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## Oliver Cowdery

Author(s): Junius F. Wells

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**Abstract:** This series presents a sketch of the life of Oliver Cowdery, in an attempt to dispel inaccuracies previously published. Though he faltered and fell, he should be honored, for he never joined the Church's enemies nor did he deny his testimony of the Book of Mormon as the work of the Lord. Cowdery was the scribe for most of the Book of Mormon and was one of the Three Witnesses. The first part discusses the Cowdery's role as a scribe and witness of the Book of Mormon.

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*“In ways we know not of, failures are worked into the texture of the eternal plans, which cannot fail, and never falter.”*

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**OLIVER COWDERY.**

BY JUNIUS F. WELLS.

UPWARDS of a year ago, I was informed by Miss Clarissa A. Bingham, of South Royalton, Vermont, whose mother was a Cowdery, that a genealogical history of the Cowdery family, descendants of William Cowdery, of Lynn, Massachusetts, 1630, was being prepared by Mrs. Mary Bryant Alverson Mehling, and I was brought into correspondence with the latter, and afterwards with Mr. A. E. Cowdery, the publisher, and the Frank Allaben Genealogical Company, from whose press the work is now about to be issued.

I found that they had an account of the life of Oliver Cowdery—mostly newspaper clippings—which contained many inaccuracies, and utterly failed to do his memory justice.

After considerable correspondence and personal interviews with Mr. Cowdery and Mr. Allaben, I was authorized to prepare a biographical sketch for the book, to be used in place of the matter they had in hand. The following article is the result, after undergoing considerable amendment to meet the views of the publisher, and to harmonize it with other matter contained in the history. It establishes upon unquestioned authorities the main facts of Oliver Cowdery's connection with Joseph Smith the Prophet, in the translation of the Book of Mormon, in the organization and establishment of the Church, and the circumstances of his leaving the Church and of his return to it. And it puts upon record, concisely and truthfully, so far as it goes, the principal events of his life, by which his name and fame are secured to all futurity,

without disparagement. I have felt a great desire to have this done, and am grateful for the opportunity now presented.

\* \* \* \* \*

Oliver Cowdery deserves to be remembered and honored by the Latter-day Saints. There is no doubt he faltered and fell—depriving himself, whether he realized it at the time or not, of the authority, gifts and power which the Lord had conferred upon him. He, however, did not join the enemies of the people, nor affiliate with the apostate branches, that sought to establish themselves as the Church; and he never denied “The Testimony of Three Witnesses.” For this he had the promise of the Lord: “The gates of hell shall not prevail against you: for my grace is sufficient for you, and you shall be lifted up at the last day.” Who can doubt it? He was the first person baptized in this dispensation, and he died in the faith.

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In presenting a brief history of the life of Oliver Cowdery, and his prominent part in the founding and development of the “Mormon” Church, it seems best to state at once that the doctrine of polygamy, which characterized the “Mormons” after they went to Utah, was not promulgated until years after he had left them, nor openly practiced until after his death. He removed from Wells, Vermont, at a very early age. He obtained a fair education for the times, and migrated to Western New York, where the schools were of the most primitive order, and engaged in the profession of school teaching. He was so employed in Palmyra, in the winter of 1828-29, and while thus engaged followed the common practice of “boarding around,” which led him into the home of Joseph Smith, Sr. Here he first heard of the reputed finding of the gold plates by Joseph Smith, Jr., which the latter claimed had been shewn him by an angel, a topic at that time on everybody’s tongue, for miles around. Oliver Cowdery\* became interested, and announced his intention of visiting young Joseph Smith and investigating the matter for himself. This was the turning point in his career.

It is certainly historical that Oliver Cowdery wrote the manuscript of the Book of Mormon at the dictation of Joseph Smith, and made the printer’s copy of the first edition. How his association with Joseph Smith began and continued during the period of the translation, is told by himself in one of a series of

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\* OLIVER COWDERY, 7 (William, Jr., 6 William, 5 Nathaniel, 4 Samuel, 3 Nathaniel, 2 William, 1), b. Oct. 3, 1806, at Wells, Rutland Co., Vt.: m. Dec. 18, 1832, in Jackson Co., Mo., to Elizabeth Ann Whitmer, b. Jan. 22, 1815, at Fayette, Seneca Co., N. Y.; dau. of Peter and Mary Whitmer. Residence (1887) South West City, Mo. He d. Mch. 3, 1850; was a teacher by profession; also practiced law.

Children of Oliver and Elizabeth

letters published in the *Messenger and Advocate*, at Kirtland, Ohio, in 1834, from which we quote in part as follows :

“Near the time of the setting of the sun, Sabbath evening, April 5, 1829, my natural eyes, for the first time, beheld this brother. He then resided in Harmony, Susquehanna county, Pennsylvania. On Monday, the sixth, I assisted him in arranging some business of a temporal nature, and on Tuesday, the seventh, commenced to write the Book of Mormon. \* \* \* 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.”

During the progress of this translation, that is from the beginning of April until some time in June, it was discovered, in the work itself, that there were to be three witnesses to whom the gold plates should be shown, and who were to testify concerning their origin and translation by inspiration, or, as it was expressed, “by the gift and power of God.” Joseph Smith stated that he had been forbidden to show the plates to anyone except as thus provided. Greatly desiring to be one of these witnesses, Oliver Cowdery, together with David Whitmer and Martin Harris, who had also become associated with Joseph Smith, retired to the woods near by the home of Whitmer, in the town of Manchester, New York, for the purpose of uniting their prayers in supplication that they might be so favored. The following is told in the language of David Whitmer :

“We suddenly beheld a dazzlingly bright light, which seemed to envelop the woods for a considerable distance around. Simultaneously with the light came a strange, entrancing influence, which permeated us so powerfully, that we felt chained to the spot, while we experienced a sensation of joy absolutely indescribable. At the same time there appeared in front of us a personage clothed in white, and near us a table containing a number of gold plates, some brass plates, the Urim and Thummim, the sword of Laban and other articles. We were requested to examine these things, and told that we must be witnesses of them to the world.”

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- i. Marie Louise, b. Aug. 11, 1835, at Kirtland, Ohio; m. Sept. 7, 1856, at Richmond, Mo., to Dr. Chas. Johnson, b. June 24, 1826. Residence (1887) South West City, Mo. We are indebted to Mrs. Johnson for the dates in this record of Oliver's family.
  - ii. Elizabeth Ann, d. May 9, 1837, at Kirtland, Ohio, aged 5 mos. 25 days.
  - iii. Josephine Rebecca, d. Oct. 21, 1844, at Tiffin, Ohio, aged 6 years 7 mos.
  - iv. Oliver Peter, d. Aug. 13, 1840, at Tiffin, aged 5 days.
  - v. Adline Fuller, d. Oct. 13, 1844, at Tiffin, Ohio, aged 15 days.
  - vi. Julia Olive, d. July 3, 1846, at Tiffin, Ohio, aged 1 mo. 6 days.

Soon after this they gave to the world the following proclamation, which was added to the last page of the Book of Mormon, and was published in the first edition. It has appeared on the first page after the title page of all subsequent editions of the book, which has been published in more than fifteen languages, with hundreds of thousands of copies distributed throughout the world:

*“The Testimony of Three Witnesses:* Be it known unto all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, unto whom this work shall come, that we, through the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, have seen the plates which contain this record, which is a record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites, their brethren, and also of the people of Jared, who came from the tower of which hath been spoken; 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. And we also testify that we have seen the engravings which are upon the plates; and they have been shown unto us by the power of God and not of man. 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 know that it is by the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, that we beheld and bear record that these things are true; and it is marvelous in our eyes, nevertheless the Voice of the Lord commanded us that we should bear record of it; wherefore, to be obedient unto the commandments of God, we bear testimony of these things. And we know that if we are faithful in Christ, we shall rid our garments of the blood of all men, and be found spotless before the judgment-seat of Christ, and shall dwell with Him eternally in the heavens. And the honor be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, which is one God. Amen.”

Oliver Cowdery  
David Whitmer  
Martin Harris

There were two copies of the manuscript of the Book of Mormon, both written by Oliver Cowdery, one as dictated to him by Joseph Smith, and the other a copy made for the printer's use. After the book was published, the latter copy, showing the printer's marking, remained in the possession of Oliver Cowdery until shortly before his death, when he gave it into the custody of David Whitmer.

Take search in the records

And it came to pass that we took the plates of gold from the  
territory of Helian departed into the wilderness and journeyed  
unto the tent of our father & it came to pass that after we  
came down into the wilderness unto our father behold  
he was filled with joy and also my mother said she was ex-  
ceeding glad for she truly had rejoiced because of us  
for she had supposed that we had promised in the wil-  
derness and she also had complained against my father  
to his wife that he was a visionary man saying behold  
they had led us forth from the land of our inheritance  
& my sons are no more and we perished in the  
wilderness and after this manner of language had my  
mother complained against my father and it had come  
to pass that my father spake unto her saying that  
that is an unvisionary man for if I had not said that  
was of the Lord a vision I should not have seen  
good things which I have seen.

Parished with his brethren but I will cause obtained  
A land of promise in the which things I do require  
ye and I know that the Lord will deliver me from  
out of the hands of labour and bring them down again  
unto us in the wilderness and after this manner of  
my father Leah comfort my mother saying cease ye  
and while we journey in the wilderness I will  
lead in generation to attain the records of the years and  
then we had returned to the tent of my father behold  
their joy was full and my mother was comforted and she  
spake saying now I feel of a promise that the Lord hath  
commanded your husband to flee into the wilderness  
ye and also know of a promise that the Lord hath  
commanded your husband to flee into the wilderness  
and give them power whosoever they will accomplish  
the thing which the Lord hath commanded them and after  
this manner of language did she speak and it came to pass  
that they did require exceedingly to do all these promises  
which the Lord had said and their joy was full.

The original copy remained in charge of Joseph Smith, who deposited it, together with other valuable papers, coins and relics, in the corner-stone of the Nauvoo House, October 2, 1841. This building was designed for a house of entertainment, where strangers might be received. It was never completed, except the first story, but part of it was roofed over, and it was occupied for many years. About 1883 it was torn down, and the contents of the corner-stone disclosed. It was found that the papers were badly damaged by exposure to the water and air, but portions of the original manuscript were intact and quite legible. About twenty pages were secured by Mrs. Sarah M. Kimball, who had been present at the laying of the corner-stone. These were taken to Salt Lake City, and given to Joseph F. Smith, the president of the "Mormon" Church, who kindly permitted a photograph to be made from one of the pages (manuscript page 8) to be used expressly in this work. Our engraving is of this page, showing the page heading reading as follows :

"LEHI SEARCHETH THE RECORDS.

"And it came to pass that we took the plates of brass and the servant of Laban, and departed into the wilderness, and journeyed unto the tent of our father. And it came to pass that after we had come down into the wilderness unto our father, behold he was filled with joy, also my mother Sariah, was exceeding glad, for she truly had mourned because of us : for she had supposed that we had perished in the wilderness ; and she also had complained against my father, telling him that he was a visionary man ; saying, Behold thou hast led us forth from the land of our inheritance, and my sons are no more, and we perish in the wilderness. And after this manner of language had my mother complained against my father. And it had come to pass that my father spake unto her, saying, I know that I am a visionary man ; for if I had not seen the things of God in a vision, I should not have known the goodness of God, but had tarried at Jerusalem, and had perished with my brethren. But behold, I have obtained a land of promise, in the which things I do rejoice ; yea, and I know that the Lord will deliver my sons out of the hands of Laban, and bring them down again unto us in the wilderness. And after this manner of language did my father Lehi comfort my mother Sariah, concerning us, while we journeyed in the wilderness up to the land of Jerusalem, to obtain the record of the Jews. And when we had returned to the tent of my father, behold their joy was full, and my mother was comforted ; and she spake, saying, now I know of a surety that the Lord hath commanded my husband to flee into the wilderness ; yea, and I also know of a surety that the Lord hath protected my sons, and delivered them out of the hands of Laban, and gave them power whereby they could accomplish the thing which the Lord hath commanded them. And after this manner of

language did she speak. And it came to pass that they did rejoice exceedingly, and did offer sacrifice and burnt offerings unto the Lord; and they gave thanks unto the God of Israel. (I. Nephi 4:38; 5:1-9)."

The first edition of the Book of Mormon was published at Palmyra, in 1829, and on the sixth day of the following April, 1830, the "Mormon" Church was organized at Fayette, Seneca county, New York. There were but six members present, though about thirty converts had been baptized previous to this date. Among those present, and the first person who had been baptized in the new faith, May 15, 1829, was Oliver Cowdery, He was an energetic disciple, and very successful in proselyting. "On Sunday, April 11, 1830," the history of the "Mormon" Church says, "Oliver Cowdery preached the first public discourse that was preached by any of our number." He, together with Parley P. Pratt and others, led the first mission to the Lamanites, as the "Mormons" called the Indians, in the fall of 1830, and spring of 1831. They went first to the Catteraugus tribe, near Buffalo; thence to the Wyandottes, near Sandusky, Ohio; and thence to Western Missouri, where they visited the Shawnees, and spent a considerable time among the Delawares. Oliver Cowdery delivered a notable discourse, pointing to the origin of the Indians as told in the Book of Mormon, to the latter tribe, which was appreciatively replied to by its chief.\*

He was always connected with the printing and publishing department, more especially, while with the "Mormons," and was entrusted with the manuscript of the Book of Commandments and with money to be used for its publication; taking it, in company with John Whitmer, to Jackson county, Missouri, in November, 1831, where the Church printing office was established. He was appointed to assist in preparing this for the press, expecting to publish an edition of three thousand copies in the following May. He was, about this time, appointed at the head of seven to preside over that part of the Church in Missouri; and spent about two years in Jackson county, remaining until the uprising that ultimately drove the "Mormons" from the county. His was the first name among those commanded to leave the county. In their extremity, his associates sent him as a special messenger back to Kirtland, Ohio, to confer with Joseph Smith and the other leaders regarding the conditions in Jackson county. He did not return, as the printing office had been destroyed, but was appointed to obtain a new outfit, and was given charge of the publication called *The Evening and Morning Star*, but changed in October, 1834, to *The Messenger and Advocate*, of which he was the editor.

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\* *History of the Church*, Vol. I, page 183.