

Book of Mormon Witnesses, Part 2: Oliver Cowdery

In 1841 the *Times and Seasons* (an early LDS publication) printed a poem by J.H. Johnson, a part of which reads:

“The wise shall understand.” Daniel.
Amazed with wonder! I look round
To see most people of our day,
Reject the glorious gospel sound,
Because the simple turn away.
Or does it prove there is no time,
Because some watches will not go?
But does it prove there is no crime
Because not punished here below?
...Or prove that Christ was not the Lord
Because that Peter cursed and swore?
Or Book of Mormon not his word
Because denied, by Oliver?¹

According to some anti-Mormons, this poem proves that early Saints believed Cowdery had denied his testimony of the Book of Mormon.

What did Johnson mean – the “Book of Mormon... denied by Oliver”? Many have claimed that Peter “denied” Christ, wherein actually Peter did not deny Christ’s divinity, but denied being linked with Jesus at the high priest’s house. Likewise, Johnson, employing poetic license may have used “denied” in a broader sense of setting aside or failing to promote the Book of Mormon rather than the narrower analytical sense of renouncing the Book of Mormon.²

Even if, however, one assumes that Johnson *believed* that Oliver renounced the Book of Mormon, he was not privy to such first hand information,³ and at worst was perpetuating an unsubstantiated rumor. As noted by Anderson, “It does not matter historically if an irresponsible rumor can be proved to be contemporary – it is still rumor without direct evidence to support it.”⁴

Some detractors claim that Oliver virtually denied his testimony because he associated himself with a Methodist Church following his excommunication. But as Richard L. Anderson has observed:

Since faith in Jesus Christ was the foundation of his religion, he logically affiliated himself with a Christian congregation for a time, the Methodist Protestant Church at Tiffin, Ohio. There is no more inconsistency in this than Paul’s worshipping in the Jewish synagogue, or Joseph Smith’s becoming a Mason in order to stem prejudice. A late recollection of Oliver’s Methodist affiliation alleged that he was willing to renounce Mormonism, but what this meant to him is much too vague to imply a denial of his testimony—at his excommunication from the Church he had resigned from membership while strongly suggesting that he did not disbelieve basic doctrines. Thomas Gregg asked Cowdery’s

colleague in the law, William Lang, whether the former Mormon leader had “openly denounced Mormonism.” The answer was that he kept this subject entirely to himself: “He would never allow any man to drag him into a conversation on the subject.”⁵

There is a wealth of evidence, however, which demonstrates that Oliver *never* denied his testimony. For example, there is evidence that after leaving the Church and practicing law, Cowdery’s integrity was once challenged in court because of his Book of Mormon testimony.

The opposing counsel thought he would say something that would overwhelm Oliver Cowdery, and in reply to him in his argument he alluded to him as the man that had testified and had written that he had beheld an angel of God, and that angel had shown unto him the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated. He supposed, of course, that it would cover him with confusion, because Oliver Cowdery then made no profession of being a “Mormon,” or a Latter-day Saint; but instead of being affected by it in this manner, he arose in the court, and in his reply stated that, whatever his faults and weaknesses might be, the testimony which he had written, and which he had given to the world, was literally true.⁶

Oliver Cowdery—at this time an excommunicated from the LDS Church—testified to all those present that the Book of Mormon was true. Eventually Oliver left his law practice and journeyed to Kaneshville, Iowa, with his wife and daughter and finally reunited with the Church in 1848. Before he was baptized he bore his testimony to the congregation that had gathered for a conference.

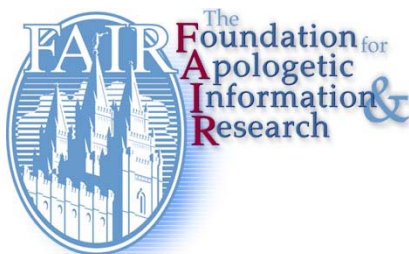
I wrote, with my own pen, the entire *Book of Mormon* (save a few pages) as it fell from the lips of the Prophet Joseph, as he translated it by the gift and power of God, by the means of the Urim and Thummim, or as it is called by the book, Holy Interpreters. I beheld with my eyes, and handled with my hands, the gold plates from which it was transcribed. I also saw with my eyes and handled with my hands the Holy Interpreters. That book is true. ...It contains the everlasting gospel, and came forth to the children of men in fulfillment of the revelations of John, where he says he saw an angel come with the everlasting gospel to preach to every nation, kindred, tongue and people. It contains principles of salvation; and if you, my hearers, will walk by its light and obey its precepts, you will be saved with an everlasting salvation in the kingdom of God on high.⁷

Oliver rejoined the Church and prepared to journey to Utah to unite with the main body of the Latter-day Saints but he

died while living temporarily in Richmond, Missouri. Oliver Cowdery had contracted tuberculosis. His dying breaths were spent testifying of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. Lucy P. Young, his half-sister, was at his bedside and reported:

“Oliver Cowdery just before breathing his last, asked his attendants to raise him up in bed that he might talk to the family and his friends, who were present. He then told them to live according to the teachings contained in the Book of Mormon, and promised them, if they would do this, that they would meet him in heaven. He then said, ‘Lay me down and let me fall asleep.’ A few moments later he died without a struggle.”⁸

Whereas there is no reliable evidence that Oliver denied his testimony, there is abundant evidence that he maintained the truth of his testimony and the veracity of the Book of Mormon throughout the remainder of his life.



For more details on this topic see
<http://www.mormonfortress.com/cowdery1.html>

Written by Michael R. Ash for the Foundation for
Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR),
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¹ *Times and Seasons*, 2:482.

² Richard L. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1981), 153–154.

³ See Matthew Roper, “Comments on the Book of Mormon Witnesses: A Response to Jerald and Sandra Tanner,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* (Provo, Utah: FARMS) 2:2, 172.

⁴ Anderson, 154.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶ George Q. Cannon September 18, 1881 in *Journal of Discourses*, 22:254.

⁷ Andrew Jenson, *LDS Biographical Encyclopedia*, (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History Company, 1901), 1:246.

⁸ *Ibid.*