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OLIVER'S JOSEPH

OLIVER Cowdery is one of the most intriguing and puzzling figures in our early history. We must honor him if only because he was the chief beneficiary of one of Joseph Smith's most peculiar qualities: his generosity in sharing his visions. Joseph showed a singular willingness to admit others into the revelatory process. He did not try to monopolize the gift of revelation, as a power-hungry leader might do, but shared as widely as he could. Almost immediately after Oliver's arrival in Harmony in 1828, Joseph gave him a chance to try his hand at translating. He did not say, "This is my gift alone, and only I can exercise it." Presumably he handed the Urim and Thummim over to Oliver and said, in essence, "Try it for yourself." The incident reminds us of the likelihood that William W. Phelps, Warren Parrish, and

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Fredrick G. Williams, along with Oliver, were invited to help with the translation of Abraham. Joseph wanted to bring his brethren in as much as he possibly could.

There is doubtless a theological reason for Oliver participating in some of the most striking revelations of the Restoration—the need for a second witness. But Joseph’s inclusion of a second person in these visionary experiences is really unmatched in sacred history. The closest we come is the combined vision of the three Apostles at the Mount of Transfiguration and possibly Nephi’s vision of the tree of delicious fruit after Lehi’s dream. Joseph went further than any preceding prophet in having Oliver as witness—at the bestowal of the Aaronic Priesthood, the bestowal of the Melchizedek Priesthood, and the visit of Christ and the prophets in the Kirtland Temple. It was part of Joseph’s style.

For him, sharing visions was one of the highest forms of communion. I love his effusion to William Phelps after writing a scolding letter to the Saints in Missouri. Suddenly he stopped and, seeking relief from the strains of berating his brethren, broke out, “Oh Lord when will the time come when Brother William thy servent and myself behold the day that we may stand together and gase upon eternal wisdom engraven upon the hevens while the magesty of our God holdeth up the dark curtain until we may read the round of Eternity to the fullness and satisfaction of our immortal souls.”¹ One senses that the two of them standing together was almost as important to Joseph as gazing upon eternal wisdom. Sidney shared one of these transcendent experiences with Joseph in viewing the heavens in section 76, but Oliver was the chief beneficiary of Joseph’s expansive prophethood.

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OLIVER FALTERS

These glorious moments make Oliver's departure from the Church in 1838 all the more puzzling. How could he wander away so callously less than two years after seeing Christ on the pulpit of the Kirtland Temple? Was there some flaw in his character, some blind spot, some weakness that made him crumple under pressure?

His career in the Church reached a high point in 1836. He was assistant president under Joseph, editor of the *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, and back in his role as co-witness of the great revelations, but then signs of weakness began to show.

We hate to say anything critical of Oliver because we don't want to undermine his veracity as a witness. But the fact is that Oliver, while attractive and intelligent, did not have the rocklike qualities of Brigham Young or Wilford Woodruff. He wavered; he waxed hot and cold. His record reinforces my sense that Joseph had to work with the people who came his way. He was not given giants to help him build the kingdom. The early converts were good-hearted, spiritually sensitive souls with very human flaws, Oliver among them. Joseph had to build his own giants using the human materials that happened to be drawn into the Restoration.

Oliver, for one thing, seems to have been sensitive about his position in the Church, something like David Whitmer. He worried that Sidney Rigdon was replacing him in the hierarchy. Oliver was on his way to Missouri in 1830 when Sidney was baptized. In Missouri, Oliver became one of seven branch presidents, but meanwhile, back in Kirtland, Rigdon was helping Joseph with the translation of the Bible and being made counselor to Joseph in the presidency of the high priesthood.² After Oliver returned to Kirtland from Missouri in the summer of 1833, it took nearly a year and a half before he reclaimed his rightful place

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in the presidency. At first he was merely a member of the Kirtland high council while Sidney and Frederick G. Williams were Joseph's counselors. In the December 5, 1834, entry in the history, in which Oliver was finally ordained an assistant president, he took pains to explain that he was deposed from this role only temporarily because of his absence in Missouri and that his rightful place was at Joseph's side. Then he listed himself as the first assistant president ahead of Sidney Rigdon.³ The account of this reinstatement would be more persuasive if someone besides Oliver himself had written it. He was the one to underscore his own importance in the Church hierarchy.

For nearly three years he held an honored position among the Church leaders. He helped choose the first group of Twelve Apostles and gave them their charge and blessing. When Joseph translated the Egyptian papyri, Oliver resumed his place as scribe. He helped compile the revelations for the Doctrine and Covenants and presented them to the Church for approval. He was elevated from the high council of Kirtland to the presidency.⁴ In the Kirtland Temple when Christ and the Old Testament messengers appeared, Oliver Cowdery was in his former position as second witness. Then in September 1837 he was demoted again from the First Presidency and named as assistant counselor with Sidney Rigdon as first counselor. Seven months later he was cut off from the Church.

FINANCIAL INSECURITY

Perhaps Oliver was insecure about his Church position because he had no fixed skill or profession to fall back on in those early years. His uneasiness about making a living seemed to have played into his alienation from the Church as much as anything.

Oliver's Joseph

Six of the nine charges against him in his Church court trial, as Richard L. Anderson has pointed out, involved his economic affairs. He had a habit of changing jobs, which was not uncommon in those days but was also not the basis of a secure life. Before he met Joseph, he had tried blacksmithing, store clerking, and schoolteaching. While relaying the Book of Mormon manuscript to the print shop in 1829, he wrote Joseph that he had taken up printing as a trade.⁵ While in Missouri from 1830 to 1833, he had worked in editing, printing, and farming, and in Kirtland he was again assigned editorial and print jobs. In May of 1835, after he was appointed to help Frederick G. Williams edit a Democratic newspaper, the *Northern Times*, he began to contemplate a political career. In the fall of 1835, he wrote to state and national Democratic politicians offering his support, the usual prelude to a patronage position, billing himself as the manager of a newspaper.⁶ He was elected justice of the peace in Kirtland in 1837 and, after he left the Church, went on to a ten-year career as a lawyer and sometime editor.⁷

In 1847 he moved from Tiffin, Ohio, to Elkhorn, Wisconsin, to practice law with his brother Lyman, and within a year he was nominated to run for the state assembly.⁸ Were he to migrate to Utah, his plan was to open a nursery and sell fruit trees.⁹ While working on this idea, he thought about joining the gold rush in hopes of building up his capital stock.¹⁰ Never in his life did he enjoy financial security, and he often complained of poverty. His tendency to look at the green grass on the other side of the fence doubtless reflected his need to scramble for a living.

We have to admire Cowdery's courage in holding on through difficult times and eventually finding his way back to the Church. He left Missouri for Ohio in 1838 just as a depression was seizing the national economy. Small wonder that he complained of

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poverty while in Tiffin. It was a time when the economic slowdown brought Chicago's growth to a standstill. How was a small-town attorney to make his fortune under such conditions? On top of economic hard times, Oliver was handicapped by a chronic lung condition that likely was the cause of his death in 1849. To have survived that long was a tribute to his abilities.

OLIVER'S HISTORY

Oliver looms large in our understanding of the early Church because he wrote a history as well as served as counselor and second witness. In fact, he was officially appointed as Church historian before his mission to Missouri in 1830 removed him from the scene. Not long after his return from Missouri and assumption of the editorship of the Church paper, he wrote an account of the founding events.

From October 1834 through October 1835, Oliver published eight letters in the *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*. This was the first published account of Joseph's "marvilous experience" and one of three major sources dealing with his early years along with Lucy Smith's *Biographical Sketches* and Joseph's own manuscript history. Joseph wrote a brief history in 1832 but did not publish it. His longer account was not begun until 1838. Lucy's narrative was dictated after the Prophet's death. Thus, for a number of years, Oliver's account stood alone.

We value the letters because they give us an early view of the young Joseph, but they are frustrating to read. In one letter Oliver appears to be leading up to the story of the First Vision, and then he pulls back just when we thought it was coming. He spends so much time on historical and theological excursions that we grow impatient and plead with Oliver to get back to Joseph's story.

Oliver's Joseph

In the first letter he seems unduly concerned to present himself as a writer of high sensibility who will tell of events that “may be entertaining” to Church members. In standard sentimental fashion, he first exhibits himself in a contemplative mood, poised to set pen to paper: “And while the gray evening is fast changing into settled darkness, my heart responds with the happy millions who are in the presence of the Lamb, and are past the power of temptation, in rendering thanks, though feebly, to the same parent.” The rhetorical flourishes carried over into a way of describing events that put himself in the forefront. His feelings and thoughts are always on display, making the story more Oliver’s than Joseph’s. “Not only have I been graciously preserved from wicked and unreasonable men, with this our brother,” he writes, “but I have seen the fruit of perseverance in proclaiming the everlasting gospel.” When John the Baptist appeared, “I received baptism, by the direction of the angel of God—the first received into this church, in this day.” We learn very little of Joseph during the translation process and much more about how it felt to Oliver: “These were days never to be forgotten—to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the inspiration of heaven, awakened the utmost gratitude of this bosom! Day after day I continued, uninterrupted, to write from his mouth, as he translated with the Urim and Thummim.”¹¹ Joseph remains a shadowy figure in the background—a voice and a mouth—while Oliver sits in the spotlight, recording and rejoicing.

In the second and third letters, Oliver settles down to writing without the more extreme rhetorical flourishes. But even in this more sober account, Joseph remains a blurred figure—a person to whom events happen, but who has little personal presence. Oliver introduces him as “our esteemed friend and brother, J. Smith Jr. one of the presidents of this church,” as if he were

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just one among a number of leaders.¹² But that is one of the few times Oliver mentions Joseph's name. In all eight letters, Joseph is named only twice.¹³ Most of the time he is "this brother," or more commonly "our brother."¹⁴ For long stretches, Joseph is only a pronoun—*he* or *him*.

RECOVERING THE PLATES

The most detailed and vivid description in all the letters was Oliver's account of Joseph's walk to the hill in September of 1827. In his 1832 history, Joseph gives one line to those thoughts: "I had been tempted of the adversary and sought the Plates to obtain riches and kept not the commandment that I should have an eye single to the glory of God."¹⁵ A single sentence sufficed for Joseph to tell everything about the temptation of riches. Oliver devoted six pages to the struggle with greed. He elaborates Joseph's internal battle as he trudged along: at one moment, Oliver says, Joseph reflected on "the brightness and glory of the heavenly messenger," but then "a thought would start across the mind on the prospects of obtaining so desirable a treasure—one in all human probability sufficient to raise him above a level with the common earthly fortunes of his fellow men, and relieve his family from want." Then the warning of the angel rushed back on the boy as he got close to the hill, and he wavered back and forth. "Here was a struggle indeed," wrote Oliver. His mind was carried back to "poverty, abuse,—wealth, grandure and ease, until before arriving at the place described, this wholly occupied his desires." Then as he climbed the hill, greed won out completely. In Oliver's story, Joseph came to Cumorah with "a fixed determination to obtain and agrandize himself." As he pried up the stone, all Joseph desired was to relieve himself and his friends from want.¹⁶

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The events at the hill, in Oliver's retelling, followed naturally from Joseph's wayward thoughts on the walk over. In the history which Joseph himself wrote, he let his readers surmise the reason for not getting the plates in 1823; Oliver left no doubt. The "fixed determination" to obtain "wealth and ease in this life" occasioned the failure. When he looked into the stone box, Joseph first examined it for anything of value besides the plates that would "add to his store of wealth." Then he reached in but received a shock that drained his natural strength. Two more attempts brought greater shocks each time. After he blurted out an unpremeditated question, "Why can I not obtain this book?" the angel appeared and explained all. In a speech that occupies nearly three pages in Dean C. Jessee's edition of Oliver's letters, Moroni goes on and on about the evils of seeking wealth through the plates. "They are not deposited here for the sake of accumulating gain and wealth and for the glory of this world."¹⁷ To learn this lesson, Joseph was denied the plates for four years. We have no idea where that long speech came from. Did Joseph pass it along to Oliver, or was he, in keeping with the customs of historians in that era, expanding on a hint that Joseph had given him?

Nothing in Joseph's own history contradicted Oliver's telling of the events at Cumorah, nor did the Prophet correct the account after it was printed in Kirtland in 1835. But when Joseph wrote his own version in the 1838 history, he said nothing about his desire for gain or the angel's rebuke, omitting even the few words in the 1832 account. Joseph left out parts of the Cumorah happenings that to Oliver were essential. Oliver relived the struggle between greed and God's glory more intensely than Joseph himself. Oliver, who strove unsuccessfully for financial security all his life, had been told at his first meeting with the Prophet in April 1829 to "seek not for riches but for wisdom" (D&C 6:7), as if that

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question was on his personal agenda even then. The temptation to put property first finally drove him out of the Church; one reason for his excommunication was his insistence on his right to sell land in Jackson County. Plagued to the end of his life by the issue of wealth versus service to God, Oliver inserted worldly gain into his construction of the Prophet's motives.

Despite the influence of personal motives, does Oliver give an accurate picture of Joseph's motives and Moroni's response? It is the question we cannot help asking ourselves. We want to know the real Joseph. But reading Oliver's account compels us to recognize how dependent we are on observers in reconstructing history. We have to use what people like Oliver give us despite their particular perspectives. They are our only access to the Prophet, even though they inevitably inject their own biases into their accounts.

LUCY'S ACCOUNT

Joseph's mother, Lucy, had her own view of the events at the hill in September 1823. She wrote as a mother for whom obedience was a primary virtue in children. In her trip on the canal boat to Buffalo in 1831, she was the one to bring order to an unruly collection of kids. She doubtless wanted the same from her own children. Throughout her account of Moroni and the plates, she put the emphasis on obedience. The first thing she had Joseph Sr. say after hearing of Moroni was that young Joseph was to attend "strictly to the instruction which he had received from this heavenly messenger." At the hill on the first day, she told how the angel showed him the difference between good and evil and "the consequences of obedience and disobedience to the commandments of God." As Alvin lay dying, Lucy remembered him telling Joseph, "I want you to be a good boy, and do everything that lies

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in your power to obtain the Record.” In Lucy’s telling, Joseph obtained the plates when he realized that “I must be up and doing, and set myself about the things which God had commanded me to do.” On the fateful day when Joseph went to obtain the plates from the hill, Lucy “trembled with fear, lest all might be lost in consequence of some failure in keeping the commandments of God.”¹⁸ But she had no need to worry; Joseph had learned obedience. In her account, he had become the good boy prophet.

Joseph’s account of the failure at the hill no more conforms to his mother’s history than to Oliver’s. Writing in 1839 about seeing the plates for the first time, Joseph said, “I made an attempt to take them out but was forbidden by the messenger and was again informed that the time for bringing them forth had not yet arrived.”¹⁹ In Joseph’s telling, the time was not yet ripe and that was all. He made no reference to a neglected commandment. He told of no struggle to obey. He left room for learning obedience to be the reason for the delay but did not mention it himself.

RECONCILIATION

The three accounts—Oliver’s, Lucy’s, and Joseph’s—perplex us. Who is telling the truth? Must Joseph’s own abbreviated account be given preeminence among the three, leaving out greed and strict obedience? The juxtaposition drives home the realization which we all understand when we stop to think about it. There is not just one Joseph Smith in the records. There are as many Josephs as there were observers. We can only arrive at our own preferred version by triangulation. Joseph won’t sit still for a single definitive portrait. Nor will the selections we make from Lucy, from Oliver, and from Joseph ever result in a conclusive final version, no matter how fair-minded and well-informed we are.

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We will simply add our story of the Prophet to all the other stories that have been told, beginning with Oliver's in 1834.

Rather than despair at the plethora of accounts and the impossibility of nailing down one perfect depiction, we should, I believe, rejoice in the benefits of multiplicity. We should recognize that the diversity of accounts adds depth to our understanding of Joseph. We see him better for viewing him through many eyes. Rather than regretting Oliver's—as well as Lucy's—biases, we should be grateful that his needs and anxieties led him to see a side of Joseph we might otherwise have missed. Oliver's Joseph is not *the* Joseph, probably not *our* Joseph, but his story of the Prophet will always be one inescapable element in every account of Joseph Smith.

NOTES

1. Joseph Smith, Kirtland, Ohio, to William W. Phelps, Independence, Missouri, November 27, 1832, in Dean C. Jessee, comp. and ed., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 287.
2. D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 40–43; Doctrine and Covenants 90:19, 21; Stanley R. Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery: Second Elder and Scribe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), 93.
3. Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 1:21.
4. This period of Oliver's career is sketched in Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery*, 122–32.
5. Oliver Cowdery to Joseph Smith Jr., December 28, and November 6, 1829, Joseph Smith Papers, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.
6. For example, see Oliver Cowdery's letters to John A. Bryan, William Kenmore, and R. M. Johnson, in Oliver Cowdery, Letterbook, 1833–38, Oliver Cowdery Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

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7. For his work as justice of the peace, see Oliver Cowdery's Docket (Kirtland, Geauga County, Ohio), Huntington Library, San Marino, California. For his career after he left the Church, see Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 37–48.
8. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 44; for the delay of his return, see Oliver Cowdery to Phineas Young, April 16, 1848, in Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery*, 255–57.
9. Oliver Cowdery to Phineas Young, April 16, 1848, in Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery*, 256.
10. Oliver Cowdery to Phineas Young, no date, in Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery*, 261.
11. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989–92), 1:28–29.
12. Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:45.
13. Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:27, 48.
14. Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:27–29, 48–49, 69, 85, 90–91.
15. Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:8.
16. Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:75–77.
17. Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:85–87.
18. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (London: S. W. Richards, 1853), 82–83, 88, 99, 101.
19. Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:281.