

The Cowdery Controversies  
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It's really an honor to speak at the FAIR conference and I'd like to talk a little bit about a person that I have a great deal of affection for and that's Oliver Cowdery. I would like to discuss some of the controversies surrounding Oliver Cowdery. The first one that comes up is something that happened before Oliver was even born. It is known as the "Wood Scrape" and this happened in Middletown, Vermont in 1802. It was a group of people who broke away from the Congregational Church, started their own group, started using divining rods to prophesize to search for treasure, to search for lost articles.

And the main participants were the Wood family of Middletown, Vermont and a man by the name of Justus Winchell. They predicted that there would be an earthquake in January of 1802 and there was quite a bit of hubbub about this in the community, quite a bit of alarm. The local militia was called out, and when the earthquake did not take place the group was disgraced and Winchell was warned out of the community and the Wood family who had been prominent prior to that, left and went to New York.

A 19th century historian by the name of Barnes Frisbie wrote about this Wood Scrape and he believed it was the origin of Mormonism. Now the Cowdery family lived at that time in Wells, Vermont, which is the neighboring township next to Middletown. Frisbie got a report that this Winchell had stayed at a Cowdery home before the Wood Scrape. And he writes "I have been told that Joe Smith's father resided in Poultney" that's another neighboring community "at the time of the Wood movement and that he was in it, and one of the leading rods-men. Of this I cannot speak positively, for the want of satisfactory evidence." At least he admits it. "That he was a rods-man under the tuition of this counterfeiter [Winchell] after he went to Palmyra has been proven, to my satisfaction."

I have before said that Oliver Cowdery's father was in the "Wood Scrape" he really didn't say that he just said that Winchell stayed at the Cowdery home. "Cowdery lived in Wells afterwards in Middletown and then went to Palmyra and there we find these men with the counterfeiter Winchell searching for money over the hills and mountains with the hazel rod, and their sons Joe and Oliver, as soon as they were old enough, were in the same business, and continued in it until they brought out the "vilest scheme that ever cursed the country" Mormonism. So the attempt is to link Joseph Smith Senior with William Cowdery, Oliver Cowdery's father in some kind of a movement that later produced the Church.

It's really based on hearsay evidence as you can tell, of course this was the trend with 19th century historians generally. But the Smiths at that time were in Eastern Vermont and Lucy Mack Smith documents their history pretty well and she never mentions them going over to Western Vermont over to the Middletown area. Michael Quinn's speculated that they went over their just briefly and Joseph Smith Senior got involved in a Wood Scrape and then they went back to Eastern Vermont. There is a Joseph Smith listed in the 1800 Census for Poultney, Vermont, but I found that there was also a Joseph Smith in all

of the tax records throughout the 1790s so I think there was good evidence that that Joseph Smith was a long time resident in the area and we don't have any evidence that the Smith family moved over there.

Also the Woods and Winchell left the town in disgrace and William Cowdery who lived in Wells at the time, moved right into Middleton in 1809 and then went temporarily to New York and when he came back he moved again to Middleton. He married his second wife there after his first wife died in the Congregational Church in Middleton and every bit of evidence we can find from contemporary evidence from Middleton indicates that he was a respected citizen and that probably wouldn't be true if we had been involved in the Wood Scrape.

Another thing that frequently comes up is the Ethan Smith connection. Ethan Smith was author of "View of the Hebrews" it's first edition was published in 1823, second edition in 1825 and he at that time was a Minister in Poultney, Vermont where the Cowdery family was living at the time. Let me give you an example of speculation on Ethan Smith and Oliver Cowdery.

“Since Pastor Smith wrote his book to convince his fellow Americans of the religious importance of his ideas about the American Indians we can speculate that he also used his to pulpit to expand on him. In the congregation Oliver Cowdery might thus have heard and been deeply impressed and there was a reasonable period of time in which Oliver Cowdery could have supplied Joseph with a copy of "View of the Hebrews." Though later Joseph claimed that he did not meet Oliver until the Spring of 1829 he might have said that to preclude any appearance of collusion. It's also possible to some other individuals who are involved in the collaboration and that Oliver worked with them first and not directly with Joseph until later.”

Again this is just pure speculation. I think it comes up because in 1818 Oliver's stepmother had her three daughters baptized in the Congregational Church in Poultney and Ethan Smith was the minister of that church but he didn't become minister until 1821. And when I searched through records in Poultney I couldn't find any mention of the Cowdery's in the church records for the time that Ethan Smith was minister. So what it boils down to is we can't prove the negative, we can't prove that Oliver didn't know Ethan Smith that he wasn't aware of View of the Hebrews or anything like that but we can say that we don't have any evidence of an association between the two.

And this idea of Oliver Cowdery getting involved in the early origins of Mormonism long before he taught school in Manchester, it comes in another theory as well. There is a book called "Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon?: The Spalding Enigma" the authors are Cowdery, Davis and Vanick. And they speculate that Oliver went to New York in the early 1820s, around 1822 made contact with the Smith family and eventually got Sidney Rigdon involved in using the Spalding manuscript to produce the Book of Mormon.

And they have him over there based on some reports after the Book of Mormon was published, there were a couple of newspapers in Ohio that said, we remember this Oliver

Cowdery when he was printer in Canada and Western New York about 7 or 8 years ago and that was published I think in 1831. Based on that report they theorized that Olive was actually in New York around 1822. And another person Ersamus Turner mentions Oliver being with the Smiths and he didn't exactly specify the time period but his authors conclude that it was before Alvin Smith's death. They just put one thing together after another and also work William Morgan into the picture. William Morgan was a Mason who became disaffected and threatened to publish some Masonic secrets and was apparently kidnapped and killed. His body was never found.

And they also theorize that Oliver became a scribe to William Morgan. As you may know William Morgan's widow later became a plural wife to Joseph Smith, so there is a very interesting connection there later on. But I believe this theory is built on false assumptions and I really don't think there is good evidence for placing Oliver in New York that early. His sister Lucy Cowdery Young she married Phineas Young, Brigham Young's brother. She wrote that he didn't go to New York until he was 20-years-old. He would have turned 20 in October of 1826. So it seems like 1827 based on her account 1827 would be a reasonable time to place him in New York.

The very contemporary record of Oliver Cowdery in New York is Lyons Newspaper in the fall of 1827. Now Lyons is just East of Palmyra, maybe 13 miles or something like that. But Oliver Cowdery and his father William are both listed in the lost-letters at the Lyons post office in 1827.

And next to them is the name of Solomon Chamberlin which is really an interesting coincidence because in 1829 Chamberlin obtained some proofs of the Book of Mormon before it was even published and he went out preaching using those proofs. But this is the first time that we can definitely place Oliver in New York.

Then we also know, this is a court record, from a grocer Lyons trying to collect on a debt from Oliver and his brother Lyman and the court record makes it clear that they signed the note in August of 1828. So it seems like Lyons is the first place that Oliver moved to when he went to New York. His brother Warren had lived in New York since about 1816 and he left some records or he mentions several members of the family being with him but Oliver has never mentioned in those records.

Another claim that is often made is that Oliver denied his testimony. Two of the really prominent publications, one was called "A Confession of Oliver Overstreet" and this Oliver Overstreet claimed that he had been bribed to impersonate Oliver Cowdery in a return to the church. Now that's a fairly easy one to refute because of when Oliver returned in and bore his testimony at Council Bluffs, Iowa, there were many members of the congregation who had known him from years before.

Another publication was called "Defence in a Rehearsal of My Grounds for Separating Myself from the Latter-Day Saints" and in this publication Oliver supposedly admits that when Moroni appeared he later realized that Sidney Rigdon sounded a lot like Moroni. And Richard Anderson has done a very good job of analyzing that document and I noted

it in my bibliography, it's from the Ensign April 1987, and he goes over it point-by-point showing why that document should be considered a forgery. Jerald and Sandra Tanner note on their website they claimed that they knew that both of these documents were forgeries by 1967. So I don't think we need to take either of those seriously and modern scholars don't.

One of the more interesting controversies has to do with plural marriage. This is an entry from Wilford Woodruff's Journal in 1857. "President Young stayed 3 hours in compiling his history. He remarked that the revelation upon a plurality of wives that was given to Joseph Smith. He revealed it to Oliver Cowdery alone upon the solemn pledge that he would not reveal it or act upon it, but he did act upon it in a secret manner and that was the cause of his overthrow."

Here's another statement from Brigham Young, 1872. "While Joseph and Oliver were translating" this doesn't come from – this is a person by name of Charles Walker making notes of a Brigham Young speech. He said that "While Joseph and Oliver were translating the Book of Mormon they had a revelation that the order of Patriarchal Marriage and the Sealing was right. Oliver said to Joseph, why don't we go into the Order of Polygamy, and practice it as the ancients did? We know it is true, then why delay?' Joseph's reply was 'I know that we know it is true, and from God, but the time has not yet come.' This did not seem to suit Oliver, who expressed a determination to go into the order of Plural Marriage anyhow, although he was ignorant of the order and pattern and the results. Joseph said, 'Oliver if you go into this thing it is not with my faith or consent.' Disregarding the counsel of Joseph, Oliver Cowdery took to wife Miss Annie Lyman cousin to George A. Smith. From that time he went into darkness and lost the spirit. Annie Lyman is still alive, a witness to these things." That was 1872. As far as I know we don't have any statement from Annie Lyman.

Richard Anderson and Scott Faulring and Greg Smith who is here and he has also researched this all believe that Oliver did practice plural marriage in Kirtland in the 1830s. And Richard and Scott believed that it happened between August 1833 and May of 1834. Now the problem with Brigham Young saying that from "that time he went into darkness and lost the spirit" that just doesn't fit at all because if he practiced it in 1833 or 1834, in December of 1834 he was ordained assistant President of priesthood. And in April of 1836 he saw the Savior with Joseph Smith. So it makes you wonder how accurate Brigham Young is when he makes that claim. Todd Compton believes that Joseph Smith's first plural marriage to Fanny Alger took place about the same time. But Anderson and Faulring believe that Oliver was actually the first to practice plural marriage and then it was before the Fanny Alger marriage.

So there is some really interesting things going on here. I am not quite sure what to think about this. Benjamin Johnson was in Kirtland at the time as a young man. I believe he was 15-years-old in 1833 and he wrote a letter in 1903 talking about plural marriage in Kirtland and he said "...and then there was some trouble with Oliver Cowdery, and whisper said it was relating to a girl then living in his family. Without doubt in my mind Fanny Alger was at Kirtland the Prophet's first plural wife in which by right of his calling

he was justified to the Lord. Well Oliver, J. Carter and W. Parrish or others were not justified of the Lord either in their criticisms upon the doings of the Prophet, or in their becoming a "law unto themselves," through which they lost the light of their calling and were left in darkness." And he is echoing Brigham Young's idea that that was the cause of Oliver's downfall but it really doesn't fit in the record very well.

Then there is a letter that Oliver wrote in 1846. It was to Daniel and Phoebe Jackson, Phoebe Jackson was Oliver's sister. July 24th, 1846 this is before Oliver came back into the church. He doesn't actually mention plural marriage but he gives some pretty strong hints. They had apparently written a letter to him talking about certain people practicing plural marriage in Nauvoo and this is how Oliver responded. "Now, brother Daniel and sister Pheobe, what will you do? Has sister Pheobe written us the truth? and if so, will you venture with your little ones into the toils and fatigues of a long journey and that for the sake of finding a resting place, when you know of miseries of such magnitude as have, as will, and as must rend asunder the tenderest and holiest ties of domestic life? I can hardly think it possible that you have written us the truth, that though there may be individuals who are guilty of the iniquities spoken of – yet no such practice can be preached or adhered to as a public doctrine. Such may do for the followers of Muhammad; it may have been done some thousands of years ago; but no people professing to be governed by the pure and holy principles of the Lord Jesus, can hold up their heads before the world at this distance of time and be guilty of such folly, such, wrong, such abomination. It will blast, like a mildew, their fairest prospects, and lay the ax at the root of their future happiness."

Pretty strong statement against plural marriage. So I am really undecided at this time if Oliver practiced plural marriage and certainly the statements from Brigham and Benjamin Johnson indicate that and several others like Joseph F. Smith also made that claim, apparently based on Brigham Young's comments. But Oliver's comments indicate that he didn't. So it's a very interesting one.

So this is directly related to the next controversy did Oliver accuse Joseph of adultery?

This is a letter that Oliver wrote to Joseph in January of 1838. "I learn from Kirtland, by the last letters, that you have publicly said, that when you were here I confessed to you that I had willfully lied about you. This compels me to ask you to correct that statement and give me an explanation until which, you and myself are two."

On a very same day Oliver Cowdery wrote a letter to Warren Cowdery, his older brother, and they're talking about Joseph Smith. He said "when he was here we had some conversations in which, in every instance, I did not fail to affirm that what I had said was strictly true, a dirty nasty, filthy affair of his and Fanny Alger's was talked over in which I strictly declared that I had never deviated from the truth of the matter and as I supposed was admitted by himself. At any rate just before leaving, he wanted to drop every past thing, in which had been a difficulty or difference. He called witnesses to the fact, gave me his hand in their presence, and I might have supposed of an honest man, calculated to say nothing of former matters."

“Never believe that Oliver will disgrace the gray hairs of his father or the high sense of honor in the bosom of his brothers, so much as to acknowledge to Joseph Smith, Jr. that he has lied about him. There is something to damning in the thought. My former conduct towards him and that family, when they were poor, and hated, in giving the last cent of my honest earnings to save him from being turned into the streets, is so manifest in the memory of those who knew me at the time, and my course pursued in defending him before all men with my ability and talent, since speak sufficiently in my own heart and proclaim the honest integrity dwelling there too loudly to overlook unnoticed what is passed.”

Oliver's reaction to Joseph's marriage to Fanny Alger certainly indicates to me that he wasn't aware that it was a plural marriage. That's another possible reason for concluding that he didn't practice plural marriage himself. I suppose you can argue that he was angry that his attempt to practice plural marriage was not approved and I think that is the argument is given.

By the way Todd Compton he wrote the book called "In Sacred Loneliness" about Joseph Smith's plural marriages. He believes that Oliver Cowdery did not practice plural marriage at that time or at any time.

Another claim that is made is that Oliver renounced the church and joined them Methodists Church. And there was a man by the name of Charles Keen who lived in Tiffin, Ohio where Oliver went after he was excommunicated from the church. He lived there in the 1840s. And this claim is basically traced to him. A statement he made in 1885. He says, “Mr. Cowdery opened a law office in Tiffin, and soon effected a partnership with Joel Wilson. In a few years Mr. Cowdery expressed a desire to associate himself with a Methodist Protestant church of this city. Reverend John Souder and myself were appointed a committee to wait on Mr. Cowdery and confer with him respecting his connection with Mormonism and the Book of Mormon. We inquired of him if he had any objection to making a public recantation of Mormonism. He replied that he had objections; that in the first place it could do no good; that he had known several to do so, and they always regretted it; and in the second place it would have a tendency to draw public attention, invite criticism and bring him into contempt. But he said, nevertheless, if the Methodists church require it, I will submit to it. We did not demand it, but submitted his name to the church and he was admitted a member thereof. At that time he arose and addressed the audience present, admitted his error and implored forgiveness, and said he was sorry and ashamed of his connection with Mormonism. He continued his membership while he resided in Tiffin and became superintendent of the Sabbath-school, and led an exemplary life while he resided with us.”

This statement was made 40 years after the fact and it's too bad that we don't have a contemporary record. It would be very interesting to know exactly what Oliver said.

Here is another statement by a woman named Adeline Fuller Bernard who apparently lived in the Cowdery home during the 1840s. She said, "I have often heard Mr. Cowdery

say that Mormonism was the work of Devil" and she made that statement in 1881. So you really have two statements indicating that Oliver made negative comments about the church and I think it's possible that he did. In 1838 when he was excommunicated he felt first of all that he had been unjustly cut off from the church and then his life and the lives of his family were threatened and all of his belongings were thrown out into the street and he left along with the Whitmers under very regrettable conditions. And in some of his letters he refers to the High Council who excommunicated him pretty harshly. And I think it's entirely possible that he could have been talking about that, but we really don't know for sure. It's interesting to contrast these statements with the statements of two other residents of Tiffin, William Gibson and William Lang and they were both there at the same time that Oliver became associated with the Methodists and he was associated with the Methodists there was no question about that.

Gibson said, "I think it is absolutely certain that Mr. Cowdery, after his separation from the Mormons, never conversed on the subject with his most intimate friends and never by word or act, disclosed anything relating to the conception, development or progress of the 'Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.'"

And Lang makes a very similar statement. Now as to whether Cowdery ever "openly denounced Mormonism, "let me say this to you: No man ever knew better than he how to keep one's own counsel. He would never allow any man to drag him into a conversation on the subject. He suffered a great deal of abuse here because it was association with Mormonism on that account."

So it's interesting, it's a little difficult to believe that all of the remaining public statement about the church and that Lang and Gibson didn't hear about it. Unfortunately we don't have any contemporary records to check for that time period. And there is the story of Oliver bearing his testimony in a courtroom at a trial where he was one of the attorneys. Brigham Young said "a gentleman in Michigan said to him, when he was pleading law, 'Mr. Cowdery, I see your name attached to the Book of Mormon; if you believe it to be true, why are you in Michigan?' Do you believe this book? 'No sir,' replied Oliver Cowdery. But your name is attached to it, the man said and Oliver Cowdery replied, 'There is my name attached to that book, and what I have there said, I said, and what I saw, I know that I saw, and belief has nothing to do with it, for knowledge has swallowed up the belief that I had in the work, since I know that it is true.' He gave this testimony when he was pleading law in Michigan." And Brigham Young made a statement in 1855, 5 years after Oliver died.

Then there was a man by the name of Charles Nielsen who was on a mission in the Midwest and recorded that he talked to a gentleman by the name of Barrington who was present in the courtroom when Oliver voiced his testimony. And this is discussed, I think quite well, in early Mormon documents of Volume II starts on page 467 and Vogel gives Brigham Young statement one by George Q. Cannon and then he gives several statements from Nielsen and another one Seymour Began.

But when you get in and start reading all of these accounts especially from Nielsen there are quite a number of inconsistencies. Sometimes Michigan is named as the state or this took place, sometimes it's Ohio. Illinois is also mentioned and several of the dates and different details just don't match up very well. My inclination, I believe Vogel is right when he says this claim rests on less than satisfactory grounds.

Certainly it is possible this happened, but we can't tie it down to any specific time or place. So until something else comes up I am not inclined to use this. For example, I am talking about all Oliver Cowdery at Education Week and relating some inspirational experiences and I am not inclined to use this one because I don't think there is enough primary evidence for it.

Was Oliver stable?

Now this is a claim that Dan Vogel makes. I will read his comment. "Cowdery was far from being a dispassionate teacher, lawyer described here, and at least during this early period of his life he was known to be unstable and given to obsessive and morbid thoughts. Also, like Harris and Whitmer, he had a history of visions prior to June of 1829. Considering his state of mind and visionary predisposition, his obsessive thoughts may have carried him to the point of delusion; at least, this possibility must be taken into consideration when assessing his role as one of the witnesses."

Was he unstable? I think it depends partly on how you define your terms. But Vogel takes a naturalistic approach and defines Oliver's religious feelings as obsessive and unrealistic. I don't think we would define them that way at all but I believe the best way to determine if he was unstable is to go look at the statements of people who knew him. And the record is really overwhelmingly positive in Oliver's favor.

Let me give you a few examples here. This is from Ohio. "Oliver led an exemplary life while he resided with us." Here's another one. "Cowdery was an able lawyer, and agreeable, irreproachable gentleman"; "He was an able lawyer, a fine orator, and led a blameless life, while residing in this city. His life was as pure and undefiled as that of the best of men. He was an able lawyer, a great advocate. His manners were easy and gentlemanly; he was polite, dignified, yet courteous. His addresses to the court and jury were characterized by a high order of oratory with brilliant and forensic force. He was modest and reserved, never spoke ill of anyone, never complained."

"Mr. C earned himself an enviable distinction at the bar of this place and of this judicial circuit, as a sound and able lawyer, as a citizen none could have been more esteemed. His honesty, integrity, and industry were worthy the imitation of all." These are all non members making these statements generally people who knew him when he practiced law.

The Wisconsin Argus, described Oliver as "a man of sterling integrity, sound and vigorous intellect, and every way worthy, honest and capable. When he died in 1850, the local circuit court and bar honored him with a resolution: "In the death of our friend and



brother, Oliver Cowdery, his profession has lost an accomplished member and the community a reliable and worthy citizen. Really from every indication you know the people talked about Oliver in Vermont, in New York and in Ohio and Wisconsin gave reports that are quite the opposite of unstable.

I would like to conclude just by reading a couple of things. This is from his friend William Lang. He said, "I often expressed to my objection to the frequent repetition of 'And it to pass' to Mr. Cowdery and said that a true scholar ought to have avoided that which only provoked a smile from Cowdery. Joseph Smith was killed while Cowdery lived here. I will remember the effect upon his countenance when he read the news in my presence. He immediately took the paper over home to read to his wife. On his return to the office we had a long conversation on the subject and I was surprised to hear him speak with so much kindness of a man that had wronged him as Smith did."

This is a letter that Oliver wrote to his friend and brother-in-law Phineas Young which I think gives a fine conclusion. "I have cherished a hope, and that one of my fondest, that I might leave such a character, as those who might believe in my testimony, after I should be called hence, might do so, not only for the sake of the truth, but might not blush for the private character of the man who bore that testimony. I have been sensitive on this subject, I admit; but I ought to be so – you would be, under the circumstances, had you stood in the presence of John, with our departed Brother Joseph, to receive the Lesser Priesthood – and in the presence of Peter, to receive the Greater, and looked down through time, and witnessed the effects these two must produce – you would feel what you have never felt, were wicked men conspiring to lessen the effects of your testimony on man, after you should have gone to your long sought rest."

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