

Protestant Ladder

By Henry H. & Eliza Spalding

Henry and Eliza Spalding, Presbyterian missionaries stationed at Lapwai on the Clearwater River in present-day western Idaho, produced this Protestant Ladder in 1845. The ladder may have been related to an 1839 Protestant Ladder (now lost) created by Methodist minister Daniel Lee, who was stationed in the Willamette Valley.

In 1836, two Presbyterian couples arrived in the Oregon Country to establish missions in the Plateau region. Marcus and Narcissa Whitman established a mission at Waiilatpu, several miles west of the present-day town of Walla Walla, Washington; and the Spaldings established their mission at Lapwai in the traditional territory of the Nez Perces (Nimi'ipuu). The first Catholic missionaries, Francis N. Blanchet and Modeste Demers arrived in the Pacific Northwest in 1838. By the early 1840s, the Presbyterians learned of the popularity of the Catholic Ladder produced by Blanchet in 1839.

Henry Spalding, with assistance from his wife Eliza, created the Protestant Ladder to compete with the Catholic Ladder. In Spalding's view, the Catholic Ladder misrepresented Protestantism as a withered branch of Christianity and promoted misguided teachings. The Protestant version focuses on presenting two competing histories of the Catholic and Protestant traditions, with emphasis on the errors of the Catholic tradition and the righteousness of the Protestant tradition. The Protestant Ladder offers more pictorial images, whereas the Catholic Ladder tends to rely on symbols to assist in the memorization of theological concepts.

The Protestant Ladder, created near the end of the Spaldings's tenure in Idaho, saw limited usage at Lapwai. The Spaldings attempted both Christian conversion and significant cultural change among the Nez Perces. In keeping with the Protestant tradition of stressing literacy and bible-reading, Henry Spalding produced the first printed book in the Nimi'ipuu language in 1839. The couple also worked to convince the Nez Perces to adopt a stationary, agricultural lifestyle and to cease traditional religious and cultural practices. The Nez Perces' response to missionization was markedly mixed. Although the number of Christian converts remained small, several leaders demonstrated a willingness to adopt elements of this outside culture that they believed would be beneficial to them. With differing expectations about the nature of their inter-relations, the Nez Perces and the Spaldings maintained an uneasy relationship until the pressures of large-scale American emigration and infectious disease epidemics severely eroded Native-newcomer relations. All Protestant missions in the Plateau region were closed in the late 1840s following an outbreak of armed conflict in the region and the onset of the Cayuse War.

Further Reading: Pipes, Nellie. "The Protestant Ladder." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 37, 1936: 237-240.

Drury, Clifford M. *Henry Harmon Spalding*. Caldwell, Idaho, 1936.

Miller, Christopher L. *Prophetic Worlds: Indians and Whites on the Columbia Plateau*. Seattle, Wash., 1985.

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