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The Scribe as a Witness

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Abstract: An in-depth review of sources regarding Oliver Cowdery's testimony of the Book of Mormon. Gives details of the translation of the Book of Mormon and the disaffection and rebaptism of Cowdery.

The Scribe as a Witness

Part 4

“New Evidence from Modern Witnesses”

By Richard Lloyd Anderson

● Oliver Cowdery had fair warning that participation in the translation of the Book of Mormon would bring public ridicule. While teaching school and boarding with the Smith family during the winter of 1828-29, he began to hear rumors “from all quarters.”¹ He was obviously a sincere believer, to ignore the bitter community sentiment

against the Smiths, to persist in inquiring concerning the ancient plates in the possession of the Smiths’ son, and to face raw weather and muddy spring roads to travel over a hundred miles to Harmony, Pennsylvania, and offer his services as scribe in translating the history of the inhabitants of ancient America.

Probably no one gets such a brutally candid view of an executive or author as does a secretary, but Joseph Smith passed this severe test. Five years later the memory of this time was still vivid:

“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*, or, as the Nephites would have said, ‘Interpreters,’ the history, or record, called ‘The Book of Mormon.’”²

The above statement is an important part of Oliver Cowdery’s testimony as a Book of Mormon witness. Three full months of constant companionship with the translator of the record convinced this intelligent man of the inspired nature of the process by which the Book of Mormon was produced.

His official testimony, however, went far beyond this. Persecution in Pennsylvania had forced a change of residence to the Whitmer farm in upstate New York, where continued translation brought to light the direct promise that three men should see the plates.³ An overwhelming desire to become the three witnesses came upon Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris.⁴ In his original version of the Church history, Joseph

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LAW NOTICE.
COWDERY & WILSON, Attorneys and Counselors at Law, and Solicitors in Chancery, will attend to business entrusted to their management in the several courts in this State, and in the Circuit and District courts of the United States. Office in the Grand Jury room. Tiffin, Ohio, June 2, 1843.—Gm

Refer to
 His Excellency, W. Shannon, Columbus, O.
 Hon. John Brough, “
 Gen. H. A. Moore, “
 S. Medary, Esq. “
 Hon. R. Wood, Cleveland.
 Payne & Wilson, “
 Hon. B. Bissel, Painesville.
 “ B. B. Taylor, Newark.
 “ E. Lane, Norwalk.
 “ M. Birchard, Warren.
 “ N. C. Read, Cincinnati.
 “ R. P. Spalding, “
 “ Van R. Humphrey, Hudson.
 Parrish & Snow, Eagle, Canton.

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An 1843 Tiffin, Ohio, newspaper law notice of Oliver Cowdery and partner, a Mr. Wilson.

“These were days never to be forgotten—to sit
under the sound of a voice
dictated by the inspiration of heaven....”

Smith emphasized, “they became so very solicitous, and teased me so much” that he sought a revelation on the subject. The result was a promise, conditioned upon faith, that these men would see the plates “with your eyes.”⁵ The original passage in the Book of Mormon implied even more, since it promised that the plates would be shown “by the power of God.”⁶

The most complete and dramatic account of what subsequently happened is given by Joseph Smith, who depicts the anticipation that brought the four men into the woods to pray for the fulfillment of these promises, their disappointment after repeated unsuccessful prayers, the confession of lack of faith on the part of Harris, the appearance of the angel showing the plates, and the divine voice declaring the truth of the translation and issuing a command that these witnesses “bear record of what you now see and hear.”⁷ The appearance of the angel, the reality of the plates, and the command of God to testify of their experience are all summarized in the official testimony that the three witnesses permitted to be published with their names affixed:

“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 . . . and we also know that they have been translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice hath declared it unto us; wherefore we know of a surety, that the work is true.”⁸

Nothing short of biblical Christianity furnishes such a concrete statement of supernatural reality.

One cannot dismiss the experience easily, for each man so testifying impressed his community with his capacity and unwavering honesty, and all three consistently reaffirmed the experience in hundreds of interviews throughout their lives. Oliver Cowdery was generally recognized by Mormon and non-Mormon alike as an astute and highly intelligent individual, and his mature life was spent in the practical vocation and avocation of law and politics. The fact that he considered the above experience the most impressive and solemn event of his life must weigh heavily in favor of the objective reality of the vision. Above all, he had the emotional and intellectual capacity to know whether he was deceived. If this vision was real to him, there is a burden upon every informed person to face the great probability that the Latter-day Saints have indeed received modern revelation.

One other possibility exists—fraud. But this is merely conceivable, for Oliver’s solid career as a responsible attorney and public servant is completely inconsistent with such an assumption. Thus, of greatest weight is the unvarying reiteration of this testimony throughout a lifetime. He told the same simple story of the vision, whether under privation, persecution, resentment against the translator of the Book of Mormon, ridicule by non-Mormons, or knowledge of imminent death. Beyond all doubt, he was repeating his inmost convictions as he testified of the truth of the Book of Mormon.

After the translation, Oliver Cowdery faithfully recopied the manuscript and spent the following

winter in the tedious work of supervising its printing. The book was offered for sale ten days before the formal organization of the Church, one week after which he preached its first public discourse. In the small group that he baptized on that day was his future wife, Elizabeth Whitmer, who personally heard the first private and public statements that he made concerning his Book of Mormon witness. Active proselyting in distributing the new scripture containing his name and testimony was soon noted in the local press with skeptical sarcasm: “The *apostle* to the NEPHITES (Cowdery) has *started* for the EAST, on board a boat, with a load of ‘gOld bibles.’ . . .”⁹

By the fall of the first year of Church organization, Oliver Cowdery led out in the expansion of missionary activity beyond upstate New York. In a journey perhaps as spectacular as any of the apostle Paul, he and three companions proceeded mainly on foot 300 miles west to Kirtland, Ohio, where they “baptized one hundred and thirty disciples in less than four weeks.”¹⁰ Adding a convert-companion, they traveled and preached another 600 miles to St. Louis, and walked the last 300 miles to their destination, Independence, Missouri, in the face of the cold and deep snow of a bitter winter in an unsettled country.¹¹ Oliver did not exaggerate when he later referred to the many “fatigues and privations which have fallen to my lot to endure, for the gospel’s sake. . . .”¹² Like Paul, there can be no doubt that he sacrificed for his vision. Because Kirtland was the scene of the most spectacular success of this mission, the newspapers and private records report the impact of his forceful proclamation that he had seen the angel and the plates.

An example of the unbelievers’ reaction to Oliver Cowdery comes from the Shaker community at

North Union. The vigorous leader of that settlement was impressed by Oliver's personal manner, if not his testimony. His journal introduced the incident by reviewing that the Latter-day Saint elaims "began to make a stir in a town not far from North Union, Ohio," and then described the visit of the missionaries to the Shaker settlement:

"Late in the fall a member of that society came to our house to visit the Believers. His name was Oliver Cowdery. He stated that he had been one who assisted in the translation of the golden Bible, and had seen the angel, and also had been commissioned by him to go out and bear testimony that God would destroy this generation. By his request we gave liberty for him to bear his testimony in our meeting. . . . He appeared meek and mild. . . ."13

Non-Mormon sources demonstrate beyond question the fundamental accuracy of later reminiscences of converts of the missionaries. Out of many, perhaps the most interesting is the recollection of Philo Dibble, who lived about five miles from Kirtland. With considerable ridicule his neighbors informed him "that four men had come to Kirtland with a golden Bible and one of them had seen an angel." Dibble's reaction was one of serious curiosity, shared by his wife, and they proposed to find the fact of the matter firsthand:

". . . I hitched up my carriage and again drove to Kirtland, one of my neighbors accompanying us with his team and family. On arriving there, we were introduced to Oliver Cowdery, Ziba Peterson, Peter Whitmer, Jr. and Parley P. Pratt. I remained with them all day, and became convinced that they were sincere in their professions. I asked Oliver what repentance consisted of, and he replied, 'Forsaking sin and yielding

Oliver Cowdery, Esq.—We take pleasure in copying the following articles from the Elk Horn Democrat of last week. The compliment paid to Messrs. BRESLIN and COWDERY is well deserved, as we can attest from personal acquaintance with these gentlemen.

We copy the following complimentary notice from the Seneca Advertiser, one of the best and most ably conducted democratic papers in Ohio; edited by J. G. Breslin, Esq., late Chief Clerk of the Ohio Senate, and one of the delegates to the Baltimore Convention. We assure the Advertiser, and the former friends of Mr. Cowdery, that he has not been defeated because his ability or worth were doubted, but for an unfortunate division in our own party, in the most populous towns in this district, growing out of causes which had their origin before Mr. C. came to the territory:

OLIVER COWDERY, Esq.—We are gratified to learn, as we do from the Walworth (Wisconsin) Democrat, that our esteemed friend and former fellow citizen, O. COWDERY, Esq., has been nominated as the democratic candidate for the House of Representatives in that State. This intelligence has been hailed with the highest satisfaction by his numerous friends here, whose earnest wishes for his future health and prosperity he bore with him in his departure last year.

Mr. C. was a resident among us for a period of seven years, during which time he earned himself an enviable distinction at the Bar of this place and of this Judicial circuit, as a sound and able lawyer, and as a citizen none could have been more esteemed. His honesty, integrity, and industry were worthy the imitation of all, whilst his unquestioned legal abilities reflected credit as well upon himself as upon the profession of which he was a member. Politically, Mr. C. was a prominent, active and radical democrat, never tiring in furthering the good cause. He has labored shoulder to shoulder with the democrats of old Seneca in the most trying times of the past, and we know they will ever be rejoiced to learn of his prosperity in his new home in the 'the far west.'—Seneca Advertiser.

This news article, first printed in Ohio, was reprinted in Wisconsin twice in 1848.

obedience to the gospel.' That evening he preached at Brother Isaac Morley's and bore his testimony to the administration of an angel at noonday."¹⁴

Published histories adequately record the career of Oliver Cowdery as an important General Authority in Missouri and then Kirtland. Because he came to be the leading writer for the Church in this period, his confidence in the truth of the Book of Mormon and the divinity

of the latter-day work is repeatedly expressed. The most frequently asked question about the witnesses arises from this fact: if these men had seen the angel and the plates, how could they permit themselves to leave the Church? The fundamental answer is that those who had received such special favor had special problems with egotism. Because they had seen for themselves with regard to the Book of Mormon, the time came when the majority of the witnesses considered their judgment equal to Joseph Smith's on all other matters. If specific details are different in the excommunications of Oliver Cowdery and his two brothers-in-law, David and John Whitmer, there is a common theme of a clash of wills in which these witnesses failed to acknowledge Joseph Smith in his appointed role as their leader. Yet at the peak of their personal rebellion against the Prophet, each witness insisted on the strict truth of his signed testimony. Thomas B. Marsh also allowed personal feelings to overcome his commitment to the Church, although he was president of the Twelve. He immediately sought out the witnesses through whose testimony he had been converted eight years before and asked them as fellow dissenters to tell him the truth about the origin of the Book of Mormon:

"I enquired seriously at David if it was true that he had seen the angel, according to his testimony as one of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon. He replied, as sure as there is a God in heaven, he saw the angel, according to his testimony in that book. I asked him, if so, how he did not stand by Joseph? He answered, in the days when Joseph received the Book of Mormon, and brought it forth, he was a good man filled with the Holy Ghost, but he considered he had now fallen. I interrogated Oliver Cowdery in the same manner, who

Why could men who had seen an angel leave the Church? "...those who had received special favor had special problems of egotism."

answered me similarly."¹⁵

The impressiveness of such a testimony cannot be appreciated without knowing the spirited independence that characterizes all of Oliver Cowdery's writing and is so pronounced in his personal letters at the time of his excommunication. In one of these he insists that freedom is more important than life and declares, "I shall speak out when I see a move to deceive the ignorant."¹⁶ There is every reason to believe that he told Marsh the full truth.

The cessation of his activity in the Church meant a suspension of his role as a witness of the Book of Mormon. Not that his conviction ceased, but he discontinued public testimony as he worked out a successful legal and political career in non-Mormon society and avoided its prejudiced antagonism by creating as little conflict as possible. Since faith in Jesus Christ was the foundation of his religion, he logically affiliated himself with a Christian congregation for a time, the Methodist Protestant Church at Tiffin, Ohio. There is no more inconsistency in this than Paul, worshiping in the Jewish synagogue, or Joseph Smith, becoming a Mason in order to stem prejudice. A late recollection of Oliver's Methodist affiliation alleged that he was willing to renounce Mormonism, but what this meant to him is much too vague to imply a denial of his testimony—at his excommunication from the Church he had resigned from membership while stating that he did not disbelieve basic doctrines.¹⁷ Thomas Gregg asked Cowdery's colleague in the law, William Lang, whether the former Mormon leader had "openly

denounced Mormonism." The answer was that he kept this subject entirely to himself: "He would never allow any man to drag him into a conversation on the subject."¹⁸

One of the few exceptions to this calculated silence is Oliver Cowdery's courtroom testimony of the Book of Mormon. Evidently it did not violate his conscience to be an inactive witness, but he would not accept the role of a denying witness in a direct confrontation where silence would strongly imply a denial. The courtroom incident is widely questioned by informed people, because it is related by a secondary source that inaccurately describes him as a prosecuting attorney (an office that he sought but failed to get) and erroneously locates his law practice in Michigan (a violation of his continuous residence out of the Church in Ohio and Wisconsin).

This version of the courtroom scene comes from Charles M. Nielsen, who frequently described his missionary experiences in the Midwest and the conversion in 1884 of Robert Barrington, who some 40 years before had heard Oliver Cowdery's testimony at a trial. The fact that Barrington lived in Michigan at this supposed contact is inconsistent with Cowdery's known law practice in Ohio at that time. Furthermore, the first version that Barrington gave Nielsen (recorded in 1884 in his missionary journal) was that he had been impressed with Mormonism not by Cowdery but through one Richard Cox, a Latter-day Saint who had lived in his area but moved to California. At some stage in the telling Barrington evidently created the er-

roneous impression that he had heard Cowdery, so the Nielsen account is probably thirdhand instead of secondhand.¹⁹ Yet history is filled with examples of authentic incidents not very accurately described, and the Nielsen account is perhaps a distant recollection of this historical incident.

The earliest known statement concerning Oliver Cowdery's courtroom testimony is from Brigham Young, who in 1855 publicly reported that Oliver was "pleading law" when he was confronted with his written testimony and asked directly about its truth. According to Brigham Young, his answer emphasized that his testimony was not a matter of belief but knowledge: ". . . what I have there said that I saw, I know that I saw. . . ."²⁰ Although this account wrongly places him as practicing law in Michigan, there is more to this story than first meets the eye. First, it is told within five years of his death, when the knowledge of his life was relatively vivid. Next, the fact that this story comes from the Young family is most significant. The person who did most to bring about his reconciliation to the Church was Phineas Young, who married Oliver's half-sister. In the decade that his brother-in-law was out of the Church, Phineas kept up a constant correspondence and regular visits, reporting Cowdery's actions favorably to his blood brother Brigham in an attempt to bring about Oliver's reinstatement.

Other members of the Young family had details of the courtroom incident. Seymour B. Young was 11 years of age when Cowdery returned to the Church, and remembered meeting him personally then at the home of Phineas at Kanesville. He related that Oliver had been ridiculed in court by opposing counsel for his Book of Mormon testimony and that he rose "with

✍️ We regret to learn from the *Walworth County Democrat*, that OLIVER COWDERY Esq. was defeated for the Assembly in the Elk Horn district, by a small majority. He is a man of sterling integrity, sound and vigorous intellect, and every way worthy, honest and capable.— He was defeated in consequence of his *religion!* The same cause defeated Mr. Wheeler in this district.

Although defeated for political office in Wisconsin in 1848, Oliver Cowdery was held in respect by his non-Mormon friends, as is apparent from this news report.

tears streaming down his face” and simply responded that he still believed in Mormonism, though “through my own weakness I have been disfellowshipped by that people.”²¹ Unquestionably such traditions in the Young family were based on direct contact with Cowdery was still alive. Although a at his return.

It is practically inconceivable that such an incident would become a matter of record in any court, but it certainly would have circulated as a story in Mormon circles. George Q. Cannon later related that he heard the details of this incident “when I was a boy.” A score of similar references in his public speeches all refer to the period prior to his Hawaiian mission in 1850. In his early twenties then, Cannon does not thereafter refer to himself as “a boy.” This means that Cannon heard the courtroom incident while Oliver Cowdery was still alive. Although a late recollection, George Q. Cannon had a remarkable intellect and a great capacity for accurate detail in his personal writing. Furthermore, his version of the courtroom incident is consistent with Oliver’s conservative references to Mormonism while out of the Church and places his law practice in the right state. For these reasons, his description of the courtroom testimony of the Book of Mormon

witness is probably the most correct one:

“When I was a boy I heard it stated concerning Oliver Cowdery, that after he left the Church he practiced law, and upon one occasion, in a court in Ohio, the opposing counsel thought he would say something that would overwhelm Oliver Cowdery, and in reply to him in his argument he alluded to him as the man that had testified and had written that he had beheld an angel of God, and that angel had shown unto him the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated. He supposed, of course, that it would cover him with confusion, because Oliver Cowdery then made no profession of being a ‘Mormon,’ or a Latter-day Saint; but instead of being affected by it in this manner, he arose in the court, and in his reply stated that, whatever his faults and weaknesses might be, the testimony which he had written, and which he had given to the world, was literally true.”²²

Joseph Smith took the initiative to invite Oliver Cowdery to return to the Church in 1843, an invitation likely based on Joseph Smith’s estimate that Oliver was then in the frame of mind to accept it.²³ Oliver waited another four years for some form of public apology and vindication, but then swallowed his pride by traveling to

Kanesville with Phineas Young and asking for baptism. An overdone document entitled “A Confession of Oliver Overstreet” claims that Oliver Cowdery was impersonated and consequently did not return to the Church. Yet its author conveniently died “a few days after he penned the confession given above,” making him definitely unavailable for further historical investigation. Whoever forged this melodramatic memoir followed the record of Reuben Miller slavishly, and did not know that Phineas Young was the main actor in the drama of reinstatement—not Miller, an incidental witness. The confession alleges that Miller supervised the impersonation and does not even mention Phineas Young.

What is factual about Oliver Cowdery’s return is that the deed books at Elkhorn, Wisconsin, record that he sold his property (with Phineas Young as a witness on the deed) 18 days before Church records report his arrival at Kanesville, that James J. Strang reluctantly admitted that he returned to the main body of the Church, that William Marks (then no friend of the Twelve) recalled that he had visited Marks in Illinois “when on his way to Council Bluffs,”²⁴ and that contemporary records and later recollections of numerous Latter-day Saints recall his impressive appearance and testimony there. For instance, Reuben Miller recorded the testimony of the Book of Mormon scribe in his journal at the time:

“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. I beheld with my eyes, and handled with my hands, the gold plates from which it was translated. I also beheld the Interpreters.

“...he always without one doubt or shadow of turning affirmed the divinity and truth of the Book of Mormon.”—Elizabeth Whitmer Cowdery

That book is true.”²⁵

Oliver Cowdery's stay in Kanesville was short, but impressive. He consulted officially with the members of the local presidency, Orson Hyde and George A. Smith, whom he had known at Kirtland and who wrote letters at the time referring to his reconciliation. He met in formal session with the high council and high priest quorum, and the records of both bodies describe cross-examination of the Book of Mormon witness by former associates who knew him at the height of his church career and at his apostasy. He spoke publicly in meetings after his return. John Needham, a prominent merchant in Kanesville, later recalled, “I heard him preach many time[s], and listened to his powerful testimony with regard to the work of God, Joseph Smith the Prophet, and the great events he took part in.”²⁶

The most intimate portrait of the Kanesville stay is from the son and daughter-in-law of Oliver's former associate in the First Presidency, Frederick G. Williams. Henrietta Williams was recovering from her first childbirth eight days previously and remembered the absence of her mother-in-law and husband to attend the conference at which Oliver spoke and the fact that “after that meeting the Cowderys stayed at our house.” This included the family group: “Oliver, his wife and daughter Maria, only child living.”²⁷ What impressed Ezra Williams most about the former priesthood leader was “the humble spirit, the realization of what he had lost by leaving the Church.”²⁸

The above witnesses to the fact of Oliver's return and solid reaffir-

mation of his testimony are a fair sampling of the sources that demonstrate these events beyond reasonable question. This was actually the crescendo of an eventful career, for his chronic illness restricted his activity and then terminated his life only 16 months after the reconciliation at Kanesville. David Whitmer concisely summed up this closing period: “In the winter of 1848, after Oliver Cowdery had been baptized at Council Bluffs, he came back to Richmond to live, and lived here until his death, March 3, 1850.”²⁹

In Richmond, time was strangely turned back to Oliver's close association with the Whitmer family during the translation of the Book of Mormon in their home in upstate New York 20 years earlier. The friends of that period and their families now cared for him. At his deathbed stood David Whitmer, John Whitmer, Hiram Page and his son, the son of Jacob Whitmer (and probably the father), as well as Phineas Young, Lucy Cowdery Young, and the wife of Oliver Cowdery. All report the power of his dying testimony, with subtle details that supplement each other. There is no doubt that Oliver Cowdery distinctly reiterated his firm witness of the Book of Mormon with full knowledge that he faced the closing hours and moments of life.

Of the group then surrounding him, the person with most intimate knowledge of all his actions and attitudes was his wife, Elizabeth Whitmer Cowdery. Thirty-seven years later the unwavering consistency of Oliver Cowdery's testimony of the angel and the plates stood out in her mind. In a letter

to her brother David Whitmer, she emphasized the meaning of the life of her husband in the measured prose that reflects his own words:

“From the hour when the glorious vision of the Holy Messenger revealed to mortal eyes the hidden prophecies which God had promised his faithful followers should come forth in due time, until the moment when he passed away from earth, he always without one doubt or shadow of turning affirmed the divinity and truth of the Book of Mormon.”³⁰ ○

FOOTNOTES

¹Lucey Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Liverpool, 1853), p. 128.

²*Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (October, 1834), p. 14.

³*Times and Seasons*, Vol. 3, No. 21 (September 1, 1842), p. 897; also cited in *Documentary History of the Church*, Vol. 1, pp. 52-53.

⁴*Ibid.* These three were the closest associates of Joseph Smith in the work of translation, Cowdery being the secretary to Joseph Smith without remuneration, Harris having done similar work the previous summer and then undoubtedly contemplating financing the book, and David Whitmer being the representative of his family, which had taken initiative in investigating the Book of Mormon and performing the service of transporting the translators to his family home at Fayette, New York.

⁵D&C 17:1-3 (Kirtland ed. 42:1-2).

⁶2 Ne. 27:12, Eth. 5:3 (1830 ed., p. 110; p. 548). The latter passage matches the context of the description of Joseph Smith's *History* better than the former.

⁷*Times and Seasons*, *op. cit.*, pp. 897-98; also cited in *DHC*, Vol. 1, pp. 54-56.

⁸The Testimony of Three Witnesses, at end of the original edition and in the forepart of the present Book of Mormon. The quotation inverts the sequence of two thoughts but quotes precisely the words of description, which are the same in the original and present editions of the Book of Mormon.

⁹*The Reflector* (Palmyra, N.Y.), June 1, 1830. The quotation has limited historical value in tracing Oliver Cowdery's early missionary work. Perhaps it merely refers to a journey to the neighboring Fayette area, conveniently accessible on the Erie Canal. He never left rural New York in this period.

¹⁰*The Evening and the Morning Star*, Vol. 1, No. 11 (April 1833), p. 84. Since the editor, W. W. Phelps, did not associate himself with the Church until about a year after the Lamanite mission, these inner details of the earliest Church history probably come from his associate Oliver Cowdery.

¹¹See *Times and Seasons*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Dec. 15, 1841), pp. 623-24, for Parley P. Pratt's summary of the final hardships of their journey: “[I]n 1830, in the depth of a howling winter five men penetrated Missouri's wilds, and traveled on foot from St. Louis to Independence, Jackson county, wading in snow to the knees and the greater part of the way for 300 miles, and all this as may be said, without money or friends, except as they made them.”

¹²*Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, *op. cit.*

¹³Journal of Ashbel Kitchell, copied by Henry C. Blinn, manuscript on file at the Shaker Museum, Old Chatham, New York. A variant copy of the same journal is also at Old Chatham, made by Elisha D. Blakeman; this was published by Robert F. W. Meader, “The Shakers and the Mormons,” *The Shaker Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Fall, 1962), p. 87. I have used the Blinn account because it has minor details not in Blakeman, and Mr. Meader (to whom I am indebted for manuscript copies and private correspondence) suggests that Blinn is more likely to be a careful copyist. For the spelling of Cowdery's name, Blinn has “Cowdrel” and Blakeman writes “Lowdree”; both are under-

standable misreadings in cursive copying from the name Cowdery. The location of Union Village is within the present Shaker Heights, a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio.

¹⁴"Philo Dibble's Narrative," *Early Scenes in Church History*, Faith-Promoting Series, No. 8 (Salt Lake City, 1882), pp. 75-76. David Whitmer rather consistently gave noon as the approximate time of the appearance of the angel with the plates.

¹⁵"History of Thomas Baldwin Marsh," written Nov., 1857, on file at Church Historian's Office. This was printed first in the *Deseret News*, March 24, 1858, and then in *Millennial Star*, Vol. 26 (1864), p. 406.

¹⁶Letter of Oliver Cowdery to Brothers Warren and Lyman, Feb. 4, 1838, Far West, Missouri, "Cowdery Letter Book" at Huntington Library.

¹⁷The conclusion of Cowdery's forceful letter of resignation from the Church contained this significant sentence: "I beg you, sir, to take no view of the foregoing remarks, other than my belief on the outward government of this Church." Far West Record, typescript, p. 115, also cited in *DHC*, Vol. 3, p. 18.

¹⁸Letter of William Lang to Thomas Gregg, Nov. 5, 1881, Tiffin, Ohio, cited in Charles A. Shook, *The True Origin of the Book of Mormon* (Cincinnati, 1914), p. 56. There is every reason to trust Lang's personal reminiscences but every reason to distrust Lang's theories on the origin of the Book of Mormon, which he admits Cowdery discussed with no person while living in Tiffin.

¹⁹Nielsen reported to President Heber J. Grant in a letter of Nov. 11, 1899, that he had visited Barrington in Salt Lake City, who told the courtroom story and described himself and Cox as spectators. This variation from what Barrington evidently reported to Nielsen at his conversion suggests that Barrington was not consistent in the details of his recollection.

²⁰*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 2, p. 258 (Speech of April 6, 1855).

²¹LDS Conference Report (April 1921), pp. 114-16.

²²*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 22, p. 254 (speech of Sept. 18, 1881). Note that the Cannon version contains the elements of testimony and personal regret of being out of the Church that are found separately in the Brigham Young and Seymour B. Young accounts. Several letters from Cowdery in the period while out of the Church deplore the circumstances that brought about his estrangement from the Church. See n. 23.

²³The Prophet's direction to the Twelve to write a letter of invitation to Cowdery is found in *DHC*, Vol. 5, p. 368. The proof that Cowdery was willing to entertain seriously the idea of return is his emotional answer written on Christmas, 1843, from Tiffin, Ohio, to Brigham Young and the Twelve. Deeply appreciative of an earlier letter from them containing "feelings of friendship and kindness," he portrays himself as a success but a stranger in non-Mormon society, suggests an apology due for misstatements about him, and concludes by expressing to these men his "kindness, friendship and fellowship."

²⁴Letter of William Marks to James M. Adams, June 11, 1855, Shabbona Grove, DeKalb Co., Illinois. The original has evidently perished, but a typescript of the entire letter is preserved at the library of the RLDS Department of History. Also cited in Inez Smith Davis, *The Story of the Church* (Independence, Mo., 1964), p. 420.

²⁵*Journal of Reuben Miller*, Oct. 21, 1848, Church Historian's Office. For an insight into Miller's competence as a diarist, see Richard L. Anderson, "Reuben Miller, Recorder of Oliver Cowdery's Reaffirmations," *Brigham Young University Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Spring, 1968), pp. 277-93.

²⁶Life Sketch of John Needham, given on his eightieth birthday anniversary to his family (April 1, 1899); also cited by Andrew Jensen, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City, 1901), Vol. 1, p. 416.

²⁷The impersonation theory breaks down completely in the face of family relationships. Will someone now seriously suggest that Cowdery's wife and daughter were also impersonated? Numerous former friends, including the Youngs and the widow and son of Frederick G. Williams, could certainly identify each of the Cowderys. This is a good case in point on the essential difference between authentic and invented documents. The latter inevitably lack the subtle details that reflect an accurate knowledge of their surroundings. The entire Overstreet confession is bent toward explaining a single impersonation on one public occasion. Historical sources show that Cowdery's stay at Kanesville was more prolonged than this, that he was prominent in numerous meetings, and that his family accompanied him.

²⁸Frederick C. Williams Family Record, Church Historian's Office, pp. 233-34, 246, summarized in Nancy Clement Williams, *After One Hundred Years* (Independence, Mo., 1951), pp. 148-49.

²⁹David Whitmer, *An Address to Believers in the Book of Mormon* (Richmond, Mo., 1887), p. 1.

³⁰Letter of Elizabeth Cowdery to David Whitmer, Mar. 8, 1887, Southwest City, Mo., published by George W. L. Sweich in *The Return*, December 1892, p. 9. In the period of his editorship, Sweich, who was the grandson of David Whitmer, published a number of family reminiscences and evidently obtained this letter from his grandfather's papers. Because it is obviously badly copied, I have corrected one spelling error, changed "shudder of turning" to "shadow of turning," and punctuated the sentence correctly.



Richard L. Evans

The Spoken Word

The habits we have

There is this from Samuel Johnson on habit and human behavior: "The chains of habit are generally too small to be felt, until they are too strong to be broken." "Do not begin," said John Locke, "to make any thing customary, . . . [that] you would not have continue and increase. . . ." Habits and appetites will take hold upon our lives if we let them, until they all but occupy us. "For first cometh to the mind the simple suggestion," said Thomas à Kempis, "then the strong imagination, afterwards pleasure, evil affection, assent. And so little by little the enemy entereth in altogether, because he was not resisted at the beginning."

"Check the beginning:

Once thou might'st have cured,

But now 'tis past thy skill,

Too long hath it endured."¹

At some point it becomes a question of whether or not we can change our habits or feel helpless before them. To be a reasoning, responsible person we have to be alert, with fullest possible functioning both of

mind and of body for the quick and complex decisions we have so many times to make. Especially should we avoid whatever would dull our senses, slow down our reactions, or interfere with our best judgment. Call it morality, call it common sense, call it respect—respect for life, respect for others, respect for self—call it what you will, but anything that contributes to dependability, to morality, to acuteness, to self-control, to health and happiness is good. Anything that slows down judgment, that dulls the senses, that increases dependence, that reduces self-control, anything that increases accidents or ill health isn't good. "The habits of time," said George Cheever, "are the soul's dress for eternity"—and even if we have an unwise, unwholesome habit, we should not give up the honest, prayerful, continuing effort to conquer the habit we have. "Little by little, through patience and longsuffering, thou shalt conquer by the help of God. . . ."² But a man ought to examine his habits before they become the master of the man.

¹Thomas à Kempis.

²Ibid.

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