



Martin Harris

(1783–1875)

D&C 3: Introduction, 12–13; 5: Introduction, 1, 24–25, 28; 10:6–7; 17: Introduction; 19: Introduction, 26–27, 35; 52:24; 58:35, 38–39; 70:1–3; 82:11; 102:3, 34; 104:24, 26

Martin was reared to maturity in Palmyra, New York. He became a property owner, weaver, and sheep raiser. He had a reputation in Palmyra for being a gentleman and a farmer of respectability, as well as a patriot, having served in the Ontario New York 39th Militia in the War of 1812.

It was not until 1824, when Martin hired Joseph Smith Sr. and his son Hyrum to assist him in completing his new home, that his reputation in Palmyra began to be questioned. Martin learned from the Smiths about young Joseph and his visitations from angel Moroni. Martin was not just curious about young Joseph but supportive and willing to give of his time and talents to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

The Prophet Joseph wrote, “Mr. [Martin] Harris arranged his affairs . . . and commenced writing for me while I translated from the plates, which we continued until the 14th of June following, by which time he had written one hundred and sixteen pages of the

manuscript on foolscap paper.”¹ Martin carried the manuscript pages to Palmyra to show relatives. Through his carelessness, the pages were lost (see D&C 3, 10). Although historical recounting of the lost manuscript differs in detail, Latter-day Saint scholars agree that Martin’s wife, Lucy Harris, played a role. In spite of efforts by Martin and the Prophet Joseph to find the missing pages, they were never found.

In June 1829 Martin became one of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith was with him when he beheld an angel and the gold plates and exclaimed, “‘Tis enough; mine eyes have beheld . . . ,’ and jumping up, he shouted, ‘Hosannah,’ blessing God, and otherwise rejoiced exceedingly.”²

Joseph hesitated to ask him to finance the publication of the Book of Mormon. However, neither young Joseph nor his father—a wheat farmer, cooper, and day laborer—were in a position to secure a publisher’s agreement. Oliver Cowdery, a schoolteacher and scribe of the Book of Mormon translation, likewise lacked necessary collateral. The same could be said of other early believers. Joseph Smith knew there was only one man—Martin Harris—who had the means to secure the publisher’s note. Knowing full well that accepting the printer’s debt would place his reputation, finances, and marriage in jeopardy, Martin mortgaged his farmland to ensure publication.

On April 6, 1830, he was present at the organizational meeting of what became The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. After the meeting, Martin was among the first to enter baptismal waters, being baptized by Oliver Cowdery. He gathered with the Saints to Ohio in response to a letter from the Prophet Joseph, who wrote, “I send you this to inform you that it is necessary for you to come here [Kirtland] as soon as you can.”³ Martin arrived in Kirtland in early June 1831 and seven days later was told by revelation to continue on to Missouri (see D&C 52:24). Martin arrived in Independence, Missouri, in mid-July 1831 and by early August was invited to be an example unto the Church by laying his moneys before the bishop. In obedience, Martin gave of his means to Bishop Edward Partridge for the establishment of Zion.

In 1832 Martin served a mission with his brother, Emer Harris. On that mission, the Harris brothers baptized about a hundred persons in New York and eighty-two in Pennsylvania. When Martin returned to Ohio, he volunteered to march to Missouri with Zion’s Camp. At a camp reunion held in February 1835 in Kirtland, Martin, Oliver Cowdery, and David

¹ “History of Joseph Smith,” *Millennial Star* 3, no. 6 (October 1842), 102.

² *History, 1838–1856*, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834], 25. Joseph Smith Papers.

³ Letter of Joseph Smith to Martin Harris, February 22, 1831. Joseph Smith Papers.

Whitmer were privileged to name the original members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Two days after this sacred experience, Martin was called to serve on the Kirtland high council.

With his faith evidenced and his unwavering commitments fulfilled, it is shocking that in 1837 Martin lost faith in the Restoration and the Prophet Joseph Smith. By so doing, he failed to heed the warning in his patriarchal blessing to “be humble and meek in heart or Satan will seek to raise thee up to pride and boasting.”⁴ For thirty-two years he was estranged from the Church.

At age 86 Martin requested that Brigham Young be told of his desire to visit Utah: “Tell him I should like to visit Utah, my family and children—I would be glad to accept help from the church, but I want no personal favor. Wait! Tell him that if he sends money, he must send enough for the round trip. I should not want to remain in Utah.”⁵ Upon learning of Martin’s request Brigham Young said, “I want to say this: I was never more gratified over any message in my life. Send for him! Yes, even if it were to take the last dollar of my own.”⁶

At age 88 Martin traveled via train to the Salt Lake Valley. The *Deseret News* on August 31, 1870, reported, “He is remarkably vigorous for one of his years, his memory being very good, and his sight . . . being so acute that he can see to pick a pin off the ground. We are glad to see Martin Harris once more in the midst of the Saints.” Upon gazing at the rising Salt Lake Temple and tabernacle on Temple Square, Martin exclaimed, “Who would have thought that the Book of Mormon would have done all this?”⁷ He died in Clarkston, Utah, on July 9, 1875, at age 92 and was buried with a Book of Mormon in his right hand and the Doctrine and Covenants in his left.

⁴ Patriarchal Blessing of Martin Harris, August 27, 1835, in H. Michael Marquardt, *Early Patriarchal Blessings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2007), 37.

⁵ William Homer Sr., “Passing of Martin Harris,” *Improvement Era* 29 (March 1926), 470.

⁶ Homer Sr., “Passing of Martin Harris,” 471.

⁷ Edward Stevenson, “Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon, No. III,” *Millennial Star* 48 (June 7, 1886): 390.