Oliver Cowdery

The Testimony of Oliver Cowdery
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After they came back to the Church, Oliver Cowdery and his family planned to travel to the Rocky Mountains to unite with the Saints there. What was to have been an interim visit to Richmond, Missouri, turned into an extended stay as Oliver’s health steadily declined because of an illness. While attempting to recuperate at the home of his father-in-law, Peter Whitmer Sr., Oliver entertained an acquaintance from the Ohio and Missouri days of the Church, Elder Jacob Gates. Called on a mission to England, Elder Gates stopped in Richmond on his way from Utah to the port at New Orleans. In the course of their conversation, Jacob pressed two all-important questions. First:

“Oliver, I want you to tell me the whole truth about your testimony concerning the Book of Mormon—the testimony sent forth to the world over your signature and found in the front of that book. Was your testimony based on a dream, was it the imagination of your mind, was it an illusion, a myth—tell me truthfully?”

“Oliver seemed deeply touched. Without saying a word, he moved from his chair to the bookcase and retrieved an edition of the Book of Mormon. He then read in a solemn manner the words of testimony to which he had subscribed his name, and addressing Elder Gates, he said, ‘Jacob, I want you to remember what I say to you. I am a dying man, and what would it profit me to tell you a lie? I know … that this Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God. My eyes saw, my ears heard, and my understanding was touched, and I know that whereof I testified is true. It was no dream, no vain imagination of the mind—it was real.’

“Then Jacob followed with a second question, asking about the reality of the angel, John the Baptist, under whose hands Oliver had first received the priesthood. Oliver replied, ‘Jacob, I felt the hand of the angel on my head as plainly as I could feel yours, and could hear his voice as I now hear yours.’ It was a simple observation, but the testimony was sure: ‘I felt the hand … and could hear his voice.’

Oliver Cowdery is reported to have cited this same kind of experience in describing his ordination to the Melchizedek Priesthood by Peter, James, and John. David H. Cannon visited David Whitmer in Richmond, Missouri, in 1861, where Oliver had died on 3 March 1850. At the site of Oliver’s grave, David Whitmer re-created for Brother Cannon his brother-in-law’s last moments. David Cannon said of that experience:

“The thing which impressed me most of all was, as we stood beside the grave of Oliver Cowdery the other Witness, who had come back into the Church before his death, and in [David Whitmer’s] describing Oliver’s action, when bearing his [Oliver’s] testimony, [David said that Oliver] said to the people in his room, placing his hands like this upon his head, saying ‘I know the Gospel to be true and upon this head has Peter James and John laid their hands and conferred the Holy Melchisedic Priesthood,’ the manner in which this tall grey headed man [David Whitmer] went through the exhibition of what Oliver had done was prophetic. I shall never forget the impression that the testimony of … David Whitmer made upon me.”
Notes

1. “Testimony of Jacob Gates,” Improvement Era, March 1912, 418–19. Elder Gates was later one of the seven Presidents of the Seventy in the Church, from 1862 to 1892.

Did Oliver Cowdery, one of the three special Book of Mormon witnesses, express doubt about his testimony?

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Oliver Cowdery’s strong testimony of the Book of Mormon is well documented throughout his life, and his decisive return to the Church before he died backs up his words.

In 1838 Oliver challenged the Prophet Joseph Smith’s leadership and spent the next ten years out of the Church. But in 1848 he returned to Kanesville, Iowa, the base camp of Mormon migration, and wintered in Richmond, Missouri, where his health failed. He was unable to fulfill his desire to go west with the Saints, and he died in Richmond in early 1850.

Two people who knew Oliver Cowdery best were his wife, Elizabeth Ann Whitmer, and her brother David Whitmer, also a Book of Mormon witness. David took pride in his role as the last survivor of the three witnesses, and in 1887, a year before his death, he reiterated his testimony:

“I also testify to the world, that neither Oliver Cowdery or Martin Harris ever at any time denied their testimony. … I was present at the death bed of Oliver Cowdery, and his last words were, ‘Brother David, be true to your testimony to the Book of Mormon.’”1

Elizabeth first met Oliver at her house in 1829, while the Book of Mormon was being translated there. After their 1832 marriage, she was with him constantly, except for temporary separations because of Church assignments. She later reviewed his testimony:

“He always without one doubt or shadow of turning affirmed the divinity and truth of the Book of Mormon.”2

“These plain summaries of Oliver Cowdery’s views really settle the matter, since they come from those with firsthand, intimate knowledge.

However, the importance of “the second elder” (D&C 20:3) has stimulated vicious attempts to neutralize his powerful support of the Restoration. Besides seeing an angel and the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated, Oliver was also with Joseph Smith when John the Baptist and later Peter, James, and John restored the two priesthoods. Evidently some have wanted a Cowdery denial enough to invent two documents that contradict history.

A dozen major archives in the U.S. have a strange typescript headed “A Confession of Oliver Overstreet,” in which the above-named character claims that he was bribed to impersonate Oliver Cowdery in a return to the Church. That claim is fairly easy to dismiss, for if that were so, the whereabouts of the real Oliver Cowdery could be traced somewhere else. But some two dozen Latter-day Saints, half of them Oliver’s former close friends, detail his return in their journals and in the Church’s official minute books. Moreover, sale of Oliver’s Wisconsin property before he returned appears in recorded deeds.

There is also a problem with the Oliver Overstreet manuscript itself. An important clue in identifying spurious documents is the vagueness of a document’s origin—the impossibility of going past a late typescript to an original from a known person. Such is the case with the Oliver Overstreet typescript.

Similar faults appear in a better-known historical forgery claiming to come from Oliver Cowdery the year after he left the Church. In 1906 the “mountain evangelist” R. B. Neal, a leader in the American Anti-Mormon Association, published a document with much fanfare but without evidence of the document’s authenticity. Reverend Neal claimed that the publication was a reprint of an 1839 document explaining Oliver Cowdery’s apostasy: Defence in a Rehearsal of My Grounds for Separating Myself from the Latter Day Saints.3

“No more important document has been unearthed since I have been engaged in this warfare,” R. B. Neal asserted.4

With such convictions, one can be sure that Reverend Neal would have produced evidence to prove that
the original actually existed. But all we have is his 1906 first printing, which is silent about why no one had ever heard of the document until a half century after Oliver Cowdery’s death.

The introduction simply puffs, “This real and original ‘Defence’ is a ‘rare find,’ and should be speedily sent on its mission to the thousands already deluded.”

Informed historians, however, are more skeptical. The standard bibliography of Mormon-related works first notes that Reverend Neal’s 1906 tract is “the version from which all copies have been taken,” and then conservatively adds, “whether the pamphlet ever existed is doubtful.”

The second half of the Defence is built on a supposed vision of Christ to Oliver, in which Oliver is told, “Thou shalt withdraw thyself from among them.” If such an event took place, why did the Second Elder violate divine instruction and return to the Church afterward?

Nothing is said about the angel and the gold plates, but the Defence challenges the restored priesthood, “about which,” the pamphlet’s author writes, “I am beginning to doubt.” One reason is that John the Baptist’s voice “did most mysteriously resemble the voice of Elder Sidney Rigdon.”

Predictably, none of the twenty Cowdery letters from the period of his apostasy express such doubts. For instance, Oliver’s spirited resignation letter to his high council court closed by saying that he questioned Church government only, not its spiritual foundations. Indeed, a private letter during his estrangement speaks feelingly of the responsibility he felt after standing “in the presence of John, with our departed brother Joseph … and in the presence of Peter.”

Moreover, the 1906 tract falls into a major historical trap by paralleling, too closely, mistakes David Whitmer made in his 1887 An Address to All Believers in Christ, written after Oliver’s death. In doing so, the Defence identifies Whitmer’s Address as one of its probable sources of information.

David, the witness who never returned to the Church, justified his view of Joseph Smith as a fallen prophet by remembering a revelation in the winter of 1829–1830 that authorized Oliver Cowdery and Hyrum Page to “go to Toronto, Canada, and … sell the copy-right of the Book of Mormon” for that country.11
their hearts,” making clear the conditional command.12

The most glaring mistake perpetrated in the Defence is the true destination, for Hyrum Page says that “we were to go to Kingston,” and he relates that they did.13 Thus, in real life, Oliver Cowdery went to a location 150 miles away from Toronto, the place that David Whitmer erroneously mentioned in his address. Yet the Defence mistakenly has Oliver Cowdery say that the “revelation … sent Bro. Page and me so unwisely to … Toronto.”14

Before the microfilm-photocopy era, which has made in-depth local history possible, the 1906 pamphlet was often accepted as legitimate, even by LDS historians. Now, however, with modern methods of verification, the pseudo-Cowdery Defence fails every specific test that a genealogist or historian can set up.

Following are four examples, presented in a question-answer format to highlight issues:

Q. Doesn’t the Defence sound like Oliver Cowdery’s prose?
A. It sounds too much like Oliver Cowdery. Over fifty striking phrases and sentences match passages from eight letters of his that appeared in the Messenger and Advocate during 1834–1835. A full 35 percent of the Defence is word for word what was first recorded in these published letters. Yet the hundred or so letters and editorials that exist from the Second Elder show a clear creative style that never mechanically repeats elements from earlier writing.

Q. Could not the original manuscript and all 1839 copies of the Defence have accidentally perished?
A. That would be odd, since the 1906 pamphlet, if it were authentic, would have to have been published from an earlier manuscript, which R. B. Neal never produced. Furthermore, the Defence states that its purpose is to explain Cowdery’s position to Latter-day Saints. Even if all copies had perished by 1906, the Saints living during the mid- to late-1800s would have been aware of the work, but none record that they were.

In Oliver’s lifetime, LDS journalists noticed major publications against the faith and refuted them, as in the cases of E. D. Howe in 1834 or John C. Bennett in 1842. But the early Nauvoo press did not mention any printed attack from Oliver Cowdery. Instead, the year after the supposed 1839 pamphlet, Church editors who had worked with Cowdery at the Kirtland press reprinted several of Oliver’s letters in the Messenger and Advocate. The editors announced that the letters answered the questions of “the coming forth of the Book of Mormon … and the restoration of the Priesthood … from the pen of a living witness.”15

Q. Would not Church officials, when Oliver returned to the Church, suppress mention of his early opposition?
A. Actually, the opposite is the case. Three sets of minutes at Kanesville in 1848 show that Oliver was examined carefully to see whether he really supported the mission of Joseph Smith. William E. McLellin had published a letter of Oliver Cowdery to David Whitmer, implying that Oliver held keys higher than those of the Twelve, and Oliver was questioned on his motives in that matter. If Oliver had really written the Defence, Church leaders would have at least asked him about it to clarify his worthiness to be rebaptized.

Q. The Defence claims that it was printed at Pressley’s Job Office, Norton, Ohio. Does this detail check out?
A. Ohio experts know of no such press, and gazetteers of the time indicate that the village of Norton in Delaware County was too small to have a press. There was a Norton township some thirty-five miles from Kirtland, but townships are merely geographical jurisdictions, like small counties, and are rarely given as places of publication.

My book Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses gives some other statements that opponents of the Church have used to throw doubt on Oliver’s testimony.16 One is an 1841 poem by Joel H. Johnson, making the point that God’s revelations are true no matter who opposes them: “Or prove the gospel was not true / Because old Paul the Saints could kill? / Because the Jews its author slew, / and now reject their Saviour still? … / Or Book of Mormon not his word / because denied by Oliver?”17

The poem is a secondary comment, not a primary source. It is rhetoric, not history. To qualify for the latter, it would have to be based on demonstrable knowledge Joel Johnson had of Oliver outside the Church, which it is not. Johnson may simply have meant that Oliver had withdrawn from the Church and did not then stand openly for the ancient record.
Attacks on Oliver Cowdery typically add a Brigham Young statement, although it clearly was not intended to refer to Oliver. President Young said that “some of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon” had received visitations but were yet “left to doubt and to disbelieve that they had ever seen an angel.”18 President Young then followed with an example of “one of the Quorum of the Twelve” of his day. His description fits none of the Three Witnesses, particularly Oliver Cowdery. Indeed, on another occasion Brigham Young expressly declared, “Oliver Cowdery … never denied the Book of Mormon, not even in the wickedest days he ever saw, and came back into the Church before he died.”19

When Oliver returned to the Saints, and as he approached the last year of his life, he reiterated his witness of the plates and the priesthood—the same testimony that he had held since the beginning of the Restoration:

“I beheld with my eyes, and handled with my hands, the gold plates. … I was present with Joseph when an holy angel … conferred, or restored, the Aaronic Priesthood. … I was also present with Joseph when the Melchizedek Priesthood was conferred by the holy angels of God.”20

Notes
2. Elizabeth Cowdery to David Whitmer, March 8, 1887, published in the religious periodical The Return 3, no. 5 (Dec. 1892): 7. I have changed shudder to shadow, the probable reading of the original.
8. Ibid., pp. 4–5.
9. History of the Church, 3:18, passage reproduced from the Far West Record.
10. Oliver Cowdery to Phineas Young, March 23, 1846, Tiffin, Ohio, orig. at LDS Archives. For a photo of The Lord Jehovah appeared to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in the Kirtland Temple, April 3, 1836. Moses, Elias and Elijah also appeared. Note D&C 110.
Oliver Cowdery Testifies In Court
About the Golden Plates and Book of Mormon
Account given by C.M. Nielson

After being challenged by a rival attorney during a trial, Cowdery affirms that his written testimony of seeing the golden plates is true.

“When I was 21 years of age I was working my father’s farm in Michigan. I had worked hard on the farm that summer and decided to take a day off, so went to the city. Near the courthouse I saw a great many people assembling and others walking that way, so I went over to see what was up. There was a jam in the courtroom, but being young and strong, I pushed my way close up to the center, where I found the prosecuting attorney addressing the court and jury in a murder trial.

“The prosecuting attorney was Oliver Cowdery, and he was giving his opening address in behalf of the state. (After he was cut off from the Church, Oliver Cowdery studied law, practicing in Ohio, Wisconsin and then Michigan, where he was elected prosecuting attorney.) After Cowdery sat down the attorney representing the prisoner arose and with taunting sarcasm said: ‘May it please the court and gentlemen of the jury, I see one Oliver Cowdery is going to reply to my argument. I wish he would tell us something about the Mormon Bible; something about that golden Bible that Joe Smith dug out of the hill; something about the great fraud he perpetrated upon the American people whereby he gained thousands of dollars. Now he seems to know so much about this poor prisoner, I wonder if he has forgotten all about Joe Smith and his connection with him.’ The speaker all the while sneering and pointing his finger in scorn at Cowdery in the hope of making him ridiculous before the court and jury.

Everybody present began to wonder if they had been guilty of making such a mistake as choosing a Mormon for prosecuting attorney. Even the judge on the bench began looking with suspicion and distrust at the prosecuting attorney. The prisoner and his attorney became elated at the effect of the speech. People began asking, ‘Is he a Mormon?’ Everybody wondered what Cowdery would say against such foul charges.

“Finally Oliver Cowdery arose, calm as a summer morning. I was within three feet of him. There was no hesitation, no fear, no anger in his voice, as he said: ‘May it please the court, and gentlemen of the jury, my brother attorney on the other side has charged me with connection with Joseph Smith and the golden Bible. The responsibility has been placed upon me, and I cannot escape reply. Before God and man I dare not deny what I have said, and what my testimony contains and as written and printed on the front page of the Book of Mormon. May it please your honor and gentlemen of the jury, this I say, I saw the angel and heard his voice—how can I deny it? It happened in the daytime when the sun was shining bright in the firmament; not in the night when I was asleep. That glorious messenger from heaven, dressed in white, standing above the ground, in a glory I have never seen anything to compare, with the sun insignificant in comparison, and these personages told us if we denied that testimony there is no forgiveness in this life nor in the world to come. Now how can I deny it—I dare not; I will not!’”

Source:
“Oliver Cowdery and His Testimony: An Address Delivered by Judge C. M. Nielsen in the Twenty-fourth Ward Meeting House, Salt Lake City, Utah, February 20, 1910