

a significant addition. Near sunset on Sunday, April 5, Joseph's brother Samuel arrived at the Smith cabin in Harmony accompanied by a stranger named Oliver Cowdery. Samuel was coming to spend the spring with Joseph, probably to help with the planting. Cowdery came seeking information about the plates. Twenty-two years old, a year younger than Joseph, and unmarried, Cowdery had learned of Joseph's work while teaching the district school in Manchester and boarding with the Smiths. Lucy Smith said Cowdery became so obsessed with the story of the plates he could think of nothing else. When he learned that Samuel was going to Harmony, Cowdery asked to go along.<sup>50</sup>

Oliver Cowdery was born in Wells, Rutland County, Vermont, not fifty miles from Joseph's birthplace, and moved to western New York with his family about the same time as the Smiths. The district school committee on which Hyrum Smith served hired his brother Lyman Cowdery but accepted Oliver in his place when Lyman was unable to honor the contract. Oliver had blacksmithed, clerked in a store, and worked in New York City, trying to help his family and to accumulate enough for a start in life.<sup>51</sup>

Joseph Sr. had been reluctant to say much when Cowdery first inquired. Experience had taught caution. But Cowdery won the family's trust and was told enough to whet his curiosity. In early April, he and Samuel set out in the rain to walk to Harmony on the muddy spring roads. On the way south, they stopped in Fayette to see David Whitmer, a friend of Oliver's, and promised to send back information about the plates.<sup>52</sup>

Joseph and Cowdery talked late into the evening the Sunday of his arrival. Cowdery learned more of the story and decided to stay. On April 6, he witnessed the purchase agreement for the Isaac Hale property, and the next day the translation began again, moving forward with only a few pauses until the book was completed by late June. "Day after day," Cowdery reported in 1834, "I continued, uninterrupted, to write from his mouth, as he translated with the *Urim* and *Thummim*." When Martin Harris had taken dictation from Joseph, they at first hung a blanket between them to prevent Harris from inadvertently catching a glimpse of the plates, which were open on a table in the room. By the time Cowdery arrived, translator and scribe were no longer separated. Emma said she sat at the same table with Joseph, writing as he dictated, with nothing between them, and the plates wrapped in a linen cloth on the table.<sup>53</sup> When Cowdery took up the job of scribe, he and Joseph translated in the same room where Emma was working. Joseph looked in the seerstone, and the plates lay covered on the table.<sup>54</sup>

Neither Joseph nor Oliver explained how translation worked, but Joseph did not pretend to look at the "reformed Egyptian" words, the language on the plates, according to the book's own description. The plates lay covered

on the table, while Joseph's head was in a hat looking at the seerstone, which by this time had replaced the interpreters. The varying explanations of the perplexing process fall roughly into two categories: composition and transcription. The first holds that Joseph was the author of the book. He composed it out of knowledge and imaginings collected in his own mind, perhaps aided by inspiration. He had stuffed his head with ideas for sermons, Christian doctrine, biblical language, multiple characters, stories of adventure, social criticism, theories of Indian origins, ideas about Mesoamerican civilization, and many other matters. During translation, he composed it all into a narrative dictated over the space of three months in Harmony and Fayette.<sup>55</sup>

Composition is the naturalistic explanation for the *Book of Mormon*—the way books are always written—but it is at odds with the Joseph Smith of the historical record. The accounts of the neighbors picture an unambitious, uneducated, treasure-seeking Joseph, who had never written anything and is not known to have read anything but the Bible and perhaps the newspaper. None of the neighbors noted signs of learning or intellectual interests beyond the religious discussions in a juvenile debating club. To account for the disjuncture between the *Book of Mormon's* complexity and Joseph's history as an uneducated rural visionary, the composition theory calls for a precocious genius of extraordinary powers who was voraciously consuming information without anyone knowing it.<sup>56</sup>

The transcription theory has Joseph Smith "seeing" the *Book of Mormon* text in the seerstone or the Urim and Thummim. He saw the words in the stone as he had seen lost objects or treasure and dictated them to his secretary. The eyewitnesses who described translation, Joseph Knight, Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer, who was in the house during the last weeks of translation, understood translation as transcription. Referring to the seerstone as a Urim and Thummim, Knight said: "Now the way he translated was he put the urim and thummim into his hat and Darkened his Eyes then he would take a sentance and it would apper in Brite Roman Letters. Then he would tell the writer and he would write it. Then that would go away the next sentance would Come and so on."

Joseph himself said almost nothing about his method but implied transcription when he said that "the Lord had prepared spectacles for to read the Book." Close scrutiny of the original manuscript (by a believing scholar) seems to support transcription. Judging from the way Cowdery wrote down the words, Joseph saw twenty to thirty words at a time, dictated them, and then waited for the next twenty to appear. Difficult names (Zenoch, Amalickiah) were spelled out.<sup>57</sup> By any measure, transcription was a miraculous process, calling for a huge leap of faith to believe, yet, paradoxically, it is more in harmony with the young Joseph of the historical record than is composition. Transcription theory gives us a Joseph with a miraculous gift

that evolved naturally out of his earlier treasure-seeking. The boy who gazed into stones and saw treasure grew up to become a translator who looked in a stone and saw words.

Whatever the process, the experience thrilled Oliver Cowdery. "These were days never to be forgotten," Cowdery reflected in 1834. "To sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the *inspiration* of heaven, awakened the utmost gratitude of this bosom!" The young prophet more than fulfilled Cowdery's expectations. On the other hand, the shock of the sudden immersion in a supernatural work now and then gave Cowdery pause, and like Harris he needed further reassurance.<sup>58</sup> A revelation helped put Cowdery's doubts to rest by telling of two spiritual experiences he had never mentioned to Joseph and that only a prophet, as Cowdery saw it, could have known about.<sup>59</sup>

Cowdery was open to belief in Joseph's powers because he had come to Harmony the possessor of a supernatural gift alluded to in a revelation as the "gift of Aaron," or "gift of working with the rod." Most likely, Cowdery used a rod to discover water and minerals. The revelation spoke of divine power causing "this rod of nature, to work in your hands." His family may have engaged in treasure-seeking and other magical practices in Vermont, and, like others in this culture, melded magic with Christianity. For a person with his cultural blend, an angel and gold plates had excitement and appeal. The revelation said nothing to discourage Cowdery's use of his special powers. "Behold thou has a gift, and blessed art thou because of thy gift. Remember it is sacred and cometh from above." Rather than repudiate his claims, the revelation redirected Cowdery's use of his gifts. "Thou shalt exercise thy gift, that thou mayest find out mysteries, that thou mayest bring many to the knowledge of the truth."<sup>60</sup>

Soon after Cowdery began work on the *Book of Mormon*, he wanted to exercise the greater gift of translation. Characteristically, Joseph made no effort to monopolize the work. In a peculiar form of democratic generosity, he held out the expectation throughout his life that his followers could receive revelations or see the face of God as he did. The first revelation to Cowdery promised "a gift if you desire of me, to translate even as my servant Joseph." Hearing this, Joseph remembered, Cowdery "became exceedingly anxious to have the power to translate bestowed upon him."<sup>61</sup>

Cowdery tried the experiment but failed. He began and then stopped, apparently mistakenly believing that he needed only to ask God and look in the stone. A revelation explained his mistake. "Behold I say unto you," the revelation chided, "that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right, I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you. . . . You feared, and the time is past, and it is not expedient now." Cowdery was to return to writing, "and then behold, other records have I, that I will give unto you power that you may assist to translate."<sup>62</sup>