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"...publish it upon the mountains": The Story of Martin Harris, One of the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon, Part I

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Abstract: Reviews Martin Harris's role in bringing forth the Book of Mormon, and discusses Harris's testimony of the Book of Mormon.

AMONG the early settlers of western New York was Nathan Harris, an industrious farmer who acquired extensive land holdings in the vicinity of Palmyra in 1792. His son, Martin, nine years of age, at the time of this pioneer move, was destined to play an important role in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

Twenty-four years later, in 1816, Joseph Smith, Sr., moved his family from Norwich, Vermont, to the neighborhood of Palmyra, which was by now a well-established community. The two families soon became acquainted—Martin, now a mature man with substantial farming interests of his own, sometimes hiring the boy, Joseph, Jr., twenty-three years younger, to work for him.¹

That the Smith and Harris families were on intimate terms before Joseph Smith, Jr., received the plates in 1827,

THE TESTIMONY OF THREE WITNESSES

Be It Known unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, unto whom this work shall come: That we, through the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, have seen the plates which contain this record, which is a record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites, their brethren, and also of the people of Jared, who came from the tower of which hath been spoken. And we also know that they have been translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice hath declared it unto us; wherefore we know of a surety that the work is true. And we also testify that we have seen the engravings which are upon the plates; and they have been shown unto us by the power of God, and not of man. And we declare with words of soberness, that an angel of God came down from heaven, and he brought and laid before our eyes, that we beheld and saw the plates, and the engravings thereon; and we know that it is by the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, that we beheld and bear record that these things are true. And it is marvelous in our eyes. Nevertheless, the voice of the Lord commanded us that we should bear record of it; wherefore, to be obedient unto the commandments of God, we bear testimony of these things. And we know that if we are faithful in Christ, we shall rid our garments of the blood of all men, and be found spotless before the judgment-seat of Christ, and shall dwell with him eternally in the heavens. And the honor be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, which is one God. Amen.

Oliver Cowdery
David Whitmer
Martin Harris

“...publish it upon the mountains”

and that Martin was deeply interested in and impressed by the divine manifestations given to Joseph, is attested by the Prophet's mother. Mentioning the trouble which beset Joseph when he took possession of the plates, she states: “No one ever heard anything from us respecting them [the plates], except a confidential friend, whom my husband had spoken to about them two or three years previous.”² Elsewhere in her history she identifies this confidential friend by name as Martin Harris.³

Among the earliest authentic records of the association of Joseph Smith, Jr., and Martin Harris, is Edward L. Stevenson's account of his conversation with Martin during their trip from Ohio to Utah: “He said that Joseph Smith, the Prophet, was very poor, and had to work by the day for his support, and he [Harris] often gave him work on his farm, and that they had hoed corn together many a day. . . . Joseph he said, was good to work with and jovial, and they often wrestled together in sport, but the Prophet was devoted and attentive to his prayers.”⁴

THE STORY OF MARTIN HARRIS, ONE OF THE THREE WITNESSES OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

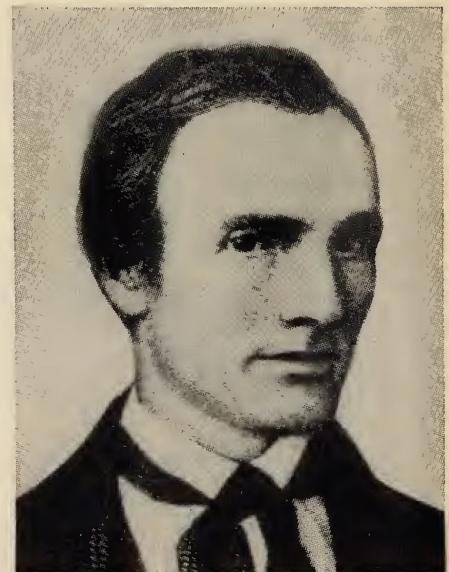
by William H. Homer, Jr.

When the time arrived for Joseph Smith, Jr., to take possession of the plates, difficulties multiplied, as he had been forewarned what would happen by the Angel Moroni. Attempts by persons of evil intent to gain possession of the plates were almost daily occurrences, but all these nefarious schemes were frustrated.

The opposition around Manchester, nearest village to the Smith farm, soon became so intense that translation of the divine record was manifestly impossible at that time and place. The Prophet decided to seek a more tolerant environment. He accepted an invitation from his wife's parents to come to their home in Harmony, Pennsylvania. Because of the bitter feeling against his mission, it had been hard for him to secure employment for some time, and he now experienced difficulty in meeting some of his obligations and financing the trip.

Martin Harris saved the day. Joseph Smith, Jr., and his wife's brother, Alva

Hale, were attending to some business in Palmyra when Martin Harris approached. “Here, Mr. Smith, is fifty dollars; I give this to you to do the Lord's work with; no, I give it to



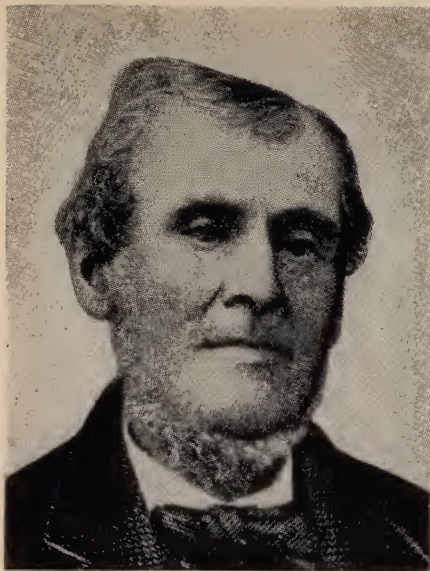
Oliver Cowdery
THE IMPROVEMENT ERA

¹Preston Nibley, *The Witnesses of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, 1953), p. 107.

²Lucy Mack Smith, *Joseph Smith, the Prophet* (Salt Lake City, 1902), p. 132.

³*Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁴Nibley, *op. cit.*, pp. 134-135.



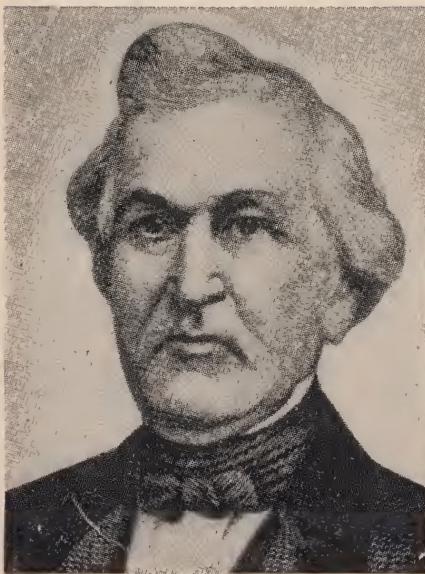
Martin Harris

the Lord for his own work." Joseph gratefully accepted the proffered money; but he wanted to give Martin a note for it, which Alva Hale offered to endorse. But Martin insisted on it as a gift, in the presence of witnesses.⁵ Thus the journey to Harmony, a distance of about 155 miles, was made possible in midwinter.

Settled in new and more peaceful surroundings, Joseph began copying some of the characters from the plates, and by use of the Urim and Thummim, did some translating.

Martin Harris, not content to wait until spring to know what progress was being made, traveled from Palmyra to Harmony in February 1828. He was much impressed with the transcription of characters and the

⁵Lucy Mack Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 112-113.



David Whitmer

MARCH 1955

EDITOR'S NOTE

Martin Harris, the eldest of the Three Witnesses to the divinity of the Book of Mormon, has long been a subject of interest to the Latter-day Saints. Still, too few of us know very much about him. He was a neighbor of the Smith family in New York, and one of the first to hear of young Joseph's experiences in searching for the true church. It was Martin Harris who took the copy of the Book of Mormon figures to Professor Anthon in New York City; it was his money which made possible the publication of the Book of Mormon. It was he who left the Church to endure a lifetime of bitterness; it was he, who in the late autumn of his life, rejoined the Church, came to Utah, and lived among the Saints, always testifying of the truthfulness of the Book.

In this series all those things—and more—will be recorded as to the life of Martin Harris.

translation already accomplished and asked permission to be entrusted with them. This request was granted, and he proceeded with them to New York City. Here, at one of America's most distinguished institutions of learning, Columbia College, now Columbia University, he submitted the characters and translation to the noted professor of ancient languages, Charles Anthon.⁶

What followed has become such a familiar story that it is but briefly touched upon in this recital. A certificate of authenticity and correctness concerning the characters and their interpretation in so far as they had been translated, was issued by Professor Anthon. But upon being told that Joseph had been given the plates from whence the characters were taken by a divine messenger, he took back the certificate and destroyed it, declaring that there was no such thing now as ministering of angels.

Martin, profoundly impressed by the experience, returned to Harmony and reported the events to Joseph Smith. Just what Martin had in mind when he undertook the trip to Columbia College is not entirely clear, but the incident served to dispel any doubts he might have entertained at this time regarding the Prophet's claims.

⁶Ariel L. Crowley writing of "The Anthon Transcript," in the January 1942 issue of THE IMPROVEMENT ERA says of Martin Harris: "Therefore, he proceeded with a minimum of delay to lay the transcript before a scholar learned in the ancient languages, Charles Anthon, adjunct professor of languages and ancient geography in Columbia College, New York, 1828. A telegram from New York, dated July 7, 1941, adds also this information concerning him and his degrees and scholastic pedigree:

"Ariel L. Crowley:
"Charles Anthon, A. B., Columbia, 1815; and LL.D., 1831; was adjunct professor Greek and Latin here 1820 to 1830. . . ."

"Milton Halsey Thomas,
"Curator of Columbiana."

Crowley also says, "Undoubtedly, also, Martin Harris sought to secure the opinion of other learned men," and cites Pomeroy Tucker, early anti-Mormon writer, who knew both Joseph Smith and Martin Harris, as alluding to the Honorable Luther Bradish and Dr. Mitchell.

Professor Anthon wanted Martin to bring the plates to him for translation. Martin remarked that part of the golden book was sealed, whereupon Professor Anthon replied, "I cannot read a sealed book," thus fulfilling literally the prophecy of Isaiah:

And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed. (Isaiah 29:11.)

The meeting with Professor Anthon strengthened Martin's resolution to give further aid to the Prophet. He returned to Palmyra and arranged his affairs—for he contemplated an indefinite stay—and went back to Harmony about April 12, 1828. He immediately commenced to write while Joseph dictated the translation and continued uninterruptedly until June 14, during which time 116 written pages of foolscap paper were translated.

The effort required for a rugged outdoorsman like Martin Harris to remain seated throughout the long days, alert for each word that fell from the lips of the Prophet, can be imagined. It is related that Martin and Joseph would retire to the banks of the Susquehanna River and cast stones out on the water to relieve Martin's cramped muscles and Joseph's mental strain, for the gift of translation was not bestowed upon Joseph without intense effort on his part. Note the failure of Oliver Cowdery's endeavor to translate when he lost the small measure of the gift of translation which he had temporarily possessed. He failed to realize that merely asking for a divine gift was not sufficient without prayerful thought and study:

(Continued on following page)

“ . . . PUBLISH IT UPON THE MOUNTAINS ”

(Continued from preceding page)

Do not murmur, my son, for it is wisdom in me that I have dealt with you after this manner.

Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. (D. & C. 9:6-7.)

During the translation of this part of the record, Martin was constantly subject to criticism from his family and friends. Seeking some means of allaying their prejudices, he importuned Joseph for permission to show the manuscript to his skeptical friends and especially to his wife. The Prophet inquired of the Lord by the Urim and Thummim, but the request was denied. Martin, however, not to be dissuaded, plead with Joseph again to inquire of the Lord. Joseph yielded but once more received an emphatic negative answer.

The extremely insistent nature of Martin Harris was now manifest. For a third time he besought Joseph to inquire of the Lord concerning this matter. This third petition was granted, but the Lord imposed strict conditions, which Martin Harris by solemn covenant was bound to fulfill: The translation might be shown to five people—Martin's brother, Preserved Harris, to Martin's wife, mother and father, and to his wife's sister, Mrs. Cobb. No other persons were to see the manuscript.⁷

But in his enthusiasm upon arriving home, Martin forgot his solemn pledge and showed the manuscript to unauthorized persons. In the resultant confusion it became lost, and he was unable to regain possession of it. A number of theories have been advanced as to the ultimate fate of the manuscript, but the manuscript has never been brought to light.

Joseph at this time was sorely in need of rest. Exhausted by long hours of translation and deeply worried by the serious illness of his wife and the death of a newborn son, he paid a short visit to his parents in Manchester.

When the overly long absent Martin Harris met Joseph there and apprised him of the loss of the manuscript, the scene which followed can only be imagined. Joseph, appalled by the enormity of the loss, wounded to the depths of his soul by the betrayal of his trust and the breaking

of the covenant by which Martin was bound, was also in utter spiritual darkness. He had incurred the displeasure of the Lord by his repeated importuning in behalf of Martin Harris. “The Prophet suffered the torments of the damned. . . . In the bitterness of his soul he feared to approach the Lord.”⁸

He was shortly thereafter rebuked and warned in the following revelation:

The works, and the designs, and the purposes of God cannot be frustrated, neither can they come to naught. . . .

Remember, remember, that it is not the work of God that is frustrated, but the work of men; . . .

Behold, you have been entrusted with these things, but how strict were your commandments; and remember also the promises which were made to you, if you did not transgress them.

And behold, how oft you have transgressed the commandments and the laws of God, and have gone on in the persuasions of men.

For, behold, you should not have feared man more than God. Although men set at naught the counsels of God, and despise his words—

Yet you should have been faithful; and he would have extended his arm and supported you against all the fiery darts of the adversary; and he would have been with you in every time of trouble.

Behold, thou art Joseph, and thou wast chosen to do the work of the Lord, but because of transgression, if thou art not aware thou wilt fall.

But remember, God is merciful; therefore repent of that which is contrary to the commandment which I gave you, and thou art still chosen, and art again called to the work;

Except thou do this, thou shalt be delivered up and become as other men, and have no more gift.

And when thou deliveredst up that which God had given thee sight and power to translate, thou deliveredst up that which was sacred into the hands of a wicked man,

Who has set at naught the counsels of God, and has broken the most sacred promises which were made before God, and has depended upon his own judgment, and boasted in his own wisdom.

And this is the reason thou hast lost thy privileges for a season— . . .

Nevertheless, my work shall go forth. (D. & C. 3:1, 3, 5-14, 16.)

Thus it is clear how grave was Martin's transgression in the sight of the Lord, and how his carelessness placed the Prophet's entire mission in jeopardy. “This was the most bitter lesson Joseph Smith ever received. It seemed necessary to prepare him for

the great responsibilities yet before him.”⁹

Shortly after this, both the plates and the Urim and Thummim, which had been taken from Joseph, were restored to him.

Besides failing to enlighten his immediate relatives—which was his purpose in begging for possession of the translation—Martin Harris now found himself discredited and humiliated. Suffering and remorse dogged his footsteps. Even the Spirit of the Lord was withdrawn. The separation from his wife and breaking up of his family soon followed.

Discord between Martin Harris and his wife, Lucy, grew with Martin's every contribution of time, labor, or money to the cause of the Church. Records bring to light the ironic fact that she was the first recorded donor¹⁰ of actual cash towards the translation of the Record, and the instigator¹¹ of the first legal proceedings against Joseph Smith, Jr.

On hearing that Joseph had received the plates she became much excited and insisted on seeing them, offering financial assistance in the translation, if only she could be assured of their authenticity. She could never accept Joseph's reason for not granting her whim: that the Lord had forbidden the plates to be shown to anyone save those whom he would later designate as witnesses. Repeatedly Lucy offered Joseph money, and repeatedly he refused it, at length being forced to state bluntly that he preferred to depend upon men rather than their wives for assistance. This incensed Lucy, for she considered herself superior to her husband; but it did not deter her. The next day she told of having seen the plates in a dream the night before and was convinced that Joseph was telling the truth. “I mean to help you anyway,” she exclaimed and gave him twenty-eight dollars. Joseph Smith, Jr., finally accepted this amount to silence her importunings.

Lucy pressed her advantage of having donated money and employed every subterfuge in efforts to view the plates and get copies of the translation from her husband. To this end she even enlisted the aid of a Mr.

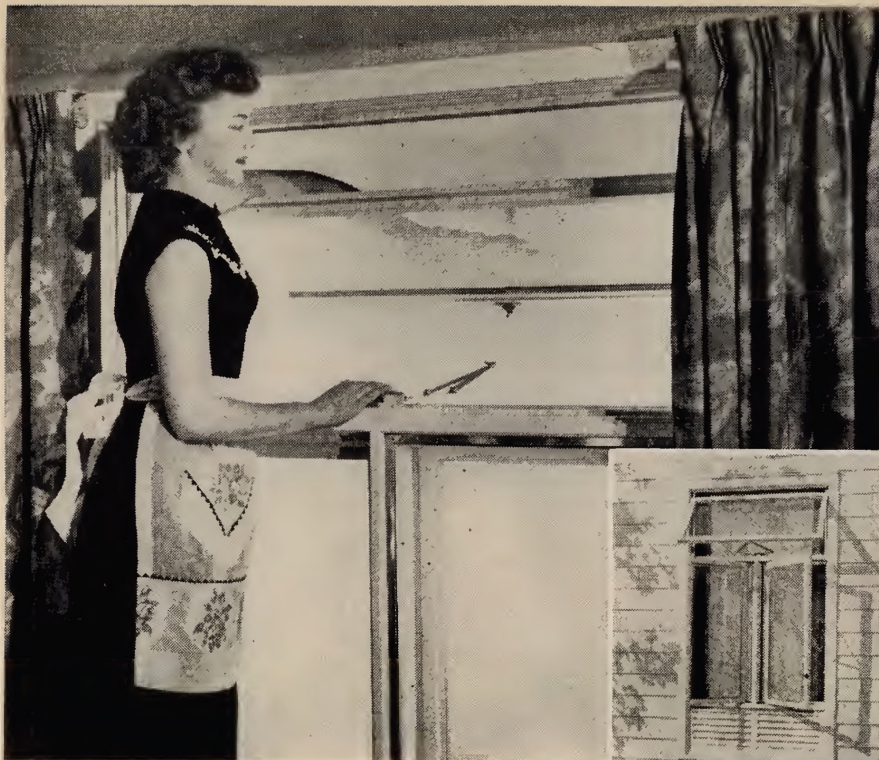
⁹Joseph Fielding Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

¹⁰Lucy Mack Smith, *op. cit.*, 112.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 132-134.

⁷*Documentary History of the Church*. (Salt Lake City, 1927) Vol. 1, p. 21.

⁸Joseph Fielding Smith, *Essentials in Church History* (Salt Lake City, 1950), p. 65.



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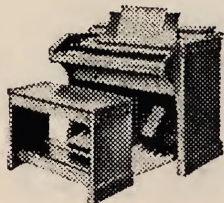
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PROVO

Martin Harris

(Continued from page 146)

Dikes, who was courting her daughter. Once she spent two uninvited weeks at the Joseph Smith, Jr., home in Pennsylvania, and with neighbors, ransacking the house and digging in the grounds in a vain attempt to find the plates.¹² It is understandable why domestic relations between Lucy and Martin became more strained with every passing week.

Early in August 1828, Mrs. Harris determined to prevent her husband from going to Harmony, Pennsylvania, to visit Joseph Smith, Jr., and Oliver Cowdery, who were progressing with the translation. When her attempts to satisfy her curiosity about the plates were frustrated, she resolved to hinder the work in every way possible. Not content with the damage caused by loss of the first 116 pages of translated manuscript, she sought to stir up ill-feeling around Palmyra and bring Joseph Smith, Jr., into disrepute. When sure of her ground, she entered a complaint against Joseph Smith, Jr., before a magistrate at Lyons, New York, charging him with attempting to defraud her husband out of his money and property. She signed an affidavit herself and directed the officers whom to subpoena as witnesses in the case. The Prophet's mother relates her anxiety at this time because: ". . . this was the first time a suit had ever been preferred before a court against any of my family."¹³

When court was called,

the witnesses being duly sworn, the first arose and testified, that Joseph Smith, Jr., had told him that the box which he had, contained nothing but sand; and he Joseph Smith said it was gold, to deceive the people.

Second witness swore, that Joseph Smith had told him that it was nothing but a box of lead, and he was determined to use it as he saw fit.

Third witness declared, that he once inquired of Joseph Smith what he had in that box, and Joseph Smith told him there was nothing at all in the box, saying that he had made fools of the whole of them, and all he wanted was to get Martin Harris's money away from him. . . .

Next came Mrs. Harris's affidavit in which she stated that she believed the chief object which Joseph Smith had in view, was to defraud her husband out of all his property, and that she did not believe that Joseph Smith had ever been in possession of the gold plates which he talked so much about.

¹²Lucy Mack Smith, *op. cit.*, 109-116.

¹³*Ibid.*, 133.

The magistrate then forbade the introduction of any more witnesses until Martin Harris should be sworn. Martin, being called upon, testified with boldness, decision and energy, to a few simple facts. When he arose he raised his hand to heaven, and said: "I can swear that Joseph Smith never has got one dollar from me by persuasion, since God made me. I did once, of my own own free will and accord, put fifty dollars into his hands, in the presence of many witnesses, for the purpose of doing the work of the Lord. This, I can pointedly prove; and I can tell you, furthermore, that I have never seen in Joseph Smith, a disposition to take any man's money without giving him a reasonable compensation for the same in return. And as to the plates which he professes to have, gentlemen, if you do not believe it, but continue to resist the truth, it will one day be the means of damning your souls."

After hearing this testimony, the magistrate told them they need not call any more witnesses, but ordered them to bring him what had been written of the testimony already given. This he tore in pieces before their eyes and told them to go home about their business, and trouble him no more with such ridiculous folly. And they did go home perfectly discomfited.¹⁴

Dissension between Lucy and Martin Harris mounted, finally resulting in separation. Martin left Lucy well-provided for. She was given a home near Palmyra and approximately eighty acres of choice farm land. An old Dominion law, still in effect in New York State at that time, made it unlawful for a man to deed property to his wife. Martin overcame this obstacle by deeding the land to his brother, Peter, who, on the same day, deeded it to Lucy, making the transference legal.¹⁵

Martin and Lucy Harris had three children, all born at Palmyra: Lucy, married Flanders Dikes; George W., killed in the Civil War, 1864; Duty L., died in infancy.

¹⁴Ibid., 132-134.

¹⁵Copy of this deed is in the Church archives.

(To be continued)

WONDER OF BOOKS

By Catherine E. Berry

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MARCH 1955



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