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Translation of the Record (Continued), Oliver Cowdery, Amanuensis

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CHAPTER VI.

TRANSLATION OF THE RECORD—(CONTINUED). OLIVER COWDERY, AMANUENSIS.

On the 5th day of April,^p as if in fulfillment of the promise made to Joseph Smith in the revelation concerning Martin Harris, just quoted, namely, that the Lord would provide means whereby the prophet might accomplish the thing which the Lord had commanded him to do—Oliver Cowdery came to the young Prophet's house, at Harmony, Pennsylvania. This was the first meeting of these two men. Oliver Cowdery, a native of Vermont, and now twenty-four years of age, had moved into the state of New York about four years previous to this, and for a time had been employed as a clerk in a store. In the winter of 1828-9 he left the store and taught the district school in the town of Manchester, which was only some nine miles from his father's home. At Manchester he became acquainted with the Smith family, Joseph Smith, Sen., being a patron of the school he taught. According to the American custom of those days, the school teacher "boarded round" in turn with the families of the neighborhood. This brought Oliver Cowdery into immediate contact with the Smith family, and while he was boarding at their home the parents of the

^pThis date in the Prophet's history, published in the Mill Star (Supplement), Vol. xiv., p. 12, is set down as the 15th of April, and the day Oliver began writing as Joseph translated is said to be the 17th of April. The 15th and 17th, however, are typographical errors. In the original manuscript of the History of the Church in the Historian's Office, the dates are written the 5th and 7th; see also "Times and Seasons," Vol. I., p. 201, where Oliver Cowdery gives the dates 5th and 7th of April, 1829.

Prophet related to him the circumstances of their son obtaining the Nephite record.

Young Cowdery became intensely interested in the story related to him. Meantime he met David Whitmer in Palmyra, a young man about his own age, who lived with his father's family some twenty-five miles from Palmyra, near the town of Waterloo, in a neighborhood called Fayette, Seneca county, at the north end of Seneca Lake. In his conversation with young Whitmer, Oliver told him of his acquaintance with the Smith family and expressed himself to the effect that there must be something in the story of finding the plates, and he announced his intention to investigate the matter.⁹ Later, when Oliver started for Harmony, where the Prophet was living, he passed the Whitmer home at Fayette, and promised David that he would report his findings to him concerning Joseph having the plates.

Oliver became convinced that Joseph's story was true, and being informed by the Prophet that it was the will of God that he should remain and act as his scribe in the work of translation, he did so, and on the 7th of April (1829) commenced to write as the prophet indited the translation obtained by means of the Urim and Thummim.

Oliver, in a few days, became anxious to learn more largely the will of the Lord concerning himself and his connection with the work then coming forth, and the Prophet through the Urim and Thummim obtained a revelation for him in which occur the following passages:

A great and marvelous work is about to come forth unto the children of men. Behold, I am God, and give heed unto my word, which is quick and powerful. * * * Behold the field is white already to harvest; wherefore, whoso desireth to reap,

⁹Statement of David Whitmer in Kansas City Journal, June 5, 1881.

let him thrust in his sickle with his might, and reap while the day last, that he may treasure up for his soul everlasting salvation in the kingdom of God. * * Now as you have asked, behold I say unto you keep my commandments, and seek to bring forth and establish the cause of my Zion; seek not for riches, but for wisdom; and behold, the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto you, and then shall you be rich. Behold, he that hath eternal life is rich. * * * Verily, verily, I say unto thee, blessed art thou for what thou hast done, for thou hast inquired of me; and behold, as often as thou hast inquired thou hast received instruction of my spirit. If it had not been so, thou wouldst not have come to this place where thou art at this time. Behold, thou knowest thou hast inquired of me, and I did enlighten thy mind; and now I tell thee these things, that thou mayest know that thou hast been enlightened by the spirit of truth; yea, I tell thee that thou mayest know that there is none else, save God, that knoweth thy thoughts and the intents of thy heart; I tell thee these things as a witness unto thee, that the words of the work which thou hast been writing are true. Therefore be diligent; stand by my servant Joseph faithfully, in whatsoever difficult circumstances he may be for the word's sake. Admonish him in his faults, and also receive admonition of him. Be patient, be sober, be temperate; have patience, faith, hope, and charity. Behold, thou art Oliver, and I have spoken unto thee because of thy desires; therefore treasure up these words in thy heart; be faithful and diligent in keeping the commandments of God, and I will encircle thee in the arms of my love.

* * * * Veril, verily, I say unto you, if you desire a further witness, cast your mind upon the night when you cried unto me in your heart that you might know concerning the truth of these things; did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? And now, behold, you have received a witness, for if I have told you things which no man knoweth, have ye not received a witness?"

"Doc. & Cov., Sec. vi. The reader may think I am quoting over copiously from these revelations given while the translation of the Book of Mormon was in progress and he may think that these incidents have little or nothing to do with the story of the translation, and the story of the translation itself but little to do with the object of this work. I would suggest, however, that this

These revelations, it should be observed, contain sharp reproofs for the transgressor. They do not flatter Joseph Smith any more than they do Martin Harris, though Joseph is the one through whom they were given. Each is re-proved and evidently without respect of person. They represent the Lord as holding out no promise either to the Prophet or his associates of immunity from difficulty, from trial. They are redolent rather of warning. The prophet is plainly told of the many that were lying in wait to destroy him. Deep humility and repentance is required when a wrong is committed; and if that is not forthcoming then behold the self-willed, the proud, are told to go their way, and trouble the Lord no further concerning their future connection with this work.

Look, in passing, at this revelation to Oliver Cowdery: There is no flattering promise of a worldly character in it. A great and a marvelous work is about to come forth; thrust in your sickle and reap; keep my commandments, is almost sternly said; seek to bring forth and establish the cause of Zion; seek not for riches, but for wisdom; be diligent; stand by my servant Joseph in whatsoever difficult circumstances he may be for the word's sake. Then there are to be difficult circumstances? "Admonish him in his faults." What, the Prophet! Yes, the Prophet—he is not to be above admonition. What humility in the prophet is here! This smacks of the Spirit of Christ. Receive admonition of him. Be patient. Be sober. Be temperate. Have

history of the translation is necessary to future arguments to be made when I come to the considerations of the objections to the Book of Mormon in part IV., where I shall examine other theories for the origin of the Book of Mormon. Besides I want the reader to know the atmosphere in which this work of translation was done; and for that purpose call especial attention to the spirit of the several revelations that have been quoted.

patience, faith, hope, and charity. This is admirable. False prophets have no such basic principles as these. They build not with such stones. And Oliver's reward? Not riches of this world. Not greatness in the eyes of men. Not the honors and applause of the world. "If thou wilt do good, yea and hold out faithful to the end, thou shalt be saved in the Kingdom of God." This is to be his reward. There is nothing worldly in all this. This spirit is worthy the great work these young men are, under God, bringing forth. This is the kind of atmosphere one would expect to find surrounding men engaged in such a work. But it is time to return to the narrative.

When Oliver found that the secret meditations of his heart were thus revealed through Joseph Smith; when his secret prayers were revealed and the answer of God's Spirit to those prayers made known, he could no longer doubt that his new-found friend was a prophet of God. It must have been with renewed zeal that he took up again his work as a scribe. It was of these days that he afterwards wrote;

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.^s

Soon after this, namely, on the 15th day of May, 1829, Oliver Cowdery himself became a witness to the ministration of an angel, for it was upon that date that John the Baptist appeared to him and Joseph Smith while they were engaged in prayer in the woods, near Harmony. John ordained them to the Aaronic priesthood and instructed them

^sTimes and Seasons, Vol. II., p. 201.

upon the subject of baptism, a full account of which is given in "New Witnesses for God," Vol. I.[†] Subsequently he, with Joseph, received another visitation of angels some time in the month of June following, when Peter, James and John conferred upon them the Melchizedek priesthood; on the banks of the Susequehanna River, a full account of which is also given in Vol. I., of "New Witnesses for God."[‡]

Meantime Oliver was writing his friend, David Whitmer, his findings as to the truth of the Prophet Joseph having the plates. He wrote soon after his arrival in Harmony that he was convinced that Joseph Smith had the records.[‡] Shortly after this, doubtless immediately after Joseph received the revelation in which the secret meditations and prayers of Oliver respecting the work before he saw the Prophet were made known, Oliver wrote a second letter to David, in which he enclosed a few lines of what had been translated, and assured him that he knew of a surety that Joseph Smith had a record of a people that inhabited the American continents in the ancient times: and that the plates they were translating gave a history of these people; he moreover assured David that he had "revealed knowledge" concerning the truth of what he affirmed. These letters young Whitmer showed to his parents, and to his brothers and sisters.

Mr. Joseph Knight, Sen., of Colesville, Broome county, New York, several times brought the young men provisions—food—which enabled them to continue the work of translation without interruption. But for this timely assistance the work of translation must have been relinquished from time to time in order to secure supplies. Mr. Knight knew

[†]Chapter xiv.

[‡]Chapter xiv.

[‡]Whitmer's statement; Kansas City Journal, June 5, 1881.

the Smith family and had called upon them a number of times at their home in Manchester. He evidently had considerable faith in the claims of Joseph concerning the Book of Mormon; for on the occasion of his visit to him in May, 1829, he desired to know what his duty was with reference to the work that the Lord was about to bring forth. The prophet inquired of the Lord, and, as in the case of Oliver Cowdery, after declaring that a great and marvelous work was about to come forth, the revelation said:

Keep my commandments, and seek to bring forth and establish the cause of Zion. Behold, I speak unto you, and also to all those who have desires to bring forth and establish this work; and no one can assist in this work, except he shall be humble and full of love, having faith, hope and charity, being temperate in all things whatsoever shall be entrusted in his care.^w

For a time the Prophet had been permitted to pursue the work of translation at Harmony without interference. But now there began to be mutterings of an approaching storm of persecution. Threats were frequent, and the young men were only preserved from actual violence by the blessing of the Lord and the influence of Mr. Isaac Hale, father of the Prophet's wife; who, though he had no faith in the Prophet's work, and in the past had manifested some hostility towards him, he still believed in law and order; was opposed to mob violence; and was willing that Joseph and his associates should be permitted to complete their work without interference.*

On account of the manifestation of this unfriendly spirit in the community, however, Joseph and Oliver kept secret for a time the circumstance of their ordination to the priest-

^wHistory of the Church, Vol. I., p. 47.

^{*}History of the Church, Vol. I., p: 44.

hood and their baptism. They could not, however, long continue silent on such a subject, and in a few days, under a sense of duty, they commenced to reason out of the scriptures with their friends and acquaintances concerning the work of God. But Joseph was evidently uneasy concerning their safety at Harmony, and under his direction Oliver wrote to David Whitmer at Fayette, asking him to come down to Harmony and take them to the elder Whitmer's home, giving as a reason for their rather strange request that they had received a commandment from God to that effect.^y This request found David Whitmer in the midst of his spring work. He had some twenty acres of land to plow and concluded to do that and then go. "I got up one morning to go to work as usual," he says, "and on going to the field, found that between five and seven acres of my land had been plowed under during the night. I don't know who did it; but it was done just as I would have done it myself, the plow was left standing in the furrow. This enabled me to start sooner."^z Nor was this the only assistance of like character given to him. While harrowing in a field of wheat before starting on his journey he found to his surprise that he had accomplished more in a few hours than was usual to do in two or three days. The day following this circumstance he went out to spread plaster over a field, according to the custom of the farmers in that locality, when, to his surprise, he found the work had been done, and well done.

^yWhitmer's statement, Kansas City Journal, June 5, 1881. Also report of visit to David Whitmer, by Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith, Mill. Star, Vol. XL., pp. 769-774.

^zStatement of David Whitmer, Pratt and Smith's Report, Mill. Star, Vol. XL., pp. 769-774.

Let it be observed that this reported conversation was published during the life time of David Whitmer. It took place on the 7th of Sept., 1878; and Whitmer did not die until 25th Jan., 1888.

David Whitmer's sister, who lived near the field, told him that three strangers had appeared in the field the day before and spread the plaster with remarkable skill. She at the time presumed that they were men whom David had hired to do the work.^a

This assistance, provided through some divine agency—it can be accounted for in no other way, enabled David Whitmer to respond sooner than he otherwise could have done to the call to go and bring the Prophet and his associate from Harmony, where mob violence was impending, to the home of his father, Peter Whitmer, where the work of translation could be finished in peace and security.

When David Whitmer was approaching the little village of Harmony with his two-horse team and wagon, he was met some distance from the town by the prophet and Oliver. "Oliver told me," says David Whitmer, in relating the circumstance, "that Joseph had informed him when I started from home, where I had stopped the first night, how I read the sign at the tavern; where I stopped the next night, etc.; and that I would be there that day before dinner, and this was why they had come out to meet me; all of which was exactly as Joseph had told Oliver, at which I was greatly astonished."^b

^aCannon's Life of Joseph Smith, pp. 67, 68.

^bStatement of David Whitmer, Pratt and Smith Report, Mill. Star, Vol. XL., pp. 769-774. Another instance that in like manner illustrates the seership of the prophet Joseph is related in the Church History, and which occurred while making a journey from Independence, Missouri, to Ohio, in company with Bishop Newel K. Whitney. Near New Albany their horses took fright and while they were running at full speed Bishop Whitney attempted to jump out of the conveyance, but caught his foot in the wheel and had his leg and foot broken in several places. This occasioned delay of several weeks among a not very friendly people; for besides their manifest coldness an attempt was made to poison the prophet. And now the prophet's statement: "Brother Whitney had not had his foot moved from the

The day following David Whitmer's arrival at Harmony the plates were packed up and delivered into the care of the Angel Moroni, that they might be safely conveyed to Fayette. "When I was returning to Fayette," says David Whitmer, "with Joseph and Oliver, all of us riding in the wagon, Oliver and I on an old fashioned, wooden spring seat, and Joseph behind us, when traveling along in a clear, open place, a very pleasant, nice looking old man suddenly appeared by the side of our wagon and saluted us with, 'Good morning; it is very warm;' at the same time wiping his face or forehead with his hand. We returned the salutation, and by a sign from Joseph, I invited him to ride if he was going our way. But he said very pleasantly, 'No, I am going to Cumorah.' This name was somewhat new to me, and I did not know what 'Cumorah' meant. We all gazed at him and at each other, and as I looked round inquiringly of Joseph, the old man instantly disappeared, so that I did not see him again."

Replying to the question, "Did you notice his appearance?" David Whitmer replied: "I should think I did. He was, I should think, about five feet eight or nine inches tall and heavy set, about such a man as James Cleve there (a gentleman present at the Whitmer, Pratt and Smith inter-

bed for nearly four weeks, when I went into his room, after a walk in the grove, and told him if he would agree to start for home in the morning, we would take a wagon to the river, about four miles, and there would be a ferry boat in waiting which would take us quickly across, where we would find a hack which would take us directly to the landing, where we should find a boat, in waiting, and we would be going up the river before 10 o'clock, and have a prosperous journey home. He took courage and told me he would go. We started next morning, and found everything as I had told him, for we were passing rapidly up the river before 10 o'clock, and landing at Wellsville, took stage coach to Chardon, from thence in a wagon to Kirtland, where we arrived some time in June. (History of the Church, Vol. I., p. 272.)

view), but heavier. His face was as large; he was dressed in a suit of brown woolen clothes, his hair and beard were white, like Brother Pratt's, but his beard was not so heavy. I also remember that he had on his back a sort of knapsack with something in it shaped like a book. It was the messenger who had the plates, who had taken them from Joseph just prior to our starting from Harmony."^c

Soon after the arrival at the Whitmer residence, in the garden near by, Moroni once more delivered the sacred record to Joseph, and the work of translation was renewed with even greater vigor than at Harmony; for when Oliver would tire of writing, one of the Whitmers or Emma Smith would relieve him.

David Whitmer says that soon after the installment of Joseph, his wife, and Oliver Cowdery in the Whitmer household, he saw something which led him to believe that the plates were concealed in his father's barn, and frankly asked the prophet if it were so. Joseph replied that it was. "Some time after this," David adds: "My mother was going to milk the cows, when she was met out near the yard by the same old man [meaning the one who had saluted his party on the way from Harmony; at least, David judged him to be the same, doubtless from his mother's description of him,] who said to her: 'You have been very faithful and diligent in your labors, but you are tired because of the increase of your toil; it is proper, therefore, that you should receive a witness, that your faith may be strengthened.' Thereupon he showed her the plates. My father and mother had a large family of their own, the addition to it, therefore, of Joseph, his wife Emma, and Oliver, very greatly increased the toil and anxiety of my mother. And although she had

^cWhitmer's Statement, Pratt and Smith Report, Mill. Star, Vol. XL., pp. 769-774.

never complained she had sometimes felt that her labor was too much, or, at least, she was perhaps beginning to feel so. This circumstance, however, completely removed all such feelings, and nerved her up for her increased responsibilities."^d

^dPratt and Smith Report, Mill. Star, Vol. XL., p. 772.