

a little season nevertheless let him impart ~~unto~~ the many women
 impart to be sent up unto the land of Zion behold these things are in
 his own hands let him do according to wisdom verily I say let him be an-
 dained as an angel unto the churches that shall stand & let him be an-
 dained unto this power & now speedily ~~go forth~~ ^{visit} the churches expounding these things
 unto them with my servant Oliver - behold this is my ~~power~~ ^{power} obtaining man-
 ners even as I have directed he that is faithful & endureth shall over-
 come the world he that sendeth up treasures unto the land of Zion shall
 receive an inheritance in this world & his works shall follow him & also
 a reward in the world to come yea & blessed are the dead that die in
 the Lord from hence forth when the Lord shall come & all things shall pass
 away & all things become new they shall rise from the dead & shall
 not die & shall receive an inheritance before the Lord in the Holy City & he
 that liveth when the Lord shall come & have kept the faith blessed is he new
 the first in the land of Zion

The above image shows section 63 of the Doctrine and Covenants, revealed to Joseph Smith in August 1831 and recorded by Oliver Cowdery. (Used by permission of L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah)



Gary E. Smith, Elijah Restores the Power to Seal Families for Eternity. Elijah, a prophet who lived on this earth hundreds of years before Christ, visited the Prophet Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in the Kirtland Temple in April 1836. This event is recorded in section 110. (© 1997 Intellectual Reserve, Inc. All rights reserved)

Susan Easton Black

5



OLIVER COWDERY IN THE DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS

EXCLUDING Joseph Smith, no other person is mentioned more often in the Doctrine and Covenants than Oliver Cowdery. His name appears or he is specifically addressed in thirty sections.¹ In at least seven of these sections, his name is linked with Joseph Smith as having received the revelation along with or in conjunction with the Prophet (sections 6, 7, 13, 18, 24, 26, and 110). At least three entire sections were received by Joseph Smith specifically for or in behalf of Oliver Cowdery (sections 8, 9, and 28). Two sections recount Joseph and Oliver receiving priesthood keys from holy messengers (sections 13 and 110). Nineteen sections mention Oliver Cowdery's name in conjunction with a specific assignment.² And finally, one section is attributed to Oliver as the author.³ Reviewing the place of Oliver Cowdery in the

Susan Easton Black is a professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University.

DAYS NEVER TO BE FORGOTTEN

Doctrine and Covenants reveals the sacred role of a man called by God to do a marvelous work among the children of men. That role included being the principal scribe of the Book of Mormon translation, the first “preacher” in the restored Church, the second elder, an Apostle, and Associate President of the Church.⁴ For a critical season, he was a trusted servant of the Lord and second only to Joseph Smith in this dispensation. This essay reviews some of the ways the Lord revealed his will to Oliver Cowdery. In addition, it is hoped that the reader will discover Oliver’s greatness as he followed the Lord’s will and proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ, accepted divine direction from the Lord (through his servant Joseph Smith), and sent God’s word forth to the world.

REVELATIONS GIVEN TO JOSEPH SMITH THE PROPHET AND OLIVER COWDERY

The wording in the introductory section headings takes on added significance when a distinction is made between the phrases “revelation given through Joseph Smith” and “revelation given to Joseph Smith the Prophet *and* [so and so],” meaning in conjunction with another person. The Doctrine and Covenants records only four individuals who enjoyed that privilege: Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, and David and John Whitmer. Of this select group, Oliver was the first to receive revelations with Joseph. Over a seven-year period (1829–36), Oliver received at least seven revelations in conjunction with the Prophet which were directed specifically to him or in some cases to him and a few others (sections 6, 7, 13, 18, 24, 26, and 110). Of these, two were given through the Urim and Thummim (sections 6 and 7), three by the revelatory process to the Prophet’s mind and heart (sections 18,

24, and 26), and two as visions in which ancient prophets restored priesthood keys (sections 13 and 110).

REVELATIONS RECEIVED THROUGH THE
URIM AND THUMMIM—SECTIONS 6 AND 7

Receiving the word of God through a physical medium, such as the Urim and Thummim, was common in this dispensation and in others. The best-known use of seer instruments was Joseph Smith's use of both the Nephite interpreters and the seer stone, with which he translated the Book of Mormon "by the gift and power of God."⁵ By means of the Urim and Thummim, both Joseph and Oliver were told in 1829 that a "marvelous work is about to come forth unto the children of men," and "the field is white already to harvest." They were also admonished to "keep my commandments, and seek to bring forth and establish the cause of Zion." By so doing, the promise given was a knowledge of the mysteries of God, the gift to translate holy writ, and an opportunity to do much good in this generation (D&C 6:1, 3, 5).

To accomplish the expected good, Oliver learned that the Lord knew his thoughts and the intents of his heart and that he encircled him in arms of love. He was reminded of the night that he cried unto the Lord. "Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter?" asked God. "What greater witness can you have than from God? . . . [Therefore] perform with soberness the work which I have commanded you" (D&C 6:23, 35). As the revelation continued, Joseph and Oliver recorded, "Behold the wounds which pierced my side, and also the prints of the nails in my hands and feet" (D&C 6:37). Was it a literary phrase or did Joseph and Oliver—through the Urim and Thummim—actually see Jesus Christ, the King of Kings, the Holy One of Israel? Perhaps.⁶

DAYS NEVER TO BE FORGOTTEN

In receiving the subsequent revelation, Joseph recorded the circumstances leading to the receipt of that revelation: “A difference of opinion arising between us [Joseph and Oliver] about the account of John the Apostle, mentioned in the New Testament, as to whether he died or continued to live, *we mutually agreed to settle it by the Urim and Thummim.*”⁷ By this means, they learned that the resurrected Lord asked, “John, my beloved, what desirest thou?” John replied, “Lord, give unto me power over death, that I may live and bring souls unto thee.” His request was granted and then magnified. John would “prophesy before nations, kindreds, tongues and people” and be “as flaming fire and a ministering angel; he shall minister for those who shall be heirs of salvation who dwell on the earth” (D&C 7:1–3, 6).

REVELATIONS FROM HEAVENLY BEINGS

Section 13 contains the ordination of Joseph and Oliver to the Aaronic Priesthood. On May 15, 1829, as they knelt in prayer on the banks of the Susquehanna River near Harmony, Pennsylvania, John the Baptist, acting under the direction of Peter, James, and John, conferred the lesser priesthood upon Joseph and Oliver. Recalling the event, Joseph wrote, “I baptized [Oliver] first, and afterwards he baptized me, after which I laid my hands upon his head and ordained him to the Aaronic Priesthood, and afterwards he laid his hands on me and ordained me to the same Priesthood—for so we were commanded. . . . No sooner had I baptized Oliver Cowdery, than the Holy Ghost fell upon him, and he stood up and prophesied many things which should shortly come to pass. . . . We were filled with the Holy Ghost, and rejoiced in the God of our salvation.”⁸ Oliver wrote more poetically of that day at the Susquehanna River:

Oliver Cowdery in the Doctrine and Covenants

On a sudden, as from the midst of eternity, the voice of the Redeemer spake peace to us, while the veil 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! . . . 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 an angel from glory—’twas a message from the Most High!

I shall not attempt to paint to you the feelings of this heart, nor the majestic beauty and glory which surrounded us on this occasion; but you will believe me when I say, that earth, nor men, with the eloquence of time, cannot begin to clothe language in as interesting and sublime a manner as this holy personage.⁹

Section 110 contains the glorious visions manifested to Joseph and Oliver on April 3, 1836, one week after the Kirtland Temple dedication.¹⁰ As the men knelt in prayer, this time at the temple’s Melchizedek Priesthood altars, “the veil was taken from our minds, and the eyes of our understanding were opened. We saw the Lord standing upon the breastwork of the pulpit, before us; and under his feet was a paved work of pure gold.” When the vision closed, the heavens again opened. Moses appeared and, according to Joseph, “committed unto us the keys of the gathering of Israel from the four parts of the earth, and the leading of the ten tribes from the land of the north.” Next came Elias, who bestowed the keys of “the dispensation of the gospel of Abraham.” And then “another great and glorious vision burst upon us.” Elijah, the prophet, stood before them and spoke of turning “the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers” (D&C 110:1–2, 11–13, 15).

DAYS NEVER TO BE FORGOTTEN
REVELATIONS GIVEN SPECIFICALLY
TO OLIVER COWDERY

Sections 8, 9, and 28 were given through Joseph Smith specifically to Oliver Cowdery—two in April 1829 and one in September 1830. The first two were received while Joseph was translating the Book of Mormon, and the third came during the infancy of the Church.

In section 8, Joseph was told of two divine gifts that Oliver could claim. The first was the spirit of revelation whereby the Lord would give revelation in his mind and heart, “by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart” and the second was the gift of Aaron, which had “told [him] many things” (D&C 8:2, 6).

Section 9 explained that Oliver had not been able to translate successfully and consistently because he had commenced again to write for Joseph. For his “transgression,” the second gift spoken of in section 8 became dormant. The Lord was not displeased with Oliver for his lack of persistence, so he was instructed to continue as a scribe for Joseph until the translation of the Book of Mormon record was finished. Then, if Oliver desired, there would be other records that he could assist in translating. In the meantime, patience must prevail. In the revelation Oliver was informed why, ultimately, he was not as successful as Joseph in the translation process: “Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong;

Oliver Cowdery in the Doctrine and Covenants

therefore, you cannot write that which is sacred save it be given you from me” (D&C 9:7–9). The revelation ends with a plea for Oliver to “stand fast in the work” and obtain the promise of being “lifted up at the last day” (D&C 9:14).

The third revelation specifically directed to Oliver is found in section 28, which was received about five months after the Church was organized. Oliver had been led to believe in the false revelations received by Hiram Page, one of the eight witnesses to the Book of Mormon.¹¹ The revelation reminds Oliver that no one “shall be appointed to receive commandments and revelations in this church” except the Prophet Joseph (D&C 28:2). Oliver was to be like Aaron of old, declaring the commandments and revelations with power and authority unto the Church, but he should not command Joseph. Although Oliver learned he would receive other revelations, he was not to write them by way of commandment (see D&C 28:4–5). With his leadership role clarified, Oliver was admonished to take “Hiram Page, between him and thee alone, and tell him that those things which he hath written from that stone are not of me and that Satan deceiveth him” (D&C 28:11). After fulfilling that responsibility, Oliver was instructed to journey to the borders of the Lamanites, namely Indian Territory, west of Missouri, and there declare the gospel “with the sound of rejoicing” (D&C 28:16).

SCRIBE AND CLERK

The number of revelations actually recorded or written down by Oliver Cowdery may never be known, since many of the earliest copies of the sections in the Doctrine and Covenants are missing or only later transcriptions have survived. Oliver was probably the scribe for most of the early revelations received between 1829

DAYS NEVER TO BE FORGOTTEN

and 1831, including the following sections in the Doctrine and Covenants: 6–9, 11–12, 14–18, 20–24, 26, and 28–32; the early Missouri revelations, found in 57–62; and 63–70. Section 13 was probably also recorded by Oliver Cowdery, but the earliest extant handwritten copy of the revelation was copied sometime between June 11 and November 3, 1839, by the Prophet’s secretary, James Mulholland. The earliest handwritten copy of section 110, written before November 1843, is in Willard Richards’s handwriting. Yet Oliver was present on both occasions, heard the words of heavenly messengers, and received sacred priesthood keys at their hands.

That said, there is one extant section in the Doctrine and Covenants that was first written, in part, by Oliver. It is section 102, which contains minutes of a February 17, 1834, meeting of the first high council held in Joseph Smith’s home in Kirtland. As clerks of the meeting, Oliver Cowdery and Orson Hyde recorded that the meeting’s purpose was to organize the high council consisting of twelve of the twenty-four high priests present. Oliver was one of the original twelve men chosen to that body (see D&C 102:3). When lots were cast to ascertain who on that council should speak first, Oliver was selected.¹²

AN APOSTLE OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

In the majority of instances when Oliver Cowdery is mentioned in the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants, each has a specific purpose, but when taken as a whole, a strong theme emerges—his responsibility as an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. The first mention of Oliver Cowdery as an Apostle appears in a revelation that was received immediately following the visionary experience of the three witnesses (Oliver, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris) wherein they saw the divine messenger Moroni,

Oliver Cowdery in the Doctrine and Covenants

the Book of Mormon plates, and other sacred Nephite relics, and heard the voice of Jesus Christ. “And now, Oliver Cowdery, I speak unto you, and also unto David Whitmer, . . . and I speak unto you, even as unto Paul mine apostle, for you are called even with that same calling with which he was called” (D&C 18:9). Oliver’s official “appointment” as an Apostle came at the time he and Joseph received the Melchizedek Priesthood under the hands of “Peter, and James, and John, whom I have sent unto you, by whom I have ordained you and confirmed you to be apostles, and especial witnesses of my name” (D&C 27:12). Oliver’s appointment as an Apostle was reiterated again in the “Articles and Covenants of the Church,” the document later canonized as Doctrine and Covenants section 20. Speaking of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery’s apostleship, the revelation states that “Joseph Smith . . . was called of God, and ordained an apostle of Jesus Christ, to be the first elder of this church; and to Oliver Cowdery, who was also called of God, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to be the second elder of this church” (D&C 20:2–3). In his calling and capacity of an Apostle, from 1829 until his disaffection from Mormonism in 1838, Oliver faithfully executed that role in acting as a witness of Christ and in proclaiming the restored gospel.

The Doctrine and Covenants also discusses Oliver Cowdery’s stewardship over the medium of print. At first he was responsible to select and write “books for schools in this church, that little children also may receive instruction before me as is pleasing unto me” (D&C 55:4). However, within a short time, W. W. Phelps was appointed to be the Church printer, and Oliver was called to assist him in copying, correcting, and selecting text that “all things may be right before me, as it shall be proved by the Spirit through him” (D&C 57:13). Later, Oliver, in company with newly appointed Church historian John Whitmer, carried

DAYS NEVER TO BE FORGOTTEN

the handwritten revelations from Ohio to Missouri for publication (see D&C 69:1). In Missouri, Oliver reviewed, prepared, and assisted Phelps in the publication of the revelations, first in the *Evening and the Morning Star* and later for inclusion in the Book of Commandments. When he returned to Kirtland, he continued his work in the printing office. Oliver was told such work was only “the beginning of the stewardship” (D&C 104:32). By fulfilling these directives, his apostolic calling was enlarged, and the words he wrote were read by thousands in his day and by millions today.

Sadly, in April 1838, Oliver was excommunicated from the Church. But in spite of his disaffection, his name appeared in one later revelation. On January 19, 1841, his name appears in Doctrine and Covenants section 124, which was received in Nauvoo. In the revelation, Hyrum Smith learned that he was to be appointed as a “prophet, and a seer, and a revelator unto my church, as well as my servant Joseph.” And in so doing, “he may ask and receive, and be crowned with the same blessing, and glory, and honor, and priesthood, and gifts of the priesthood, that once were put upon him that was my servant Oliver Cowdery” (D&C 124:94–95). Notice the phrase “was my servant Oliver Cowdery.” Although Oliver had left the Church years earlier, his position as second elder remained vacant until Hyrum’s appointment.

CONCLUSION

Over 22 percent of the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants are linked in one way or another to Oliver Cowdery. Is it any wonder that he was privileged to receive revelations with Joseph, that he became the second elder of the Church, or that the Lord was mindful of him as he spread the gospel in spoken and written word? Oliver Cowdery’s contributions during an

Oliver Cowdery in the Doctrine and Covenants

important season in the early history of the Church were second only to Joseph Smith's. Whether serving as scribe for the Book of Mormon translation, as a recipient of sacred priesthood keys, or as an apostolic witness, Oliver was in the forefront. For his seven years of commitment to Christ's earthly kingdom, the Church owes Oliver Cowdery an enormous debt of gratitude.

NOTES

1. See Doctrine and Covenants 6, 7, 8, 9, 13, 17, 18, 20, 21, 23, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32, 55, 57, 58, 61, 63, 67, 68, 69, 70, 82, 102, 104, 110, 111, and 124.
2. See Doctrine and Covenants 20:3; 21:10–12; 23:1; 25:6; 30:5; 32:2; 55:4; 57:13; 58:58; 60:6, 17; 61:23; 63:46; 68:32; 69:2, 4; 70:1–8; 82:11; 102:3, 34; 104:28–33; 124:94–95.
3. Oliver Cowdery is traditionally credited with authoring Doctrine and Covenants section 134, although there is evidence suggesting that W. W. Phelps also assisted in writing the document.
4. See Doctrine and Covenants 6:17, 22–24; 18:9; 20:2; 21:10–12; 124:94–95.
5. Joseph Smith to John Wentworth, as cited in Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 4:537; see also Joseph Smith—History 1:62.
6. In Doctrine and Covenants section 6, Oliver was told he would be permitted to translate the Book of Mormon (see verse 25). In section 8 he was instructed on how to receive an understanding of the translation (see verses 1–3). Finally, in section 9 he was told why he was not successful (see D&C 9:1, 5, 7–11). All this suggests that Oliver could use the Urim and Thummim.
7. Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:35–36; emphasis added.
8. Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:39–40, 42; also Joseph Smith—History 1:71, 73.

DAYS NEVER TO BE FORGOTTEN

9. Oliver Cowdery to William W. Phelps, *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, October 1834, 14, 16.
10. Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:435–36.
11. Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:109–10, 115.
12. Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:31.