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"The Private Character of the Man Who Bore That Testimony": Oliver Cowdery and His Critics

Larry E. Morris

During the cold, wet spring of 1829, Oliver Cowdery and Samuel Smith made their way from Palmyra, New York, to Harmony, Pennsylvania, enduring freezing nights, impassable roads, and frostbite to reach the Prophet Joseph. They arrived on 5 April 1829, and Joseph and Oliver met for the first time. As Lucy Mack Smith summarized: "They sat down and conversed together till late. During the evening, Joseph told Oliver his history, as far as was necessary for his present information, in the things which mostly concerned him. And

Review of LaMar Petersen. *The Creation of the Book of Mormon: A Historical Inquiry.* Salt Lake City: Freethinker, 1998. xxvi + 257 pp., with appendixes, bibliography, and index. $15.95.

Review of Robert D. Anderson. *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999. xlv + 263 pp., with index. $19.95.

Review of Dan Vogel. "The Validity of the Witnesses' Testimonies." In *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon,* ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalf. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002. xvii + 368 pp. $21.95.

the next morning they commenced the work of translation, in which they were soon deeply engaged."[1]

Over the next few months, Oliver transcribed most of the Book of Mormon and was the first "Mormon" to be baptized. He and Joseph also testified of receiving the priesthood from heavenly messengers, witnessing the appearance of Moroni, seeing the plates, and hearing the voice of God. Oliver is rightly described as the cofounder of Mormonism. So it is not surprising that treatments of early church history pay special attention to Oliver Cowdery's background and character. In this article I would like to examine how LaMar Petersen *(The Creation of the Book of Mormon),* Robert D. Anderson *(Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith),* and Dan Vogel ("The Validity of the Witnesses' Testimonies") handle primary and secondary sources related to Oliver Cowdery. Although they approach Oliver from quite different angles, none of the three takes advantage of the rich wealth of primary documents so relevant in judging Oliver's character and his reliability as a witness of the Book of Mormon.

Oliver's Excommunication and Methodist Affiliation

A couple of years ago, I was on a book-buying spree at Benchmark Books when I picked up a copy of Petersen's book. I garnered a good bit of bibliographic information by checking the footnotes in this book. Petersen implies (without actually saying as much) that Joseph Smith created the Book of Mormon. He also implies—again, without explicitly stating it—that Oliver's testimony of the Book of Mormon is suspect because of his excommunication, his joining the Methodist

1. Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 439. All quotations are from this 1853 version of Lucy Mack Smith's history. The detail that one of Oliver's toes was frozen during the journey is included in Lucy Mack Smith's rough draft but not in the version published by Orson Pratt in 1853. In his 7 September 1834 letter to W. W. Phelps, printed in *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834): 13–16, Oliver Cowdery stated that he and Joseph Smith met on the evening of 5 April 1829, took care of "business of a temporal nature" the next day, and commenced translating on 7 April.

Church, his supposed denial of his testimony, and his rejection of the Doctrine of Covenants (pp. 84–86).

Petersen correctly notes that in April 1838, the high council in Far West, Missouri, upheld the following charges against Oliver: "urging on vexatious Lawsuits," "seeking to destroy the character of President Joseph Smith jr by falsly insinuating that he was guilty of adultery," "treating the Church with contempt by not attending meetings," "for the sake of filthy lucre . . . turning to the practice of the Law," "being connected in the 'Bogus' business [counterfeiting]," and "dishonestly Retaining notes after they had been paid and . . . betaking himself to the beggerly elements of the world and neglecting his high and Holy Calling."[2]

Petersen's point is to show that church officials attacked Oliver's character. This is true enough, but the validity of the charges is another question. Petersen does not mention that Oliver Cowdery did not attend the council and was thus not present to defend himself. Nor does Petersen note that the council rejected the only two charges that Oliver discussed in his letter to Bishop Edward Partridge.[3] Finally, letters that Oliver Cowdery wrote during his decade out of the church shed light on his attitude toward his excommunication. In 1843, Oliver wrote to Brigham Young and the Twelve: "I believed at the time, and still believe, that ambitious and wicked men, envying the harmony existing between myself and the first elders of the church, and hoping to get into some other men's birth right, by falsehoods the most foul and wicked, caused all this difficulty from beginning to end."[4]

2. Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 163. The high council excommunicated Oliver Cowdery on 12 April 1838.

3. Ibid., 164–66.

4. Oliver Cowdery to Brigham Young and the Twelve, 25 December 1843, Brigham Young Collection, Family and Church History Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter Church Archives); in Richard Lloyd Anderson and Scott Faulring, eds., *The Documentary History of Oliver Cowdery,* preliminary draft (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), 4:330. When quoting primary documents, I have retained the spelling, underlining, and capitalization of the original (but not crossed-out words).

Two years later, Oliver wrote to Brigham's brother Phineas:

> But, from your last [letter], I am fully satisfied, that no unjust imputation will be suffered to remain upon my character. And that I may not be misunderstood, let me here say, that I have only sought, and only asked, that my character might stand exonerated from those charges which imputed to me the crimes of theft, forgery, &c. Those which all my former associates knew to be false. I do not, I have never asked, to be excused, or exempted from an acknowledgement of any actual fault or wrong—for of these there are many; which it always was my pleasure to confess. I have cherished a hope, and that one of my fondest, that I might leave such a character, as those who might believe in my testimony, after I should be called hence, might do so, not only for the sake of the truth, but might not blush for the private character of the man who bore that testimony.[5]

Oliver's sincerity is clearly evident: he was interested in returning to fellowship but not at the expense of his reputation—something he was determined to preserve because he took his role as a witness of the Book of Mormon so seriously. His excommunication and his reaction to it thus make him a more credible witness, not the reverse.

Similarly, Oliver's accusing Joseph of adultery can hardly be taken as evidence that he is not a valid witness. To the contrary, his willingness to make such an accusation while still in the church (Petersen mistakenly says he was not) reveals Oliver's independent spirit. The document in question is a letter from Oliver to his brother Warren written in January 1838, three months before Oliver's excommunication. Speaking of Joseph Smith, Oliver wrote, "A dirty, nasty, filthy affair of his and Fanny Alger's was talked over in which I strictly declared that I had never deviated from the truth in the matter, and as I

5. Oliver Cowdery to Phineas H. Young, 23 March 1846, Church Archives, in Anderson and Faulring, *Documentary History of Oliver Cowdery,* 4:394–95.

supposed was admitted by himself."[6] Oliver was apparently unaware that Fanny Alger had become the first plural wife of Joseph Smith. Regardless of the difficulties between Joseph and Oliver, however, this whole incident has no direct bearing on Oliver's reliability as a witness. It is not clear why Petersen even brings it up.

Next, after claiming that Oliver's joining another church "is not usually acknowledged by Mormon writers" (p. 85), Petersen curiously quotes one of them, Stanley Gunn, to show that Oliver indeed became a charter member of the Tiffin, Ohio, Methodist Protestant Church. Petersen also fails to mention that Richard Lloyd Anderson, Oliver Cowdery's chief biographer since Gunn, freely discusses Oliver's Methodist affiliation in a 1981 Deseret Book publication—*Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (p. 57).

Several primary documents not mentioned by Petersen bear directly on Oliver's joining with the Methodists. In 1885, eighty-two-year-old Gabriel J. Keen, longtime Tiffin, Ohio, resident and Methodist Church member, signed an affidavit in which he affirmed:

> Mr. Cowdrey expressed a desire to associate himself with a Methodist Protestant Church of this city. Rev. John Souder and myself were appointed a committee to wait on Mr. Cowdrey and confer with him respecting his connection with Mormonism, and the "Book of Mormon." We accordingly waited on Mr. Cowdrey at his residence in Tiffin, and there learned his connection, from him, with that order, and

6. Oliver Cowdery to Warren A. Cowdery, 21 January 1838, retained copy, Oliver Cowdery Letter Book, Huntington Library, in Anderson and Faulring, *Documentary History of Oliver Cowdery,* 4:218–19. As Todd Compton points out, several nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints, as well as unsympathetic ex-Mormons, considered Joseph Smith's relationship with Fanny Alger to be a marriage. See Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 28. See Scott H. Faulring, "The Return of Oliver Cowdery," in *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson,* ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 162 n. 43, for a discussion of what Oliver Cowdery may have known about the early practice of plural marriage and whether he participated in it.

> his full and final renunciation thereof. We then inquired of him if he had any objections to make a public recantation. He replied that he had objections; that in the first place it could do no good; that he had known several to do so, and they always regretted it; and in the second place it would have a tendency to draw public attention, invite criticism and bring *him* into contempt. But said he, nevertheless, if the church require it, I will submit to it, but I authorize and desire you and the church to publish and make known my recantation. We did not demand it, but submitted his name to the church and he was unanimously admitted a member thereof. At that meeting he arose and addressed the audience present, admitted his error and implored forgiveness, and said he was sorry and ashamed of his connection with Mormonism. He continued his membership while he resided at Tiffin and became superintendent of the Sabbath-school, and led an exemplary life while he resided with us.[7]

Keen, a respected citizen of Tiffin, clearly believed that Oliver Cowdery had fully renounced Mormonism. Still, certain difficulties remain with Keen's statement: he recorded the incident (apparently for the first time) more than forty years after it happened; his account was never corroborated by other witnesses; and he gave the statement at the request of Arthur B. Deming, the anti-Mormon editor of *Naked Truths about Mormonism* and a man likely to lead his witness. Furthermore, two equally respected citizens of Tiffin claimed that Oliver never discussed Mormonism. "I think that it is absolutely certain that Mr. C., after his separation from the Mormons, never conversed on the subject with his most intimate friends, and never by word or act, disclosed anything relating to the conception, development or progress of the 'Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,'"

7. G. J. Keen, statement to Arthur B. Deming, 14 April 1885, *Naked Truths about Mormonism* 1 (April 1888): 4.

wrote William Henry Gibson, judge, general, orator, businessman, lawyer, and Tiffin's most famous resident.[8]

William Lang, who apprenticed in Oliver Cowdery's law office and later became mayor of Tiffin and a member of the Ohio senate, used similar language: "Now as to whether C. ever openly denounced Mormonism let me say this to you: no man ever knew better than he how to keep one's own counsel. He would never allow any man to drag him into a conversation on the subject."[9]

There are several points to consider here. First, Gibson and Lang were not present during Oliver Cowdery's interview with Keen and Sounder. It is possible that during the interview Oliver made negative statements about Mormonism or Mormons that he never made in Gibson's or Lang's presence. Indeed, Adeline Fuller Bernard, apparently adopted by Oliver and Elizabeth Cowdery and in her twenties when Oliver joined the Methodist Church, later claimed that Oliver made similar statements.[10] However, it is difficult to believe that

8. William Henry Gibson to Thomas Gregg, 3 August 1882, in Charles A. Shook, *The True Origin of the Book of Mormon* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1914), 57.

9. William Lang to Thomas Gregg, 5 November 1881, in Shook, *True Origin of the Book of Mormon,* 56.

10. Adeline Fuller was born between 1810 and 1820 and apparently lived with the Cowdery family for several years, beginning in Kirtland and moving with them to Far West and Tiffin, Ohio, where she married Lewis Bernard in 1845. (Whether she was related to Oliver's mother, Rebecca Fuller, is not known.) In 1881, when she was in her sixties or seventies, she wrote three letters (4 March, 18 March, and 3 October) to newspaper editor and publisher Thomas Gregg (1808–1892), author of the anti-Mormon book *The Prophet of Palmyra*. In her first letter, Adeline Fuller Bernard claimed, "I have often heard Mr. Cowdry say that Mormanism was the work of Devil" (Adeline M. Bernard to Thomas Gregg, 4 March 1881, typescript, L. Tom Perry Special Collections Library, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University). Bernard may have been recalling harsh statements Oliver made against those he held responsible for his excommunication—"they themselves have gone to perdition," Oliver wrote (Cowdery to Brigham Young and the Twelve, 25 December 1843, in Anderson and Faulring, *Documentary History of Oliver Cowdery,* 4:330). Bernard's letters are problematic for the following reasons: she apparently dictated the letters to others, and the accuracy of the handwritten transcriptions is unknown (indeed, in the second letter, Bernard herself states that her niece made errors in recording the first letter); no originals are extant for the first two letters, so the accuracy as well as the provenance of the typescripts is also uncertain; and Bernard's mental stability—as well as the accuracy of her memory and her basic reliability—is also unknown. (She gets

Oliver could have publicly begged forgiveness for his association with Mormonism (as reported by Keen) without Gibson or Lang hearing about such an incident. Both are emphatic that he *never* discussed the church.

Second, any negative statements Oliver made privately in Tiffin must be viewed in light of his family's harsh treatment in Missouri. Two months after Oliver's excommunication, on 17 June 1838, Sidney Rigdon delivered his famous "Salt Sermon," declaring that the "Salt that had lost its Savour"—meaning dissenters Oliver Cowdery, David and John Whitmer, W. W. Phelps, Lyman E. Johnson, and others—and was "henceforth good for nothing but to be cast out, and troden under foot of men."[11] Two days later, eighty-three church members signed a statement warning the dissenters out of Caldwell County: "There is but one decree for you, which is depart, depart, or a more fatal calamity shall befall you. . . . We will put you from the county of Caldwell: so help us God."[12]

The difficulties that began with the failure of the Kirtland Safety Society—where Oliver and David Whitmer both suffered severe financial losses and became embroiled in financial controversy—had now culminated in a death threat. "These gideonites understood that

certain details right, such as Oliver's living in Tiffin from 1840 to 1847, and gets others wrong, such as the vision of the Three Witnesses occurring at midnight.) This is thus a good topic for further research. Thanks to Richard Lloyd Anderson for sharing his files on Bernard.

11. George W. Robinson, The Scriptory Book of Joseph Smith, 47, Church Archives, in Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record,* 190 n. 1.

12. *Document containing the Correspondence, Orders, &c. in relation to the disturbances with the Mormons; and the Evidence given before the Hon. Austin A. King, Judge of the Fifth Judicial Circuit of the State of Missouri* ([Missouri State Department] Boon's Lick Democrat, 1841), 103–6, in Anderson and Faulring, *Documentary History of Oliver Cowdery,* 4:252, 255. Sidney Rigdon was apparently the author of the "warning out" document, although he did not sign it. A year and a half earlier, in Kirtland (on 7 November 1836), Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and several other prominent Saints, including Oliver Cowdery, had signed a statement "warning out" the local justice of the peace, although this document specifically noted that "we intend no injury to your person proper[t]y or carracter in public or in private." Lake County Historical Society, Mentor, Ohio, in Anderson and Faulring, *Documentary History of Oliver Cowdery,* 3:478.

they should drive the dissenters as they termed those who believed not in their secret bands," wrote John Whitmer. "They had threatened us to kill us if we did not make restitutions to them by upholding them in their wicked purposes."[13]

John Whitmer's mention of a secret band of Gideonites was right on the mark. As Leland H. Gentry writes, "All evidence indicates that the Danite order originated about the same time Sidney Rigdon gave vent to his feelings in his 'Salt Sermon.' The original purpose of the order appears to have been to aid the Saints of Caldwell in their determination to be free from dissenter influence."[14]

Not coincidentally, the Danites were originally known as the "Brothers of Gideon," and a key participant was Jared Carter (who actually had a brother named Gideon), a member of the high council that had excommunicated Oliver and also one of the signatories of the "warning out" document. Sampson Avard, who soon became head of the Danites, had been the first person to sign the document. "Avard arrived some time since," Oliver had written in a 2 June letter. "He

13. Book of John Whitmer, 86–87, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Archives, in Anderson and Faulring, *Documentary History of Oliver Cowdery,* 4:256–57.

14. Leland H. Gentry, "The Danite Band of 1838," *BYU Studies* 14/4 (1974): 426–27. According to the *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History,* ed. Arnold K. Garr, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard O. Cowan (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 275, the Danites were a "defensive paramilitary organization sanctioned neither by the state nor by the Church," that their leader Sampson Avard "instituted initiation rites and secret oaths of loyalty and encouraged subversive activities," and that the group "attempted to coerce reluctant Saints into consecrating their surplus money and property to the Church." David J. Whittaker points out, however, that "some groups of Danites were to build houses, others were to gather food, or care for the sick, while others were to help gather the scattered Saints into the community." Whittaker, "The Book of Daniel in Early Mormon Thought," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley,* ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 1:170. Since the term *Danite* had different meanings for different people, attempts to compile lists of Danites inevitably arouse controversy. See, for instance, D. Michael Quinn's list in *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 479–90.

appears very friendly, but I look upon [him] with so much contempt, that he will probably get but little from me."[15]

According to John Whitmer, he, David, Oliver, and Lyman Johnson rushed to neighboring Clay County to "obtain legal counsel to prepare to over throw these attachments which they had caused to [be] used against us. . . . But to our great asstonishment when we were on our way home from Liberty Clay Co[unty] we met the families of O. Cowdery and L. E. Johnson whom they had driven from their homes and rob[b]ed them of all their goods save clothing, bedding, &c."[16]

Considering these shocking circumstances, why should it be surprising that Oliver Cowdery, a man who remained devoutly religious his entire life, joined with a community of Christians when he moved to Ohio? As Anderson and Faulring note, "after his expulsion from the Mormon Church in 1838, Oliver and his family had no choice but to fellowship with a non-Mormon Christian group."[17]

Moreover, although Oliver Cowdery's distinction between the "outward government" of the church and its core doctrine, between his enemies and the church leaders he continued to admire, was likely lost on his Tiffin associates, he continued to make such a distinction. In a letter to Phineas Young, Oliver spoke of the "torents [torrents] of abuse and injury that I have received, fomented, no doubt, by those miserable beings, who have long since ceased [to] disgrace the Chu[rch o]f which you are a m[ember]."[18] But three months later, in a letter to Brigham Young and the Twelve, Oliver wrote, "I entertain no unkindly feelings toward you, or either of you."[19] (Significantly, none

15. Oliver Cowdery to Warren A. and Lyman Cowdery, 2 June 1838, Lyman Cowdery Collection, Church Archives, in Anderson and Faulring, *Documentary History of Oliver Cowdery,* 4:249–50.

16. Book of John Whitmer, 86–87, in Anderson and Faulring, *Documentary History of Oliver Cowdery,* 4:257.

17. Anderson and Faulring, *Documentary History of Oliver Cowdery,* 4:312.

18. Oliver Cowdery to Phineas Young, 26 August 1843, Oliver Cowdery Letters, Archive of the First Presidency, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in Anderson and Faulring, *Documentary History of Oliver Cowdery,* 4:326.

19. Cowdery to Brigham Young and the Twelve, 25 December 1843, in Anderson and Faulring, *Documentary History of Oliver Cowdery,* 4:329.

of the men addressed in this letter—Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, Parley P. Pratt, William Smith, Orson Pratt, Willard Richards, Wilford Woodruff, John Taylor, and George A. Smith—had signed the 1838 "warning out" document addressed to Oliver and the other dissenters.) Seen in this context, Oliver's Methodist affiliation, along with any negative statements he may have made about his experience in Missouri, does no damage to his role as a witness—quite the contrary.

Petersen next quotes what he himself calls a "bit of doggerel" that supposedly proclaimed Cowdery's denial of the Book of Mormon:

> Or prove that Christ was not the Lord
> Because that Peter cursed and swore?
> Or Book of Mormon not his word
> Because denied by Oliver?[20]

Richard Lloyd Anderson has shown, however, that the author of this poem, Joel H. Johnson, had no firsthand experience with Oliver and that Johnson's sentiments therefore have no bearing on Oliver's reliability as a witness.[21]

Finally, Petersen reports (without giving a reference) that David Whitmer claimed that Oliver rejected the Doctrine and Covenants. But why rely on David Whitmer to tell us what Oliver thought when the latter spoke for himself? As Richard Lloyd Anderson points out, Oliver Cowdery edited (and approved of) the Kirtland edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. In his correspondence, he also showed approval for the Twelve (even while he was out of the church) and rejected William McLellin's attempt to begin a new church movement. Finally, Oliver stated that Joseph Smith had fulfilled his mission faithfully, and, on his deathbed, Oliver expressed support for Brigham Young and the other leaders of the church.[22] Such evidence hardly indicates that

20. *Times and Seasons* 2 (1841): 482, cited in Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 153.

21. R. L. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses,* 153–55.

22. See Richard Lloyd Anderson, "The Second Witness on Priesthood Succession," part 3, *Improvement Era,* November 1968, 14–20. There is no doubt that David Whitmer had serious objections to the Doctrine and Covenants. He may have mistakenly assumed that Oliver agreed with him.

Oliver rejected the Doctrine and Covenants. Nor does it reflect negatively on Oliver's role as a witness.

Petersen thus opts for secondary accounts and even Joel Johnson's rumor, rather than drawing on primary sources to show us what kind of a person Oliver was. And even when Petersen refers to original documents, he offers no historical context. Given Petersen's extensive bibliography and obvious research, this is disappointing.

Beating a Dead Horse, or Two Dead Horses

A few weeks ago, I was on a book-checking-out fit at the BYU Library when I picked up a copy of Robert D. Anderson's book. (There sure are a lot of Andersons writing about Mormon history lately.) Whereas Petersen concentrates on Oliver Cowdery's later experiences, Anderson does the opposite—dealing mainly with Oliver's early life. But Anderson creates suspicion about his research by getting basic facts wrong. He says that Oliver was born in Middletown, Vermont, and that in "1803 the Cowdery family, including seven-year-old Oliver, moved to Poultney" (p. 97). However, the record is clear that Oliver was born in Wells, Vermont, on 3 October 1806 and that the family subsequently made the following moves: to Middletown in 1809, to New York in 1810, back to Middletown around 1813, and to Poultney in 1817 or 1818.[23] I understand that Anderson's main topic is Joseph Smith, so I don't expect him to do original Cowdery research—such as ferreting out the fine details of the family history, which have not been widely known. But it is another thing to get Oliver's birthplace wrong and to miss his birth date by ten years, especially when the correct information is easily available in the sec-

23. Wells, Vermont Town Record, Record of Births, 158–59; Hiland Paul and Robert Parks, *History of Wells, Vermont, for the First Century after Its Settlement* (1869; reprint, Wells, Vt.: Wells Historical Society, 1979), 81; Carl A. Curtis, "Cowdery Genealogical Material," 1970, 1, L. Tom Perry Special Collections; Mary Bryant Alverson Mehling, *Cowdrey-Cowdery-Cowdray Genealogy* (n.p.: Allaben Genealogical, 1911), 186–88; "Historical and Genealogical Material, Poultney, Vermont, Part 1, Historical," 1052, typescript, Poultney town clerk's office, Poultney, Vermont.

ondary sources that Anderson himself cites. For me, red flags start popping up when I see mistakes like this because they reflect a lack of precision. So we are off to a shaky start.[24]

Next, Anderson claims that Oliver's father, William Cowdery, "had been enmeshed in a scandal involving magic about 1800 near their home and had used divining rods in seeking treasure" (p. 97). Anderson relies on secondary sources for this information even though a nineteenth-century source is readily available—*The History of Middletown, Vermont,* published by Barnes Frisbie in 1867.[25] A check of Frisbie's history reveals that the author himself cannot speak authoritatively because he was not an eyewitness of the scandal, which became known as the "Wood Scrape"—in which members of the Wood family united with a treasure seeker named Winchell, employing divining rods and proclaiming frightening prophecies. In addition, Frisbie's star witness, Laban Clark—who was in Middletown at the time—describes the incident in detail without once mentioning William Cowdery. This source thus fails to support either of Anderson's claims about William Cowdery (that he was involved in the scandal and that he used divining rods to search for treasure).[26]

I believe the larger question is this: since the Wood Scrape occurred four years before Oliver's birth, what is the point of bringing it up in the first place? Some might reply (and D. Michael Quinn seems

24. I don't fault R. D. Anderson for stating—as many previous historians have done—that Oliver once worked as a blacksmith (p. 96). Still, this is a rumor worth dispatching. It apparently originated with Eber D. Howe, the anti-Mormon author of *Mormonism Unvailed,* but Cowdery family documents do not corroborate that idea nor is it consistent with Oliver's studious bent or slight build.

25. Key sections of Barnes Frisbie, *The History of Middletown, Vermont* (Rutland, Vt.: Tuttle, 1867), are reprinted in *Early Mormon Documents,* ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 1:599–621.

26. Frisbie, *History of Middletown, Vermont,* in *Early Mormon Documents,* 1:599–621. For more information on the Wood Scrape, see Richard Lloyd Anderson, "The Mature Joseph Smith and Treasure Searching," *BYU Studies* 24/3 (1984): 489–560; D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View,* rev. and enl. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 35–36, 121–30; and Larry E. Morris, "Oliver Cowdery's Vermont Years and the Origins of Mormonism," *BYU Studies* 39/1 (2000): 106–29.

to be in this group) that the point is to illustrate that Oliver brought with him an interest in folk magic,[27] which is certainly relevant to his involvement with Joseph Smith. But early church history already stipulates that Oliver had such an interest. "Now this is not all," asserted Joseph in a revelation to Oliver (within weeks of Oliver's arrival in Harmony), "for you have another gift, which is the gift of working with the rod: behold it has told you things: behold there is no other power save God, that can cause this rod of nature, to work in your hands" (Book of Commandments 7:3).[28] It seems likely that critics also raise the Wood Scrape—a scandal in which a visionary man failed to deliver on his promises—to imply guilt by association, to taint Oliver's reputation, and to raise questions about his reliability, with thinking that goes something like this: "Oliver's father was duped by a prophet who used magical means to search for treasure and divine hidden secrets. Like father, like son." Any serious historical investigation rejects such "reasoning."

Another reason for discussing the Wood Scrape is to imply what Frisbie states explicitly: "It is my honest belief that this Wood movement here in Middletown was one source, if not the main source, from which came this monster—Mormonism."[29] However, although, Frisbie and Quinn both attempt to link Joseph Smith Sr. (and, by implication, Joseph Jr.) with the Wood Scrape, no such link exists.[30] The

27. But, of course, even if William Cowdery's involvement in the Wood Scrape were proved—and it hasn't been—this would still prove nothing about Oliver. Documents relating to the family's religious history would be necessary to show a link between the Wood Scrape and Oliver's use of the rod.

28. Oliver's use of a divining rod does not count as a strike against him. As Quinn points out in *Magic World View,* 34, such use was common among respected people at the time. "From north to south, from east to west, the divining rod has its advocates," revealed *The American Journal of Science and Art* in 1826. "Men in various callings, . . . men of the soundest judgment . . . do not disown the art." It seems that anyone trying to put folk magic in context would mention this, but critics sometimes bring up the Wood Scrape without discussing what Richard L. Bushman has called "the line that divided the yearning for the supernatural from the humanism of rational Christianity." Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 79.

29. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 1:621.

30. See Morris, "Oliver Cowdery's Vermont Years," 116–18.

Wood Scrape is thus of little, if any, value in understanding Oliver Cowdery's reliability as a witness of the Book of Mormon.

Not surprisingly, Anderson next moves to the second point of controversy in Oliver's early history: his alleged association with Ethan Smith, minister of the church Oliver's stepmother once attended (under the previous minister) and author of *View of the Hebrews*.[31] A number of critics have theorized that Ethan Smith's book "provided the concept and outline for much of the Book of Mormon" (p. 98). According to one subtheory, Oliver knew Ethan Smith or read his book (or both) and used this knowledge to help produce the Book of Mormon. Of course, backing up such a scenario involves proving two things: Oliver's knowledge of Ethan Smith's theories and Oliver's contribution to the Book of Mormon.

On the first point, Anderson acknowledges that "there is no documentation that Ethan Smith and Oliver Cowdery had any kind of relationship" (p. 97). Nevertheless, Oliver certainly could have read *View of the Hebrews* before meeting Joseph. The real crux of the matter is whether there is evidence that Oliver helped create the Book of Mormon, and Anderson fails to discuss recent scholarship on this topic—which I see as a serious flaw and another instance of lack of precision. Royal Skousen's study of the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon offers strong evidence that Oliver acted simply as scribe, not coauthor.[32] In addition, witnesses of the translation process, including such friendly individuals as David Whitmer and such hostile individuals as Isaac Hale, agree that Joseph dictated the text. (Nor do any of them mention Joseph and Oliver doing any sort of planning.) Anderson's view of "Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery constructing narratives of Joseph's personal life within Ethan Smith's conceptual framework" (p. 98) thus gets no support from the primary

31. See ibid., 122 n. 3, for a list of books and articles discussing *View of the Hebrews*.

32. See Royal Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins,* ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 61–93.

sources. Nor is it difficult to summarize Anderson's use of primary documents in his section on Oliver's background. Anderson simply does not use them.

Hearsay Testimony

Next we move on to Dan Vogel. Several years ago, I was on a book-buying binge at Sam Weller's when I came across a copy of *Early Mormon Documents,* volume 1. When you are reading history, there is no substitute for the original documents. I was impressed with Vogel's textual editing and annotation, and I picked up a copy. I also purchased volumes 2, 3, and 4 when they came out (that is no small investment). Vogel finds a lot of interesting documents in a lot of different places. He also locates vital records, census records, and so on, about most of the people mentioned in the documents. I consider him an expert on primary sources related to early Mormonism and appreciate his considerable research. I took a careful look at what he had to say about the Wood Scrape, for example, and found him to be careful and fair, correctly noting instances where Quinn had overstepped the sources.

But in his article on the witnesses, Vogel does some things that surprised me. First, he quotes nineteenth-century sources like John A. Clark and Thomas Ford in a rather uncritical manner. I don't understand that. I assume Vogel agrees that when it comes to testimony, there is no substitute for getting (to use another equine metaphor) something straight from the horse's mouth. If I want to know what William Clark said about the Lewis and Clark expedition, my best source is William Clark himself. (If I want to know about William Clark's character, on the other hand, my best source is reliable people who knew him well.) Of course, what he said and the accuracy of what he said are two different things. But before I can judge his testimony against other sources and evaluate it, I first need the testimony itself. And witnesses always have the final word on what their testimony is—that is the very nature of testimony.

If such firsthand testimony is not available, we turn to secondhand sources, what in court is called "hearsay evidence" (and is generally not allowed). But it is a dangerous thing to trust expedition member John Ordway for what Clark said about the journey. We now have to ask a whole slew of questions we did not have to ask about Clark—when Ordway recorded Clark's statements, whether his memory was reliable, whether he was a careful transcriber, whether he was honest, whether he had an ax to grind. We also need to compare Ordway's account to other secondhand accounts. History, of course, employs different standards than the courtroom, and historians naturally handle a good deal of hearsay testimony. I just believe they ought to always distinguish between first- and secondhand testimony and openly acknowledge the limitations of the latter.

Well, then, what about Clark and Ford? Both gave reports of what Book of Mormon witnesses supposedly said. Clark was an editor and minister who knew Martin Harris. According to Vogel, "Harris told John A. Clark in 1828 that he saw the plates 'with the eye of faith . . . just as distinctly as I see any thing around me,—though at the time they were covered over with a cloth'" (p. 104). What? This account from a secondhand witness raises some interesting questions about Martin Harris.[33]

But let us look at the source. Here is the context of the above quotation, taken from a letter from John A. Clark to *The Episcopal Reader:* "To know how much this testimony [of Three Witnesses] is worth I will state one fact. A gentleman in Palmyra, bred to the law, a professor of religion, and of undoubted veracity told me that on one occasion, he appealed to Harris and asked him directly,—'Did you *see* those plates?'"[34]

This won't do. Vogel's claim that "Harris told John A. Clark" is not accurate. This is not secondhand testimony but thirdhand—"he

33. As Vogel himself points out, however, Clark heard this account in 1828, meaning that even if it could be verified it would prove nothing about Martin Harris's 1829 experience as one of the Three Witnesses.

34. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 2:270.

said that he said that he said." If secondhand evidence is problematic, thirdhand evidence is hugely more so. As if that weren't enough, Clark does not name his source—making it impossible to judge that person's honesty or reliability. What we have is a thirdhand, anonymous account of what Martin Harris supposedly said. (I think that is called a rumor.) Either through neglect or intent, Vogel has represented an anonymous, thirdhand account as being an identified, secondhand account—and there is a vast difference. And since we have Harris's firsthand account—it is printed in the Book of Mormon—and several recorded interviews from both friendly and hostile sources (see *Early Mormon Documents,* vol. 2), there is no reason to rely on a thirdhand account.[35]

This is not to say that anonymous accounts can never be taken seriously. Lewis and Clark scholars, for example, have noted two anonymous accounts that Meriwether Lewis tried to commit suicide as he traveled down the Mississippi River in September 1809. Major Gilbert C. Russell, commander of a fort near present-day Memphis, Tennessee, wrote that members of the keelboat crew told him of the attempts. Similarly, Amos Stoddard, a friend of Lewis's who was in the area, wrote that he heard of Lewis's suicide attempts on the boat. Both reports are treated seriously, not simply as rumor, even though neither man identifies his sources. (Most scholars believe Lewis made good on these threats a month later at an inn southwest of present-day Nashville; others believe Lewis was murdered.)

But some interesting differences distinguish Lewis's case from that of the witnesses: first, Russell was a secondhand witness—that is, he talked to someone who saw Lewis try to kill himself. Clark on the other hand (and I mean John A., not William) is a thirdhand witness because his account involves a quotation—he talked to someone who reported what Martin Harris had said. Second, historians necessarily turn to Russell and Stoddard because no other accounts are available, but first-

35. At the same time, Clark's report of his direct conversation with Martin Harris is an important historical document that relates particularly to the Anthon transcript.

and secondhand testimony abounds with Martin Harris. In my own research, I am inclined not to use thirdhand accounts at all, unless simply to show what rumors were circulating. There is just too much room for error—such as in the military exercise or parlor game in which a piece of information changes as it goes from person to person.

Vogel doesn't make any bones about Thomas Ford's account being anonymous and thirdhand. The governor of Illinois at the time Joseph and Hyrum Smith were killed, Ford wrote an account of how Joseph basically tricked unnamed witnesses into seeing the plates—after a prolonged session of fasting and prayer (and ridicule from Joseph). As Vogel says, "Ford claimed that his account came from 'men who were once in the confidence of the prophet' but did not identify his sources" (pp. 102–3). (This could actually be fourthhand testimony—Ford [4] may have talked to men [3] who talked to someone else [2] who talked to the witnesses [1].) Vogel then points out the weaknesses in this document but mysteriously insists that "the essence of the account contains an element of truth" (p. 103).

I am not comfortable with that kind of reasoning. In the first place, historical methodology ought to eliminate Ford's claim as valid evidence—it is anonymous on two levels because neither the sources nor the witnesses are named; in addition, it involves an unknown number of links. It is pure rumor. Secondly, Ford's account contains an element of truth only if one presupposes certain things about the witnesses. But isn't the point to begin without presuppositions and see what the documents tell us, or, in Vogel's words, to "try to determine more accurately the nature of [the witnesses'] experiences" (p. 79)? Again, Vogel expresses a desire to "examine the historical nature of these events" (p. 79). Again, I agree. But why take a main thread of the discussion from a thirdhand, anonymous account when there are identified first- and secondhand accounts available? What sense does it make to conclude (based partly on Ford's "hearsay hearsay") that the Eight Witnesses "may have seen the plates through the box" (p. 104) in a purely "visionary" experience when such a conclusion is flatly contradicted by the witnesses' firsthand testimony: "As many of the leaves as the said Smith has translated we did handle

with our hands; and we also saw the engravings thereon."[36] (The fact that the witnesses' statement does not include the time and place of their experience, nor the complete details of that experience, does not disqualify it as historical evidence, as Vogel seems to imply. It is a firsthand document, and its language is unequivocal.)

Although strict legal standards do not apply to history, *some* standards do. Thirdhand and anonymous is thirdhand and anonymous, and fair is fair. The Clark and Ford accounts are too far removed from the source to qualify as solid evidence, especially with more direct evidence available. Therefore, I believe they have historical value chiefly as an indicator of what kind of rumors were circulating, not as reliable accounts of witness testimony. (I apply this same standard to thirdhand accounts of Oliver Cowdery, in a packed courtroom, bearing his testimony of Moroni's visit, and I agree with Vogel that "the claim rests on less than satisfactory grounds.")[37]

"Obsessive and Morbid Thoughts"

In regard to the Second Elder, Vogel takes quite a different tack than Petersen or Anderson. "At least during this early period of his life," Vogel writes, Oliver Cowdery "was known to be unstable and given to obsessive and morbid thoughts. Also, like Harris and Whitmer, he had a history of visions prior to late June 1829. . . . Considering his state of mind and visionary predisposition, his obsessive thoughts may have carried him to the point of delusion; at least, this possibility should be taken into consideration when assessing his role as one of the three witnesses" (pp. 95–96).

Vogel offers examples of these "obsessive and morbid thoughts": (1) Oliver's intense preoccupation with the story of the gold plates when he was boarding with the Joseph Smith Sr. family; (2) a letter

36. "The Testimony of the Eight Witnesses."

37. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 2:468. One difference between the Cowdery account and the Clark and Ford accounts is this: while Clark's and Ford's sources are not identified, one of the Cowdery versions identifies Robert Barrington as its source. It is therefore potentially verifiable in a way that the others are not.

to Joseph Smith in which Oliver expressed his "longing to be freed from sin and to rest in the Kingdom of my Savior"; (3) a second letter to Joseph telling of his "anxiety at some times to be at rest . . . in the Paradice of God"; and (4) a revelation received by Oliver in which he compared the word of God to a "burning fire shut up in my bones," declaring that he was "weary with forebearing" and "could forebear no longer."

Let us look at these in context.

1. Lucy Mack Smith relates that Oliver boarded with the Smiths after accepting a position as a school teacher. Joseph Smith had received the plates a year earlier, and Oliver "had been in the school but a short time, when he began to hear from all quarters concerning the plates, and as soon began to importune Mr. Smith upon the subject, but for a considerable length of time did not succeed in eliciting any information."[38] When Joseph Sr. had gained trust in Oliver, he told him about the plates. Not long after that, Oliver told Joseph Sr. and Lucy that he was delighted at what he had heard and believed that he would have the opportunity of writing for Joseph Jr. The next day, Oliver mentioned his intention of going to Harmony to see Joseph Jr., saying, "I have made it a subject of prayer, and I firmly believe that it is the will of the Lord that I should go. If there is a work for me to do in this thing, I am determined to attend to it."[39]

Joseph Sr. advised him to seek for his own testimony, "which [Oliver] did, and received the witness spoken of in the Book of *Doc. and Cov*."[40] Joseph Jr. later recalled Oliver's statement that "one night after [Oliver] had retired to bed, he called upon the Lord to know if these things were so, and that the Lord had manifested to him that they

38. L. F. Anderson, *Lucy's Book,* 432.

39. Ibid., 433.

40. Ibid., 434. As Lavina Fielding Anderson points out, this is probably a reference to Doctrine and Covenants 6:22–24: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, if you desire a further witness, cast your mind upon the night that 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? What greater witness can you have than from God? And now, behold, you have received a witness; for if I have told you things which no man knoweth have you not received a witness?"

were true."[41] In his 1832 autobiographical sketch, Joseph Jr. told more about this manifestation: "[The] Lord appeared unto a young man by the name of Oliver Cowdery and shewed unto him the plates in a vision, also the truth of the work, and what the Lord was about to do through me his unworthy servant."[42]

These accounts make it clear that Oliver was a religious individual who had a powerful experience that convinced him of the truth of Joseph Smith's claims (although Oliver left no detailed description of this epiphany). Given Oliver's conviction that he was about to participate in the divinely appointed restoration of ancient scripture, it seems perfectly fitting that he was "so completely absorbed in the subject of the Record, that it seemed impossible for him to think or converse about anything else."[43] Who wouldn't have been? But note the difference between Lucy's language—"completely absorbed in the subject"—and Vogel's, "obsessive and morbid." Although he is using Lucy Mack Smith as his source, Vogel is wresting her text by introducing negative connotations not present in her history. Furthermore, there is every indication that Oliver competently completed his term of teaching before leaving for Harmony. Oliver's functioning normally in the everyday world is another sign that his preoccupation with the plates was intensely religious but not unhealthy or psychotic.

2–3. During November and December of 1829, while he was in Manchester, New York, Oliver wrote two letters to Joseph, who was in Harmony, Pennsylvania. In these letters, Oliver expresses some of his deep religious reflections. "My dear Brother," he writes in the first, dated 6 November,

> when I think of the goodness of christ I feel no desire to live or stay here upon the shores of this world of iniquity only to to ser[v]e my maker and be if posible an instriment in his

41. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 1:74.

42. Scott H. Faulring, *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith,* 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 8.

43. L. F. Anderson, *Lucy's Book,* 433.

hands of doing some good in his cause with his <grace> to assist me when I consider and try to realize what he has done for me I am astonished and amaised[.] [W]hy should I not be[?] [F]or while I was rushing on in sin and crouding my way down to that awful gulf he yet strove with me and praised be his holy <and> [=] <Eternal> name he has redeemed my soul from endless torment and wo not for any thing that I have me[r]ited or any worthyness there was in me for there was none but it was in and through his own mercy wraught out by his own infinite wisdom by prepareing from all Eternity a means where<by> man could be saved on conditions of repentance and faith on that infinite attonement which was to be mad[e] by a great and last sacrif[i]ce which sacr[i]fice was the death of the only begotten of the Father[,] yea the eternal Father of Heaven and of Earth that by his reserection all the Family of man might be braught back into the presance of God if therefore we follow christ in all things whatsoever he comma[n]deth us and are buried with him by baptism into death that like as christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Eternal Father[,] even so we also should walk in newness of life and if we walk in newness of life to the end of this probation at the day of accounts we shall be caught up in clouds to meet the Lord in the air but I need not undertake to write of the goodness of God for his goodness is unspeakable neither tell of the misteries of God for what is man that he can comprehend and search out the wisdom of deity for great is the misteries of Godliness therefore my only motive in this writing is to inform you of my prospects and hopes and my desires and my longing to be freed from sin and to rest in the Kingdom of my Savior and my redeemer when I begin to write of the mercys of god I know not where to stop but time and paper fails.[44]

44. Oliver Cowdery to Joseph Smith, 6 November 1829, in Anderson and Faulring, *Documentary History of Oliver Cowdery,* 1:78–79.

In the second letter, dated 28 December, Oliver expresses similar feelings:

> Be asured my c<h>angeing business has not in any degree I trust taken my mind from meditating upon my mission which I have been called to fulfill nor of slacking my diligence in prayr and fasting but but some times I feel almost as though I could quit time and fly away and be at rest in the Bosom of my Redeemer for the many deep feelings of sorrow and the many long struglings in prayr of sorrow for the sins of my fellow beings and also for those who pretend to be of my faith almost as it were seperateth my spirit from my mortal body do no think by this my Brother that I would give you to understand that I am freed from sin and temptations no not by any means that is what I would that you should understand is my anxiety at some times to be at rest in the Paradice of my God is to be freed from temptation &c.[45]

Each meditation thus laments the sinfulness of this world, proclaims the glory of Christ, and expresses the natural Christian desire for what Paul called "a better country, that is, an heavenly" (Hebrews 11:16). Indeed, Oliver's passages are reminiscent of Paul's epistle to Titus, where he writes:

> For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another. But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour;

45. Oliver Cowdery to Joseph Smith, 28 December 1829, in Anderson and Faulring, *Documentary History of Oliver Cowdery,* 1:80–81.

> That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:3–7)

Oliver's letters reflect deeply religious contemplations, but they are not "obsessive," which my dictionary defines as "excessive often to an unreasonable degree," or "deriving from obsession" (which is defined as "a persistent disturbing preoccupation with an often unreasonable idea or feeling"), and they are not "morbid"—defined as "abnormally susceptible to or characterized by gloomy or unwholesome feelings."[46] Again, Oliver's ability to function normally in the world of ordinary life is telling. During the time he wrote these letters, Oliver was helping coordinate the printing of the Book of Mormon. Lucy indicates that Oliver took a lead role in this task, working with the printer and ensuring the security of the manuscript. John H. Gilbert, who set the type for the Book of Mormon (and later declared the Mormon Bible to be a "very big humbug"), said that either Oliver or Hyrum delivered pages of the printer's manuscript each morning, that Oliver often read or checked proofs, and that Oliver even set some type at one point. Others who observed Oliver's work with the printer included Pomeroy Tucker, Stephen S. Harding, and Albert Chandler, all hostile to Mormonism. None of these men ever indicated that Oliver acted strangely or irrationally or that he displayed obsessive or morbid tendencies. The historical record instead gives every indication that Oliver acted in a coherent, businesslike manner.[47]

4. The document in question is a revelation recorded by Oliver and known as the Articles of the Church of Christ (later superseded by D&C 20). In this document, Oliver draws on several scriptural sources to define various aspects of church government. As he closes, Oliver writes, "Behold I am Oliver I am an Apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ Behold I have

46. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary,* 10th ed. Definitions quoted in this review come from this edition.

47. For Lucy Mack Smith, see L. F. Anderson, *Lucy's Book,* 460–70. For Gilbert, Tucker, Harding, and Chandler, see Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 2:515–52, 3:62–72, 82–86, and 221–23, respectively.

written the things which he hath commanded me for behold his word was unto me as a burning fire shut up in my bones and I was weary with forbearing and I could forbear no longer Amen."[48] This does not strike me as obsessive or morbid but rather as a devout paraphrasing of Jeremiah 20:9: "But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay."

While we are on the subject of the Articles of the Church, it is worth noting Vogel's claim that the Three Witnesses were "suggestible, willing subjects" capable of being deceived or hypnotized (p. 97). Similarly, Robert Anderson calls Oliver "an awestruck, encouraging, and supportive individual who responded fully to [Joseph's] charisma" (p. 97). But Oliver showed himself to be much more than a willing subject or awestruck follower. Within weeks of his arrival at Harmony, he was trying to translate the plates himself. Not long after that, he received his own revelation on the Articles of the Church. Then, in the summer of 1830, when Joseph made changes to Oliver's revelation, Oliver commanded Joseph "in the name of God" to delete certain changes.[49] This does not sound like an individual perfectly willing to be deluded. If anything, Oliver's strong will interfered with his relationship with Joseph and was a prominent factor in his leaving the church.

Oliver's Reputation

What of Vogel's claim that Oliver was "known to be unstable" (p. 95)? Checking Webster's again, *unstable* means "not steady in action or movement," "wavering in purpose or intent," "lacking steadiness," or, more to the point, "characterized by lack of emotional control." So the question is, Known to be unstable by whom? I don't

48. Articles of the Church of Christ, in Anderson and Faulring, *Documentary History of Oliver Cowdery,* 1:66.

49. Joseph Smith History, 1839 draft, Dean C. Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith, Volume 1: Autobiographical and Historical Writings* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 260.

know of any such reports coming from Vermont, where Oliver lived until he was around twenty. In an 1869 history of Wells, Vermont, for instance, the authors conspicuously decline taking shots at Oliver even though they enjoy poking fun at Mormonism in general: "Oliver the youngest son, was the scribe for Joe Smith, the founder of the book of Mormon. Smith being illiterate was incapacitated to write his wonderful revelations, employed this Oliver Cowdry to perform the duties of a scribe. We well remember this same Oliver Cowdry when in our boyhood, the person who has figured so largely in giving to the world the wonderful revelations that many dupes seek to follow. He attended school in the District where we reside in 1821 and 1822. He then went to Palmyra, N. Y. There with Joe Smith and others in translating mormonism."[50] Similarly, Barnes Frisbie, so intent on linking the origins of Mormonism with the Wood Scrape, has nothing negative to report on Oliver.

What of the people who knew him in New York before he left for Harmony? The school board (which included Hyrum) trusted him to take his brother's place as a teacher; Joseph and Lucy trusted him with details of Joseph Jr.'s obtaining the plates; David Whitmer trusted him to give a candid report on his (Oliver's) meeting with Joseph Smith. What of the Palmyra neighbors so vocal in their condemnation of Joseph Smith? One, David Stafford, stated that "Oliver Cowdery proved himself to be a worthless person and not to be trusted or believed when he taught school in this neighborhood." But Stafford's statement is contradicted by John Stafford, who called Oliver "a man of good character," and by a host of others: "peaceable," said Lorenzo Saunders; "as good as the general run of people," said Hiram Jackway; "His reputation was good," recalled Benjamin Saunders; "greatly respected by all," concluded William Hyde.[51]

50. Paul and Parks, *History of Wells, Vermont,* 79.

51. For David Stafford, John Stafford, Lorenzo Saunders, Hiram Jackway, Benjamin Saunders, and William Hyde, see Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 2:57, 123, 134, 115, 139, and 3:197, respectively.

Known to be unstable? It surely doesn't sound like it. What about his later life? Did Oliver reveal signs of instability or obsessive or morbid thoughts? Note these comments from the respected Tiffin residents mentioned earlier: "[Cowdery] led an exemplary life while he resided with us."—G. J. Keen. "Cowdery was an able lawyer, and agreeable, irreproachable gentleman"; "He was an able lawyer, a fine orator, a ready debater and led a blameless life, while residing in this city."—William Henry Gibson. "[Cowdery's] life . . . was as pure and undefiled as that of the best of men. . . . Mr. Cowdery was an able lawyer and a great advocate. His manners were easy and gentlemanly; he was polite, dignified, yet courteous. . . . His addresses to the court and jury were characterized by a high order of oratory, with brilliant and forensic force. He was modest and reserved, never spoke ill of any one, never complained."—William Lang.[52]

Others concurred. "Mr. C . . . earned himself an enviable distinction at the bar of this place and of this judicial circuit, as a sound and able lawyer, and as a citizen none could have been more esteemed," wrote John Breslin, an editor who served in the Ohio House. Breslin added, "His honesty, integrity, and industry were worthy the imitation of all." Horace A. Tenney, editor of the *Wisconsin Argus,* described Oliver as "a man of sterling integrity, sound and vigorous intellect, and every way worthy, honest and capable." When Oliver died in Missouri in 1850, the local circuit court and bar honored him with a resolution: "In the death of our friend and brother, Oliver Cowdery, his profession has lost an accomplished member, and the community a reliable and worthy citizen."[53]

All of this from individuals and institutions who had no particular reason to volunteer positive information on Oliver, at a time when anti-Mormonism was raging throughout the Midwest. By contrast,

52. For Keen, Gibson, and Lang, see Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 2:506; *Seneca Advertiser,* 12 April 1892; Shook, *True Origin of the Book of Mormon,* 57; and William Lang, *History of Seneca County* (Springfield, Ohio: Transcript Printing, 1880), 364–65, respectively.

53. All references in this paragraph are cited in R. L. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses,* 44–46, 48.

Vogel offers not a single contemporary account indicating that Oliver Cowdery was unstable or likely to be deluded.

Religious Experience and History

"The important question," argues Vogel, "is not whether the witnesses were trustworthy or if they continued to maintain their belief in the Book of Mormon throughout their lives. The central question . . . concerns the nature of their experiences and if their statements are distinguishable from those claiming similar religious testimonies" (pp. 79–80).[54] Again, "To emphasize Harris's business ethics or Cowdery's intelligence or Whitmer's good citizenship is irrelevant to their potential to be inclined to see visions" (p. 97).

It seems that Vogel is acknowledging that Oliver was honest and intelligent—he simply allowed his "visionary predisposition" and his "obsessive thoughts" to carry him "to the point of delusion" (p. 96). In other words, Oliver sincerely thought he saw the plates but he was mistaken, misled, deluded. Oliver was deceived or tricked or hypnotized into believing something that was not true. A "delusion" is a "persistent false psychotic belief regarding the self or persons or objects outside the self"; "psychosis" is a "fundamental mental derangement (as schizophrenia) characterized by defective or lost contact with reality." By Vogel's view, this is exactly what happened to Oliver: he had a persistent view (indeed, it lasted the rest of his life) about something

54. It is not clear to me why Vogel's "central question" concerns a comparison with similar religious testimonies. As a historian, does he claim to have access to those experiences? Does he have any way of knowing whether they were genuine or not? And how would the experience of the Book of Mormon witnesses being "distinguishable" prove anything? However, if one is looking for a key difference between the experience of the Book of Mormon witnesses and the religious epiphanies of others, how about this: the plates. How many other religious individuals claimed to have received an ancient artifact from a divine messenger—an artifact seen and handled by several other people? (Similarly, when Scott Dunn—in his *American Apocrypha* article "Automaticity and the Book of Mormon"—asks for "evidence of clear differences" (p. 36) between the Book of Mormon and other texts produced through "automatic writing," it seems to me that Moroni's delivering "the original text" to Joseph Smith is one clear difference.)

that involved a loss of contact with reality (seeing plates and an angel when there were none).

Vogel theorizes that—after a preparatory period of prayer, discussion, anticipation, expectation, and so on—"Smith may have taken three suggestible, willing subjects into the woods and used prayer as a method of induction" (p. 97). In this scenario, the Three Witnesses were deluded by Joseph Smith—they were not co-conspirators with him. So, when Cowdery, Whitmer, and Harris continued to testify of the Book of Mormon throughout their lives, they were in one sense telling the truth: they were reporting the facts as they had perceived them.

If I read Vogel correctly, he is suggesting that Oliver and the others really had some kind of "spiritual" experience—that they really believed that they saw an angel with plates, even though the angel and plates were not actually there. Vogel also expresses a desire to "examine the historical nature of these events" (p. 79). Of course, this is the whole problem, a problem faced by Vogel or any other historian researching the witnesses: history deals with human events that can (at least theoretically) be demonstrated to have occurred or not to have occurred, but visions fall into the realm of the supernatural and are not verifiable in the same manner as ordinary human events.[55]

Take certain experiences of the apostle Paul. When he had a vision of Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul experienced something different from those who accompanied him: "And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man" (Acts 9:7). (To make things even more interesting, Paul later reported that "they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were

55. Of course, even the assumption that historians can demonstrate what did or did not happen in the past is open to debate. What does it mean when two (or more) people perceive the same event differently? Is it even appropriate to speak of "the same event"? Is there such a thing as "objective reality"? Such events as the death of Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings, and the assassination of John F. Kennedy have been the source of endless controversy, even though they involved no supernatural element. Nonetheless, while I believe that epistemological distinctions have value up to a point, I also believe that historians can get at the truth of puzzling events through careful, thorough, open-minded research.

afraid; but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me" (Acts 22:9). Again, Paul claimed, "I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven" (2 Corinthians 12:2).

Joseph Smith expressed the same kind of impressions, even echoing Paul: "The heavens were opened upon us, and I beheld the celestial kingdom of God, and the glory thereof, whether in the body or out I cannot tell" (D&C 137:1). To take an example particularly relevant to the present discussion, note what Joseph said about his experience of seeing the plates with Martin Harris: "We now joined in prayer, and obtained our desires, for before we had yet finished, the same vision was opened to our view—*at least it was, again to me,* and I once more beheld and heard the same things."[56] I have always taken this as a candid acknowledgment that visions have a different nature than normal human experience. (It also strikes me as the kind of admission not likely to be made by a person masterminding an imagined vision.)

As I see it, these kinds of religious experiences are not empirical, meaning they cannot be verified or disproved through normal observation or testing. (This is clearly evident in the case of Paul: asking observers what they saw or heard does not get to the truth or the heart of Paul's experience.) I also believe such experiences are not empirical because they involve more than the normal senses—they involve the grace of God and what Paul calls "the eyes of your understanding" (Ephesians 1:18). (I would not claim that visions do not involve the physical senses. I believe they could involve both physical and spiritual means of perception, which seems to be the point David Whitmer was making when he said he saw the plates with both his physical and spiritual eyes.) I would subsequently argue that the visionary experiences of Paul, Muhammad, St. Francis, Joseph Smith, and others are not generally proper subjects of history

56. Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith,* 1:237, emphasis added.

because history is limited to empirical observation, and visions transcend empirical observation.[57]

Does that leave the historian totally adrift in regard to visions? I do not believe so. While history cannot verify or disprove a vision's veracity, it can tell us a good deal about the lives of the people involved and the times they lived in. Historians must simply do their best with the tools they have. In the case of Oliver Cowdery, history cannot tell us whether he really saw the angel and the plates or not. However, history can help us understand whether Oliver was unstable, given to obsessive thoughts, and likely to be deluded, as Vogel claims.

We investigate such issues through normal historical channels—by checking the accounts of reliable people on the scene. Take another example from the Lewis and Clark era, one particularly applicable because it involves stability—in this case, the stability of Meriwether Lewis in the weeks before he died. Those who argue that Lewis committed suicide claim that he acted in an unstable manner during this period. And how do they make the case for instability? By quoting William Clark, who was worried about Lewis's mental state when the two parted in St. Louis late in August 1809; by referring to a contemporary newspaper that said Lewis was "indisposed" when he reached New Madrid, Missouri, several days later; by mentioning Gilbert Russell's firsthand report of Lewis's drinking and secondhand report of Lewis's suicide attempts; by offering a letter from John Neelly (Lewis's companion on the trail called the Natchez Trace) that said Lewis acted unwell during the trip; by quoting Mrs. Griner, caretaker of the inn where Lewis spent his last night, when she said that Lewis acted irrationally and talked to himself in a strange manner.

By contrast, what does Vogel offer in the way of evidence that Oliver Cowdery was unstable? He offers no accounts at all from reliable

57. Saying that a vision is different from normal experience is not the same as saying it is, in Vogel's words, "internal and subjective" (p. 86). In the case of the Three Witnesses, Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer reported having the same visionary experience that involved physical objects. This experience involved the supernatural to be sure (and by my definition it is not empirical), but it was clearly not internal and subjective.

witnesses.[58] Instead, he simply shows that Oliver was a religious person—as seen by his intense preoccupation with the Book of Mormon and by his devout longing to proclaim the gospel and to be free of the sins of this world. That is the extent of Vogel's evidence, the sum total of his claims concerning Oliver's instability, his obsessive and morbid thoughts, and his tendency to be deluded. This is circular reasoning pure and simple. Oliver's "state of mind and visionary predisposition" (p. 96) are taken as evidence that he was deluded when he saw the plates and the angel.[59] But this is only true if one first assumes that Oliver's earlier spiritual experience was bogus, and on what basis can Vogel possibly make that assumption? As a historian, Vogel has no access to Oliver Cowdery's private religious experiences. Therefore, the best Vogel or any other historian can do is investigate whether Oliver had a previous history (based on the accounts of reliable witnesses) of being "unstable." No such evidence concerning Oliver has come to light. Vogel's claim that Oliver was "known to be unstable" thus collapses because Vogel cannot demonstrate that a single person ever made such an accusation. Vogel's sole evidence that Oliver was unstable is Vogel's own interpretation of Oliver's religious experience, and this does not count as historical evidence.[60] (Personally, I would find it quite refreshing if Vogel would tell us

58. While Vogel does quote Lucy Mack Smith in regard to Oliver Cowdery, Lucy hardly supports Vogel's conclusions. Quite the contrary, Lucy clearly believed that Oliver was stable, reliable, and capable of being trusted.

59. The phrase "visionary predisposition" itself reveals Vogel's bias. If Oliver had a genuine spiritual experience or vision while he was contemplating what Joseph Sr. and Lucy had told him about the plates, it would hardly be fair to characterize his subsequent attitude as a "predisposition."

60. On one level, historians do have a basis for judging "religious experience." If, for example, one found reliable evidence that Joseph Smith and the Three Witnesses agreed to concoct a story about Moroni appearing and showing them plates, this would certainly give one good historical reason to reject the testimony printed in the Book of Mormon. Again, if a third party claimed to have tricked Joseph and the others (by pretending to be an angel and producing fake plates, for example), this would also count as potential historical evidence. (Stephen Harding claims to have tricked Calvin Stoddard in a similar manner; see Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 3:82–86.) Of course, such scenarios involve deceit or insincerity, taking them out of the realm of genuine religious experience.

what he thinks about these issues. Does he acknowledge the existence [or at least the possibility] of angels but insist that Oliver did not see one, or does he reject the notion altogether?)

Hallucinations and Tin Plates

As Vogel points out, Richard Anderson and other "apologists" have frequently cited primary documents concerning Oliver Cowdery's honesty or intelligence. Rather than arguing this point, Vogel claims that Oliver's trustworthiness is not "the important question" (p. 79), that his intelligence is "irrelevant" to his "potential to be inclined to see visions" (p. 97). (In doing so, Vogel seems to agree that Oliver was honest and intelligent.)

Whoa, Nellie. Vogel gives the appearance of making a historical claim (that Oliver was inclined to see visions or was capable of being deluded), but he immediately disqualifies the type of historical evidence normally used to substantiate or refute such a claim—that is, accounts from reliable people who knew the person in question. Therefore, when a third party like John Breslin or Horace Tenney (neither of whom had apparent ulterior motives) says that Oliver's honesty and integrity were worthy of the imitation of all, or that Oliver was a man of sound and vigorous intellect, this—according to Vogel—does not really relate to Oliver's inclination to see visions or be taken in by an "induced" vision. But try as he might, Vogel cannot disassociate Oliver's honesty and intelligence from his claim of visionary experience, or what Vogel thinks is a delusion. Instability, obsessive and morbid thoughts, and a susceptibility to delusion are flaws (either related to character or intelligence), and how would a historian ever identify such flaws if not through the accounts of reliable people who knew the individual well?

That is not all. Vogel concentrates on Oliver's experience as one of the Three Witnesses, basically claiming that Joseph primed Oliver, David, and Martin into a highly excitable state and "induced" a vision. We are to understand this as hypnosis or hallucination that somehow did not manifest itself in normal life. (In Vogel's words, "hallucinators

are otherwise indistinguishable from other people and can function normally in society" [p. 97]. If a claim ever cried out for an extensive footnote, this one does, but Vogel does not oblige.) But Vogel would have done well to point out that Oliver Cowdery claimed to have received quite a variety of visions over a considerable period of time. In 1836, for example, seven years after Joseph and Oliver reported the vision of John the Baptist, "The vail was taken from their [Joseph and Oliver's] minds and the eyes of their understanding were opened. They saw the Lord standing upon the breast work of the pulpit before them, and under his feet was a paved work of pure gold. . . . After this vision closed, the Heavens were again opened unto them and Moses appeared before them. . . . After this Elias appeared. . . . After this vision had closed, another great and glorious vision burst upon them, for Elijah, the Prophet . . . also stood before them."[61] This seems to be a vision in the biblical tradition, similar to the Transfiguration, one that Vogel might call "purely visionary."

Moroni's visit was different because it involved the voice of God, an angel, and physical objects. The Three Witnesses said, "We also know that they [the plates] have been translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice hath declared it unto us. . . . 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" (The Testimony of the Three Witnesses). The plates themselves take this out of the realm of the purely visionary, but David Whitmer reported seeing, "but a few feet from us, . . . a table upon which were many golden plates, also the sword of Laban and the directors. I saw them as plain as I see you now, and distinctly heard the voice of the Lord declaiming that the records of the plates of the Book of Mormon were translated by the gift and the power of God."[62] (Looking at David Whitmer's account, I wouldn't call this vision internal, subjective, or

61. Vision, 3 April 1836, Joseph Smith Diary, in Anderson and Faulring, *Documentary History of Oliver Cowdery,* 3:366–67. Interestingly, this early version of Doctrine and Covenants 110 was recorded by Warren Cowdery, Oliver's oldest brother.

62. Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1993), 63.

purely visionary. A table is hardly required for objects that are imagined or seen in the "mind's eye.")

The visits of John the Baptist and of Peter, James, and John fall into yet another category, one where Joseph and Oliver claimed physical contact with resurrected beings. Concerning the visit of John the Baptist, Joseph wrote, "While we were thus employed praying and calling upon the Lord, a Messenger from heaven, descended in a cloud of light, and *having laid his hands upon us,* he ordained us."[63]

What did Oliver say about these experiences? Rather than referring to them in some mystical, hazy way, he habitually used concrete, definite language to describe them, leaving little doubt as to his absolute conviction that these experiences were genuine:

> On a sudden, as from the midst of eternity, the voice of the Redeemer spake peace to us, while the vail was parted and the angel of God came down clothed with glory, and delivered the anxiously looked for message, and the keys of the gospel of repentance!—What joy! what wonder! what amazement! While the world were racked and distracted—while millions were grouping as the blind for the wall, and while all men were resting upon uncertainty, as a general mass, our eyes beheld—our ears heard. As in the "blaze of day;" yes, more—above the glitter of the May Sun beam, which then shed its brilliancy over the face of nature! Then his voice, though mild, pierced to the center, and his words, "I am thy fellow servant," dispelled every fear. We listened—we gazed—we admired! 'Twas the voice of the angel from glory—'twas a message from the Most High! and as we heard we rejoiced, while his love enkindled upon our souls, and we were rapt in the vision of the Almighty! Where was room for doubt? No where: uncertainty had fled, doubt had sunk, no more to rise, while fiction and deception had fled forever![64]

63. Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith,* 290, emphasis added.

64. Oliver Cowdery to W. W. Phelps, 7 September 1834, in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 2:420.

> I have been sensitive on this subject, I admit; but I ought to be so—you would be, under the circumstances, had you stood in the presence of John, <with> our departed brother Joseph, to receive the Lesser Priesthood—and in the presence <of> Peter, to receive the Greater.[65]

> I was present with Joseph when an holy angle [angel] from god came down from heaven and confered or restored the Aronic priesthood, And said at the same time that it should remain upon the earth while the earth stands. I was also present with Joseph when the Melchisideck priesthood was confered by the holy angles [angels] of god.[66]

> The Lord opened the heavens and sent forth his word for the salvation of Israel. In fulfillment of the sacred Scripture the everlasting Gospel was proclaimed by the mighty angel, (Moroni) who, clothed with the authority of his mission, gave glory to God in the highest. This Gospel is the "stone taken from the mountain without hands." John the Baptist, holding the keys of the Aaronic Priesthood; Peter, James and John, holding the keys of the Melchisdek Priesthood, have also administered for those who shall be heirs of salvation, and with these ministrations ordained men to the same Priesthoods. . . . Accept assurances, dear Brother, of the unfeigned prayer of him, who, in connection with Joseph the Seer, was blessed with the above ministrations.[67]

65. Oliver Cowdery to P. H. Young, 23 March 1846, in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 2:492.

66. Reuben Miller Journal, 21 October 1848, in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 2:494. William Frampton was also present when Oliver bore his testimony at Council Bluffs, Iowa, in October 1848. In a letter written more than fifty years later, Frampton quoted Oliver thus: "I received the Priesthood in connection with Joseph Smith from the hands of the Angel, I conversed with the Angel as one man converses with another. He laid his hand on my head, and later with Joseph received the Melchisedeck Priesthood." Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 2:496.

67. Oliver Cowdery, statement to Samuel W. Richards, 13 January 1849, in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 2:499.

In suggesting that Oliver Cowdery's "obsessive thoughts may have carried him to the point of delusion" (p. 96), Vogel has seriously understated the case. If Oliver were deluded, this was not a one-time anomaly, momentary lapse of reason, or single instance of overactive imagination—this was delusion on a grand scale: a prolonged, sustained fantasy by one who maintained belief in the false reality even years after being removed from the environment. If deluded, Oliver Cowdery was seriously out of touch with reality—hearing voices, seeing one angel after another, examining objects, and even feeling hands on his head—all this in the absence of external stimuli. Given the scope of these visions, I believe something has to give—either Oliver's honesty or his intelligence. Either he is lying about all these angels or else his intellect is hardly "sound and vigorous." And yet Oliver's business associates go out of their way to praise both Oliver's integrity and his mind.

Vogel thickens the plot by suggesting that "it would have been possible for [Joseph] to make plates out of tin" (p. 108). Of course, Joseph's manufacturing plates and passing them off as an ancient artifact falls fully in the realm of possibility. If Joseph did produce such plates, he did it at a specific time and place, with specific material obtained from a specific person or location. All of this would be potentially verifiable through normal historical means—through the journals, letters, or reminiscences of honest people on the scene (or possibly through such documents as receipts or promissory notes for the sale of tin or tools). Certainly it is conceivable that Joseph could have constructed fake plates (although Vogel offers no support for this notion) and kept it a secret. But I'm not sure *how* conceivable this is—the Palmyra neighbors were obviously keeping a close eye on Joseph (just check *Early Mormon Documents,* vols. 2 and 3); why didn't they notice anything? Where and when did Joseph make his plates? Did anyone else know about these plates?

As hard as it would have been for Joseph to keep his manufacture of tin plates a secret while he was alive, is it possible that he could keep the secret after death—that no evidence would come forth after more than one hundred and fifty years (in a society where historical

inquiry is actively promoted)? Let us look at another parallel from the same time period in American history. General James Wilkinson received appointments from George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and even became governor of Louisiana. Although some accused him of treason, Wilkinson was never charged with illegal activity. Long after his death, however, a search of Mexican archives revealed that Wilkinson had indeed spied for the Spanish, an offense he would have been executed for. This example points out the difficulty of keeping a plot hidden after one's death, for Wilkinson was a master deceiver.

Getting back to Oliver, Vogel apparently believes that Oliver was sincere—that he really believed he saw visions. But what about the tin plates? As Richard Anderson remarks, "Oliver Cowdery played an extraordinary role in the beginning of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. . . . no one else stood in the unique position of being able to expose Joseph Smith at all critical points, if he could be exposed."[68] This is doubly true for tin plates, a physical object that has to be transported from place to place. Vogel is apparently suggesting that Oliver, an intelligent, thinking man who must have had countless opportunities to recognize the truth, was taken in by this fraud, that he never caught on that the plates were fake. But such a theory is not compatible with what Oliver himself said about the plates: "I beheld with my eyes, and handled with my hands, the gold plates from which [the Book of Mormon] was transcribed."[69] This is clear language, but look what Vogel does with Oliver's text: "Oliver Cowdery also probably intended to refer to separate occasions when he told a group in Council Bluffs, Iowa, according to Reuben Miller, 'I beheld with my eyes. And handled with my hands the gold plates' . . . . Cowdery probably handled the plates, covered by a cloth, sometime during his residence in Pennsylvania and then simply amalgamated the two experiences" (p. 89).

68. R. L. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses,* 37.
69. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 2:495.

Vogel is jumping to conclusions not justified at all by the text itself. How does Vogel know that Oliver intended to refer to separate occasions? How does Vogel know that Oliver is talking about touching the plates through a cloth? (Vogel mentions this possibility more than once; Oliver never mentions it.) Oliver doesn't make either of those claims. If anything, Oliver's mention of seeing and handling the plates in the same breath would indicate a single experience, not two. (Could Oliver have seen and handled the plates when he was attempting to translate?) This is another example of where Oliver's honesty and intelligence come very much into play. By Oliver's own account, he saw and handled the plates and thus had the perfect chance to see if they looked genuine. If one assumes the plates were fake, one must ask whether Oliver was lying (sacrificing his honesty) or whether he was actually tricked into believing that crude (how could they have been otherwise?) tin plates were really intricate ancient artifacts (sacrificing his intelligence—how gullible can a person be?). Either of these is a character flaw, but what evidence does Vogel offer that reliable people on the scene, Mormon, ex-Mormon, or anti-Mormon, perceived such flaws in the character of the Second Elder? He offers none.[70]

70. Vogel seems to believe that even though Joseph constructed fake plates, no one actually saw those plates—they only felt them through a cloth or hefted them in a box. (This would account for the fact that no one pointed out the obvious: "Hey, these aren't gold plates with intricate engravings—these are tin plates produced in the local blacksmith shop.") Vogel further suggests that whenever a witness "saw" the plates, he was not seeing the tin plates but rather the imaginary plates, which had "the appearance of ancient work, and of curious workmanship." To make this logic work, Vogel makes the astonishing assertion that "Smith may have produced a box containing the plates or perhaps something of similar weight. The witnesses were permitted to lift the box, but their view of the plates was visionary. In other words, they may have seen the plates through the box. Thus, each man could claim that he had both seen and handled the artifact" (p. 104). But does Vogel reach this conclusion based on any statement from the Eight Witnesses themselves? Absolutely not. Instead, he relies on speculation and thirdhand accounts from the likes of Stephen Burnett, Warren Parrish, and Thomas Ford. Vogel thus reaches a conclusion that flies in the face of clear, direct testimony offered by the witnesses themselves: "And as many of the leaves as the said Smith has translated we did handle with our hands; and we also saw the engravings thereon" (The Testimony of the Eight Witnesses). "I thank God that I felt a determination to die rather than deny the things which my eyes had

As I see it, neither Petersen, Anderson, nor Vogel seriously mines the rich source material available on Oliver Cowdery (particularly ironic for Vogel, since his other works show a sound knowledge of those sources). When evaluating eyewitness testimony, historians ask three main questions: (1) Was the witness known to be reliable? (2) Did he record his testimony reasonably soon after the event itself? and (3) Is his account corroborated by other reliable witnesses? For Oliver Cowdery, a man shown by the historical record to be honest, intelligent, and of sound character, the answers to all three questions are yes. If he does not qualify as a good witness, who would?

seen, which my hands had handled" (Hyrum Smith, p. 51). "I have most assuredly seen the plates from whence the Book of Mormon is translated, and . . . I have handled these plates" (John Whitmer, p. 54). See Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Personal Writings of the Book of Mormon Witnesses," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited,* 39–60.