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New Book Compiles Scholarship on Oliver Cowdery

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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 26 | 2006

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<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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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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of the *Deseret Morning News*). In his article on this topic, Patrick A. Bishop, a Church Educational System coordinator who discovered the image while doing research in the Library of Congress's archives, compares the newly identified image with known likenesses of Oliver. "While [my] observations . . . are not absolute," he writes, "they do provide convincing evidence that this is indeed a heretofore-unknown image of Oliver Cowdery."

This book is available at the BYU Bookstore. To order a copy online, go to byubookstore.com, or go to maxwellinstitute.byu.edu and, at the bottom of the notice for this book, click on the "more" link to the BYU Bookstore. 

PUBLICATIONS

Beholding Salvation: The Life of Christ in Word and Image, by S. Kent Brown, Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, and Dawn C. Phesey (Deseret Book, 2006), presents 80 full-color illustrations of Christ as depicted by the old masters and modern artists. It narrates his life, comments on events in his ministry that inspired the art, and details how the imagery has evolved apace with changing interpretations of his life and mission.

Oliver Cowdery: Scribe, Elder, Witness, edited by John W. Welch and Larry E. Morris (Maxwell Institute, 2006), compiles 30 years' worth of scholarly writings about the Second Elder of the Church in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of his birth on 3 October 1806.

The Dead Sea Scrolls Electronic Library Revised Edition 2006, edited by Emanuel Tov (Brill Academic Publishers, 2006), is a newly updated and fully searchable CD-ROM program that allows users to view high-quality images of all the nonbiblical scroll texts along with their Hebrew or Aramaic transcriptions and their English translations.

St. Ephrem the Syrian: Select Poems, edited, introduced, annotated, and rendered into English by Sebastian Brock and George Kiraz (BYU Press, 2006), features original texts and lucid translations of 20 substantial poems from the fourth century. Written by the most important theologian of the Syriac Christian tradition, they reflect upon the history of salvation, commencing with paradise and continuing through the earthly life of Christ and the rise of the Christian church.

Verse by Verse: The Four Gospels, by D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner (Deseret Book, 2006), is an in-depth scripture commentary on Christ's ministry and teachings. It includes illustrations, charts, maps, and other study aids.

Verse by Verse: Acts through Revelation (previously published under the title *New Testament Apostles Testify of Christ*), by D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner (Deseret Book, 2006), examines the doctrines taught by the early apostles and shows how those teachings harmonize with principles and doctrines of the restored gospel.

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The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship encourages and supports research on the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Bible, other ancient scripture, and related subjects. The Maxwell Institute publishes and distributes titles in these areas for the benefit of scholars and interested Latter-day Saint readers.

Primary research interests at the Maxwell Institute include the history, language, literature, culture, geography, politics, and law relevant to ancient scripture. Although such subjects are of secondary importance when compared with the spiritual and eternal messages of scripture, solid research and academic perspectives can supply certain kinds of useful information, even if only tentatively, concerning many significant and interesting questions about scripture.

The Maxwell Institute makes reports about this research available widely, promptly, and economically. These publications are peer-reviewed to ensure that scholarly standards are met. The proceeds from the sale of these materials are used to support further research and publications.

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