Rise and Fall

When most Americans, especially those in the Midwestern United States, hear ‘The Prophet’, their minds likely jump to the influential and powerful religious leader of the Shawnee people whose brother, Tecumseh, was a famous Indian warrior and chief. They probably also think of the flaws and inconsistencies of his life, if they know his story. At least, my experience suggests that. Perhaps that is due to the locality of my education here in the Midwest, or perhaps it’s representational of the powerful influence of his views not only on his followers, but history of the area as well. Less well-known as ‘Tenskwatawa’ and even less as ‘Lalawethika’, his influence and power over his people could not be argued during the height of the early 1800’s. However, he did not operate alone, but with his brother who gained yet further fame from his experiences in battle. Together, they would attempt to form a confederacy and revolt against the white influence of the area. However, how long would they be able to maintain adamant followers?

Tenskwatawa was not always a powerful and influential member of the Shawnee people and their history. As a child, he was largely ignored due to several factors. This was likely largely due to the fact that he was abandoned as a young child and taken in by his eldest sister, Tecumpease, whom “favored Tecumseh over either of the younger brothers and … generally ignored the young Lalawethika…” (Edmunds, 30). Tecumseh was not only favored by his sister, but the eldest brother as well took “special pains to see that [he]… was properly trained in the skills of hunting and warfrare…” (Edmunds, 30). The fact that his brother was becoming a respected warrior largely overshadowed any spark that may have lie within him. In addition, Lalwethika attempted to overcompensate “for his insecurity through boastful harangues on his own importance…” as well as having an accident “while playing with a bow and iron-tipped arrow…and lost the sight of his right eye…” (Edmunds, 30). As trade with the whites increased and alcohol began to permeate the Shawnee culture, Tenskwatawa became largely caught up in it and his credibility dropped further still as he “acquired a taste…that both increased his bragging and decreases his popularity”. (Edmunds, 31).

Tenskatawa’s famous revolution of the Shawnee religious beliefs stemmed from a vision he experienced during the winter of 1805. While on the White River in present-day Indiana, he passed out among other tribesmen “as he raised the pipe to his lips, Lalawethika gasped, dropped the blazing twig, and toppled over…” (Edmunds, 29). Not waking, “Lalawethika lay sprawled by the fire, as till as death...” and he appeared to have stopped breathing (Edmunds, 29) . Others began to fear that he had passed out and died. They even went so far as to begin plans to prepare his body for a funeral, and then he awoke. He recounted his vision as dealing with the current situation of the Shawnee people and where it was going to lead them. He “told a strange tale of death, heaven, and resurrection...” (Edmunds, 33). In essence, it seems to mirror the Christian ideas of Heaven, Hell, and possibly God himself, as well as the behavior and paths that lead to both. He said that he was allowed, by ‘The Maker of Life’ to view both past and future, as well as a paradise which was “…’a rich, fertile country, abounding in game, fish, pleasant hunting grounds and find corn fields…’” (Edmunds, 33). He also explained that sinners would be tortured as determined by their ‘wickedness’ in the life before. Eventually they [sinners] would be allowed to enter heaven but were not permitted to partake in the pleasures there.

Furthering these new ideas and views, Tenskwatawa experienced “several similar experiences … with additional insights, which he incorporated into a well-defined pattern of religious and social doctrines…” (Edmunds, 34). He was effectively a changed man and wanted to lead his fellow tribesmen to the paradise he had been allowed to see. He defined several major ‘pillars’ or ‘tenants’ of his ideas in regards of how to become more religiously and socially favored in light of his revelations. The first idea was to abandon the use of alcohol entirely among his followers; condemning the use of alcohol. His vision explained that alcoholics would be required to consume lead to atone for their abuse in the past lives if they continued to do so. His second tenant was in regards to the treatment of the elderly and more respected members of Indian culture, as he “instructed his listeners to always treat tribal elders with respect and to provide for kinsmen who were injured, diseased, or incapable of caring for themselves…” (Edmunds, 35). This belief effectively tied back into traditional views and instincts, as his belief highly valued respect and kindness towards those people. Kindness was regarded as all around good demonstration of self, as it shaped the third pillar as well: to “remain truthful and not strike wives and children…” of the tribe. (Edmunds, 35). In return, the fourth pillar stated that women should remain faithful to their husband and that warriors should not be longing for and chasing down women in their free time. Instead, they should act as physical leaders and sentinels of the tribe and should only have one wife. In the same light, the fifth pillar said that marriages should be monogamous and stay between two people, instead of being polygamous.

Most of these ideas meshed well with traditional beliefs, and thus appealed to many natives who felt led-astray in the current circumstances. In addition, the “Master of Life” had communicated to Tenskwatawa that the Shawnee had made some poor choices lately, especially in regards to currently used dances, medicine, and especially fire. He urged the tribe to avoid the some traditional dances seen as corrupt and suggested new ones that “would both please the Master of Life and bring joy to the dancers…” (Edmunds, 36). He also disputed the use of ‘medicine bundles’ and claimed any opposition to him was the work of anti-Shawnee ideas and were false prophets. Fire was to be extinguished and renewed “to be kindled in the traditional manner…” (Edmunds, 36). This was an important point to Tenskwatawa’s doctrine, as the fire represented the life of their body and it must remain lit at all times no matter the circumstances in order to, essentially, remain alive.

Not only did this appeal to those who already felt mislead and over influenced by the whites, but it also urged peace and calmness among the tribes. This, in and of itself, was enough to convince a large amount of people. World peace has been an ideal for many groups, though it has failed time and time again. This speaks to not only the tribes during this time, but the general human psyche and its ‘fight or flight’ natural instinct. People would much rather not have to make that decision, and thus peace is almost always an over-arching goal of a collective group, unless they are rebelling of course. Even that rebellion could be seen as targeting the idea of peace, however, if the provocation and result desired is considered. Beyond that, The Prophet’s doctrine included personally trained specialists that would help to unite beliefs and people across villages toward the same goals. He would send out messengers to enlist these converts that would meet with him to discuss details and provide as counsel to their respective villages. This would also help ensure the followers did not stray and were always able to receive personal yet advised counsel on matters of importance to them and their village. Not only were most of his ideals appealing to people, but his warnings demanded respect, or face the consequence of being “cut off from the face of the Earth…” (Edmunds, 40). These were more threats than warnings, in all honesty. Additionally, this was extra powerful considering the way Tenskwatawa had received his visions. He had appeared to have risen from the dead and had visited the afterlife and understood the paths and decisions required to reach that place. He spoke well, promised cures and powers, food, safety and security, and to rid the Shawnee of the ever-intrusive white man.

Tenskwatawa’s time of influence and respect would not be long-lived, however. His brother, Tecumseh, and he would proceed to organize and enlarge the confederacy in size and faith until the upcoming ‘Battle at Tippecanoe’. Tenskwatawa and his brother “established a settlement called Prophetstown near the juncture of the Tippecanoe and the Wabash Rivers, just north of present-day Lafayette…” (Rafert, 71). While some doubt of his doctrine occurred fairly-early during his doctrine when disease struck and he failed to actively prevent and cure the majority of cases, the fatal blow to his movement occurred at the Battle of Tippecanoe against American general William Henry Harrison here near Prophetstown. After the construction of Fort Harrison by the government on ‘treaty land’ that had been promised to the Indians, Tenskwatawa knew the fight would happen soon. Tecumseh and he had promised not to let the Americans do such a thing, and they had to act or lose face from their followers. However, Tecumseh was currently on a recruiting run into the South Eastern part of the country, trying to build more support for the movement. When Harrison forced his hand at Prophetstown, Tenskwatwa knew he must act. He planned a surprise attack that he said must be executed in the early morning hours, so as to surprise and confuse the Americans in the dark. He also promised that he would make them invulnerable, provide light to see the American’s by, and send “rain and hail to dampen the Americans’ powder…” (Edmunds, 110). At first, his promises of a sound and glorious victory appeared to be coming true. There was a slight rain falling, the campfires lit by the Americans effectively blinded them to the Indian ambushes but allowed the Indians to clearly see them, and the Americans’ were at first quite surprised of the attack. However, as morning wore on and daylight approached, his warriors soon realized his medicine and promises were false. The Americans’ were becoming organized and effective in their battle formations, and the Indians were suffering losses. “As dawn broke and the Indians retreated, the Prophet also fled to his village, where he was confronted by angry warriors…” who were confused and enraged by their failed assault (Edmunds, 113). He attempted to offload the blame to his wife, saying she was on her menstrual period and thus unclean, but his “followers scoffed at his claims, and although they spared his life, they hurried to abandon Prophetstown…” (Edmunds, 114). After this, Tenskwatawa would remain in the tribe, but no longer hold a position of leadership or influential power. All of his allies and followers felt greatly and tragically deceived. Eventually, he would proceed north into Canada and the war of 1812 involving Britain would commence.

After the War of 1812, Tenskwatawa remained around Amherstburg and dealt with many British Indian agents. He eventually returned to America, and later died in Kansas in the fall of 1836.The rise and fall of Tenskwatawa’s influence over this period is something that seems to overlooked quite often. Though Tenskwatawa is generally portrayed as a flaky, unreliable leader who is overshadowed by his brother, his religion was critical to Tecumseh's success. It is of some interest to note that it was Tenskwatawa, not Tecumseh, who began the entire reform movement. The movement was designed to solve their current problems of American influx and culture, no matter how flawed their leader may have been. While Tecumseh will remain the ‘courageous’ and ‘upstanding’ of the brothers, it was Tenskwatawa whom enabled him to be that person.

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