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Oliver Cowdery for the Defense

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Abstract: This article is a recital of Oliver Cowdery's testimony of the Book of Mormon before a court in Michigan.

OLIVER COWDERY

For the Defense

By

C. M. NIELSEN

EDITOR'S NOTE

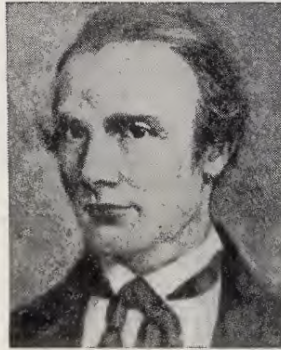
NEXT to Joseph Smith, no one was closer to the beginnings of the "marvelous work and a wonder" than Oliver Cowdery in the years immediately preceding and following the founding of the Church. At its organization on April 6, 1830, he was accepted and sustained along with the Prophet as one of its presiding officers, "and the first preacher of this Church unto the Church, and before the world. . . ." During the translation of the Book of Mormon, when he served as scribe, he had received the "same power, and the same faith, and the same gift" as Joseph, had shared in the revelations and witnessed the heavenly visitations leading to the restoration of the gospel in its fulness. As one of the three witnesses who saw the plates and the angel in whose charge they were, he left record of his testimony for all time.

Yet it is a matter of history that personal disaffection led him to withdraw himself from the Church. Other than that he studied law and practiced in Ohio, Wisconsin, and then Michigan, where he was elected prosecuting attorney, little is known concerning his activities during the eleven years of his separation until the day in October, 1848, when he reappeared at a conference in Council Bluffs and sought to renew his membership. There he bore humble testimony to the truth of the work for which the Prophet short years before had forfeited his life. Had he ever denied that testimony?

From J. W. Tate there comes an excerpt from the *Deseret News* of February 21, 1910, in which Judge C. M. Nielsen relates an incident within an incident, a missionary experience wherein Oliver Cowdery unexpectedly figures as a prosecuting attorney who takes the stand as witness for a cause he was eminently qualified to defend.

IN the year 1884, I was traveling as a missionary in Minnesota. I had most of the eastern part of the state to myself. I was without purse or scrip and one night slept in a haystack. Next day I came to a city and wandered up and down the streets. I had no money, no friends, and didn't know where to go. I passed a large store called the Emporium. I was attracted by it, but didn't know why. There were about twenty-five teams hitched near the place, owned by farmers in town on business. Something told me, "Go over and see a certain man." The street was full of people and I wondered which man. Then one man seemed to me as big as three ordinary men. The spirit whispered: "Go over and speak to him!" I hesitated to approach this entire stranger, but the same voice came to me a second and a third time. Then I went.

He was a prosperous-looking farmer with a fine two-seated buggy, which he was ready to enter. Not knowing



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what else to say, I said: "How far are you going?"

"Home; where are you going?"

"I have no certain place; I am from Utah."

"You are not a Mormon, are you?" he asked, anxiously.

"Yes."

"Then God bless you!" he replied, reaching out his arms and dropping the lines. "Get into this buggy as fast as you can. When we get home, my wife will rejoice as I rejoice now. I will then explain all."

Reaching the home, he called, "Mother, here's a real live Mormon elder."

I'm afraid I didn't look very fine, as I had slept in a haystack the previous night. They took me by the hand and led me into the house. They called in their sons and daughters and we sat around the table. My new-found friend then said:

"Now, young man, you thought it strange how I acted when you spoke to me. When I get through, you will realize the importance of your coming to us. When I was twenty-one years of age, I was working my father's farm in Michigan. I had worked hard on the farm that summer and decided to take a day off, so went to the city. Near the courthouse I saw a great many people assembling, and others walking that way, so I went over to see what was up. There was a jam in the courtroom, but being young and strong, I pushed my way close up to the center, where I found the prosecuting attorney addressing the court and jury in a murder trial. The prosecuting attorney was Oliver Cowdery, and he was giving his opening address in behalf of the state.

"After Cowdery sat down, the attorney representing the prisoner arose and with taunting sarcasm said: 'May it please the court and gentlemen of the

jury, I see one Oliver Cowdery is going to reply to my argument. I wish he would tell us something about the Mormon Bible; something about that golden Bible that Joe Smith dug out of the hill; something about the great fraud he perpetrated upon the American people whereby he gained thousands of dollars. Now he seems to know so much about this poor prisoner, I wonder if he has forgotten all about Joe Smith and his connection with him,' the speaker all the while sneering and pointing his finger in scorn at Cowdery in the hope of making him ridiculous before the court and jury.

"Everybody present began to wonder if they had been guilty of making such a mistake as choosing a Mormon for prosecuting attorney. Even the judge on the bench began looking with suspicion and distrust at the prosecuting attorney. The prisoner and his attorney became elated at the effect of the speech. People began asking, 'Is he a Mormon?' Everybody wondered what Cowdery would say against such charges.

"Finally, Oliver Cowdery arose calm as a summer morning. I was within three feet of him. There was no hesitation, no fear, no anger in his voice, as he said: 'May it please the court, and gentlemen of the jury, my brother attorney on the other side has charged me with connection with Joseph Smith and the golden Bible. The responsibility has been placed upon me, and I cannot escape reply. Before God and man I dare not deny what I have said, and what my testimony contains as written and printed on the front page of the Book of Mormon. May it please your honor and gentlemen of the jury, this I say, I saw the angel and heard his voice—how can I deny it? It happened in the daytime when the sun was shining bright in the firmament; not in the night when I was asleep. That glorious messenger from heaven, dressed in white, standing above the ground, in a glory I have never seen anything to compare with, the sun insignificant in comparison, and this personage told us if we denied that testimony there is no forgiveness in this life nor in the world to come. Now, how can I deny it—I dare not; I will not!'"

The man who related this to me was a prominent man in that state; he was a rich man, a man who had held offices of trust from the people—a man of respect, one when you look into his face you will not doubt. To strengthen his

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"Even by Study and also by Faith"

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mind sufficiently, the Lord will give you power, and even add to your store of ideas as you speak.

7. Do not apologize for your speech. If it is the best you can do, go ahead with it and do better next time.

We cannot agree with the individual who declared that it was unnecessary for members of the Church to prepare to speak, because whether we fill our mental reservoirs with knowledge and then call upon the Lord to direct us in selecting the subject to be preached, or whether we carefully organize a speech for a definite occasion, asking the help of the Lord in planning, it all calls for preparation.

As members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints we should remember that "the simple honest heart is of more avail with the Lord than all the pomp, pride, splendor, and eloquence produced by men,"⁸ and at the same time we should strive constantly to perfect our understanding of things praiseworthy and of good report—"even by study and also by faith."

⁸Widtsoe, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

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statement this man, who knew nothing of Mormon history, said Oliver Cowdery mentioned something he wanted me to explain; that the angel took back a part that was not translated. We know this and that part of the golden plates then withheld will be revealed at some future time.

"Since I heard Oliver Cowdery speak," continued my host, "I have not had peace for these many years. I want to know more about your people. I felt when I listened to Oliver Cowdery talking in the courtroom he was more than an ordinary man. If you can show us that you have what Oliver Cowdery testified to, we shall all be glad to receive it." He and his whole

family embraced the gospel and came to Utah.

In November 1848, Oliver Cowdery, before a high council at Council Bluffs, called for the purpose of considering his case, said: "Brethren, for a number of years I have been separated from you. I now desire to come back, I wish to come humbly and to be one in your midst. I seek no station. I only wish to be identified with you. I am out of the Church. I am not a member of the Church, but I wish to become a member of it. I wish to come in at the door. I know the door. I have not come here to seek precedence. I come humbly, and throw myself upon the decisions of this body, knowing, as I do, that its decisions are right, and should be obeyed."

TIME PERSPECTIVE IN ANCIENT AMERICA

(Continued from page 471)

Archaic" development in Central Mexico, establishes still another correlation of the chronologies of these key areas, and additional proof of the general correctness of our chronologic reconstruction. And this in turn, finally, has increased the reliability of the Maya and Central Mexican chronologies as basic reference scales for the cross-dating of developments in other areas of Middle America, and for the downward extension of the historico-chronologic reconstruction to include even the dating of the discovered phases of the "Early Archaic" culture, the most ancient of the pre-Columbian civilizations of Middle America.

A SUMMARY OF THE ANCIENT HISTORY OF MIDDLE AMERICA

ACCORDING TO THE LATEST STAGE OF CHRONOLOGIC RECONSTRUCTION⁸

THE HUNTING HORIZONS

THE PRIMITIVE HUNTING CULTURES (ice-age and post-glacial, some 10,000 years?)

THE PRE-ARCHAIC HUNTING CULTURES (late pre-agricultural, some 5,000 years?)

Both hypothetical, based on the discovery of human artifacts of these periods in North and South America, or regions on either side of Middle America, and the present general distribution of nomadic hunting tribes.

THE AGRICULTURAL HORIZONS

(Early Pre-Columbian Archaic)

THE EARLY ARCHAIC CIVILIZATION (?? —1000?—c.311?B.C. in the main area of Central and Southern Mexico, some 2,500 years?)

⁸Based on a detailed investigation by the writer recently completed for publication under the title *The Eras of the Mayas; a Study in Ancient Maya Chronology and the Early Historical Dating of Mexico and Central America* (Itzan Society, Pub. No. 5).

Rise and diffusion of the first agricultural civilization of Middle America (probably mainly highland): permanent settlements of farmers and artisans (= the *Quinametzin* or "Mighty Men" of the sixteenth-century sources?); cultivation of maize, squash, and cotton; textile clothing and oriental-like turbans; pottery and clay figurines; buildings of wood and adobe bricks (hypothetic); rudimentary hieroglyphic writing (probable); and a comparatively pure religion.

Pre-Zacatenco phases undiscovered.

Zacatenco phases discovered so far only in Central Mexico.

Transitional Period I (c. 500—50 B.C., about 450 years)

General destruction or disappearance of the Early Archaic civilization in Central and Southern Mexico and the Gulf Coast, and the beginnings of the advanced Olmec-Maya civilization in the Gulf Coast and of the archaic Miraflores culture in the Southern Highlands.

THE ADVANCED OLMEC-MAYA CIVILIZATION (c. 200? B.C.—A.D. 400, about 600 years)

Rise and diffusion of the second agricultural civilization (mainly lowland): establishment of many towns and temple-cities in the southeastern Gulf Coast region and later in other parts of Middle America, under bearded priest-rulers of the royal *Chan* or "Serpent" lineage; domestication of new agricultural plants, such as beans, cacao and rubber; stone and brick masonry; temple-pyramids; hieroglyphic writing and paper books; astronomy, calendar and date inscriptions; and a highly advanced religion, centering around the worship of the Rain-god of the Gulf Coast (i.e., the famed Fair God of Life and Light, called *Itzam-na* in the later Maya, writings of Yucatan and *Quetzalcoatl* (original) in the later Toltec-Aztec writings of Central Mexico).

Discovered aspects: Classical Olmec in the southeastern and central Gulf Coast, Archaic Maya, in southern Yucatan and "Middle Archaic" in Central Mexico.

Transitional Period II (c. A.D. 323?—750, about 427 years)

Fall of the advanced Olmec-Maya civilization, ascendancy of the barbarian

THE IMPROVEMENT ERA