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## The Book of Mormon Witnesses

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## *The Book of Mormon Witnesses*

The testimony of the Book of Mormon witnesses has been a thorn in the side of the critics for more than a century and a half. Some critics have tried to ignore their testimonies, while others have simply glossed over their significance.

Recorded in the front of every copy of the Book of Mormon are signed statements by eleven witnesses who saw the Book of Mormon plates. The first statement is signed by the Three Witnesses—Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris. These three men claimed that an angel showed them the plates and that they heard the voice of the Lord telling them that the record which Joseph translated was true. The other Eight Witnesses signed a statement claiming that Joseph had physically shown them the plates (no angels and no voices) and that they had seen the metallic construction and the engravings on the plates. None of these eleven witnesses ever denied their testimonies of what they had seen despite the fact that several of them left the Church and never returned.

### *The Three Witnesses*

At some point all of the Three Witnesses broke with the Church. Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris eventually returned but David Whitmer did not. All three men, however, maintained stellar reputations among their non-Mormon peers during their absence from Mormonism. While their associates did not agree with their views on the Book of Mormon, they nevertheless acknowledged that these three men were honest men who actually believed that to which they testified. Pomeroy Tucker, for instance, who knew Harris but did not believe in the Book of Mormon, once said there was no easy explanation as how to reconcile Harris' witnesses to the Book of Mormon and the evident fact that Harris was an honest man.

While Harris was separated from the Church he looked for comfort in other Christian faiths. His quest for gospel joy led him along several paths—all affiliated with some Mormon splinter group (except for a brief encounter with Shakerism) until at last he returned to Mormonism. Despite the claim of the critics that his spiritual wandering showed signs of religious instability, it showed instead that once he left Mormonism he was unable to find the gospel joy he once felt but earnestly sought it until he returned to where he had started.

Some critics charge that Harris' testimony is suspect because during his encounter with Shakerism he reportedly said that his belief in Shakerism was greater than it was for the Book of Mormon. His testimony of Shakerism is second-hand, at best, and may not be accurate. We do not know if those who reported Harris' comments heard them directly from Martin, or if they were repeating rumors. At about the same time that Harris made his comments regarding Shakerism, he bore his testimony about the Book of Mormon to two different individuals who recorded the conversations. There are numerous records of people who had conversations with Harris and remember his testimony of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon.

All three witnesses reaffirmed their testimonies on their deathbeds. When Martin Harris was near death, his highly practical neighbor, George Godfrey, was present and deliberately waited for a semiconscious moment to suggest that Martin's testimony was possibly based on deception. Godfrey approached Martin just a few hours before the witness died. At this stage Martin was weak and feeble and unable to recognize to whom he was speaking. Godfrey asked Martin if, perhaps, there was really some element of fraud or deception in what he had claimed to witness. Martin, however, replied as he always did. He knew the Book of Mormon was not fake. He had seen and heard the very things to which he had testified; he had seen an angel, heard a voice, and had seen the golden plates. He said that he could have been a rich man if he were willing to lie and recant his testimony, but he could not perjure himself—he could not deny the things he saw.

Although David Whitmer never returned to the Church he, like the other two witnesses, never denied his testimony. In an effort to impugn the veracity of Whitmer's testimony, critics point to a statement David wrote after he left the Church.

If you believe my testimony to the Book of Mormon; if you believe that God spake to us three witnesses by his own voice, then I tell you that in June, 1838, God spake to me again by his own voice from the heavens, and told me to "separate myself from among the Latter-day Saints, for as they sought to do unto me, so should it be done unto them."<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after David and other notable Mormons had been excommunicated, outspoken LDS leader Sidney Rigdon preached his "Salt Sermon" warning dissenters to leave town. Other radical Mormons, such as Sampson Avard, enforced expulsion of those who did not leave on their own. Joseph Smith and the Twelve criticized Rigdon's aggressive speeches as well as the secret and unsanctioned actions of Avard.

Whitmer claimed that God told him to separate himself from the Latter-day Saints. Whitmer had already been excommunicated months earlier; he had already left the Church. In context, Whitmer must have understood the inspiration as direction to separate himself from the Latter-day Saint people. This could easily have been inspired direction. Confrontation with some of the more radical characters within the Church (such as Sampson Avard) might have caused Whitmer serious harm—physical, emotional, or spiritual. However Whitmer understood this direction from God, it did not conflict with his testimony of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon.

In the fifty years that Whitmer lived outside of the Church he insisted that he knew the Book of Mormon was divinely revealed. Dozens of interviews with Whitmer—which took place after David had left the Church—all tell the same story; David affirmed the veracity of his testimony. In Richmond, Missouri, where David lived, the non-Mormons knew him as honest and trustworthy. When one anti-Mormon lectured in town, calling Whitmer disreputable, the local non-Mormon paper responded with a front-page editorial in the local paper. Although the editors were unsympathetic to Mormonism, they insisted that after forty-six years of residence in Richmond, they knew that Whitmer’s character was without blemish.

When another anti-Mormon published an article claiming that David had denied his testimony, David printed a proclamation testifying to the truth of the Book of Mormon and reiterating the fact that neither he, nor Cowdery nor Harris had ever denied their testimonies. Attached to Whitmer’s proclamation was an accompanying statement signed by twenty-two of Richmond’s political, business, and professional leaders who certified that they had been “long and intimately acquainted” with Whitmer and knew him to be “a man of the highest integrity and of undoubted truth and veracity.”<sup>2</sup> A few days before he died, an article in the Chicago Tribune read:

“David Whitmer, the last one of the three witnesses to the truth of the Book of Mormon, is now in a dying condition at his home in Richmond. Last evening he called the family and friends to his bedside, and bore his testimony to the truth of the Book of Mormon and the Bible.”<sup>3</sup>

The Richmond Democrat also added this comment: “Skeptics may laugh and scoff if they will, but no man can listen to Mr. Whitmer as he talks of his interview with the Angel of the Lord, without being most forcibly convinced that he has heard an honest man tell what he honestly believes to be true.”<sup>4</sup>

Because the critics are unable to accept angels and scriptures from Heaven, they generally conclude that the Three Witnesses were duped or deluded, and that they merely imagined they saw an angel with plates. As evidence they note an interview in which Harris was supposedly asked if he saw the plates with his “naked eyes” to which he responded, “No, I saw them with a spiritual eye.”<sup>5</sup> In another interview Harris allegedly claimed that he only saw the plates in a “visionary or entranced state.”<sup>6</sup>

Does “visionary” mean imaginary? Does the belief that the experience had visionary and spiritual qualities contradict the claim that the plates were real? Consider this: On separate occasions Harris also claimed that prior to his witnessing the plates, he held the (covered) plates on his lap and said that they weighed approximately fifty pounds.<sup>7</sup>

It seems unlikely—from his physical descriptions as well as his other testimonies and the testimonies of the other two witnesses—that the entire experience was merely in his mind. *Spiritual* and *visionary* are not synonymous with merely subjective. On another occasion critics charged Harris with delusion—that he merely imagined to have seen an angel and the plates. Martin responded by extending his right hand:

“Gentlemen, do you see that hand? Are you sure you see it? Are your eyes playing a trick or something? No. Well, as sure as you see my hand so sure did I see the angel and the plates.”<sup>8</sup>

David Whitmer helps clear up the spiritual vs. natural viewing of the plates. Responding to the interviewer who questioned Harris, Whitmer replied,

“Of course we were in the spirit when we had the view, for no man can behold the face of an angel, except in a spiritual view, but we were in the body also, and everything was as natural to us, as it is at any time.”<sup>9</sup>

Like Harris, Whitmer had, at times, been charged with being deluded into thinking he had seen an angel and the plates. One observer remembers when David was likewise accused, and said:

“How well and distinctly I remember the manner in which Elder Whitmer arose and drew himself up to his full height—a little over six feet—and said, in solemn and impressive tones: ‘No sir! I was not under any hallucination, nor was I deceived! I saw with these eyes, and I heard with these ears! I know whereof I speak!’”<sup>10</sup>

Paul understood the difficulty of describing spiritual experiences when he wrote:

I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth) (2 Corinthians 12:2–3.)

Paul’s vision was real, yet he was unsure whether he had the experience in or out of his body. Harris may have had similar feelings. He knew the plates were real, yet

he also knew that when the angel showed him the plates he was able to see them by the power of God.

### *The Eight Witnesses: Physical or Visionary Experience?*

The latest attacks on the Book of Mormon witnesses have focused on the testimony of the Eight Witnesses. While the Three Witnesses signed an affidavit testifying that they had beheld an angel of God who showed them the Book of Mormon plates, the Eight Witnesses signed an affidavit testifying that Joseph had shown them the plates in broad daylight and had allowed them to handle the plates with their hands. Joseph, they claimed, had a set of physical, metal plates which appeared to be made of gold and were engraved with curious characters.

The combination of the testimonies lends strong support for Joseph's credibility and the accuracy of his claims regarding the Book of Mormon plates. Those who would doubt the testimony of the Three Witnesses because it involved the supernatural are forced to account for the physical experience described by the Eight Witnesses. It is also important to note that in addition to the Eight Witnesses who handled the *uncovered* plates, several others—including Alva Beman, Joseph's mother Lucy, his wife Emma, his sister Catherine, and his brother William—handled and felt the plates while covered by a cloth. All of these witnesses confirm that Joseph had *real metal plates!* This presents a major stumbling block to critics.

Since any coherent explanation for the Book of Mormon must accommodate *all* of the evidence, some critics claim that Joseph constructed imitation plates from tin. Even Joseph Smith's chief modern critic, who believes that there were no golden plates, said, "I find it difficult to believe that JS [Joseph Smith] could create a set of plates that could pass visual inspection. If he could, he certainly would have been more open about showing them."<sup>11</sup>

The most recent attacks on the testimony of the Eight Witnesses attempt to prove that they did *not actually see* physical plates but they may have lifted something heavy hidden in a box, and that they did not handle the plates themselves but that they thought they saw the plates in a vision induced by enthusiasm, mass-hypnosis, or Joseph's power of suggestion. The experience of handling uncovered plates, they charge, was merely an illusion in the mind of the eight and is conflated with some of their earlier accounts of handling the covered plates or some other heavy object while covered or in a box. The evidence, which the critics cite, rests primarily on a handful of second-hand accounts. Like so many anti-Mormon accusations, such a charge is in conflict with the historical record.

According to one report, for example, John Whitmer (one of the Eight Witnesses) claimed that the plates were shown to him "by a supernatural power." Another report has John Whitmer claiming that he saw an "angel" who testified of the Book of Mormon. According to some critics, this indicates that the Eight Witnesses did not see or feel actual plates. As historian Richard L. Anderson explains, however, this added detail of an angelic messenger differs drastically from all other John Whitmer

accounts and must be seen as a red flag. David Whitmer, for instance, often complained of being misquoted in many of his interviews.

Of the 23 reports made by John Whitmer concerning his testimony of the experience with the plates, only these two accounts have any ambiguity regarding the physical nature of handling the plates. In all other instances wherein John gives details, he speaks of seeing and/or handling the plates as a normal event. In the record wherein John Whitmer claims that he saw the plates by a “supernatural power” he also claimed to have “handled” the plates and that there were engravings on both sides.

A few months before John Whitmer died, another interviewer asked him if he had really handled the plates with his hands and if they were of a material substance. John replied that he had handled the plates and that they were very real, heavy, and material. John even noted details such as the fact that each plate was thick enough to be engraved on both sides and that they were joined by three rings, each in the shape of “D.” Such specific physical details disprove the claim that the Eight Witnesses did not physically see actual plates.

The interviewer specifically asked John if the plates were covered, to which he replied in the negative. Joseph, he said, had handed over the plates—uncovered—and they were able to handle the plates with their hands, and turn the leaves to their satisfaction. Of the 42 statements or personal reports from the Eight Witnesses, over two-thirds give physical descriptions of their encounter with the plates. The remaining third basically give generic reaffirmations to their belief in the Book of Mormon. The preponderance of evidence supports the traditional LDS belief that all of the Witnesses accurately testified of their encounters with the Book of Mormon plates.

The fact that Joseph had actual metal plates rules out the possibility that he was deluded and merely imagined to be translating an ancient record. The only two remaining possibilities are that Joseph was a con man (and either fooled all those who handled the plates or included some or all of them as co-conspirators) or that he was telling the truth.

It does not seem plausible that Joseph could have fooled all of the witnesses with tin plates and he certainly could not have manufactured golden plates. Does it seem more plausible to theorize that all or some of those who handled the plates were part of a big con (at the very least, the Eight Witnesses would have been part of the deception)? When we realize that not one of the witnesses ever came forth to expose the con—despite the fact that some of them left the Church—such a theory seems dubious as well. The one and only theory that actually fits all of the evidence is the one proposed by Joseph Smith—he really received and translated an ancient record engraved on golden plates. As Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s character Sherlock Holmes once said, “when you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”<sup>12</sup>



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