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The Credibility of the Book of Mormon Translators

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Richard Lloyd Anderson

The Credibility of the Book of Mormon Translators

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Woodrow Wilson Foundation Fellow, and was Honors Professor of the Year at Brigham Young in 1978. He has participated in field trips to Bible sites in the Mediterranean area and Israel. In this article, Anderson examines historical evidence that substantiates the credibility of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery. By citing documents that verify the autobiographical claims made by both Joseph and Oliver, Anderson establishes the argument that their private activities and writings were perfectly consistent with their public claims and statements. As he states, "Religious history is blind without unflinching use of history, but empty if history cannot include religious experience." Both history and religious experience are used in this article to verify the credibility of the two main translators of the Book of Mormon in their accounts of that work.

No two people knew more about the astounding beginnings of Mormonism. Schoolteacher Oliver Cowdery boarded with Joseph Smith's parents the winter after the manuscript of the first translation was lost. Joseph was then married and living over a hundred miles away in Harmony, Pennsylvania. His earliest record tells of frustration at spare-time progress: "My wife had written some for me to translate . . . and I cried unto the Lord that he would provide for me to accomplish the work whereunto he had commanded me."¹ Oliver had never seen Joseph Smith and was seeking answers about Joseph's ancient records and an angelic commission to translate them. Late in life Joseph's mother remembered Oliver's intense investigation, her full detail of which has only recently become available.² One day "he had been in a deep study all day, and it had been put in his heart that he would have the privilege of writing for Joseph when the term of school which he was then teaching was closed." The "next day" he braved drenching rain and slimy roads, determined to be with the Smiths instead of overnighting nearer the school. With more intense resolve to help Joseph,

Oliver said that conviction of the truth of the Book of Mormon was “working in my very bones, insomuch that I cannot for a moment get rid of it.”³

Oliver’s spiritual search was not yet over, according to Lucy Smith. Although he had prayed and was sure “that there is a work for me to do in this thing,” the Smiths counseled him:

We thought it was his privilege to know whether this was the case and advised him to seek for a testimony for himself. He did so, and received the witness spoken of in the Book of Doctrine and Covenants.⁴

The mentioned “witness” is in the revelation that came through Joseph Smith soon after the two young men met, the Lord saying to Oliver, “if you desire a further witness, cast your mind upon the night that you cried unto me.” The Lord asked, “Did I not speak peace to your mind?” and then emphasized: “I have told you things which no man knoweth.”⁵ Readers have long known that Oliver received an answer, for after the revelation he told it to Joseph, who said, “one night after he had retired to bed he called upon the Lord to know if these things were so, and the Lord manifested to him that they were true, but he had kept the circumstances entirely secret.”⁶ Thus a great vision is only suggested, a striking pattern in early Mormon history. The noisy braggart exaggerates his experiences and trumpets them for ego or profit. On the other hand, Joseph Smith acts like an authentic person in waiting for the appropriate time to share many details of his revelations. Both Joseph and Oliver shared deep convictions consistently but cautiously, leaving many profound dimensions to come out as their friends—and later historians—became better acquainted with their early lives. In this case, Joseph’s private record almost incidentally gives the full answer to Oliver’s prayer, which was never paraded for notoriety by either Joseph or Oliver:

[The] Lord appeared to a young man by the name of Oliver Cowdery and showed unto him the plates in a vision, and also the truth of the work and what the Lord was about to do through me, his unworthy servant. Therefore he was desirous to come and write for me to translate.⁷

Oliver's many sacrifices for the restored gospel had begun. Joseph's brother Samuel had planned to spend spring with the young Prophet, evidently taking responsibility for planting his small farm. So the helpful brother and the prospective scribe faced late March as soon as school ended for farmers' children:

The weather had for some time previous been very wet and disagreeable, occasionally freezing nights. This made the roads almost impassable, particularly in the middle of the day. But Mr. Cowdery was determined not to be detained by wind or weather and persevered until they arrived at Joseph's house, although Oliver froze one of his toes and suffered much on the road from fatigue, as well as Samuel.⁸

The meeting was a moment of destiny for both men. Oliver first wrote of it:

Near the time of the setting of the sun, Sabbath evening, April 5, 1829, my natural eyes for the first time beheld this brother. . . . On Monday the 6th, I assisted him arranging some business of a temporal nature, and on Tuesday the 7th, commenced to write the Book of Mormon.⁹

Joseph's later history echoes Oliver's recollection, indicating that "I had never seen him" until the meeting, and that "during the month of April, I continued to translate, and he to write, with little cessation, during which time we received several revelations."¹⁰ One revelation authorized Oliver to translate, though his lack of success brought instruction to continue as they had begun.¹¹ Joseph recalled May, when "we still continued the work of translation."¹² In June they moved to the Whitmer farm and completed the book. The result was that no one but Joseph and Oliver knew intimate details of the whole translation. Before moving from Pennsylvania, they were given restored priesthood authority together in daylight appearances of ancient apostles and prophets. And at noontime both of them stood before the angel as he displayed the plates to the Three Witnesses. No two knew more about the astounding beginnings of Mormonism. The reality of these events must be measured largely by the credibility of Oliver Cowdery and Joseph Smith.

These men can now be studied in depth at an early point, largely because of the historical upgrading of the extensive Mormon archives in the last two decades.

Belief in another's story is normally based on practical and instinctive tests that teachers and parents use with children, careful buyers with sellers, or discerning citizens with officials suspected of duplicity. Does the story fit known events accompanying it? Is the story verified by other eyewitnesses? Is the story told plausibly and without obvious exaggerations? Are private comments consistent with public explanations? Do details given spontaneously add up to a consistent picture? Does the person telling the story have a record of honesty? Finally, what sincerity does the teller project?

This last question is hard to pin down historically because it is hard to measure in real life. How many times are the real facts shown by the intuition of a psychologist, or a mother, or by the subtle currents of a lie detector? History cannot fully replay the manner in which something was said or watch the expressions of Joseph or Oliver telling of their visions. But it can search their private language for clues on what motivated them in life. It can furnish documents that capture their religious feelings. Above all, the religious believer asks whether true spirituality is found in the person he trusts, whether it is Christ, Paul, Wesley, or Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery.

The above tests can be complex when the issues are interwoven. For instance, consistency of story weaves into the manner in which the story was told. But three strong issues follow here that can be illuminated by fresh discussion. They are highlighted by subheadings.

HISTORICAL VERIFICATION

The translation story invites historical investigation. For instance, Cowdery's recollection of meeting Joseph on April 5, 1829, is given above, with his comment that they took care of "some business of a temporal nature" the next day. A land contract exists between Joseph Smith and his father-in-law, dated April 6, 1829, and signed by Oliver Cowdery and Samuel

Smith, who Lucy says arrived in Harmony the previous day with him.¹³ As another example, translating was difficult because Joseph was poor, and the translators could not work for a living while devoting their full time to producing a large manuscript. Joseph's earliest record gives his financial condition when Oliver arrived: "We had become reduced in property, and my wife's father was about to turn me out of doors, and I cried unto the Lord that he would provide for me to accomplish the work whereunto he had commanded me."¹⁴ Later he summarized their conditions during translation:

Mr. Joseph Knight, Sr., of Colesville, Broome County, New York, having heard of the manner in which we were occupying our time, . . . very kindly and considerately brought us a quantity of provisions, in order that we might not be interrupted in the work of translation by the want of such necessaries of life. . . . [H]e several times brought us supplies, a distance of at least thirty miles, which enabled us to continue the work, which otherwise we must have relinquished for a season.¹⁵

Knight's own recollections survive, a talkative account that displays little awareness of what the Prophet had independently said. With unique details Knight confirms translation during poverty. Before Cowdery's coming, Joseph Smith was "poor," and "his wife's father and family were all against him and would not help him." Knight mentions several visits he made back and forth between upper Pennsylvania and his lower New York home. He gave food, some money, and writing paper. On one trip Knight found that Joseph and Oliver had run out of food, suspending writing to "find a place to work for provisions." As the Prophet said, Knight's help enabled them to continue translating.

Verification involves one of Cowdery's two descriptions of that period, which emphasizes his role as scribe:

I wrote with my own pen the entire Book of Mormon (save a few pages) as it fell from the lips of the Prophet as he translated it by the gift and power of God, by means of the Urim and Thummim, or as it is called by that book, "Holy Interpreters." . . . That book is true.

Sidney Ridgon did not write it. Mr. Spaulding did not write it. I wrote it myself as it fell from the lips of the Prophet.¹⁶

Remains of the original Book of Mormon manuscript match Cowdery's description. Decay took its toll after it was placed in the humid cornerstone at Nauvoo. But 30 percent of Joseph Smith's dictation to Cowdery is now preserved in LDS archives. Dean Jessee has analyzed the surviving leaves:

Of the 144 pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript in the Church Historian's Office, 124 pages are in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery; eleven were probably written by John Whitmer; and twelve others are the work of an unidentified scribe.¹⁷

This means that 86 percent of the manuscript remaining was written by Oliver Cowdery. Since the handwriting of others is limited to 1 Nephi, Cowdery very probably did all the rest, in which case he wrote 95 percent of the manuscript. Thus he is correct in saying that he wrote "the entire Book of Mormon (save a few pages)," the known exception adding up to 23 pages done by others.¹⁸

Oliver Cowdery's other description is familiar because it speaks on the central issue, the inspiration of the process:

These were days never to be forgotten—to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the *inspiration* of heaven, awakened the utmost gratitude of this bosom! Day after day I continued uninterrupted to write from his mouth, as he translated with the *Urim* and *Thummim* . . . the history or record called The Book of Mormon.¹⁹

Thus Cowdery reinforced Joseph Smith's terse phrases from the beginning. The Prophet's first edition preface said that the plates were translated "by the gift and power of God," that this work was completed according to "the commandments of God . . . through his grace and mercy."²⁰ Joseph no doubt wrote this in 1829 for publication early the following year. So Joseph Smith's words of deep faith are contemporaneous with final translation. And Oliver's earliest letter also comes from the last month of the translation, one filled with quotations from a new

revelation on the value of each soul before God. Oliver encouraged Hyrum Smith to begin to share the glorious restored gospel:

Stir up the minds of our friends against the time when we come unto you, that then they may be willing to take upon them the name of Christ, for that is the name by which they shall be called at the last day.²¹

The practical point of the letter is to thank the Rockwells for shoes, indicating a possible visit. But the writer's goal is clearly spiritual, for most of the letter stresses discipleship and follows the opening theme: "These few lines I write unto you, feeling anxious for your steadfastness in the great cause of which you have been called to advocate." The letter is unsophisticated and intense, a spontaneous burst of faith. It shows the inner elation that Oliver later claimed to have experienced while working on the Book of Mormon. Written in the third month of translation, it confirms the sustained enthusiasm of the secretary.

These sample verifications show that the Book of Mormon translators met and did practical business at the place and time that they reported, that their poverty and Knight's help were just as they claimed, and that Oliver Cowdery in fact wrote as much of the manuscript as was reported. So their memories were accurate for physical circumstances. But something more appears in the investigation—the enthusiasm of spirit, the state of mind that they claimed to have. Here history comes close to reconstructing what is spiritual, for the translators' thoughts are on record at that critical time. During 1829 Oliver Cowdery seems totally sincere and moved by altruism. From his first days in the Smith household there is the deepest desire to serve God, followed by his sacrifices in translation and his personal zeal. Such inner experience is the end product for most religions and the point of beginning for Mormon foundations. For Oliver Cowdery and Joseph Smith moved far beyond the inner light of the Pietist, Quaker, or Seeker, adding their firm witness that supernatural beings authenticated their translation, displayed the ancient metal book, and gave authority to refound Christ's church.

UNAFFECTED HISTORY

There is a credibility of modesty in supernatural claims. Paul's personality was hardly modest, but he had a healthy reserve about narrating "the abundance of the revelations."²² Several visions in Acts are not even mentioned in his letters. His first known reference to the Damascus vision is a stark, "Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?"²³ Impressive details would come later as Luke wrote Paul's early history, also including Paul's two speeches about his early visions.²⁴ Scholars are generally suspicious of expansion and interpolation. So although Joseph Smith has taken much criticism for not detailing his visitations at the beginning, this apparent historical weakness is really a great religious strength. One of the most obvious facts in organizations is the inverse ratio of power and assertiveness. The person with real authority needs no excess words, a truth well known to psychologists, who perceive overacting as a telling admission of weakness. Joseph and Oliver later said that their authority to baptize was first given by the miraculous appearance of John the Baptist, who then commanded them to baptize each other. In 1829 they firmly acted on such power by adding the phrase "having authority given me of Jesus Christ" to the traditional baptismal formula.²⁵ In 1830 they also used higher authority in performing spiritual ordinances done by New Testament Apostles, the earliest reference stating that Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer were under Joseph and were as "Paul, mine apostle, for you are called even with that same calling with which he was called."²⁶ In 1830 the position of the Church was clear, as it was that year to the journalist who reported Cowdery as saying that "the ordinances of the gospel have not been regularly administered since the days of the apostles, till the said Smith and himself commenced the work."²⁷ But at that point no document explains the basis for this position.

Some critics charge fraud, since Joseph and Oliver did not write up their experiences then, but this is normal life. The two men later particularized as they had opportunity. The careful diarist is rare in any society. What biographers normally get are

general statements about important experiences, followed by what further circumstances their subjects might recall if they are writing or being interviewed. In 1832 Joseph Smith made a raw record of his main religious experiences, and he started with a survey in this sequence: “testimony from on high”; “ministering of angels”; “reception of the holy priesthood by the ministering of angels to administer the letter of the gospel . . . and the ordinances”; “reception of the high priesthood after the holy order of the son of the living God . . . the keys of the kingdom of God.”²⁸ Thus Joseph privately recorded the sequence of his first vision of God, Moroni’s appearances in connection with Book of Mormon translation, and the restoration of the lesser and higher priesthoods—forthright but concise statements of revelation and authority. A formal summary was printed in 1835, a revelation stating the source of priesthood authority:

John I have sent unto you, my servants, Joseph Smith, Jr., and Oliver Cowdery, to ordain you unto this first priesthood which you have received . . . and also . . . Peter, and James, and John, whom I have sent unto you, by whom I have ordained you and confirmed you to be apostles . . . and bear the keys of your ministry . . . unto whom I have committed the keys of my kingdom.²⁹

These are crisp claims, carrying little description or justification. Yet Oliver and Joseph both saw the need to make fuller reports. In biography, elaboration is not usually invention, because those who make history are usually too busy to write it. There are more war memoirs than war diaries. The Church grew, obtained a stable location, and established a regular periodical circulating to the whole Church. Then Oliver Cowdery was driven from Jackson County and came to Kirtland to carry on the interrupted Church newspaper. Soon he announced a decision to expand a recollection into “a full history of the rise of the Church of the Latter-day Saints, and the most interesting parts of its progress,” a project that faded after telling quite fully how Joseph Smith learned of the plates and finally obtained them.³⁰ Cowdery started the series with the coming of John the Baptist, a narrative filled with the spon-

taneous detail of the eyewitness. Oliver spoke of the "voice of the Redeemer," the angelic glory superimposed on the brilliant May sunlight, John's reassuring voice, which "though mild, pierced to the center," then of kneeling "when we received under his hand the holy priesthood." He poured out gratitude to God for the restored authority and for "the majestic beauty and glory which surrounded us on this occasion."³¹ Cowdery's words are eloquent and convey the impact of an overwhelming experience. They are more impressive because Oliver waited for a natural opportunity and did not feel forced into a public release at the beginning.

Likewise, Joseph Smith struggled for years for the chance to write his history in depth, finally beginning in earnest in 1838, several years after Cowdery had summarized priesthood restoration.³² Joseph added his own particulars, not at all relying on the Cowdery narrative. He described the prayer for knowledge of authority to baptize, the angel descending "in a cloud of light," the ordination, the baptism, and the subsequent ecstasy of "great and glorious blessings from our Heavenly Father" as the translators rejoiced and prophesied by the Holy Ghost.³³ If Joseph had been skilled at publicity, he would have circulated all this with the Book of Mormon at the outset. Instead, it came artlessly as his later life furnished time and scribes for his autobiography.

The story of higher priesthood restoration was even more cautiously told. Its reality rests on the first statements quoted above; as discussed, they follow the inverse principle that real authority needs no self-conscious explanation of it. And there is a corollary operating—an inverse law of sacredness which dictates that the highest gifts will be reported guardedly and reverently. On at least seven occasions Joseph Smith alluded to higher priesthood restoration, but he never saw the need to give a full account.³⁴ In the meantime the tragic estrangement of Joseph and Oliver came, the latter withdrawing from the Church for a decade. During this separation both translators gave new details that were consistent with the unguarded comments of the other. And neither argued the point—both took for granted the angels' ordination. For instance, Cowdery

wrote his brother-in-law that his reputation must be cleared before returning to the Church because its credibility rested on "the private character of the man who bore that testimony." He had "stood in the presence of John with our departed Brother Joseph, to receive the lesser priesthood." He had also stood "in the presence of Peter to receive the greater."³⁵ When prematurely aged by his lung condition, Oliver Cowdery returned to the exiled Mormons. Obviously making his peace with God before dying, he very simply reviewed what he knew about the beginnings:

I was present with Joseph when an holy angel from God came down from heaven and conferred or restored the Aaronic priesthood and said at the same time that it should remain upon the earth while the earth stands. I was also present with Joseph when the Melchizedek Priesthood was conferred by the holy angels of God, which we then confirmed upon each other by the will and commandment of God.³⁶

Eighteen years before, the first printed copies of the Book of Mormon carried a testimony of revelation printed over the names of three witnesses, Oliver being one:

And we declare with words of soberness, that an angel of God came down from heaven, and he brought and laid before our eyes, that we beheld and saw the plates, and the engravings thereon; . . . [T]he voice of the Lord commanded us that we should bear record of it.³⁷

Again we see the rhetoric of assertion, not persuasion. The public statement is forceful, but it is not descriptive in trying to overawe the reader by divine brilliance, costume, or countenance. These realistic features were given later as the Three Witnesses freely spoke and answered questions, last-surviving David Whitmer sometimes submitting to extensive cross-examination by newspaper reporters. Through decades after seeing the angel, none of the three denied their daylight experience or reduced it to a subjective level.³⁸ In reality there are four witnesses, for Joseph Smith had been with them. He gave the first printed details of the angelic revelation and the voice of

God to the Three Witnesses. This procedure would be odd for a conspiracy, for the three severed their membership in 1838; Joseph produced this part of his history manuscript in 1839 and did not publish it until 1842.³⁹ He dared to greatly enlarge the story without consulting any of them.

The world would read the witnesses' declaration in the Book of Mormon, but believers and serious investigators could feel the dimensions of the experience in Joseph's later history. There he portrayed the first "light above us in the air" and the angel's appearance as he held the ancient record, turning "over the leaves one by one, so that we could see . . . the engravings thereon distinctly."⁴⁰ He also included the words of the voice of God. The 1830 public testimony only summarized the Lord's words approving the manuscript and commanding the listeners to witness, but Joseph Smith gave the more complete and persuasive version later:

<i>1830 Testimony</i>	<i>1839 History</i>
that "they have been translated by the gift and power of God."	These plates have been revealed by the power of God, and they have been translated by the power of God. The translation of them which you have seen is correct, and I command
that "we should bear record of it."	you to bear record of what you now see and hear. ⁴¹

In form the 1830 words are a clear condensation of sentences that would originally be spoken in an expanded form. Quotation in indirect discourse of the third person tends to be more compressed than the first version in first person. In other words, approximate quotation is generally more concise than exact quotation. Thus not all expanded accounts are interpolations.

The shift from early simple records to later complex ones tempts the critic to see fabrication. But no real analyst can ignore the purpose of the compositions he studies. The issue is not really *short* versus *long* accounts, but *beginning testimony*

versus *later history*. Symbolic of all vision reports, the above seventeen words of 1830 became forty-four as the Prophet told God's message in 1839. Early visions—even those seen by Joseph Smith alone—were mostly reported in the main two stages of a shorthand declaration followed by later graphic narrative. It is beside the point to apply a strict historical measure to early Mormonism, because it first acted on the need for summary testimony to announce its new message to the world. The need for history developed as the Church grew. It then produced history at a point which, compared to other world religions, was very early, and with superbly direct information. The story of Book of Mormon translation and visions was produced mainly between the years 1832 and 1839 and hardly grew after that. There is no ongoing mythology of founding, but after those years merely summary testimony based on the narrative record.

Oliver Cowdery and Joseph Smith are consistent with themselves and with each other in discussing the visions, whether in short or extensive form. Usually, they simply reiterate what they have seen, without attempts to oversell or overexplain. For instance, a Shaker community reported Oliver's testimony a year after finishing the manuscript: "He stated that he had been one who assisted in the translation of the golden Bible, and had seen the angel. . . . He appeared meek and mild."⁴² Nearly two decades later his Book of Mormon knowledge was recorded on returning to the Church: "I beheld with my eyes, and handled with my hands, the gold plates from which it was translated. I also beheld the Interpreters."⁴³

There are advantages in examining Joseph and Oliver through documents, for lifetime patterns appear there that could not be judged by their first converts. But those converts made decisions based on personal impressions of look and tone. One can approximate this experience through Parley P. Pratt's letter to his Canadian converts. Six years after his own conversion he was still overwhelmed by the reality of the Prophet's testimony of the beginning:

One of the most interesting meetings I ever attended was held in the Lord's house Sunday before last. One week

before, word was publicly given that Brother Joseph Smith, Jr. would give a relation of the coming forth of the records and also of the rise of the Church and of his experience. Accordingly a vast concourse assembled at an early hour. Every seat was crowded, and four or five hundred people stood up in the aisles. Brother Smith gave the history of these things, relating many particulars of the manner of his first visions, and the spirit and power of God was upon him in bearing testimony, inso-much that many, if not most of the congregation were in tears. As for myself I can say that all the reasonings in uncertainty and all the conclusions drawn from the writings of others . . . dwindle into insignificance when compared with living testimony.⁴⁴

RELIGIOUS CREDIBILITY

Joseph and Oliver kept private journals and wrote many candid letters, current tools from which to estimate their motives and values. Part of their credibility is that they were generally regarded by associates as honest men. As with Lincoln, public storms raged around them but personal friends were convinced of their truthfulness. Joseph's religiously divided family knew him well, and all became Mormons, confident that his word was reliable.⁴⁵ Oliver Cowdery's non-Mormon community respected him as a man of honor.⁴⁶ These facts are important, though the careful student wants to confront the men as personally as did Parley P. Pratt. New manuscript sources opening up in the last few decades furnish much more information on these men, and a high proportion is personal. A main thrust of present Mormon studies is the reopening of early records. Thus there are now better tools with which to know the youthful Joseph Smith. Although secular biographers sought to do this with Freudian theory, they used guesswork instead of firsthand sources. Joseph Smith speaks personally in many documents from the early 1830s. Nauvoo manuscripts, on the other hand, often reveal his extensive responsibilities more than his inner feelings. He was then a leader directing the economic, political, social, and religious problems of thousands. Joseph's Nauvoo diaries are also inferior to his Kirt-

land diaries in personal reflections because the pressure of affairs made entries shorter, and they seem more the product of secretaries than previously. In the Nauvoo diaries it is harder to find the private thoughts of this busy administrator.

The best collection of the Prophet's teachings contains about four hundred pages, and a hundred of these are devoted to the New York and Ohio periods, the first half of the Prophet's direction of the Church. Moreover, this New York and Ohio selection features business letters, doctrinal expositions, and official Presidency statements. The title of the book, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, of course indicates its design, which as a byproduct gives a formal image of the Prophet. But the intimate view of the Prophet is found in the minutes of talks, Joseph's private diaries, and his personal letters—and much of this material is unpublished. For instance, his earliest known letter closely follows the completion of the Book of Mormon translation and effectively shows his religious concerns, not only for the typesetting of the new work of scripture, but for his family and the small nucleus of believers near Palmyra, New York. He instructs Oliver:

Tell them that our prayers are put up daily for them that they may be prospered in every good word and work, and that they may be preserved from sin here and from the consequence of sin hereafter. And now, dear brother, be faithful in the discharge of every duty, looking for the reward of the righteous. And now may God of his infinite mercy keep and preserve us spotless until his coming and receive us all to rest with him in eternal repose through the atonement of Christ our Lord. Amen.⁴⁷

Joseph's critics include Christian fundamentalists who should accurately label him deeply Christian, totally devoted to God and his work. The early Joseph is above all the Joseph of faith, of great humility, and of constant prayer. Two 1832 letters to his wife symbolize this. Waiting for Newel Whitney's leg to mend in Indiana, he does not tell of religious study or practical planning. Instead he tells Emma that he has "visited a grove" daily to "give vent to all the feelings of my heart in

meditation and prayer."⁴⁸ Waiting for Newel Whitney to purchase goods in New York City, the Prophet does not have a taste for sightseeing or seeking out libraries. Instead he prefers private "reading and praying and holding communion with the Holy Spirit and writing to you."⁴⁹ The same year he opens his private journal with a prayer: "Oh, may God grant that I may be directed in all my thoughts; oh, bless thy servant. Amen."⁵⁰

Oliver Cowdery's first letters are also intense with love for God and Christ, the first already quoted, written during Book of Mormon translation. Cowdery's next letter answered the one just quoted from the Prophet; it shared some practical affairs but mostly shared faith in the plan of salvation stressed in the Book of Mormon:

My dear brother, when I think of the goodness of Christ I feel no desire to live or stay here upon the shores of this world of iniquity, only to serve my maker and be if possible an instrument in his hands of doing some good in his cause, with his grace to assist me.⁵¹

Six weeks later Oliver sent Joseph another letter as Father Smith travelled to summon his son on typesetting business. Knowing that they would soon see each other, Oliver wrote a short but feeling letter, again addressing some practical problems but sharing sorrow for a wicked world:

I feel almost as though I could quit time and fly away and be at rest in the bosom of my Redeemer for the many deep feelings of sorrow and the many long strugglings of prayer in sorrow for the sins of my fellow beings.⁵²

These letters disclose no intrigue—only mutual faith that their authors were engaged in a great, divine cause. Such letters cannot be written for effect, for they are unstudied and unpolished, in this respect quite different from the 1830 testimonies of the witnesses or the Book of Mormon preface. Furthermore, for a long time they lay obscure in Church letter books without any attempt being made to prove anything by them. Their recovery now recreates the earnest faith operating in Book of Mormon translation.

The glimpses in council records sustain the intense dedication shown in the earliest Cowdery-Smith letters. The atmosphere is not one of dreamy perfection; the millennium has not arrived, but these brethren are preparing a people for it. Church recorders captured sincere strugglings and strivings, Oliver exhorts his brethren on "the necessity of having their hearts drawn out in prayer to God and also realize that they are in the immediate presence of God."⁵³ Joseph speaks of the potential of faith: "And could we all come together with one heart and one mind in perfect faith, the veil might as well be rent today as next week, or any other time."⁵⁴ A year later the Prophet has the same goal, urging Church leaders to pray for a special revelation of comfort and instruction: "To receive revelation and the blessing of heaven it was necessary to have our minds on God and exercise faith and become of one heart and of one mind." He asked the leaders to pray "separately and vocally," which they did; the result was the elevated and stimulating section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants, a treasury of spiritual insight.⁵⁵

Profound faith and reverence characterize Joseph and Oliver in the early years of the Church. The above illustrations of spirituality all date to 1832, in a period of about three years after the translation of the Book of Mormon. And the same qualities continue in their private journals through the next three years, the peak of Oliver's prominence in the Church. The early Joseph and Oliver are men with missions, servants of Christ devoted to his work. This is supremely relevant in judging their Book of Mormon translation. They are the kind of men that God would use in such a great work. Their lives and thoughts are in harmony with what they claimed to do. He who invited men to ask and receive ought to respond to such seekers after his kingdom. Their intense prayerfulness is consistent with communion with God. Not only is their translation story credible by numerous practical tests—the translators themselves emerge as spiritually credible.

SUMMARY

This essay joins others in asking what intellectual tests the Book of Mormon can meet, but that book also transcends in-

tellectual tests. It closes with the invitation to pray and know through the Holy Ghost, the invitation of every true prophet. Paul's travels are exciting reading in Luke's Acts of the Apostles. That work is respected by many tough-minded historians and classicists, who accept its rich information about ancient sea voyages, cities, and social customs. But one should step from physical authenticity to its spiritual witness that Paul and Peter performed miracles in Christ's name, and brought salvation from God to their converts. Paul warned that spiritual things must be spiritually discerned and chided the Corinthians for using only reason to determine what parts of the gospel to believe.⁵⁶ Neither Jesus nor his apostles offered the world painless belief. They challenged all to put God's cause above money, power, cheap pleasure, status, and reputation. Those who confound the logical with the respectable will not easily see why Paul said, "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise."⁵⁷ Early Mormon Jared Carter had no problem in believing that the Spirit might speak through the unsophisticated as he measured Joseph Smith in an 1831 meeting: "Brother Joseph, notwithstanding he is not naturally talented for a speaker, yet he was filled with the power of the Holy Ghost, so that he spoke as I never heard man speak."⁵⁸

Religious history is blind without unflinching use of history, but empty if history cannot include religious experience. Knowing God is closely related to knowing love, ethical values, and other inner realities. Did Oliver and Joseph translate by revelation and receive testimony and authority from angels? One must judge their credibility and discern the product of their work. Their activities are verified and their lifetime testimonies unwavering. The translators' minds harmonize with their prophetic call. Moreover, their claims are phrased with the confident simplicity of men who expect to be believed. What they said is important, but so also is how they said it; lack of overstatement in their first testimonies underlines depth of conviction. Were they sincere but deceived? The counterquestion is whether God and prayer are realities. If so, Joseph and Oliver cannot be faulted in prayerfulness and Christian discipleship. Their words are impressive by every test at the beginning and by the supreme test of enduring to the end, for ridicule and per-

secution brought no change. Their testimony appears in many forms, including the forceful context of the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, a time of God's favor yet glowing in the records of scores who were there. One was Oliver Cowdery, who privately wrote of the visible glory that filled the temple in the evening meeting.⁵⁹ He also reported the day's dedication service with characteristic restraint. Near the end, "President J. Smith then arose and bore record of his mission." Soon after, "President O. Cowdery spoke and testified of the truth of the Book of Mormon, and of the work of the Lord in these last days."⁶⁰

By this time documents disclose these founders' personal feelings about their testimony. A secular society hardly recognizes that decisions can be made in terms of future accountability. But the Prophet reveals this perspective in adjusting a conflict with the intense comment, "I would be willing to be weighed in the scale of truth today in this matter, and risk it in the day of judgment."⁶¹ The Prophet and Cowdery kept journals with periodic and profound introspection. Thus Cowdery's editorial farewell rings true in saying that he had well counted the cost of trying to "persuade others to believe as myself," and he willingly faced the "judgment seat of Christ," who would see "the integrity of my heart."⁶² The names of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery led the rest in certifying the truth of the events and teachings of the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, the first book to name the messengers restoring both the Book of Mormon and the two priesthoods.⁶³ The preface, stamped with Oliver Cowdery's phraseology, expresses their solemn view of eternal responsibility:

We do not present this little volume with any other expectation than that we are to be called to answer to every principle advanced, in that day when the secrets of all hearts will be revealed, and the reward of every man's labor be given him.⁶⁴

NOTES

1. Joseph Smith, "A History of the Life of Joseph Smith," 1832 manuscript that was the Prophet's first attempt to give "an account of his marvelous

experiences." Portions are dictated, but Dean Jessee has determined that significant parts are in the Prophet's handwriting. For background see Dean C. Jessee, "Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9:275 (1969). This manuscript and others not noted are held by the LDS Historical Department. Documents are herein transcribed with verbal exactness but with moderate editorial correction of spelling and punctuation.

2. The outline and approximate words following are found in the recollections of Oliver Cowdery's Manchester stay in the edited publication, Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Liverpool, 1853), pp. 128-29. However, the quotations and personal details come from her preliminary manuscript, being prepared for publication by this author.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. Doctrine and Covenants, current ed. 6:22-24, 1833 Book of Commandments 5:11.

6. Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* 1:35, this volume (Salt Lake City, 1902) dictated by the Prophet and compiled under his direction. All quotations agree with the Nauvoo printing of 1842 unless otherwise noted.

7. "A History of the Life of Joseph Smith," cit. n. 1.

8. Lucy Smith, preliminary manuscript. Cp. *Biographical Sketches*, pp. 130-31.

9. *Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1:14 (1834).

10. *History of the Church* 1:32, 35.

11. See *ibid.*, p. 36, D&C 8 and 9, and the 1833 first printings in Book of Commandments 7 and 8.

12. *History of the Church* 1:39.

13. Agreement of Joseph Smith, Jr., and Isaac Hale, April 6, 1829, for Joseph's purchase of the latter's thirteen-acre farm, consideration \$200, with \$114 due by the end of that April. In the light of the next quotation on Joseph's poverty and the risk of being turned away, it is possible that Cowdery's teaching salary secured the home for translation.

14. "A History of the Life of Joseph Smith," cit. n. 1. Part of this quotation was used in the opening paragraph of this article to show Joseph's need of a full-time scribe. His prayer sought this assistance and also relief from financial pressure.

15. *History of the Church* 1:47, the final "which" following the 1842 text. These 1839 memoirs are supplemented by Joseph's 1842 reflections (*HC* 5:124): "Joseph Knight, Sr., . . . was among the number of the first to administer to my necessities, while I was laboring in the commencement of the bringing forth of the work of the Lord."

16. Reuben Miller, Journal, Oct. 21, 1848. For background on Miller's capability and interest in Cowdery, see Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Reuben

Miller as a Recorder of Oliver Cowdery's Reaffirmations," *BYU Studies* 8:277 (1968).

17. Dean C. Jessee, "The Original Book of Mormon Manuscript," *BYU Studies* 10:276 (1970). Recent attempts to equate the unidentified scribe with Solomon Spaulding were a bubble burst by the careful analysis of Jessee in the *Deseret News, Church News*, Aug. 20, 1977, pp. 3-5.

18. Statistics are calculated from inventory of pages in Jessee, *BYU Studies* 10:273, cit. n. 17.

19. Cit. n. 9 above.

20. Quoted phrases are from a special "Preface" subscribed "The Author," an explanation of the 116-page loss that appeared in the 1830 edition but is not carried into current editions. The Prophet repeated such language many times in summarizing his translation, examples of which are in Richard L. Anderson, "By the Gift and Power of God," *Ensign*, Sept., 1977, p. 79.

21. Oliver Cowdery to Hyrum Smith, June 14, 1829, Fayette, New York, Joseph Smith Letter Book 1. For a convenient transcription, see Lyndon W. Cook, *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah 1981), p. 29. Correct "unto Zion" there to "unto you."

22. 2 Corinthians 12:7, where Paul resumes the first person after indirectly narrating a great vision to avoid claiming "glory" for himself. Except for charges of his enemies, he would not have listed his sacrifices (11:18-33) or cautiously summarized the greatest of his "visions and revelations of the Lord" (12:1-7).

23. 1 Corinthians 9:1, a letter written about A.D. 56. This is before the composition of Acts, which could not be written until some six years afterward, the date of events in its last chapter. In 1 Corinthians 15:8 Paul also testifies of seeing Christ without giving any particulars.

24. Luke's history of Paul's vision is in Acts 9, and Paul's two speeches on his vision are in Acts 22 and 26. For dating, cp. the previous note.

25. D&C 20:73 gives the current LDS baptismal formula, "Having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." The beginning phrase dates from the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, before which time manuscripts and printed versions read "having authority given me," the same claim of being "commissioned" but with different wording. The ordinance sections of D&C 20 were put together in 1829 by Oliver Cowdery, who relied heavily on the Book of Mormon manuscript. His document begins by saying he wrote it by "a command of God" and closes with "written in the year of our Lord and Savior 1829—a true copy of the articles of the Church of Christ. O.C." The baptismal formula exactly follows 3 Nephi 11:25 and shows that the first baptisms of the restored Church asserted a special appointment from God not claimed in orthodox Christian baptisms. Both the Prophet and David Whitmer wrote of baptisms during 1829. For a transcription of the full Cowdery document, see

Robert J. Woodford, *The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants* (BYU Ph.D. Dissertation, 1974), the first pages concerning D&C 20. For the traditional baptismal formula, see Mt. 28:19-20.

26. D&C 18:9, the same wording of the 1833 Book of Commandments. The revelation came in June, 1829, which suggests that they had by then received apostolic authority, which was not fully used until the 1830 organization of the Church. In Acts 8:12-20, confirmation of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands requires a higher authority than does baptism.

27. *Painesville [Ohio] Telegraph*, Nov. 16, 1830.

28. "A History of the Life of Joseph Smith," cit. n. 1. This 1832 source is now the earliest priesthood restoration reference, supplementing Richard L. Anderson, "The Second Witness of Priesthood Restoration," *Improvement Era*, Sept., 1968, p. 15. There correct "1842" to 1839 on p. 15, and correct "1833" to 1835 on p. 20.

29. D&C 27:8, 12-13, first printed in this form in the 1835 edition. As the preface indicates, the revising committee was the First Presidency, listed in the order of Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, and F. G. Williams. Cp. the close of this article, including n. 63.

30. Quotations are from Cowdery's preface to his historical installments, *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1:13 (1834).

31. *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1:15-16 (1834), also found in recent editions of the Pearl of Great Price, the end of the Joseph Smith section. A fraudulent pamphlet with Cowdery's name imitates and diminishes this confident language, but no copy before 1906 has been found, nor was it referred to in the 1848 discussion on Cowdery returning to the Church. For a survey of this problem, see Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City, 1981), pp. 172-73. Cp. Anderson, "The Second Witness," *Improvement Era*, Sept., 1968, pp. 20, 22.

32. For the Prophet's problems in starting his history, see Dean C. Jessee, "The Reliability of Joseph Smith's History," *Journal of Mormon History* 3:30-34 (1976).

33. *History of the Church* 1:39-42.

34. These seven accounts are in records or journals of Kirtland and Nauvoo. One is the "History of the Life of Joseph Smith," cit. n. 1; the remaining six are in Anderson, "The Second Witness," *Improvement Era*, Sept., 1968, pp. 15-16. The Dibble recollection on p. 18 is subtracted as not contemporary.

35. Oliver Cowdery to Phineas Young, Mar. 23, 1846, Tiffin, Ohio, Photofacsimile in Anderson, "The Second Witness," *Improvement Era*, Sept., 1968, p. 21.

36. Miller, Journal, Oct. 21, 1848.

37. "The Testimony of Three Witnesses," at the end of the 1830 edition of

the Book of Mormon, reprinted with minor grammatical corrections in the introductory section of current editions.

38. See Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, particularly chs. 4, 6, and 8.

39. According to *History of the Church* 1:18-19, on May 2, 1838, Joseph Smith had completed the history up to getting the plates from the angel. He may have continued to the witnesses' revelation during that year. The earliest manuscript is apparently recopied, since it was written by James Mulholland, the Prophet's scribe a short time during 1838 and for many months during 1839, during which time events were written up to the fall of 1830. Thus Joseph related the witnesses' vision no later than 1839. See Dean C. Jessee, "The Writing of Joseph Smith's History," *BYU Studies* 11:450 and 441 (1971).

40. *History of the Church* 1:54-55.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 55. (Quotation marks added by author.)

42. Journal of Ashbel Kitchell, ms. at the Shaker Museum, Old Chatham, N.Y. See Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, p. 55, where a fuller quotation is given.

43. Miller, Journal, Oct. 21, 1848.

44. Parley P. Pratt to LDS leaders in Canada, Nov. 27, 1836, Kirtland, Ohio, called to my attention by descendant Steven Pratt.

45. See Richard Lloyd Anderson, "The Trustworthiness of Young Joseph Smith," *Improvement Era*, Oct., 1970, p. 82.

46. See Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, ch. 3: "Oliver Cowdery: Non-Mormon Lawyer." Cp. Anderson, "Oliver Cowdery, Esq.: His Non-Church Decade," Truman G. Madsen and Charles G. Tate, Jr. (eds.), *To the Glory of God* (Salt Lake City, 1972), p. 199.

47. Joseph Smith, Jr., to Oliver Cowdery, Oct. 22, 1829, Harmony, Penn., Joseph Smith Letter Book 1.

48. Joseph Smith, Jr., to Emma Smith, June 6, 1832, Greenville, Indiana, Chicago Historical Society ms. This and the next letter quoted are scheduled for publication by the author in 1983 in a source book on the letters of Joseph and Emma Smith.

49. Joseph Smith, Jr., to Emma Smith, Oct. 13, 1832, in the archives of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Cp. n. 48.

50. Joseph Smith, Journal, Nov. 27 or 28, 1832, this entry and the opening pages identified as being in the handwriting of Joseph Smith by Dean C. Jessee. He is preparing a scholarly edition of this diary and other personal writings of Joseph Smith.

51. Oliver Cowdery to Joseph Smith, Jr., Nov. 6, 1829, Manchester, New York, Joseph Smith Letter Book 1.

52. Oliver Cowdery to Joseph Smith, Jr., Dec. 28, 1829, Manchester, New York, Joseph Smith Letter Book 1.

53. Far West Record, p. 20, Dec. 6, 1831, Randolph County, Indiana.

54. Ibid., p. 11, Oct. 25, 1831, Orange, Ohio, also cit. Joseph Fielding Smith (ed.), *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, 1977 ed.), p. 9.

55. Kirtland Council Minute Book, Dec. 27, 1832, cit. Cook, *Revelations of Joseph Smith*, p. 181.

56. Cp. 1 Corinthians 2:9-14 with 1:18-25.

57. 1 Corinthians 1:27.

58. Jared Carter, *Autobiography*, narration of June 3, 1831, meeting. Cp. Davis Bitton, *Guide to Mormon Diaries and Autobiographies* (Provo, Utah, 1977), p. 62, Jared Carter entry.

59. Leonard J. Arrington, "Oliver Cowdery's Kirtland, Ohio, 'Sketch Book,'" *BYU Studies* 12:426 (1972), Mar. 27, 1836 entry.

60. *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 2:281 (1836).

61. "Sketch Book for the Use of Joseph Smith, Jr.," Jan. 16, 1836, Joseph Smith's speech to the Twelve. It appears with slight modification in *History of the Church* 2:373.

62. Editor's "Address," *Latter-Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1:120-121, the quotation linking three representative phrases in a long but eloquent statement.

63. The first edition of the revelations was largely destroyed by the 1833 mob, and its publication in Missouri away from Joseph Smith probably contributed to an absence of information about the heavenly messengers. The main appearances had already been summarized in the Prophet's private 1832 autobiography. Two features of the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants moved to publicize the founding events. First, present Section 20 was changed from its later chronological position as Section 24. In 1835 it became Section 2, the featured position after the revealed preface. There it prominently testified to the revelation of the Book of Mormon through the "holy angel whose countenance was as lightning" and the inspired process of Book of Mormon translation. (See present D&C 20:1-16.) The second feature perfecting the restoration record was the printed listing of the main messengers, adding a section to present D&C 27 listing Moroni as the Book of Mormon angel, and John the Baptist and Peter, James, and John as the angels of priesthood restoration.

64. Close of preface to the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, the title page indicating that it was "compiled by" Joseph Smith, Jr., Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, and Frederick G. Williams, all of whose names appear in that order below the preface, dated Feb. 17, 1835. For Cowdery's parallel phraseology, compare his farewell address as editor, *Latter-Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1:120 (1835). He would be measured by "the strict principles of righteousness," and was filled "with the expectation and assurance that before the Judge of all and an assembled universe I must answer for the same." The full preface to the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants is conveniently quoted in *History of the Church* 2:250-51.