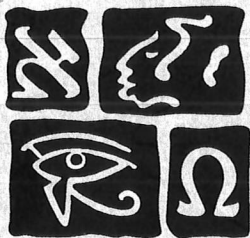




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Transcript

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Richard L. Anderson

Book of Mormon Witnesses

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Summary:

Richard Anderson gives an overview of the secular and divine functions of witnesses and refers to the anticipation surrounding the revelatory calling of witnesses to view the plates. He describes the circumstances of their calling, details aspects of their lives, comments on their character traits, and answers several typical questions of skeptics. Anderson emphasizes that these witnesses were true to their testimonies.

Transcript

Church History, Book of Mormon Witnesses

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Book of Mormon Witnesses

Richard L. Anderson

For over forty years, I have been a student of Joseph Smith's life and teachings. I have a testimony of what those close to Joseph reported: They had full confidence that, as a prophet, Joseph Smith was in touch with God and powerfully brought those hearing him closer to Christ; they knew Joseph translated the Book of Mormon, an ancient record of Christ's American ministry, from metal plates; they felt God's power as Joseph privately and publicly taught the gospel and gave full meaning to Bible verses ignored by traditional Christians. The Book of Mormon relies not only on the record of an ancient people, but also on the separate testimonies of Three and Eight Witnesses published in the back of the book's original 1830 edition and in the front of its more recent editions.

I first encountered the concept of witnesses in law school as I learned that in property transactions and other legal documents, you need two or three witnesses to attest to the signature. Then while studying history in graduate school, I learned that all history is reconstructed by witnesses. I feel there is no religious leader whom I know about—in the contemporary scene or historically—outside of the Bible, who really deals with the issue of witnesses.

Perhaps God doesn't need witnesses, but as humans we need a basis for our faith. Man does not usually understand the law of witnesses as a religious concept or as God's law. God has never given a revelation from his courts to this earth without sending more than one witness. He sustains, or backs up, his servants. In Moses' day, Aaron was to be a second witness to Pharaoh and to the Egyptian courts. He is also a witness to all of us in the book of Exodus today. In Christ's day a second witness, John the Baptist, came; Christ said John "was a burning and a shining light" (John 5:35). Jesus relied upon John's testimony of His own mission. Think, too, of the resurrection of Jesus. It didn't happen in some out-of-the-way place with nobody

seeing it. Eleven men witnessed Christ's resurrection, and other witnesses are reported in the New Testament. So the concept of witnesses is critical as we examine God's work.

Why doesn't God make all people witnesses? Latter-day Saints have an insight into that. We know, through revelation, that we must prove ourselves in this life. We come to this earth to exercise our faith, growing and learning through searching and seeking. Peter commented on this subject as he explained his position as a Christian to Cornelius, a very well-to-do and high-placed Roman Centurion who had sent for him. Peter said: "Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly; Not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before of God, *even* to us, who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead" (Acts 10:40-41). Just as God furnished witnesses of Christ's resurrection in the Bible, God provided witnesses in the Book of Mormon for Christ's appearance as a resurrected being on the American continent, and then He provided witnesses for the Book of Mormon in modern times.

I have spent a good deal of my life trying to identify the lives and the testimonies of those three men who said they saw the angel, and of those eleven men who said they saw the plates when the Book of Mormon was ready to be published. Their stories are remarkable. Their lives went in different directions, but all had a common denominator: **All had seen a thing that changed their lives.** In my life I have heard scores of questions about these witnesses, and I would like to address some of those questions here.

How did Joseph and his companions first learn that there would be witnesses? Martin Harris, one of the Three Witnesses, received a special revelation very early in 1829 at the outset of the translation of the Book of Mormon somewhat as a comfort for him because he no longer acted as scribe. In the revelation, recorded in Doctrine & Covenants 5:11-14, the Lord said: "The testimony of three of my servants . . . shall go forth with my words [unto this generation]. Yea, they shall know of a surety that these things are true, for . . . I will give them power that they

may behold and view these things as they are; And to none else will I grant this power, to receive this same testimony among this generation." So right at the outset of the translation, the promise of Book of Mormon witnesses was given by revelation.

Also, Joseph later found that the Book of Mormon prophesies in two places of its modern witnesses.¹ As the scribes of Joseph Smith sat and took dictation, they heard these words, addressed from the ancient writer to the modern translator:

And behold, ye may be privileged that ye may show the plates unto those who shall assist to bring forth this work;

And unto three shall they be shown by the power of God; wherefore they shall know of a surety that these things are true.

And in the mouth of three witnesses shall these things be established; and the testimony of three, and this work, in the which shall be shown forth the power of God and also his word, of which the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost bear record—and all this shall stand as a testimony against the world at the last day. (Ether 5:2–4)

Now, interestingly, that verse designates only three witnesses to assist in bringing forth the work, yet Joseph Smith showed the plates first to three individuals and then to eight individuals—a total of eleven. So why are there two sets of witnesses? Only the Three Witnesses had a supernatural vision by the power of God. In their testimony, located on the present flyleaf of the Book of Mormon—we transferred the testimonies from the back of the book to the front—the Three Witnesses say they saw the plates and an angel. The Eight Witnesses say they felt, handled, and lifted the plates but saw no angel.

There are those, especially in our day, who would account for the Three Witnesses' supernatural vision by saying that Joseph Smith simply got people emotionally excited enough to think they were seeing visions. But how would these people account for the physical evidence of the plates? In response to the Eight Witnesses' testimony, people might say, "Perhaps Joseph Smith made a set of plates so that people could examine something physical," but that doesn't explain that the

¹ See 2 Nephi 27:12–14 and Ether 5:2–4. (The latter is cited below.)

angel came to the Three Witnesses with supernatural power and glory from God. So you know, by the testimony of the Three Witnesses, the supernatural reality of the book and God's will in giving it. The physical nature of the Eight Witnesses' testimony complements the spiritual nature of the Three Witnesses'.

Who were the Eight Witnesses? Of the eight witnesses to the Book of Mormon who signed that they had lifted the plates, five were from the Whitmer family and three were from the Smith family, including a brother-in-law, Hyrum Page. Since the process of translating the Book of Mormon took place under the surveillance of people in fairly compact households, it is understandable that some of them constituted the witnesses. In the nineteenth century, privacy was not really the same thing as it is today. People lived more closely together in smaller homes. The women and men, first in the Smith household and then in the Whitmer household, where the work was finally finished, watched the translation process, and everybody in those households was convinced of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. As we read earlier from the Book of Mormon, the translator was told by the ancient prophets that he could share the knowledge of these plates with those who would assist to bring forth the work. It was from this group of faithful people who had helped to bring forth the work that the Eight Witnesses were selected.

Some say that because the Eight Witnesses were closely related to Joseph and to each other, their testimony is invalid. That is simply not so. Consider the example of Christ's resurrection: Of the eleven witnesses who saw Christ's resurrected body, several were brothers, and some of those witnesses were even related to Christ.

Who were the Three Witnesses? Martin Harris was a very prominent farmer in Palmyra, New York, who originally contacted Joseph Smith after learning about the discovery of the plates. Martin gave Joseph fifty dollars to help him move away from Palmyra to escape persecution and to relocate in Pennsylvania, where Joseph began the first translation of the Book of Mormon. Then in the summer of 1828, Martin went to Pennsylvania and spent almost three months as a scribe for the translation of the Book of Mormon. (Unfortunately, that work was lost.) Martin,

because he was already a man of maturity, owned a farm, and he willingly financed the Book of Mormon by mortgaging his farm. So Martin Harris assisted from the beginning as the financier for the Book of Mormon.

Oliver Cowdery came onto the scene the next summer, in 1829, and he was the effective scribe for the present Book of Mormon. Oliver was the village school teacher, and he boarded in various houses in the communities of Manchester, where Joseph Smith's parents lived, and Palmyra. (Joseph Smith was away at that time. He was married and living in Pennsylvania.) Oliver began to hear about the experiences of Joseph Smith. Of course, there was a good deal of ridicule in the community, but Oliver took these experiences very seriously and received some very deep manifestations. He went to Joseph Smith in the spring of 1829 and then wrote the entire original manuscript of the Book of Mormon.

The third person who was selected was David Whitmer. David, in a sense, represented a whole family, and his special contribution was as an investigator. David Whitmer was acquainted with Oliver Cowdery. When Oliver went to see Joseph, David asked him to send back information about the translation. After David received the information and a spiritual witness of the translation, he got a letter from Joseph and Oliver requesting help and a place to stay because persecution was increasing in the area. David brought the translators up to his home in Fayette, New York, thirty miles from Palmyra. Because he provided this refuge and assistance, David was a natural choice as one of the Three Witnesses.

How were they chosen? How did the Three Witnesses learn that *they* were the ones selected for this privilege? As the Book of Mormon translation neared completion, those who were assisting directly with the translation process came upon one of the verses that made so vivid the promise that there would be Three Witnesses. Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer went to Joseph Smith and asked Joseph to ask the Lord if they could see this great vision and have this experience, that they might be the witnesses of the Book of Mormon to this generation. Joseph said they became persistent; in fact, he used the word "teased."

Joseph inquired of the Lord and was given a revelation, recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 17. Though it consists of only nine verses, it is a remarkable revelation because it is so specific about what the witnesses would see.

There are those, even today, who persist in saying that the Three Witnesses had a subjective experience, but the very first verse of this revelation says: "Behold, I say unto you, that you must rely upon my word, which if you do this with full purpose of heart, you shall have a view of the plates" (D&C 17:1). This scripture makes it clear that the Three Witnesses would have a physical view of the plates. Further on in the first verse, they are promised a view of the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim (the means of translating ancient records), and the miraculous directors that led Lehi and his colony to the New World. Some of these artifacts the prophet Moroni placed into the Hill Cumorah to be found in the latter days. So God promises that the Three Witnesses will see five ancient objects from the Book of Mormon. The Three Witnesses are told that they would see these plates by the power of God, just as the Book of Mormon says in 2 Nephi 27:12–14. The promise is very specific.

To illustrate how the promise of the revelation was carried out, I am going to paraphrase what Joseph Smith's mother said. I love her history because she was a woman in the wings. Lucy Smith observed extremely carefully and gave so much color and detail of what was happening. She said that at the Whitmer home, they had a family devotional of prayer and some hymns. She said that Joseph stood up in the midst of that family devotional and walked over to Martin Harris and told him that it was the will of the Lord that he should see the Book of Mormon plates if he humbled himself that day.³ Martin Harris really had a struggle with faith, more so than the other two witnesses, who were younger than Joseph (around twenty-three

³ Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith, by His Mother, Lucy Mack Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 151–2.

or twenty-four years old), but Martin was about forty-six years old. He was skeptical because he had seen a lot of people deceived. The men left the house that morning to go into the woods near the Whitmer home.

Lucy said that she waited in the house until late in the day. In the late afternoon, she said, these men burst into the house filled with joy and enthusiasm, and Joseph threw himself beside her on the bed and said: "Mother, you do not know how happy I am: the Lord has now caused the plates to be shown to three more besides myself. . . . For now they know for themselves, that I do not go about to deceive the people."⁵ And they all told her what happened in those woods. More than anybody else, Joseph gave the details, the spontaneous little bits and pieces of that remarkable experience, when he dictated his history,⁶ and the Three Witnesses uphold him in interviews recorded later.

Joseph records that the four men prayed and nothing happened. Finally, Martin admitted that he was the problem, that he lacked faith and needed to separate himself from them. Martin left the group and went off by himself to pray. As soon as the prayers were reiterated (without Martin), Oliver, David, and Joseph saw a light materialize at midday that June in 1829. They said this light—David later called it a "soft light"—was brighter than the sun and more intense. In the midst of that light, the angel appeared with the plates. David later told that the angel showed them the plates and turned the leaves. The angel spoke to David, the one witness who did not come back to the Church, saying: "David, blessed is the Lord, and he that keeps His commandments."⁸

Then they heard the voice of God, and Joseph reported it exactly as the witnesses remembered it. The Lord said: "These plates have been revealed by the power of God, and they have been translated by the power of God. The translation of them which you have seen is correct, and I command you to bear record of what you now

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Joseph Smith, *History of the Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 1:52–6.

⁸ Ibid., 1:54.

see and hear.”⁹ As the vision closed, Joseph went and found Martin. The two men knelt in prayer, and the same revelation was repeated for them. Then they all returned to the house, as Lucy described.

The Eight Witnesses not only saw the plates, as the Three Witnesses did, but they felt them too. Lucy Smith said that a few days after the first witnessing, the Smiths, the Whitmers, and Oliver made the thirty-mile journey from Fayette to the Smith home in Manchester, which is south of Palmyra. She said that the male Whitmers, Joseph Sr., and her sons Hyrum and Samuel accompanied Joseph Jr. into the woods where an angel had deposited the plates on a tree stump. The Eight Witnesses testified that they saw these plates, picked them up, and examined the “curious” characters. (“Curious” did not mean “strange” in that day; it meant that the characters were very carefully crafted. These men were craftsmen and artisans, remember, so they recognized fine workmanship. The witnesses also used the word “heft,” which is archaic for our day; it means “to lift.”) They examined the plates and bore testimony in their formal statement that they had “lifted” the gold plates.

They described the physical plates as weighing between forty and sixty pounds and being approximately eight inches long, five or six inches wide, and five or six inches thick. Their descriptions varied, from seven by five by four to eight by six by five, but the descriptions are consistent because they are estimations. They didn’t take a measurement. Not only did the Eight Witnesses see the characters and turn over the leaves, but they reported seeing a sealed part. They described the plates as bound with “D”-shaped rings, saying a perpendicular center ran through the plates, like a loose-leaf notebook, and then the ring curved in a half circle across the spine. There is definitely a consistency in what the Eight Witnesses claim they saw.

I have often thought that Joseph Smith would have been in a terrible position if he was somehow putting people on. How could he produce a revelation? How could he produce five ancient objects? How could he satisfy people that a personage

⁹ Ibid., 1:54–5.

with the power of God was really there? You cannot counterfeit the power of God. You cannot counterfeit ancient objects.

Some people wonder if any of the Three Witnesses ever denied his testimony. The answer is, No, never. The Three Witnesses' lives went in different directions, but none ever denied his testimony of the Book of Mormon and its coming forth. So what did each say he experienced, and how did each support his testimony?

Let's examine each of these men individually to establish their characters. I will start with Martin Harris because he was older. Oliver Cowdery was a young school teacher; not too many people paid attention to him. David Whitmer was a young farmer; he was not really very visible. But Martin Harris was visible. He had a large farm of multiple acres (perhaps a total of around three or four hundred), and that farm was a matter of business through the whole community. The townspeople knew who he was. They knew his reputation. So what did the members of the community think of Martin Harris?

The townspeople said two things about Martin Harris. The people who talked to him accused him of being a fanatic because he believed in the Bible. That sounds like a strange fact, but I think we see that in our own culture as well. We tend to look at people who are secular as pleasing; they don't really ruffle our feathers in any way. But religious people stir us up, challenging us to be better. Martin Harris had read the prophecies in the Bible that God would do a great work in the latter days, and he believed them. He was a believer, so sometimes he was accused of being religiously overdone.

Second, the townspeople said Martin Harris was honest. Every one of the individuals in Palmyra who commented on Martin's character said he was an extremely honest individual. In fact, one of the people who set the type for the Book of Mormon, Pomeroy Tucker, later wrote a book about the early Mormons in the community and said that Martin's usual honesty was a very puzzling thing to him. Tucker wondered, How could Martin Harris, who was such an honest man and an

intelligent man, say that he had seen an angel and plates? Well, that's simple. Martin was being honest; it really happened.

When Martin Harris moved out of the community quite a few months after the book was printed, E. B. Grandin, whom Harris paid three thousand dollars to print the Book of Mormon, published his opinion of Harris in the local newspaper for the community to read. The statement almost sounds like a funeral eulogy. Grandin wrote: "Mr. Harris was among the early settlers of this town, and has ever borne the character of an honorable and upright man, and an obliging and benevolent neighbor. He had secured to himself by honest industry a respectable fortune—and he is left a large circle of acquaintances and friends to pity his delusion."¹⁰

Martin Harris was born in 1783, which means he was middle aged when he became a Book of Mormon scribe and witness in 1828. He mortgaged his farm to pay for the first edition of the Book of Mormon. Then in early 1831 he moved with the faithful Latter-day Saints to upper Ohio, and there he continued to contribute to the success of the restoration of the gospel in Kirtland, Ohio. Harris was extremely faithful for a time, but all three witnesses became disenchanted with the policies of the Church, and in 1837 and the beginning of 1838, they were each excommunicated from the Church because they simply were not in harmony with Church leadership.

The Three Witnesses left the Church because they disagreed with Joseph's policies, but they never once threw doubt upon their testimonies. (Even Peter and Paul, who had both seen visions, sharply disagreed on policy at times.) Had they not really seen the plates, when they were out of the Church, the Three Witnesses would have disavowed their experience, and they would not have tried to keep ties with the Church. All three witnesses left the Church for a time, but two came back before their deaths to make peace with God, and they all continued to bear witness to the Book of Mormon and their vision of the plates to the end.

¹⁰ *Wayne Sentinel*, 27 May 1831. See also Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 103.

Let me give an example of Martin Harris's testimony. Just before his rebaptism in 1870, a relative, William H. Homer, who was passing through Kirtland went to Martin's house, and Martin Harris volunteered to take him, as he did many people, to the Kirtland Temple. In the temple Martin expressed some fairly bitter feelings toward some of the Latter-day Saints in Utah and even displayed a jealous spirit toward the leadership of the Church, saying, "I should have been president of the Church." Then Homer asked Martin Harris, "Do you still believe that the Book of Mormon is true and that Joseph Smith was a prophet?" Martin Harris, standing in the Kirtland Temple on a bright, winter day, pointed to one of the arched Gothic windows where the sun was streaming through it and said, "Do I see the sun shining? Just as surely as the sun is shining on us . . . I saw the plates; I saw the angel."¹¹

As a very old man, Martin went to Utah and spent the last five years of his life there in upper Cache Valley. When people in his community asked him about the plates of the Book of Mormon, he continued using physical objects like the sun to illustrate his testimony. One time he raised his hand and asked, "Do you see that hand? . . . Are your eyes playing you a trick or something? . . . Well, as sure as you see my hand so sure did I see the angel and the plates."¹² Martin Harris, like all the witnesses, was especially desirous at the end of his life to have people hear and repeat his testimony.

Now let's turn to Oliver Cowdery's life. Oliver was born in 1806 about a year after Joseph Smith. Later in his life, he said that the days he acted as scribe for Joseph were never to be forgotten. As he sat within the sound of the Prophet's voice, he could feel the Spirit of the Lord. Oliver always remembered the spirituality of that experience. The first thing he did of real significance in New York after the Church was organized was lead a mission west to Kirtland, where he and four other missionaries converted about one hundred people within a few weeks.

¹¹ Preston Nibley, comp., *The Witnesses of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 117-8.

¹² Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 116.

As with Martin Harris, those who knew Oliver may not have agreed with his testimony, but they agreed that he was of admirable character. A vigorous leader of a Shaker community gave a candid impression of Oliver coming into his community. He recorded that Oliver claimed that "he [Oliver] had been one who assisted in the translation of the golden Bible, and had seen the angel, and also had been commissioned by him [the angel] to go out and bear testimony that God would destroy this generation. . . . [We] gave liberty for him to bear his testimony in our meetings. . . . He appeared meek and mild."¹³ That characteristic of Cowdery is reflected in other sources—he was a man of powerful witness, but he was also a man of great personal humility.

Another description of Oliver is given in a history of Seneca County written in about 1880 by P. W. Lang. After Oliver was excommunicated in Missouri, he returned to Ohio and became an attorney. And for ten years, when he was outside of the Church, he was very active in all the community circles that an attorney would have been in in those days. P. W. Lang, who apprenticed in Oliver's law office and whom Oliver tutored in law for two years, wrote this candid description of Oliver:

Mr. Cowdery was an able lawyer and a great advocate. . . . [H]e was polite, dignified, yet courteous. . . . With all his kind and friendly disposition, there was a certain degree of sadness that seemed to pervade his whole being. His association with others was marked by the great amount of information his conversation conveyed and the beauty of his musical voice. 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.¹⁵

He continued by saying, in essence, "I read law with Mr. Cowdery in Tiffin [Ohio] and was intimately acquainted with him from the time he came here until the time he left, which afforded me every opportunity to study and love his 'noble and true manhood.' "

¹³ Ibid., 55.

¹⁵ Ibid., Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 41.

So Oliver was a person respected by those inside and outside the Church wherever he lived. Later in life Oliver returned to the Church. As he came back in 1848, he stood in the Church conference in Kanesville, Iowa—Winter Quarters, or Council Bluffs, as it was called at that time—and said that Sidney Rigdon did not write the Book of Mormon. He said, "I wrote . . . the entire Book of Mormon . . . as it fell from the lips of the Prophet [Joseph Smith]." He said, "I beheld with my eyes, and handled with my hands, the gold plates from which it was translated. I also beheld the Interpreters."¹⁶

Now let's turn to David Whitmer's story. David Whitmer was born about a year before Joseph Smith, at the beginning of 1805. After becoming a witness, David joined with his family in selling their rather well-to-do farm holdings in Seneca County, New York. They moved for a short time to Ohio and then moved quickly to Jackson County, Missouri, a tragic experience for them and about three thousand other Latter-day Saints because they were forced out of Jackson County at gunpoint. David was a strong personality and was very visible in helping to defend and protect the Mormon community. He was appointed president of the Church in Missouri, for Joseph Smith had a great deal of confidence in him. But in 1838 David exerted his will, disagreed with Joseph Smith, and was excommunicated.

David stayed in Richmond, Missouri, for fifty years and became the most interviewed of all eleven witnesses of the Book of Mormon because he lived longer than any of them. David summed up the testimonies of all the witnesses, and he had an irreproachably honest character. He parlayed an investment of a team and a wagon into a whole livery business and became a prominent business man, providing transportation and rentals and even funeral transportation in Richmond, Missouri.

One proof that David was a distinguished and respected individual was that he appeared in an 1877 historical atlas of Ray County, Missouri, as one of twenty prominent members of the community. (From one point of view, those pictured

¹⁶ Ibid., Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 61.

had to be prominent; from another point of view, they probably had to have enough money to pay for the picture. David is pictured on a page of the atlas with his nephew David P. Whitmer underneath him. David P. Whitmer was the son of Jacob, one of the Eight Witnesses of the Book of Mormon, and he was named after his uncle David. To the left of David Whitmer, on the top line, is Alexander Donaphen, who was a lawyer for Joseph Smith at one time, and who actually saved Joseph's life by refusing to execute an order of the court-martial. So David's reputation in the community was appreciably strong. Everybody respected him. Time and again, Mormons and non-Mormons came into the community and interviewed David, and he insisted that he had seen the plates and the angel.

Let me give the flavor of two interviews with David Whitmer. First, Orson Pratt, who had known David as a fellow leader of the Church before David left the Church, visited David as an old man. Pratt was accompanied by Joseph F. Smith, who was then a young Apostle, but who later became president of the Church from about 1900 to 1918. As these two men interviewed David, Joseph F. Smith wrote down what David said:

We not only saw the plates of the Book of Mormon but also the brass plates, the plates of the Book of Ether, the plates containing the records of the wickedness and secret combinations of the people of the world. . . . The fact is, it was just as though Joseph, Oliver and I were sitting just here on a log, when we were overshadowed by a light. It was not like the light of the sun . . . but more glorious and beautiful. It extended away round us. . . . [We saw] many records or plates . . . besides the plates of the Book of Mormon, also the Sword of Laban, the Directors . . . and the Interpreters. I saw them just as plain as I see this bed (striking the bed beside him with his hand), and I heard the voice of the Lord, as distinctly as I ever heard anything in my life, declaring that the records of the plates of the Book of Mormon were translated by the gift and power of God.¹⁷

My favorite interview of David was done by James Henry Moyle, whose son, Henry D. Moyle, served as one of President McKay's counselors. On his way back to Utah after he completed his law school training in Michigan, James Henry Moyle

¹⁷Nibley, comp., *Witnesses of the Book of Mormon*, 68.

stopped in Richmond to see David Whitmer. Henry was a young man, and he wanted to be certain that David had been telling the truth. He wanted to cross-examine him and see what kind of a man he was.

That Moyle was a man of great quality is indicated by Gordon B. Hinckley's biography of Moyle, written while Hinckley lived in the Cottonwood area in Salt Lake City and knew Moyle. Moyle became one of the very first Latter-day Saints to succeed in national politics. Although his candidacy for senator and governor was unsuccessful in Utah, his party rewarded him with the post of undersecretary of the treasury in the cabinet in Washington, D.C. Later he was appointed as collector of customs in New York City for eight years. He was a very close friend of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Furthermore, Moyle was a singularly candid, intelligent, and honest man all his life.

Later, when Moyle talked about the David Whitmer interview in an address given in Salt Lake City, he said he wondered if it was possible that David Whitmer might have been deceived. Moyle stated:

I induced him to relate to me, under such cross-examination as I was able to interpose, every detail of what took place. He described minutely the spot in the woods, the large log that separated him from the angel, and that he saw the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated. . . . I asked him if there was any possibility for him to have been deceived; and that it was all a mistake, but he said, "No." I asked him, then, why he had left the Church. [He answered by talking about the policies that differentiated him from Joseph Smith.] He said he knew Joseph Smith was a prophet of God, that through him had been restored the gospel of Jesus Christ in these latter days. To me this was a wonderful testimony.¹⁸

Did the Eight Witnesses also maintain their testimony to the end? Yes! David Whitmer quoted both the Three and the Eight Witnesses in a pamphlet published a year before his death in 1887. In this pamphlet, addressed to all believers in Christ, David tried to put his message and his own feelings about the Book of Mormon in such a way that they would be available to everybody. Toward the beginning of the

¹⁸ Gordon B. Hinckley, *James Henry Moyle: The Story of a Distinguished American and an Honored Churchman* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1951), 367.

pamphlet, Whitmer said the following in answer to articles in two encyclopedias that had reported him as having denied his testimony:

I will say once more to all mankind, that I have never at any time denied that testimony or any part thereof. 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.*"¹⁹ [David went on to talk about the Eight Witnesses also as having never denied their testimony.]

It is as important to believe the witnesses of the Book of Mormon as it is to believe the testimony of Peter and Paul that they had seen the resurrected Christ. In 1 Corinthians 15:15, Paul said people could set aside the Apostles' testimonies and essentially call the witnesses liars, but God's chosen witnesses were not liars. They were honest men telling the truth.

I have been in every county where the witnesses lived, read the newspapers of their time, and seen the court records, and I know they were honest men with a divine mission. When Jesus sent apostles out, he gave them instructions (Matthew 10), and he sent seventies out on missions and gave them instructions (Luke 10). In both cases, he said this to them: "He that receiveth whomever I send receiveth me; and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me" (John 13:20).

God's voice said the **Book of Mormon** was translated correctly. The eleven witnesses are God's **modern servants**, supporting, with Joseph Smith, the truth of the Book of Mormon. **This is the message of God's law of witnesses for us today.** I would appeal to everyone to read the Book of Mormon, gain a testimony of its divinity, understand its truth, and apply its principles. I also pray that we will understand the divinity of Joseph Smith's mission to restore the gospel because the Book of Mormon is a part of that great process of restoring God's kingdom in the latter days.

¹⁹ David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, Mo.: David Whitmer, 1887), 8.

inadequate grounds, usually only mentioning Oliver's recommending it for church approval. The 1835 minutes give this report: "President O. Cowdery then arose and read an instrument containing certain principles or items upon laws in general and church governments."⁴² Because he worked with the marriage document, he was probably involved with this religious bill of rights. However, more definite evidence comes from reviewing the impassioned editorials he wrote after legal protection collapsed and Mormons were brutally forced out of Jackson County in 1833. Oliver reported the tragedy to Joseph in Ohio and was assigned to restart the *Evening and Morning Star* in Kirtland because the Missouri press had been disabled by the old citizens. Section 134 spoke of protecting civil rights and drew its views from the actual experience of a victimized minority.

In the first issue of the resurrected *Star*, Oliver wrote that "three main principles in the constitution of a free government" are "the freedom of speech, the liberty of conscience and the liberty of the press."⁴³ Section 135 declares at the outset that "no government can exist in peace" without guaranteeing "the free exercise of conscience, the right and control of property and the protection of life" (D&C 135:2). On the following 4 July Oliver's editorial said the republic would last only if citizens would not idly watch "their liberties proscribed."⁴⁴ This last word refers to the state's banning activities and also appears in section 135, in a warning of the injustice of allowing a society to be "proscribed in its spiritual privileges" (D&C 135:9). In another editorial Cowdery declared that individuals must not act contrary to "the laws or Constitution," for then they would "have an equal claim upon the same for protection with all other citizens."⁴⁵ In turn, section 135 insists that all states "are bound to enact laws for the protection of all citizens in . . . their religious belief," provided "regard and reverence is shown to the laws" (D&C 135:7). These are some of the more obvious correlations between Oliver Cowdery's 1833-34 defense of Mormon rights and the 1835 declaration on government. Such matching ideas and phrases suggest that Oliver either wrote this document or at least produced a good working draft that was modified somewhat by Joseph and his counselors. Whatever the details, the Prophet adopted section 135 as his own. While in Washington and Philadelphia seeking reparations for the 1838 expulsion of thousands from Missouri, Joseph Smith changed *we* to *I* in the governmental declaration, added a short preface and conclusion, and sent the

The 1835 D&C modified this arrangement by separating and italicizing the preface, and this may have caused the Prophet to complain, as suggested by Scott Faulring.

⁴²Kirtland Council Minute Book, closing portion of the 17 August 1835 entry. *HC*, 2:247 follows the condensed report in the *Messenger and Advocate* (August 1835).

⁴³*Evening and Morning Star* 2 (December 1833): 113.

⁴⁴*Evening and Morning Star* 2 (July 1834): 174.

⁴⁵*Evening and Morning Star* 2 (January 1834): 121.

piece to an editor to promote the image of Mormons as responsible citizens.⁴⁶ Cowdery, who was a principled politician while in and out of the church, contributed to this significant document of religious rights and civic responsibilities. It was relevant when Latter-day Saints protested persecution and is timely today in stating their strong intent to support all constitutional administrations in their prophetic spread of the gospel to the world.

What was Oliver's contribution to reporting the Kirtland visions? He must have worked closely with the Prophet on the impressive account of the heavenly visitations they received together (see D&C 110). Significantly, Oliver helped on the invocation read by Joseph Smith in consecrating the Kirtland Temple (see D&C 109). A week before this event, Cowdery's diary indicates that he met with "Pre. J. Smith, Jr., S. Rigdon, my brother W. A. Cowdery and Elder W. Parrish, and assisted in writing a prayer for the dedication of the house."⁴⁷ Thus Oliver evidently joined Joseph in the hope of the dedication prayer to Jehovah: "That all the ends of the earth may know that we, thy servants, have heard thy voice, and that thou hast sent us" (D&C 109:57). One week later, Joseph Smith and his associate president saw the Lord in the midst of brilliant glory, after which Moses, Elias, and Elijah appeared to authorize the use of additional keys of presidency. With resonating tones the Savior forgave sins and accepted the temple as a sacrifice from his latter-day disciples. Joseph and Oliver literally heard his voice, a direct answer to their dedication petition. The result was section 110, the eloquent scriptural summary of these temple appearances, perhaps dictated by Joseph to scribe Warren Cowdery with the assistance of his brother Oliver. At a minimum, the second elder again gave his name as a witness to a pivotal priesthood event.⁴⁸

Influence on the Articles of Faith

Oliver Cowdery obviously influenced another vital scriptural section, the Articles of Faith, which appear appropriately as an outline of basics at the end of the Pearl of Great Price. They became modern scripture when that short book was canonized in general conferences in 1880 and 1902.⁴⁹ In addition, the Articles of Faith were singled out for public reading and approval in

⁴⁶The Prophet's adaptation of section 134 appears in Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 455–58, 685–86. It was published in southern Pennsylvania in the *Chester County Register and Examiner*, 11 February 1840.

⁴⁷Found in the 26 March 1836 entry of "Oliver Cowdery's Kirtland, Ohio 'Sketch Book,'" ed. Leonard J. Arrington, transcribed by Dean C. Jessee, *Brigham Young University Studies* 12 (summer 1972): 426.

⁴⁸See the primary text of D&C 110, in the third person and in the hand of Oliver Cowdery's brother, Warren A. Cowdery, found in 3 April 1836 entry of Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:209–10.

⁴⁹Before the affirmative vote on 10 October 1880, counselor George Q. Cannon held up the Pearl of Great Price and revised Doctrine and Covenants "to see whether the conference will vote to accept the books and their contents as from God, and binding upon us as a people and as a Church" (*Deseret News*, 11 October 1880, found in Robert J. Woodford, "The Doctrine and Covenants: A Historical Overview," in *Studies in Scripture, Volume One: The Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson

the October 1890 general conference session. In one view, this redundant action indicates “some question as to whether the vote of 1880 on the entire Pearl of Great Price meant that the Articles . . . were to be considered as revelation and church doctrine.”⁵⁰ However, in 1890 they were read and reapproved just before a motion to sustain the Manifesto, the declaration suspending the practice of plural marriage (see D&C Official Declaration—1). In that setting, President Woodruff simply recommitted the church to the principles of priesthood authority, living prophets, and continuing revelation. Right after the authorities were sustained, he explained that nonmembers needed to know Latter-day Saint beliefs and directed the congregation to read the Articles of Faith. Then Elder Franklin D. Richards, the senior apostle who first compiled the Pearl of Great Price, proposed endorsing the Articles of Faith after stating that the whole church needed this opportunity because “we have a rising generation since this was last presented to us.” After unanimous approval of the Articles of Faith, the vote on the Manifesto was taken.⁵¹ The Articles of Faith had originated when an editor asked Joseph Smith for a survey of history and doctrine, which was prepared and published in 1842 with the thirteen Articles of Faith as a close. Though the Prophet may have enlisted help in drafting the Wentworth Letter, its technical origins are less important than the Prophet’s act of placing his name after the document, thereby issuing it by his authority.⁵²

David Whittaker probed the rich background of the Articles of Faith in a valuable essay that surveyed Mormon statements of belief that were in circulation by the early 1840s. Though some of these informal creeds do not closely resemble Joseph’s Nauvoo articles, all have common denominators. In 1834 Cowdery started a new church monthly, the *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, and the first issue began with an editorial that contained nine short statements of what “we believe.”⁵³ Yet he did not intend to give all doctrines, writing that “we

[Sandy, Utah: Randall Book, 1984], 15–16). On 6 October 1902 President Joseph F. Smith displayed the current edition, explaining that revelations duplicated in the Doctrine and Covenants had been eliminated. He added, “We now present this book in its revised form—the original matter being preserved as it was before, only divided into chapters and verses—for your acceptance as a standard work of the Church” (*Conference Report* [October 1902]: 83).

⁵⁰Clark, *Story of the Pearl of Great Price*, 207.

⁵¹*Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 52 (17 November 1890): 722–23, reprinting conference minutes of 6 October 1890.

⁵²The Articles of Faith were first published in *Times and Seasons* 3 (1 March 1842): 709–10. They were in final position of the historical and doctrinal survey prepared for editor John Wentworth, which closed with “JOSEPH SMITH” and was prefaced by the Prophet’s statement: “I have written the following sketch of the rise, progress, persecution and faith of the Latter-day Saints of which I have the honor, under God, of being the founder” (706). The document is reprinted in HC, 535–41.

⁵³*Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834): 2, near the end of the opening editorial. This list of beliefs appears as an appendix at the end of this article. The third item begins by explaining that “we do not believe” in a church without revelation. It continues by affirming belief in the offices of the primitive church.

here state them briefly.⁵⁴ Whittaker emphasized this public relations pioneering of the second elder: "It is significant that the first attempt to give a listing of 'our principles' in early Mormon periodical literature was made by Oliver Cowdery."⁵⁵ Yet Whittaker recognized the primacy of Joseph Smith's 1830 revelation on fundamental teachings and priesthood organization, which appeared as an independent unit in the 1833 Book of Commandments under the heading "The Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ" (current D&C 20). It was essentially "a constitution . . . a kind of creedal statement during the first decade of the Church."⁵⁶ As previously discussed, in 1829 Cowdery had compiled Book of Mormon ordinances to aid in the beginning preaching of the gospel, but the Prophet replaced this by the fuller summary of doctrines and procedures now known as section 20. It was the earliest outline of beliefs of the restored church, and it was read in 1830 conferences, circulated widely in manuscript form, and published as the first item in the first periodical of the restored church.⁵⁷ Both Joseph and Oliver were foremost not only in receiving the Book of Mormon and priesthood visitations, but in publicly declaring their significance in salvation.

For both founding elders, revelation was the basis of the restored church, and both stressed divine contact as the source of divine authority. In 1830 the Prophet said that the coming of the Book of Mormon showed that "God doth inspire men and call them to his holy work in these last days as well as in days of old" (D&C 20:11, 1831 text).⁵⁸ When Oliver published the principles in 1834, he first declared that the Saints must have faith in the Father and Son and then moved to continuing instruction from them: "We believe that God . . . whenever he has had a people on earth, he always has revealed himself to them by the Holy Ghost, the ministering of angels, or his own voice."⁵⁹ The Prophet regularly taught that a new dispensation comes only by divine direction. He wrote Isaac Galland from Liberty Jail, "We believe that no man can administer salvation through the gospel . . . except he is authorized from God by revelation, or by being ordained by someone whom God hath sent by revelation . . .

⁵⁴Ibid. A year after Oliver printed his statement of beliefs, he answered an inquiry of Sampson Avard by sending an informal set of beliefs somewhat different from those in the *Messenger and Advocate*. This shows that neither set was designed to be comprehensive (see Oliver Cowdery to Dr. S. Avard, 22 October 1835, Oliver Cowdery letter book, Huntington Library, San Marino, California, microfilm at Brigham Young University library). The Avard list appears in the footnote of the appendix of this article.

⁵⁵David J. Whittaker, "The 'Articles of Faith' in Early Mormon Literature and Thought," in *New Views of Mormon History*, ed. Davis Bitton and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987), 67.

⁵⁶Ibid., 66.

⁵⁷ *Evening and Morning Star* 1 (June 1832), front page.

⁵⁸The phrasing follows the earliest printed copy of section 20, published as "The Mormon Creed" in the *Painesville (Ohio) Telegraph*, 19 April 1831, agreeing here with the 1833 Book of Commandments.

and I will ask, how can they be sent without a revelation, or some other visible display of the manifestation of God."⁶⁰

About a dozen summaries of Mormon beliefs were published prior to the 1842 Articles of Faith, including the 1839 letter of Joseph Smith to Isaac Galland outlining "the doctrine of the Latter Day Saints," which is interspersed six times with "we believe."⁶¹ This shows that the Prophet had repeatedly given partial and fuller articles of faith. In fact, concepts of the Prophet's 1830 "Articles and Covenants" are reflected in over half of his later thirteen Articles of Faith (see D&C 20:2–36). These 1842 Articles of Faith contain a number of Joseph Smith's distinctive words and thoughts, as shown by the 1839 Galland letter and by an earlier explanation of Mormon beliefs he submitted to a religion editor in 1833. That summary of beliefs was to inform Christian readers "what the Lord is doing and what you must do to enjoy the smiles of your Savior in these last days." The Prophet then wrote at length on further revelation, the Book of Mormon, spiritual gifts, "the first principles of the Gospel of Christ," the virtues required of believers, and the gathering of Israel.⁶² Joseph Smith formulated his 1833 presentation along the lines of his later Articles of Faith.

The format of Joseph's Nauvoo articles was visibly influenced by Orson Pratt and by Cowdery's 1834 statement of beliefs. Pratt printed an overview of restoration visions and doctrine in Scotland in 1840, adding three American printings and advertising the pamphlet in Nauvoo in the fall of 1841.⁶³ Nine of the Articles of Faith follow Pratt's sequence and some of his phrasing. However, Pratt, who followed the sequence of doctrines in Doctrine and Covenants 20:17–36 as well as openly quoted editor Cowdery on Moroni's coming, used some language from Oliver's statement of beliefs. Furthermore, the differences between Pratt and the Prophet are striking. For example, Orson explained Mormon convictions in seven pages punctuated by some fifteen statements that began with *we believe*, while Joseph Smith covered

⁵⁹*Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834): 2, reprinted in the appendix at the end of this article.

⁶⁰Joseph Smith, Jr. to Isaac Galland, 22 March 1839, found in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 421; *Times and Seasons* 1 (February 1840): 51–56.

⁶¹Smith to Galland, 22 March 1839, found in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 416–424; *Times and Seasons* 1 (February 1840): 51–56.

⁶²Joseph Smith to N. C. Saxton, 4 January 1833, found in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 270–274. Editor Saxton published a doctrinal segment the Prophet's letter in the *American Revivalist and Rochester Observer* and received a firm protest of the Prophet afterward for this partial response (see Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 275–76, 672.)

⁶³See Orson Pratt, *Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records* (Edinburgh: Ballantyne and Hughes, 1840), 24–31. Distribution in Nauvoo is shown by the advertisements near the end of the *Times and Seasons* issues of 2 August, 16 August, and 1 September 1841. For the Prophet's awareness of Pratt's pamphlet, see Richard L. Anderson, "Joseph Smith's Testimony of the First Vision," *Ensign* (April 1996): 12. Pratt's pamphlet is reprinted in *The Essential Orson Pratt*, with a foreword by David J. Whittaker (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 1–23, with Pratt's closing "sketch of the faith and doctrine of this church" on pages 18–23.

the same ground in seventeen efficient sentences that almost fit on one of Pratt's pages. In 1834 Cowdery had used a similarly concise approach in his nine principles summarizing major Mormon teachings. Cowdery began with faith in God and Christ, progressed through doctrines of revelation, church organization, and respect for freedom of worship, and closed with the commitment to accept good from any source. Joseph's 1842 Articles of Faith match this overall design, and the lists of Joseph and Oliver differ from other early Mormon surveys of belief because they feature tolerance as a Mormon tenet and close with an expression of willingness to adopt all that is of value.⁶⁴

The Articles of Faith contain all of Oliver's 1834 principles, although the Prophet, using a broader perspective, treated Latter-day Saint teachings on original sin, Christ's atonement, and the first principles of the gospel, all of which were stressed by Doctrine and Covenants 20 and by Orson Pratt.⁶⁵ Of course, Mormon elders shared common convictions and developed similar presentations because of intense interaction in classes, meetings, and publications. Yet the 1842 Articles of Faith directly or indirectly connect with Cowdery's credo in the areas of the Godhead, early church, revelation, tolerance, and receptiveness to truth. Oliver's article on primitive organization related to contact with God: "We do not believe that he ever had a church on earth without revealing himself to that church: consequently, there were apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers in the same."⁶⁶ The Prophet used parallel language (see Article of Faith 6) also reflected in other Mormon belief statements and perhaps influenced by Cowdery and certainly by Paul's list of five priesthood offices (see Ephesians 4:11). Oliver's 1834 principles also featured eras of divine communication: "We believe that God, from the beginning, revealed himself to man. . . . We believe that God . . . always has and always will reveal himself to men when they call upon him. We believe that God has revealed himself to men in this age."⁶⁷ Joseph Smith's declaration apparently follows Cowdery's, but in tighter repetitions: "We believe all that God has revealed, all that he does now reveal, and we believe that he will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the kingdom of God" (Article of Faith 9).

Oliver's emphasis on religious tolerance is unusual among early Mormon statements of belief and no doubt impacted the Prophet's more efficient statement. As victims of verbal and physical persecution, both men were passionate on the subject. With talent for legal definition,

⁶⁴See the reprinting of Cowdery's full statement of beliefs in the appendix of this article.

⁶⁵Compare Oliver's second sketch of beliefs, penned in a letter to Sampson Avard, copied in the note to the appendix at the end of this article. Cowdery adds Mormon teachings about Christ's atonement, the Bible and Book of Mormon, and the requirement of repentance and a righteous life for salvation.

⁶⁶*Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834): 2, reprinted in the appendix at the end of this article.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*

Oliver produced an involved but balanced statement of over 125 words, with the following core thought: "We believe that . . . no man, combination of men, or government of men have power or authority . . . to prevent others from enjoying their own opinions, or practicing the same, as long as they do not molest or disturb others, . . . to deprive them of their privileges as free citizens—or of worshipping God as they choose."⁶⁸ With ten percent of Cowdery's words, the Prophet clearly made the same point: "We claim the privilege of worshipping Almighty God according to the dictates of our conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may" (Article of Faith 11). Both assertions claim the right of free conscience and take responsibility to give the same right.

It is hardly a coincidence that Oliver and Joseph ended their doctrinal summaries with the pledge to adopt every moral good. Accepting anything virtuous relates to their view of revelation—that God will give more to those who seek further divine light. In the 1839 Galland letter the Prophet explained, "We believe that we have a right to embrace all and every item of truth, without limitation or without being circumscribed or prohibited by the creeds or superstitious notions of men," adding that further truth would come "by any manifestation," whereof we know that it has come from God."⁶⁹ Thus Joseph's articles and Oliver's principles were creeds that rejected closed creeds. Their final clauses differ in wording, largely because Oliver adapted Paul's terse challenge to the Thessalonians (see 1 Thessalonians 5:21), whereas the Prophet adapted Paul's itemized invitation to the Philippians (see Philippians 4:8; 1 Corinthians 13:7). But the two founding elders used different Bible verses to express the same ideal. Educated Mormons occasionally speak of Joseph's thirteenth Article of Faith in a vacuum, as though religion were creative eclecticism. Yet that approach can focus on the thirteenth article and ignore the other twelve. Joseph Smith's final article is rooted in Paul's message to become more Christlike by greater sensitivity to God and his children. The Prophet's final sentence commits believers to "anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy" (Article of Faith 13), an immense sweep that includes Joseph's repeated theme of transcending tradition through revelation. Oliver Cowdery's final sentence anticipates both concepts in article thirteen—personal and doctrinal growth: "And further, we believe in embracing good wherever it may be found; of proving all things, and holding fast that which is righteous."⁷⁰

By outlining latter-day doctrine in crisp statements of belief, Oliver Cowdery established a prototype that was modified by others and afterward polished to a scriptural level by the Prophet. Of course, articles of belief were common in other churches, but they tended to be

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Smith to Galland, 22 March 1839, found in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 420.

dressed in thick theological layers. Cowdery set the course by publishing clear principles in common language, bound together by the theme that God had spoken again to renew Biblical principles. Oliver used his revelatory experiences and his editorial opportunity to speak out with incisive conviction. He created a concise format with a central missionary message, and Joseph directly or indirectly used it for his fuller summary of the restored message in the Articles of Faith.

But, as is the case in many firsts in history, there is a substructure to Oliver's 1834 declaration of principles. Joseph Smith asked for more effective publicity on beginnings and belief. After the Book of Mormon, the first church publication was the monthly *Evening and the Morning Star*, produced by William W. Phelps at Independence, Missouri, from June 1832 to July 1833. Phelps had been an editor before he joined the church, and the first issue of the *Star* announced the goals of the new church and its new journal. In this declaration Phelps promised not only to "bring the revelations and commandments of God which have been, but to publish those that God gives now, as in days of old."⁷¹ This initial editorial might have listed Mormon beliefs but it followed a random style; it gave the general restoration message by stating the purposes of the publication, repeatedly saying that the *Star* comes to declare that God's work has begun for gathering Israel and preparing for the second coming.⁷² These millennial themes were prominent in the first seven issues, along with revelations, pieces on moral living, and news of religion and calamities. But Joseph Smith wanted a tighter focus, and from Ohio he sent a blunt request: "We wish you to render the *Star* as interesting as possible, by setting forth the rise, progress and faith of the Church, as well as the doctrine. For if you do not render it more interesting than at present, it will fall, and the Church suffer a great loss thereby."⁷³ Phelps soon enhanced the doctrinal articles and added pieces on the growth of the church. But tragedy coincided with the issue in July, when the Independence mob trashed the press and demanded that Mormons leave the county. As already indicated, Cowdery hastened to Ohio with this news, and was retained by the Prophet to edit the *Star*, which resumed publication in Kirtland in December, heavy with reports of the Missouri atrocities.

⁷⁰*Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834): 2, reprinted in the appendix at the end of this article.

⁷¹"To Man," *Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (June 1832): 6.

⁷²See *ibid.* This piece did not logically list Mormon beliefs, though it mentioned the degrees of glory and taught repentance, baptism, and duties of members.

⁷³Joseph Smith Jr. to William W. Phelps, 11 January 1833, found in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 264. Phelps was a talented writer but accustomed to the elevated style of his period, which seems part of the Prophet's reaction. Compare George A. Smith's report of the Joseph's private criticism: "Brother Phelps makes such a severe use of language as to make enemies all the time" (HC, 5:391, reporting the George A. Smith diary entry of 15 May 1843). The 1833 criticism was broader, however, asking for more effective presentation of the miraculous restoration events and the revealed doctrines.

Under Cowdery's editorship, the church newspaper ran more missionary news and letters, together with doctrinal articles from church leaders. In the fall of 1834 the name of the publication was changed, something Joseph Smith either initiated or approved. As discussed earlier, Oliver's first issue of the new *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* contained his compact list of beliefs and the first installment of "a full history of the rise of the Church of the Latter Day Saints."⁷⁴ Beginning with his Aaronic Priesthood restoration account, Cowdery continued with segments on Joseph's early religious quest and Moroni's later instruction to him about translating the Book of Mormon. Oliver's preface said the Prophet would be consulted for these articles: "Our brother J. SMITH has offered to assist us."⁷⁵ Thus with his direct input, the Prophet's earlier request to Phelps matured in Cowdery's historical installments. The year before, Joseph had asked editor Phelps to stress "the rise, progress . . . of the Church." Cowdery's series with Joseph as silent partner indicates that the Prophet wanted a record of heavenly visitations that brought about a divinely authorized church. The year before Joseph had also said that Phelps should present the "faith of the Church, as well as the doctrine."⁷⁶ Oliver conformed his continuing history to the Prophet's wishes, and the same is obviously the case for Oliver's 1834 summary of principles. The Prophet is an observable force behind Cowdery's 1834 list of beliefs.

Witnesses in Ancient and Modern Scripture

Oliver Cowdery fulfilled every dimension of his broad role as the second witness of the restored church. President Joseph Fielding Smith (1876–1972) reviewed the history of prophets and concluded: "And we would find, I am confident, if we had the perfect record, all down the ages, whenever the Lord introduced a dispensation, he did not leave one man to testify alone."⁷⁷ The visible history of dual messengers is impressive enough: Moses and Aaron, the overlapping ministries of Isaiah and Micah and of Jeremiah and Ezekiel (leaving out Lehi and others of that generation), the Savior and John the Baptist, the leading apostles at the transfiguration, and all the apostles in the resurrection. Thus President Smith underscored a major principle at work in God's restorations throughout time: "It was necessary according to the divine law of witnesses for Joseph Smith to have a companion holding those keys. . . . So, as Oliver Cowdery states, when John the Baptist came, he and Joseph Smith received the Aaronic Priesthood under his hands; and when Peter, James and John came, he was with Joseph Smith. It was Oliver Cowdery and Joseph Smith who received the keys in the Kirtland Temple on the third of April, 1836,

⁷⁴*Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834): 13.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*

⁷⁶Smith to Phelps, 11 January 1833, found in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 264.

⁷⁷*Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith*, ed. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954) 1:205.

when Christ appeared, when Moses appeared, when Elias appeared, when Elijah appeared. And every time when the keys of a dispensation were bestowed, it was to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery—not Joseph Smith alone.”⁷⁸

Both witnesses of these visitations wrote forcefully on the necessity of direct revelation to reestablish authority and restore the full gospel of Christ. The constant vigor of their message fits their claim of personal direction of heavenly messengers. Moreover, they displayed an intense sense of responsibility that dignifies their testimonies of the miraculous founding. In his 1833 attempt to influence the Christian press, the Prophet shared his inner burden of honesty: “Therefore, I declare unto you the warning which the Lord has commanded me to declare unto this generation, remembering that the eyes of my maker are upon me and that to him I am accountable for every word I say.”⁷⁹ The second elder said the same in editorials reviewing the seriousness of his message. He served two terms as editor of the *Messenger and Advocate* and in retrospect asked, “How can I meet a fellow-being before the throne of that God who has framed the heavens and the earth, and there, if not till then, learn that through my influence or persuasion he had been led into error and was doomed to suffer the wrath of the same?”⁸⁰ Cowdery expressed constant awareness of eternal trust: “A man is responsible to God for all he writes.”⁸¹ This editor-witness continued to magnify the calling given on the day of church organization to be “the first preacher of this church, unto the church, and before the world” (D&C 21:12). He was in the unique position of accompanying Joseph Smith on four occasions when angels appeared and gave ordinations or commands for building the latter-day kingdom of God. Both men made many comments about the heavenly appearances that brought about church organization in 1830, and this article has stressed how Oliver Cowdery joined Joseph Smith in formal testimonies of these manifestations and contributed to the scriptural doctrinal statements of the restored gospel. Undergirding the restored doctrines is the authority of the message. In the beginning of the nineteenth century there was religious chaos, and God and Christ spoke to a youthful prophet and sent angels of glory to create a new dispensation. Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery gave straightforward assurances of seeing, hearing, and receiving direction from heavenly beings. Their joint convictions of these realities are woven into modern scripture.

⁷⁸Ibid., 211. *Dispensation* is used here in the narrow sense of delegation of particular authorization, generally to one prophet, as in the revelation quoted (see D&C 110:12–16; 128:21). *Dispensation* is also used more broadly as the full rights of presidency over Christ’s church in a time period, applied to the latter days (see D&C 27:12–13; 128:18).

⁷⁹Smith to Saxton, 4 January 1833, found in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 274.

⁸⁰Oliver Cowdery, “Address,” *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (May 1835): 120.

⁸¹Oliver Cowdery, “Valedictory,” *Messenger and Advocate* 3 (August 1837): 547.

Appendix: Oliver Cowdery's 1834 Statement of "Our Principles"⁸²

That our principles may be fully known, we here state them briefly:

We believe in God, and his Son Jesus Christ.

We believe that God, from the beginning, revealed himself to man, and that whenever he has had a people on earth, he always has revealed himself to them by the Holy Ghost, the ministering of angels or his own voice.

We do not believe that he ever had a church on earth without revealing himself to that church: consequently, there were apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers in the same.

We believe that God is the same in all ages and that it requires the same holiness, purity and religion to save a man *now* as it did anciently; and that, as HE is no respecter of persons, always has and always will reveal himself to men when they call upon him.

We believe that God has revealed himself to men in this age, and commenced to raise up a church preparatory to his second advent, when he will come in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

We believe that the popular religious theories of the day are incorrect; that they are without parallel in the revelations of God, as sanctioned by him; and that however faithfully they may be adhered to, or however zealously and warmly they may be defended, they will never stand the strict scrutiny of the word of life.

We believe that all men are born free and equal; that no man, combination of men or government of men, have power or authority to compel or force others to embrace any system of religion or religious creed, or to use force or violence to prevent others from enjoying their own opinions or practicing the same, so long as they do not molest or disturb others in theirs in a manner to deprive them of their privileges as free citizens—or of worshipping God as they choose, and that any attempt to the contrary is an assumption unwarrantable in the revelations of heaven, and strikes at the root of civil liberty, and is a subversion of all equitable principles between man and man.

We believe that God has set his hand the second time to recover the remnant of his people, Israel; and that the time is near when he will bring them from the four winds with songs of everlasting joy, and reinstate them upon their own lands, which he gave their fathers by covenant.

And further, we believe in embracing good wherever it may be found; of proving all things, and holding fast that which is righteous.⁸³

⁸² *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, 1 (October 1834): 2

⁸³Cowdery's punctuation and spelling are conservatively modernized; he combined the first four paragraphs here into a single paragraph. Compare his more concise profile of Latter-day Saint beliefs in writing to Sampson Avarad on 22 October 1835: "We believe, in short, in God and in the Savior Jesus Christ. We believe that all men must repent (if they are saved) for all have sinned, and that salvation is free for all. We believe that when we please God he will manifest the same to us by his Spirit, the ministering of angels, or his own voice. We believe if we endure faithful to the end we shall be saved. We believe in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and the Book of Mormon. We believe that God never had a church on earth without manifesting his will to that church, and we believe that the salvation of men was never left in that vague way that we must grope our way through this life upon uncertainties and doubts. We know that we are built upon the Rock, the word of truth, and that God has called upon his creatures in the last days preparatory to the time when he will come in the clouds of heaven" (Cowdery to Avarad, 22 October 1835, Oliver Cowdery letter book, Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif., microfilm in Brigham Young University library).