

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MORMONISM



Edited by
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of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

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GEORGE S. TATE

COWDERY, OLIVER

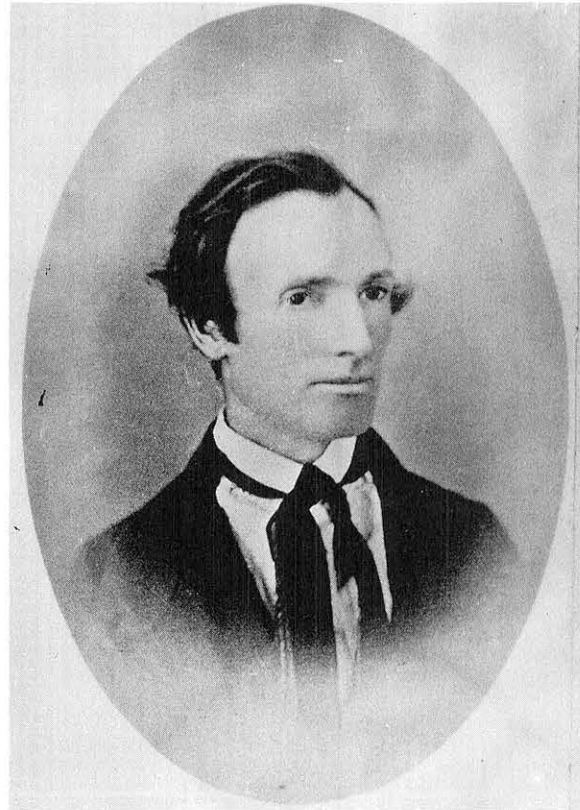
Oliver Cowdery (1806–1850) was next in authority to Joseph SMITH in 1830 (D&C 21:10–12), and was a second witness of many critical events in the restoration of the gospel. As one of the three BOOK OF MORMON WITNESSES, Oliver Cowdery testified that an angel displayed the GOLD PLATES and that the voice of God proclaimed them correctly translated. He was with Joseph Smith when John the Baptist restored to them the AARONIC PRIESTHOOD and when Peter, James, and John ordained them to the MELCHIZEDEK PRIESTHOOD and the apostleship, and again during the momentous KIRTLAND TEMPLE visions (D&C 110).

Oliver came from a New England family with strong traditions of patriotism, individuality, learning, and religion. He was born at Wells, Vermont, on October 3, 1806. His younger sister gave the only reliable information about his youth: "Oliver was brought up in Poultney, Rutland County, Vermont, and when he arrived at the age of twenty, he went to the state of New York, where his older brothers were married and settled. . . . Oliver's occupation was clerking in a store until 1829, when he taught the district school in the town of Manchester" (Lucy Cowdery Young to Andrew Jenson, March 7, 1887, Church Archives).

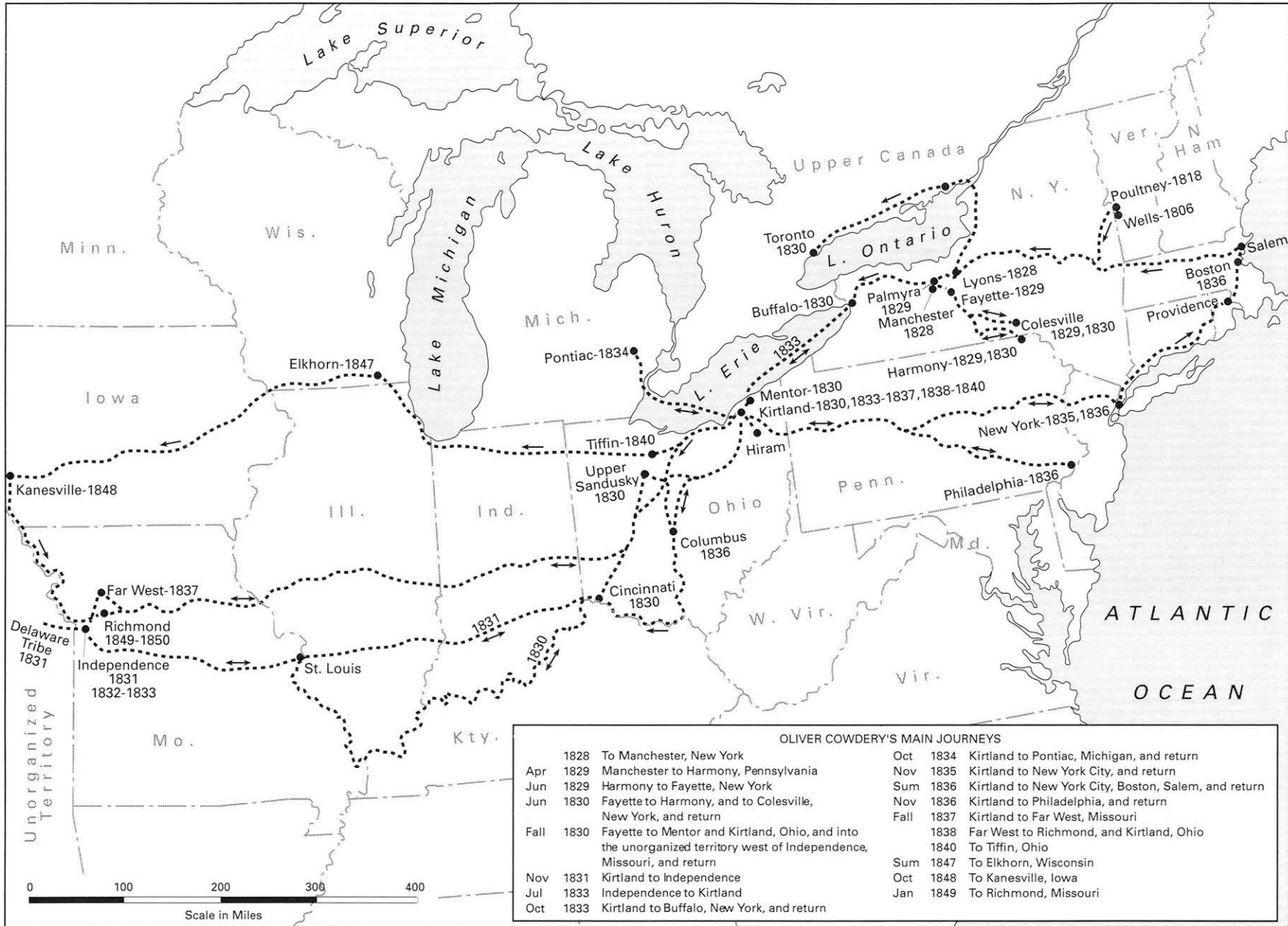
While boarding with Joseph Smith's parents,

he learned of their convictions about the ancient record that their son was again translating after Martin HARRIS had lost the manuscript in 1828. The young teacher prayed and received answers that Joseph Smith mentioned in a revelation (D&C 6:14–24). The Prophet's first history states the "Lord appeared unto . . . Oliver Cowdery and shewed unto him the plates in a vision 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" (PJS 1:10).

From April 7 through the end of June 1829, when they finished the translation, Joseph dictated while Oliver wrote, with "utmost gratitude" for the privilege (*Messenger and Advocate* 1:14). Oliver penned a letter then, expressing deep love for



Oliver Cowdery (1806–1850), scribe to Joseph Smith and witness of the Book of Mormon (1829), Second Elder of the Church (1830), and Assistant President of the Church (1834), editor, and lawyer. Cowdery was with Joseph Smith when the Aaronic and Melchizedek priest-hoods and keys were restored. After ten years of separation from the Church, he was rebaptized. He died at age forty-three, faithful to his testimony. Photograph, c. 1848, C. W. Carter Collection.



Christ, a lifetime theme. He later told how he and Joseph interrupted their work as they were translating the record of the Savior's post-resurrection American ministry, and how, as they prayed about baptism, they heard the "voice of the Redeemer" and were ministered to by John the Baptist, who gave them authority to baptize (JS—H 1:71, note).

In 1835 Oliver helped Joseph Smith correct and publish the revelations for the DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS. Section 27 lists the major priesthood messengers of the restoration: John the Baptist, whom "I have sent unto you, my servants, Joseph Smith, Jr., and Oliver Cowdery, to ordain you unto this first priesthood" (D&C 27:8); and "Peter, James, and John, whom I have sent unto you, by whom I have ordained you and confirmed you to be apostles and especial witnesses of my name, and bear the keys of your ministry" (D&C 27:12).

The lesser priesthood was restored on May 15, 1829, two weeks before the Prophet and Cowdery moved to the Whitmers' in New York to complete the translation of the Book of Mormon (*HC* 1:39–41, 48–49). The higher priesthood also came before this move; David Whitmer remembered he was ordained as an elder only weeks after their first arrival at his upstate farm (Whitmer, p. 32). The ancient apostles appeared with priesthood KEYS as Joseph and Oliver traveled between their Pennsylvania home and Colesville, New York (D&C 128:20), where Joseph Knight, Sr., lived. Knight remembered their seeking help to sustain them while translating in April or May (Jessee, p. 36).

After the move to the Whitmer farm, the angel showed the plates to Joseph Smith and the Three Witnesses in June 1829. Oliver supervised the printing of the Book of Mormon that fall and winter. After the publication of the book on March 26, the Church was organized on April 6, 1830. Oliver spoke in meeting the next Sunday, which was "the first public discourse that was delivered by any of our number" (*HC* 1:81).

Few exceeded Cowdery in logical argument and elevated style. Moreover, his speeches and writings carry the tone of personal knowledge. Generally serving as editor or associate editor in the first publications of the Church, Oliver wrote with unusual consistency through two decades of published writings and personal letters. He insisted that a relationship with God required con-

stant contact: "Whenever [God] has had a people on earth, he always has revealed himself to them by the Holy Ghost, the ministering of angels, or his own voice" (*Messenger and Advocate* 1:2). Oliver Cowdery led the LAMANITE MISSION, the first major mission of the Church (D&C 28:8; 30:5), which doubled Church membership and took the Book of Mormon to Native Americans. After the temple site was designated in Jackson County in 1831, he traveled there with copies of the revelations for their first printing. Because publishing was vital for spreading the gospel and instructing members, Oliver was called to work with William W. Phelps, an experienced editor (D&C 55:4; 57:11–13). After Missouri ruffians destroyed the press, Cowdery returned to Ohio to counsel with Church leaders, who assigned him to relocate Church publications there. Because of the importance of accurate information, he and Sidney RIGDON remained in Ohio in 1834 when many faithful men marched to Missouri with ZION'S CAMP to assist the Saints in returning to their homes and land in Jackson County.

In 1830–1831, Oliver Cowdery served as the first Church Recorder, a calling he again resumed between 1835 and 1837 (*see* HISTORIANS, CHURCH). Even in other years, he often kept the official minutes of meetings, and was often editor and contributor for the first Church newspapers. He wrote articles for the MESSENGER AND ADVOCATE that help document early LDS history. From June to October 1830, Oliver served as scribe while the Prophet completed important portions of the JOSEPH SMITH TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE.

An 1830 revelation named Oliver Cowdery next only to Joseph Smith in priesthood leadership (D&C 20:2–3), a status formalized in December 1834, when he was ranked above Sidney RIGDON, who had long served as Joseph's first counselor. Each would "officiate in the absence of the President, according to his rank and appointment, viz.: President Cowdery first; President Rigdon second, and President Williams third" (*PJS* 1:21). Cowdery wrote that this calling was foretold in the first heavenly ordination, though Missouri printing duties had intervened: "This promise was made by the angel while in company with President Smith, at the time they received the office of the lesser

priesthood” (*PJS* 1:21; cf. *HC* 1:40–41). His office next to the Prophet—sometimes called “associate president”—was given to Hyrum SMITH in 1841 (*D&C* 124: 194–6), after Cowdery’s excommunication (see *FIRST PRESIDENCY*).

Oliver’s Church career peaked from 1834 to 1836. Minutes and letters picture him as a highly effective preacher, writer, and administrator. His 1836 journal survives, showing his devotion to religion and family, his political activities, his study of Hebrew, and the spiritual power he shared at the completion of the Kirtland Temple. Cowdery’s last entry in this journal, penned the day of the temple dedication, says of the evening meeting: “I saw the glory of God, like a great cloud, come down and rest upon the house. . . . I also saw cloven tongues like as of fire rest upon many . . . while they spake with other tongues and prophesied” (Arrington, p. 426).

Oliver also alluded to more. A year later he penned an editorial “Valedictory.” After mentioning “my mission from the holy messenger” prior to the organization of the Church, he wrote that such manifestations were to be expected, since the Old Testament promised that God would “reveal his glorious arm” in the latter days “and talk with his people *face to face*” (*Messenger and Advocate* 3:548). The words he italicized match his recent temple vision of Christ on April 3, 1836, which he experienced in company with the Prophet (*D&C* 110:1–10). This was also the time that these first priesthood leaders received special priesthood keys from Moses, Elias, and Elijah, completing restoration of the “keys of the kingdom” (*D&C* 27:6–13) and completing Cowdery’s mission as “second witness” to such restoration. Oliver had deep confidence in divine appearances. In 1835 he charged the newly appointed Twelve: “Never cease striving until you have seen God face to face” (*HC* 2:195).

Despite these profound spiritual experiences, Oliver’s letters reveal a crisis of personal and family estrangement from Joseph Smith by early 1838. The Three Witnesses had seen an angel with Joseph Smith, but later they tended to compete rather than cooperate with his leadership. Cowdery disagreed with the Prophet’s economic and political program and sought a personal financial independence that ran counter to the cooperative economics essential to the Zion society that Joseph Smith envisioned. Nonetheless, when Oliver was tried for his membership, he sent a resignation let-

ter in which he insisted that the truth of modern revelation was not at issue: “Take no view of the foregoing remarks, other than my belief on the outward government of this Church” (*Far West Record*, pp. 165–66).

This trial was related to the excommunications of Oliver’s brothers-in-law John Whitmer and David Whitmer, also at this time; this paralleled Oliver’s earlier support of the Whitmer family in the matter of Hiram Page’s competing revelations (*D&C* 28:11–13). The Church court considered five charges against Cowdery: inactivity, accusing the Prophet of adultery, and three charges of beginning law practice and seeking to collect debts after the Kirtland bank failure (see *KIRTLAND ECONOMY*).

Oliver’s charge of adultery against the Prophet was simplistic, for Oliver already knew about the principle of *PLURAL MARRIAGE*. Rather than deny the charge, the Prophet testified that because Oliver had been his “bosom friend,” he had “intrusted him with many things” (*Far West Record*, 168). Brigham YOUNG later said that the doctrine was revealed to Joseph and Oliver during the Book of Mormon translation (cf. *Jacob* 2:30); clearly a fuller understanding of the principle of plural marriage came by 1832, in connection with Joseph Smith’s translation of Genesis (cf. *D&C* 130:1–2). Brigham Young added that Oliver impetuously proceeded without Joseph’s permission, not knowing “the order and pattern and the results” (Charles Walker Journal, July 26, 1872, Church Archives). Oliver married Elizabeth Ann Whitmer in 1832, and problems with polygamy apparently influenced him and the Whitmer family to oppose the principle later.

In 1838, following his excommunication, Oliver returned to Ohio, though he did not, as a fictitious deed states, then pay Bishop Edward Partridge \$1,000 for the temple lot in Independence on behalf of his children, John, Jane, and Joseph Cowdery. Such children never existed; Oliver had no such money and showed no interest in Jackson County then or later. In fact, he continued law study and practiced in Kirtland, but in 1840 he moved to Tiffin, Ohio, where he became a prominent civic leader as an ardent Democrat. His law notices and public service regularly appeared in local newspapers, and he was personally sketched in the warm recollections of the prominent Ohio lawyer William Lang, who apprenticed under Cowdery and described him as being of slight

build, about five and a half feet tall, clean, and courteous. Professionally, Cowdery was characterized as “an able lawyer,” well informed, with “brilliant” speaking ability; yet “he was modest and reserved, never spoke ill of anyone, never complained” (Anderson, 1981, p. 41).

In 1847 Oliver moved to Wisconsin, where he continued his law practice and was almost elected to the first state legislature, in spite of newspaper accounts ridiculing his published declaration of seeing the angel and the plates. In his ten years outside the Church, Cowdery never succumbed to the considerable pressure to deny his Book of Mormon testimony. Indeed, letters to his LDS relatives show that he was hurt at the Church’s rejection but remained a deep believer. Feeling that his character had been slandered, he asked for public exoneration, explaining that anyone would be sensitive about reputation “had you stood in the presence of John with our departed Brother Joseph, to receive the Lesser Priesthood, and in the presence of Peter, to receive the Greater” (Gunn, pp. 250–51).

These statements contradict a pamphlet that Oliver was alleged to have published in 1839 as a “Defense” for leaving the Church (*see* FORGERIES). Surfacing in 1906, it portrays Oliver as confused about seeing John the Baptist. But no original exists, nor does any reference to it in Cowdery’s century. Its style borrows published Cowdery phrases but rearranges his conclusions. A clumsier forgery is the “Confession of Oliver Overstreet,” which claims that the author was bribed to impersonate Cowdery and return to the Church. Abundant documents show that Oliver returned to Council Bluffs, Iowa, in 1848 with his wife and young daughter.

Diaries and official minutes record Oliver Cowdery’s words in rejoining the Church. He sought only rebaptism and fellowship, not office. He publicly declared that he had seen and handled the Book of Mormon plates, and that he was present with Joseph Smith on the occasions when “holy angels” restored the two priesthoods (Anderson, *BYU Studies*, 1968, p. 278). The High Council questioned him closely about his published letter (to David Whitmer) in which Oliver claimed that he retained the keys of priesthood leadership after Joseph Smith’s death. That was his opinion, Oliver said, before seeing the Nauvoo revelation giving all powers to Hyrum Smith “that once were put upon him that was my servant Oliver Cowdery” (D&C

124:95). “It was that revelation which changed my views on this subject” (Anderson, *IE*, Nov. 1968, p. 19).

Because they had started for Council Bluffs late in the season, the Cowdery family were forced to winter in Richmond, Missouri, where most of the Whitmer family lived. Letters throughout 1849 repeat Oliver’s hope to move west and also disclose his lack of means. They speak of his coughing up blood, a long-term respiratory condition that finally took his life March 3, 1850. The circuit court recorded a resolution of fellow lawyers that in the death of “Oliver Cowdery, his profession has lost an accomplished member, and the community a valuable and worthy citizen” (Anderson, 1981, p. 46).

David Whitmer and other relatives living near Oliver Cowdery in his final year later claimed that he disagreed with many Kirtland and Nauvoo doctrines, but Oliver’s documented criticisms at this time concern only intolerance and a continuing concern about polygamy. Although David Whitmer considered Joseph a fallen prophet, in 1848 Cowdery said publicly and privately “that Joseph Smith had fulfilled his mission faithfully before God until death” (Geo. A. Smith to Orson Pratt, *MS 11* [Oct. 20, 1848]:14), and “that the priesthood was with this people, and the ‘Twelve’ were the only men that could lead the Church after the death of Joseph” (Anderson, *IE*, Nov. 1968, p. 18). In his last known letter, Oliver accepted an assignment from the Twelve to lobby in Washington, and acknowledged the leadership of the “good brethren of the [Salt Lake] valley” (Gunn, p. 261).

Oliver’s wife, Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery (1815–1892), had known him when he was taking dictation during the translation of the Book of Mormon, before their marriage. Said she of his lifelong commitment: “He always without one doubt . . . affirmed the divinity and truth of the Book of Mormon” (Anderson, 1981, p. 63). This confidence stood the test of persecution, poverty, loss of status, failing health, and the tragic deaths of five of his six children. Dying at forty-three, Oliver was surrounded by family members who told how he reaffirmed the divinity of the Book of Mormon and the restored priesthood—and voiced total trust in Christ. Just before rejoining the Church, he penned his inner hopes to fellow witness David Whitmer: “Let the Lord vindicate our characters, and cause our testimony to shine, and then will men be saved in his kingdom” (Oliver

Cowdery to David Whitmer, July 28, 1847, *Ensign of Liberty*, 1:92).

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RICHARD LLOYD ANDERSON

CREATION, CREATION ACCOUNTS

Latter-day Saints have, in addition to the biblical Genesis, two modern restorations of ancient scriptural accounts of the Creation in the **BOOK OF MOSES** and the **BOOK OF ABRAHAM**. Related authoritative information also appears in the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the LDS temple ceremony. Drawing on this wealth of creation literature, Latter-day Saints understand that Jesus Christ, acting under the direction of God the Father, created this and other worlds to make possible the immortality and eternal life of human beings who already existed as spirit children of the Father. This understanding differs from both scientific and traditional Christian accounts in that it affirms God's purpose and role, while recognizing creation as organization of pre-existing materials, and not as an *ex nihilo* event (creation from nothing). Furthermore, these accounts describe an active role for God's spirit children in the Creation and include a more detailed version of the origins of **EVIL**.

The frequent occurrence of creation accounts in LDS scriptures and sacred ceremonies reflects a pattern of the ancient world generally, and ancient

Israel in particular, where the Creation was regularly recited or reenacted. The Creation—including its ritual recitation and reenactment—was viewed by the Israelites and other peoples of the ancient Near East as possessing a dynamic, not a static, quality. According to Raffaele Pettazzoni, a noted historian of religions, "What happened in the beginning has an exemplary and defining value for what is happening today and what will happen in the future" (p. 26).

Creation plays a central theological role in the Book of Mormon. The events surrounding creation are linked with the fall of that angel who became the **DEVIL** (2 Ne. 2:17; 9:8). His fall, in turn, led to the **FALL OF ADAM**; opposition as a feature of mortal existence; and, ultimately, the need for a divine redemption of mankind (2 Ne. 2:18–27). Book of Mormon prophets invoked the Creation as a symbol of God's goodness and a touchstone of human stewardship: "The Lord hath created the earth that it should be inhabited; and he hath created his children that they should possess it" (1 Ne. 17:36). Those who reject God's goodness, as symbolized by the Creation (and the Atonement), will inevitably be judged and punished (cf. 2 Ne. 1:10).

The creation account in the book of Moses (revealed in 1830 as the beginning of the **JOSEPH SMITH TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE**) provides several insights in addition to those found in Genesis.

First, the book of Moses establishes Mosaic authorship of its creation account indicating explicitly that it resulted from a revelation given to Moses sometime between the time of the burning bush and the exodus (Moses 1:17, 25).

Second, it clarifies the role of Jesus Christ in the Creation: "By the word of my power have I created [these lands and their inhabitants], which is mine Only Begotten Son" (Moses 1:32–33); "I, God, said unto mine Only Begotten, which was with me from the beginning: Let us make man in our image" (Moses 2:26–27); "And I, the Lord God, said unto mine Only Begotten: Behold, the man is become as one of us to know good and evil" (Moses 4:28). This is consistent with the teachings of John and Paul in the New Testament (John 1:3, 10; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:13–16; Heb. 1:2, 10).

Third, the Creation is placed in a much larger context of ongoing creations of innumerable inhabited earths with their respective heavens (in all of which Christ played a central role): "And worlds without number have I created . . . for mine own purpose; and by the Son I created them, which is