



“The Hill Cumorah” by George Anderson via history.lds.org

HOW ARE OLIVER COWDERY’S *MESSENGER AND ADVOCATE* LETTERS TO BE UNDERSTOOD AND USED?

“I made this record out of the plates of Nephi, and hid up in the hill Cumorah all the records which had been entrusted to me by the hand of the Lord, save it were these few plates which I gave unto my son Moroni.”

Mormon 6:6

THE KNOW

Oliver Cowdery is undoubtedly one of the most important figures in the early history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While the Church was headquartered in Kirtland, Ohio, Oliver served as the editor of the Church’s newspaper *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* from October 1834 to May 1835 and again from April 1836 to January 1837.¹

During his early tenure as editor of the paper, Oliver wrote a series of letters to William W. Phelps, another prominent Mormon figure, detailing the early history of Joseph Smith, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, the restoration of the gospel, and the

gathering of Israel. These letters, eight in total,² were written partly to combat anti-Mormon opposition and partly to increase the faith of Church members by publishing “a more particular or minute history of the rise and progress of the church of the Latter Day Saints [sic]; and publish, for the benefit of enquirers, and all who are disposed to learn.”³

Although the Prophet Joseph Smith began composing his personal history in 1832,⁴ this early draft remained unpublished during his lifetime, effectively making Oliver’s letters in the *Messenger and Advocate* the earliest public history of Joseph Smith, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and several other related topics.⁵

TITLE AND PUBLICATION DATE

CONTENT SUMMARY

“Dear Brother,” [Letter I] (October 1834)

Introductory remarks; Oliver’s first meeting with Joseph Smith; translating the Book of Mormon; visitation of John the Baptist

“Letter II.” (November 1834)	Discussion of apostasy and restoration; past examples of opposition to the work of God
“Letter III.” (December 1834)	Early history of Joseph Smith; the “great awakening” and “excitement” around religious topics during Joseph Smith’s youth
“Letter IV.” (February 1835)	Visitation of Moroni to Joseph Smith in 1823; description of Moroni’s physical appearance and instructions to Joseph Smith
“Letter V.” (March 1835)	Discussion on the nature and calling of angels; discussion on “the great plan of redemption”; discussion on the preaching of the gospel and the gathering of Israel
“Letter VI.” (April 1835)	Further discussion on the gathering of Israel; biblical prophecies on the restoration of Israel; “rehearsal of what was communicated” to Joseph Smith by Moroni; summary of Book of Mormon teachings concerning the redemption of Israel in the latter days
“Letter VII.” (July 1835)	Description of Joseph Smith’s discovery of the golden plates; description of the hill in Palmyra, N.Y. “in which these records were deposited”; location identified as the “hill Cumorah”; identified as the same location where the Nephites and Jaredites were exterminated
“Letter VIII.” (October 1835)	Description of the topography of the hill Cumorah; description of the “cement” box in which the plates were deposited; description of Joseph Smith’s first attempt to retrieve the plates; extensive quotations of Moroni’s teachings and instructions to Joseph Smith; history of Joseph Smith from 1823–1827; concluding remarks

The impact and authority of Oliver’s letters can be measured by several factors. First, “there is no evidence that Joseph Smith assigned Cowdery to write the letters.”⁶ Second, the Prophet gave some support by providing Oliver details about “the time and place of [his] birth” and information about his adolescence that would help Oliver correct anti-Mormon misconceptions as a main concern,⁷ but it is unclear how much information Joseph supplied about other things.

Third, Joseph was impressed enough with Oliver’s letters that when he commissioned his 1834–1836 history, copies of them were included. But they were included as a block and without any corrections or clarifications. “The transcription of [these] letters into [Joseph Smith’s] history was evidently conceived in terms of the entire series, not as a piecemeal copying of the individual letters.”⁸ The men tasked with composing this early history were Frederick G.

Williams, Warren Parrish, and Oliver himself, making the inclusion of the letters an understandable move.⁹

Finally, Oliver’s letters were republished on multiple occasions by Church presses in both North America and Europe, making them effective missionary tools in early Mormon proselytizing efforts, but again without the benefit of any improvements or the supervision of Joseph Smith.¹⁰

Even though Oliver’s history was undoubtedly popular among early Mormons, historians recognize that it does not tell the whole story and cannot be taken entirely at face value. For instance, Letter III provides a retelling of Joseph’s youth which includes the religious excitement that caused Joseph to reflect on where he could turn for answers to his soul-wrenching questions,¹¹ but then, Oliver omits any description of Joseph Smith’s First Vision in 1820.¹²

At first glance, Oliver’s narrative “appears to be leading up to the story of the First Vision,”¹³ but then it

abruptly skips the First Vision and instead places the religious excitement not between the years 1818–1820, as Joseph himself would do in his 1838 history,¹⁴ but in the year 1823 with the visitation of Moroni.¹⁵ Furthermore, instead of depicting Joseph as praying to God in the woods in consequence of this turmoil in 1820, as Joseph made clear in his own official history,¹⁶ Oliver describes him as praying in his bedroom.¹⁷

Besides these errors, Oliver includes lengthy quotations of the angel Moroni to Joseph Smith which are unlikely to be a verbatim recapturing.¹⁸ Given that this depiction of Moroni's interviews with Joseph between 1823–1827 was published some years after their occurrence, and given the fact Oliver was not present during these visits, it is more likely that, true to his extravagant literary style, Oliver somewhat embellished his account to enhance its readability and appeal.¹⁹ This is not to say Oliver's letters should be dismissed wholesale, only that they should be used carefully in historical reconstructions.

THE WHY

Oliver Cowdery was undeniably an important witness to the foundational events of the Restoration and his letters as published in the *Messenger and Advocate* offer a glimpse into these events. He was intimately familiar with the production of the Book of Mormon, having written it “with [his] own pen . . . 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.”²⁰ And, although Oliver fell into apostasy for a period, he never denied his testimony and returned to the Church a few years before his death.²¹

While Oliver's letters certainly convey his moving personal testimony of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, they don't definitively establish other matters for which there is contrary historical evidence or which remain open to discussion. This includes Book of Mormon geography. While it is true that Oliver understood the hill near Palmyra, N.Y. where Joseph retrieved the plates to be the same hill Cumorah described in the Book of Mormon where the Nephites and the Jaredites perished,²² it is unknown where Oliver got this idea. Was it from assumptions he made based on his reading of the Book of Mormon, from prophetic insights offered by Joseph Smith, or from some other source?²³

In any case, unlike the Lectures on Faith in 1835, or Joseph's Smith's epistles to the Church in 1844, or the Pearl of Great Price in 1880, or even other texts attributed to Oliver such as the “Declaration of Government and Law” (now D&C 134),²⁴ none of Oliver Cowdery's letters from this series, including Letter VII, were ever canonized as binding revelation.²⁵ As many comments by Church leaders have made clear, the Church has no official position on the geography of Book of Mormon events.²⁶

It is therefore more appropriate that, rather than seeing Oliver's views on the topic of Book of Mormon geography as being authoritative, prophetic pronouncements, they should be seen as reflections of, if not the main cause behind, popular nineteenth-century Mormon speculation on Book of Mormon geography.

While it is clear that Joseph said he was visited by the angel Moroni on the west side of the unnamed hill near his family's Manchester, N.Y., home,²⁷ that is a separate matter from how far and wide Moroni had wandered during the 36 or more years after the final battle in A.D. 385 before he deposited the plates in A.D. 421 in their designated resting place.

So, Oliver's *Messenger and Advocate* letters need to be approached cautiously. Although they are not entirely free from error and embellishment, they are, of course, quite valuable to students of early Mormon history. They provide many important insights into the translation of the Book of Mormon and the restoration of the priesthood, matters with which Oliver was personally acquainted. Most of all, these letters are intended to be read and used for increasing faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ and in affirming belief in the Book of Mormon as the word of God.

FURTHER READING

John W. Welch, “[Oliver Cowdery as Editor, Defender, and Justice of the Peace in Kirtland](#),” in *Days Never to Be Forgotten: Oliver Cowdery*, ed. Alexander L. Baugh (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), 255–77.

Roger Nicholson, “[The Cowdery Conundrum: Oliver's Aborted Attempt to Describe Joseph Smith's First Vision in 1834 and 1835](#),” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 8 (2014): 27–44.

Book of Mormon Central, “[Where Did the Book of Mormon Happen?](#),” *KnoWhy* 431 (May 8, 2018).

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NOTES

1. J. Leroy Caldwell, “[Messenger and Advocate](#),” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1992), 2:892.
2. The letters can be read [online](#) at the Book of Mormon Central [archive](#).
3. “Letter II,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 2 (November 1834): 27–28. In October of the same year that Oliver began his letters, the anti-Mormon author E. D. Howe published his highly influential work *Mormonism Unveiled* [sic] in nearby Painesville, Ohio. In it, Howe attempted to prove that the Book of Mormon was a modern fabrication based on a manuscript written by a certain Solomon Spalding and that Joseph Smith’s reputation, including his honesty and moral character, was suspect. Howe’s book can be accessed online <https://archive.org/details/mormonismunvaile00howe>. Unlike other anti-Mormon writers, like Alexander Campbell, whom Oliver also responded to elsewhere in the *Messenger and Advocate*, Howe was never mentioned by name in any of Oliver’s letters to Phelps. Nevertheless, the timing of the publication of Howe’s book, the considerable influence it wielded in popular discourse on Mormonism, and the overall content and focus of Oliver’s letters all make it seem very likely that Oliver was at the very least indirectly responding to Howe. On Oliver’s efforts to defend the Church, see generally John W. Welch, “[Oliver Cowdery’s 1835 Response to Alexander Campbell’s 1831 ‘Delusions’](#),” in *Oliver Cowdery: Scribe, Elder, Witness*, ed. John W. Welch and Larry E. Morris (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2006), 221–239; John W. Welch, “[Oliver Cowdery as Editor, Defender, and Justice of the Peace in Kirtland](#),” in *Days Never to Be Forgotten: Oliver Cowdery*, ed. Alexander L. Baugh (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), 267–270.
4. See “[History, circa Summer 1832](#),” online.
5. One year earlier, the Church’s newspaper *The Evening and the Morning Star* ran editorials by William Phelps on the content and message of the Book of Mormon and the early progress of Mormon missionary efforts, but these articles provided neither a substantive history behind the early life of Joseph Smith nor a clear narrative describing the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. See “[The Book of Mormon](#),” *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1, no. 8 (January 1833): 56–58; “[Rise and Progress of the Church of Christ](#),” *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1, no. 11 (April 1833): 83–84. On the importance of Oliver’s letters as an early Church history, see Richard Bushman, “[Oliver’s Joseph](#),” in *Days Never to Be Forgotten*, 6–10.” Phelps, “[The Book of Mormon](#),” 57, appears to be the first recorded instance of the hill in New York where Joseph Smith received the plates being called Cumorah.
6. Karen Lynn Davidson et al., eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2012), xxi.
7. Joseph Smith letter to Oliver Cowdery, “Brother O. Cowdery,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 3 (December 1834): 40. It seems very likely that Joseph provided his support in an effort to counter the accusations made in Howe’s *Mormonism Unveiled*. Additionally, it seems that that Oliver had access to Joseph’s 1832 history and incorporated elements of it in his sketch of Joseph Smith’s early life. See the discussion in “[JS Defended Himself in Letter in Messenger and Advocate](#),” online; Roger Nicholson, [The Cowdery Conundrum: Oliver’s Aborted Attempt to Describe Joseph Smith’s First Vision in 1834 and 1835](#),” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 8 (2014): 27–44.
8. Davidson et al., eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Histories, Volume 1*, 39.
9. Pages 46–103 of the 1834–1836 history are written in the hands of these scribes. The history can be accessed [online](#).
10. Republications of Oliver’s letters began appearing in 1840 when Parley P. Pratt reprinted Oliver’s depiction of the visitation of Moroni to Joseph Smith. See “A Remarkable Vision,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 1, no. 2 (June 1840): 42–44; “A Remarkable Vision,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 1, no. 5 (September 1840): 105–109; “A Remarkable Vision,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 1, no. 6 (October 1840): 150–154; “A Remarkable Vision,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 1, no. 7 (November 1840): 174–178. The letters were further republished in 1840 (“Copy of a Letter written by O. Cowdery,” *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 1 [November 1, 1840]: 199–201; “Letter II,” *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 2 [November 15, 1840]: 208–212; “Letter III,” *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 3 [December 1, 1840]: 224–225; “Letter IV,” *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 4 [December 15, 1840]: 240–242; Orson Pratt, *A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions* [Edinburgh: Ballantyne and Hughes, 1840], 8–12), 1841 (“Letter VI,” *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 11 [April 1, 1841]: 359–363; “Rise of the Church,” *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 12 [April 15, 1841]: 376–379; “Letter VIII,” *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 13 [May 1, 1841]: 390–396; “O. Cowdery’s Letters to W. W. Phelps,” *Gospel Reflector* 1, no. 6 [March 15, 1841]: 137–176), 1843 (“O. Cowdery’s First Letter to W. W. Phelps,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 3, no. 9 [January 1843]: 152–154), and 1844 ([Letters by Oliver Cowdery, to W.W. Phelps on the Origin of the Book of Mormon and the Rise of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#) [Liverpool: Ward and Cairns, 1844]; “O. Cowdery’s Letters to W. W. Phelps,” *The Prophet* 1, no. 7 [June 29, 1844]).
11. “Letter III,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 3 (December 1834): 42–43.
12. Joseph’s journal entry on November 9, 1835, which was copied by Warren Cowdery into the 1834–1836 history project, clearly recounted the 1820 vision in which Joseph saw and heard two beings. See Dean C. Jessee, “[The Earliest Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision](#),” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestation, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 2nd ed. (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2017), 9–12. For a recent attempt at making sense of Oliver’s

- omission of the 1820 vision, see Nicholson, [“The Cowdery Conundrum,”](#) 27–44.
13. Bushman, [“Oliver’s Joseph,”](#) 6.
 14. [History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 \[23 December 1805–30 August 1834\], p. 1.](#) “Sometime in the second year after our removal to Manchester [1819], there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion.”
 15. “Letter IV,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 5 (February 1835): 78. “You will recollect that I mentioned the time of a religious excitement, in Palmyra and vicinity to have been in the 15th year of our brother J. Smith Jr’s, age—that was an error in the type—it should have been in the 17th.—You will please remember this correction, as it will be necessary for the full understanding of what will follow in time. This would bring the date down to the year 1823.”
 16. [History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 \[23 December 1805–30 August 1834\], p. 3.](#) “I at last came to the determination to ask of God, concluding that if he gave wisdom to them that lacked wisdom, and would give liberally and not upbraid, I might venture. So in accordance with this my determination to ask of God, I retired to the woods to make the attempt. It was on the morning of a beautiful clear day early in the spring of Eighteen hundred and twenty. It was the first time in my life that I had <made> such an attempt, for amidst all <my> anxieties I had never as yet made the attempt to pray vocally.”
 17. “Letter IV,” 78–79. “On the evening of the 21st of September, 1823, previous to retiring to rest, our brother’s mind was unusually wrought up on the subject which had so long agitated his mind—his heart was drawn out in fervent prayer, and his whole soul was so lost to every thing of a temporal nature, that earth, to him, had lost its claims, and all he desired was to be prepared in heart to commune with some kind messenger who could communicate to him the desired information of his acceptance with God. . . . While continuing in prayer for a manifestation in some way that his sins were forgiven; endeavoring to exercise faith in the scriptures, on a sudden a light like that of day, only of a purer and far more glorious appearance and brightness, burst into the room.”
 18. See “Letter VIII,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 1 (October 1835): 197–198, where Oliver quotes Moroni for an astounding 1078 words.
 19. Oliver’s overwrought verbosity, his penchant for “rhetorical flourishes” which make “the story more Oliver’s than Joseph’s,” his telltale “flowery journalese,” and his “florid romantic language” have been noted by careful readers. See for instance the remarks of Bushman, [“Oliver’s Joseph,”](#) 7; Arthur Henry King, *The Abundance of the Heart* (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1986), 204; Davidson et al., eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Histories, Volume 1*, 38.
 20. “Last Days of Oliver Cowdery,” *Deseret News* (April 13, 1859)” 48.
 21. See Scott H. Faulring, [“The Return of Oliver Cowdery,”](#) in *Oliver Cowdery*, 321–362.
 22. Oliver makes his views plain in “Letter VII,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 10 (July 1835): 155–159.
 23. As made clear in Joseph Smith’s December 1834 letter cited above, the extent of the Prophet’s involvement with the compositions of the *Messenger and Advocate* letters was to provide Oliver with information about his youth and upbringing. In the absence of any corroborative evidence attesting to Joseph’s input beyond this, any comments made by Oliver in these letters concerning the geography of the Book of Mormon must therefore have been his alone.
 24. “On August 17, 1835, in the midst of the Saints’ attempts to petition the government for help, Oliver Cowdery and Sidney Rigdon presented a document titled ‘Declaration of Government and Law’ to Church members in Kirtland, Ohio. The declaration—now [Doctrine and Covenants 134](#)—sought to address all of the Saints’ concerns.” Spencer W. McBride, [“Of Governments and Laws,”](#) online at [history.lds.org](#).
 25. An excerpt from Letter I providing Oliver Cowdery’s firsthand testimony of the translation of the Book of Mormon and the visitation of John the Baptist was included in the 1851 Pearl of Great Price as a footnote to republished portions of Joseph Smith’s 1838 history. The Pearl of Great Price was canonized as scripture in 1880. This excerpt is present in the current 2013 edition of the Pearl of Great Price (Joseph Smith—History 1:71 footnote). Beyond this footnote reproducing part of Letter I, no material from the letters has been canonized, including any material from Letter VII concerning the location of the hill Cumorah.
 26. “Church leadership officially and consistently distances itself from issues regarding Book of Mormon geography.” John E. Clark, “Book of Mormon Geography,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:176. See also Book of Mormon Central, [“Where Did the Book of Mormon Happen?”](#) *KnowWhy* 431 (May 8, 2018). While a number of later Church leaders felt confident in following Oliver in identifying the hill Cumorah as the hill in New York, others, such as apostle and later Church president Harold B. Lee, demurred. “Some say the Hill Cumorah was in southern Mexico (and someone pushed it down still farther) and not in western New York. Well, if the Lord wanted us to know where it was, or where Zarahemla was, he’d have given us latitude and longitude, don’t you think?” For the Lee citation, and additional citations showing some variance amongst Church leaders on the issue of the location of the hill Cumorah, see FairMormon’s collection of [Hill Cumorah Quotes](#).
 27. Joseph Smith himself appeared somewhat ambivalent towards the location of the hill Cumorah. In Joseph’s earliest history the “place . . . where the plates [were] deposited” goes unnamed. [History, circa Summer 1832, p. 4.](#) In his 1838 history the Prophet again merely describes the location where he found the plates as “a hill of considerable size” without positively identifying it as Cumorah. [History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 \[23 December 1805–30 August 1834\], addendum, p. 7.](#) Also in 1838, while describing how he obtained the Book of Mormon, Joseph spoke generally of “a hill in Manchester, Ontario County New York” as the repository of the plates, again without identifying it as Cumorah. Joseph Smith, *Elders’ Journal* (July 1838): 43. Some 4 years later, however, in a letter dated 6 September 1842, Joseph exulted at hearing “Glad tidings from Cumorah! Moroni, An Angel from heaven, declaring the fulfilment of the prophets.” [“Letter to ‘The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints,’ 6 September 1842 \[D&C 128\],” p. 7.](#) It’s

conceivable that Joseph eventually accepted the identity of the hill Cumorah as being the hill in Palmyra after this theory became popular amongst early Church members. Be that as it may, it would still appear that, as with Oliver, Joseph Smith's views on Book of Mormon geography were the product of his being informed by popular nineteenth century Mormon speculation, not revelation. See Matthew Roper, [“Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations.”](#) *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004): 225–275; [“Joseph Smith, Revelation, and Book of Mormon Geography.”](#) *FARMS Review* 22, no. 2 (2010): 15–85; Matthew Roper, Paul J. Fields, and Atul Nepal, [“Joseph Smith, the *Times and Seasons*, and Central American Ruins.”](#) *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 84–97; Neal Rappleye, [“War of Words and Tumult of Opinions’: The Battle for Joseph Smith’s Words in Book of Mormon Geography.”](#) *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 11 (2014): 37–95; Matthew Roper, [“John Bernhisel’s Gift to a Prophet: Incidents of Travel in Central America and the Book of Mormon.”](#) *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 16 (2015): 207–253; Mark Alan Wright, [“Joseph Smith and Native American Artifacts.”](#) in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph and the Ancient World*, edited by Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 119–140; Matthew Roper, [“Joseph Smith, Central American Ruins, and the Book of Mormon.”](#) in *Approaching Antiquity*, 141–162.