



Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship

Volume 26 | Number 6

Article 1

January 2006

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Recommended Citation

(2006) "Maxwell Institute Supports BYU Symposium on Oliver Cowdery with Speakers, New Book," *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship*: Vol. 26: No. 6, Article 1.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights/vol26/iss6/1>

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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 26 | 2006

Number 6

<http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu>

Maxwell Institute Supports BYU Symposium on Oliver Cowdery with Speakers, New Book

To commemorate the 200th anniversary of Oliver Cowdery's birth on 3 October 1806, more than a dozen scholars treated crowds in the BYU Conference Center to fresh perspectives on Cowdery as a central figure in the Restoration. Entitled "Oliver Cowdery: Restoration Witness, Second Elder," the symposium featured cultural historian Richard L. Bushman as keynote speaker and several other distinguished speakers spread throughout four sessions of three or four concurrent presentations each. Cosponsors of the five-hour event, held on 10 November, were the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation and BYU's Religious Studies Center.

The Maxwell Institute was pleased to offer its support by teaming up with BYU Studies to compile under one cover select scholarly research on Cowdery published by BYU Studies or FARMS over the past 30 years (see the accompanying sidebar article, "New Book Compiles Scholarship on Oliver Cowdery," for more on this new publication). The volume's editors, John W. Welch and Larry E. Morris, spoke at the symposium. This report spotlights their presentations and a few others.

Oliver's Perception of Joseph

Following welcoming remarks by symposium organizer Alexander L. Baugh (Church History, BYU) and the unveiling of a new painting of Cowdery by artist Ken Corbett, Bushman addressed the topic "Oliver's Joseph." He noted that Oliver was the "chief beneficiary of Joseph [Smith]'s expansive prophethood" because Joseph shared with him so many visions and revelations—"the highest form of communion."

Bushman, who is the Gouverneur Morris Professor of History, Emeritus, at Columbia University

and author of the widely noted 2005 biography *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, asked why Cowdery, who was privileged to witness many foundational events of the Restoration, "wandered away from the Church in 1838 so callously." In partial answer, Bushman noted Cowdery's alignment with the disaffected Whitmer clan, his confrontation with Joseph Smith over alleged adultery, and his persistent financial worries. Cowdery wavered in his allegiance to the Prophet and did not have the rocklike character of Brigham Young. "Joseph had

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New Book Compiles Scholarship on Oliver Cowdery

In conjunction with the recent BYU symposium "Oliver Cowdery: Restoration Witness, Second Elder," the Maxwell Institute has published *Oliver Cowdery: Scribe, Elder, Witness*, edited by John W. Welch and Larry E. Morris. This book includes 17 important articles previously published by BYU Studies or FARMS and covers virtually all periods of Oliver Cowdery's life.

"Oliver Cowdery was scribe, second elder, missionary, editor, publisher, justice of the peace, witness of the Book of Mormon, and defender of the Restoration," Welch says. "This bicentennial collection spotlights and clarifies Cowdery's many crucial contributions to the early years of the Church."

The two leading Cowdery scholars, Richard L. Anderson and Scott H. Faulring (who are editing a four-volume collection of Cowdery documents), are both well represented in this compilation. In "The Impact of the First Preaching in Ohio," Anderson discusses the first major mission in the Church, in which Oliver, Peter Whitmer Jr.,

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to work with those who came along, and not all were giants,” Bushman said.

Bushman then focused on the perception of the Prophet Joseph discernible in Cowdery’s writings. In Cowdery’s letters dealing with Church history that appeared in the *Messenger and Advocate* in 1834–35, “Joseph remains a blurred figure while Oliver is at the forefront,” Bushman said. “We learn more about Oliver than about Joseph.” In all eight letters, Joseph is specifically named only twice. And whereas Joseph mentions in one sentence his temptation to obtain the plates for gain, Oliver devotes six pages to that struggle, saying Joseph sought “wealth and ease.” Yet Cowdery “lived the struggle between greed and God’s glory more than Joseph Smith did,” Bushman said. In fact, of nine charges cited by the Missouri high council that excommunicated him, six had to do with financial issues.

“There are as many Josephs as there are observers,” Bushman said, and we should rejoice in the multiplicity of impressions that add depth to our understanding of the Prophet. “Oliver’s is not our Joseph or *the* Joseph,” he concluded, “but will always remain significant.”

Editor, Defender, Justice of the Peace

John W. Welch, the Robert K. Thomas Professor of Law at BYU and editor in chief of *BYU Studies*, spoke on Cowdery as an editor, as a defender of the Restoration, and as a justice of the peace in Kirtland. As an editor, Cowdery published the *Messenger and Advocate* during two terms (October 1834–May 1835 and April 1836–January 1837) at a time when the Industrial Revolution was spurring a veritable printing revolution. His writing style was typically lucid, personal, tolerant, and dynamic. He published important letters to the editor, notes from the field, eight of his own letters, and serial features on “The Gospel,” “The Faith of the Church,” and the “Millennium.”

“In Oliver’s writings are found the first attempts to publish a set of articles of faith and a history of the Church,” Welch said, noting that part of the first letter appears in the Pearl of Great Price at the end of Joseph Smith—History.

Although Cowdery typically ignored the critics, on one occasion he responded brilliantly to Alexander Campbell’s very influential 1831 newspaper article “Delusions.” In this response, Cowdery is firm and witty yet tolerant. He resists quarreling over minor arguments raised by Campbell and instead positively rests his case by defending three linchpins of the Restoration: priesthood, gathering, and temple. Welch argued that one must admire Cowdery’s ability to claim the higher ground by turning his attention to the distinctive strengths of his own position.

Cowdery’s brief term as justice of the peace was busy but efficient, as evidenced by his docket (preserved in the Huntington Library in San Marino, California). In electing Cowdery to this office, townsfolk expressed confidence in his honesty, wisdom, common sense, and human concern. Welch noted that Cowdery as judge notarized many deeds and mortgages, performed five marriages, and heard 240 cases from June to September 1837.

Most matters brought before Cowdery were debt-collection cases involving small amounts of money, but 10 were criminal cases, the most serious being a two-day trial with 70 witnesses in the August case of “assault and battery and riot” in the Kirtland Temple. Cowdery dismissed the charges. A few days later, he left Kirtland for Missouri, only three months into his three-year elected office. Welch suggested that Cowdery left not wanting to be caught in the middle of the turbulence brewing in Kirtland, as it was sure to surface again in his very courtroom.

Oliver as Scribe

Royal Skousen, a linguistics professor at BYU who is editor of the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project, considered what the manuscript evidence reveals about Cowdery’s skill and even his temperament as principal scribe of the Book of Mormon.

Skousen noted that one-sixth of the Book of Mormon was set from the original manuscript (Helaman to the end of Mormon). Cowdery made an average of three errors per page when preparing the printer’s manuscript—an error rate that Skousen’s research has shown to be actually quite low in copy work of that nature. The 1830 typesetter made about the same error rate as he set type from

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the manuscripts, so overall there are fewer errors for that part of the text that he set directly from the original manuscript. Cowdery was the best scribe of those who took down Joseph's dictation, Skousen said. "He had an exquisite hand and was very meticulous. Yet we must disabuse ourselves of the idea that as a teacher he was a great speller." Skousen listed examples of Cowdery's spellings in the original manuscript that deviated from standard spelling practice of the day (as established by Samuel Johnson's 1755 dictionary) and noted that scribe 2 of the printer's manuscript was a somewhat better speller (his error rate is slightly less than Oliver's).

Of added interest was evidence that Cowdery viewed the copy work of the other scribes somewhat condescendingly. To illustrate, Skousen discussed three instances of when Cowdery, upon reviewing the work of scribes 2 and 3 on the original manuscript, suspected inaccuracy in the scribes' work and independently made unnecessary changes in wording—that is, changes that likely do not reflect the original text as Joseph dictated it. For example, at 1 Nephi 11:36, Cowdery, presumably influenced by similar phrasing in Matthew 7:27, added "and it fell" after "the great and spacious building was the pride of the world" (the following clause, "and the fall thereof was exceedingly great," works fine without Cowdery's explanatory but unnecessary later addition to the text). Another indicator of Cowdery's temperament was his uncharacteristically sloppy ruling (foolscap paper came unlined) of the printer's manuscript gathering prepared by scribe 2 of P. Because scribe 2's gathering showed carelessness, Oliver, who typically prepared the gatherings himself and did so meticulously, seems to have expressed his irritation by not maintaining his usual neat ruling on that gathering.

Of 14 emendations that Cowdery made in the original manuscript, Skousen surmises that 3 are true to the original text, a determination made possible by computer-assisted research of the remarkably systematic text. Skousen went on to discuss spelling variation in the text (e.g., *Zenock* vs. the correct *Zenoch*), the oddity of double hyphens (at the end and beginning of lines) in the printer's manuscript, Cowdery's brief attempts at punctuat-

ing the text (which were ignored by the 1830 typesetter), and an instance (in Alma 45) where Joseph both translated and wrote down about two lines of text (it is doubtful that this represents any attempt on Oliver's part to translate the plates at this point).

Conflict with the Church

Richard L. Anderson, professor emeritus of ancient scripture at BYU, spoke on financial aspects of Cowdery's conflict with the Church. He began by noting that though financial issues were not the direct cause of Cowdery's excommunication, they were an important underlying reason for his resentment of Church leaders. He went on to present a sympathetic account of Cowdery's personal liability for thousands of dollars of Church debt.

To help repay the debt incurred with the building of the Kirtland Temple, Cowdery and five others (including Joseph and Hyrum Smith and Sidney Rigdon) formed two partnerships to purchase dry goods and supplies for resale. Because the Church had not incorporated, the partners were personally responsible for the money. To understand Cowdery's financial predicaments, Anderson went through Cowdery's ledgers and receipts and concluded that by the time Cowdery left the Church in 1838, he was jointly liable for \$33,000 of its debt.

Cowdery's letters indicate that while he never lost faith in the doctrines of the Church, he became increasingly angry about its administration. He allied himself with the Whitmers, who were also becoming disaffected. He attempted to recoup financial loss by practicing law and working in debt collection, a move that made him highly unpopular with fellow church members. Eventually, after eight years as a church leader, he was excommunicated on 12 April 1838.

While out of the Church for 10 years, Cowdery never denied his testimony of the Book of Mormon or his part in the Restoration. When he desired to rejoin the Church, he wrote to his brother-in-law Phineas Young (Brigham's brother) expressing hope that the Church would clear his name of accusations of dishonesty. Such a statement never came, but he was rebaptized and fully reinstated in the Church on 12 November 1848. He died from a chronic lung condition before he could gather the money and supplies to join the Saints in Utah.

Oliver's Conversion

Larry E. Morris, an editor for the Maxwell Institute, spoke on Oliver Cowdery's conversion. Oliver first met the Smith family in the autumn of 1828 when he began teaching in the Manchester, New York, school district. Joseph and Emma Smith, who had married in 1827, were then living in Harmony, Pennsylvania, where Emma's parents lived. Not long after meeting the Smiths, Oliver (age 22) met David Whitmer (age 23), who was in Palmyra on business. "A great many people in the neighborhood were talking about the finding of certain gold plates by one Joseph Smith, jr.," David recalled in an 1881 interview with the *Kansas City Journal*. He and Oliver decided to investigate the matter.

Probably because of neighborhood harassment a year earlier—after Joseph had obtained the plates—Joseph Sr. was reluctant to tell Oliver about Joseph Jr.'s sacred experiences, even after Oliver began boarding with the Smiths. Late in January 1829, however, Joseph Sr. and Samuel traveled to Harmony, where section 4 of the Doctrine and Covenants was received. In that revelation, Joseph Sr. was told, "The field is white already to harvest; and lo, he that thrusteth in his sickle with his

might, the same layeth up in store that he perisheth not, but bringeth salvation to his soul" (v. 4). Morris speculated that this revelation may have motivated Joseph Sr. to tell Oliver about the plates.

Regardless of the exact sequence of events, Oliver followed the advice of Joseph Sr. and Lucy and prayed for a personal testimony. According to Joseph Jr., "[The] Lord appeared unto . . . Oliver Cowdery and shewed unto him the plates in a vision and also the truth of the work" (Joseph Smith Letterbook 1). As Oliver told Lucy, "I have made it a subject of prayer, and I firmly believe that it is the will of the Lord that I should go [and help Joseph with the translation]" (quoted in Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations*). Therefore, when Oliver and Samuel traveled to Harmony in early April 1829, Oliver had already received a personal witness of Joseph Smith's prophetic calling and was ready to assist with the translation, a task that Joseph and he accomplished in a truly amazing period of approximately 10 weeks.

The proceedings of this symposium will be published by the Religious Studies Center. 📖

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Parley P. Pratt, and Ziba Peterson traveled first to Buffalo, New York, and then 200 miles farther west into Ohio. They baptized 130 people, including Sidney Rigdon—a harvest that "doubled the membership of the Church and created a solid nucleus for rapid growth and a secure, if temporary, gathering location," Anderson writes.

In his award-winning article, "The Return of Oliver Cowdery," Faulring reviews in detail the efforts of Oliver's friend and brother-in-law, Phineas H. Young, to help bring Oliver back into the fold after his 1838 excommunication. As early as 1842, Phineas wrote to his brother Brigham that Oliver's heart "is still with his old friends." The next year, Joseph Smith instructed the Twelve to invite Oliver back into Church fellowship and service. This letter was inexplicably delayed for several months, but Oliver responded favorably. In fact, Faulring points out that on the last day of

Joseph Smith's life, Almon W. Babbit visited the Prophet and read a recent communication from Oliver. "Although the letter has been lost and its specific contents remain unknown, it can be presumed from Oliver's optimistic overtures that his was a congenial letter," Faulring surmises. Oliver maintained a positive but long-distance relationship with Church leaders until he was rebaptized in 1848.

Other articles discuss such topics as the translation and printing of the Book of Mormon, the restoration of the priesthood, Oliver's response to Alexander Campbell's criticisms of the Book of Mormon, and Oliver's accounts of the Pentecost-like outpourings associated with the dedication of the Kirtland Temple.

Of particular interest to many is the recent discovery of an original daguerreotype believed to be that of Oliver Cowdery (reported at length in the 18 November issue of *Church News*, a section

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