



Type: Magazine Article

"...publish it upon the mountains": The Story of Martin Harris, Chapter II

Author(s): William H. Homer, Jr.

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (April 1955), pp. 238-239. 244

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

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

SUCH events as followed the loss of the manuscript of the Book of Mormon would indeed constitute calamity in the life of an ordinary man. Martin Harris became so contrite in spirit and showed such a degree of humility that his transgressions were forgiven by the Prophet but not forgotten. Martin was reinstated in the good graces of Joseph Smith but not again intrusted to act as scribe.

Although he had received a remarkable testimony when he took the characters and translation to Professor Charles Anthon and Dr. Samuel L. Mitchell, and other testimonies in his close association with the Prophet, Martin Harris was periodically assailed by doubts. At this time he seems to have asked for further evidence that Joseph actually had the plates. The revelation given at Harmony in March 1829, indicated that if Martin Harris would humble himself he might become a witness to the Book of Mormon,

“...publish it upon the mountains”

THE STORY OF MARTIN HARRIS

by William H. Homer, Jr.

CHAPTER II

which he so earnestly desired; but if he did not humble himself, he would fall into transgression.

Seldom have conditions for obtaining a testimony been set forth more clearly; seldom has the promise of divine grace been more glorious, or the threat of punishment for lack of humility more explicit. How great was the patience of the Lord with Martin Harris!

During the course of the transla-

tion Joseph Smith had become friendly with the Whitmer family. Early in June 1829, David Whitmer came to Harmony and moved the Prophet to the Peter Whitmer home in Fayette, New York, where he resided until the translation was completed and the copyright secured.¹

As they neared the end of the record, excitement mounted in the Whitmer home, when Joseph Smith translated the following words of Moroni:

And behold, ye may be privileged that ye may show the plates unto those who shall assist to bring forth this work;

And unto three shall they be shown by the power of God; wherefore they shall know of a surety that these things are true.

And in the mouth of three witnesses shall these things be established; and the testimony of three, and this work . . . shall stand as a testimony against the world at the last day. (Ether 5:2-4. *Italics author's.*)

Joseph Smith recounts, “Almost immediately after we had made this discovery, it occurred to Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and the aforementioned Martin Harris (who had come to inquire after our progress in the work) that they would have me inquire of the Lord if they might not obtain of him the privilege to be these three special witnesses. . . . I complied.”²

The revelation contained in the Seventeenth Section of the Doctrine and Covenants ensued, promising them conditionally that they might not only view the plates but also other sacred relics mentioned in the Book of Mormon.

When the translation was finished about July 1, 1829,³ Joseph sent word to his parents, requesting them to come to him. Upon receipt of this message, the father and mother invited Martin Harris to accompany them. The Prophet's mother, ex-



Monument to the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon, one of the stately markers on Temple Square in Salt Lake City.

¹Documentary History of the Church (Salt Lake City, 1927), 1:49, 58.

²Ibid.

³Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America* (Independence, Mo. 1942), p. 30.

plaining the inclusion of Martin in their company, said, "For we loved the man, although his weakness had caused us much trouble."⁴

The morning after their arrival, following the customary devotions in the Whitmer home, Joseph Smith arose and said, "Martin Harris, you have got to humble yourself before God this day, that you may obtain forgiveness of your sins. If you do, it is the will of God that you should look upon the plates, in company with Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer."⁵

Accordingly, Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris retired to a secluded spot in the woods near the Whitmer home and engaged in earnest prayer. Joseph prayed first and the others in turn, according to agreement. When their prayers were twice repeated and still no manifestation received, Martin suggested that he leave the group; he felt that his presence might be the cause of their failure. He went farther into the woods, and the remaining three continued their humble supplication. Presently a light of great brilliancy appeared, and a heavenly Being stood before them. He held the plates in his hands and turned the pages before their eyes. The angel addressed himself to David Whitmer and said, "David, blessed is the Lord, and he that keeps his commandments." Immediately after this they heard a voice from out of the bright light above them, saying: "These plates have been revealed by the power of God, and they have been translated by the power of God. The translation of them which you have seen is correct, and I command you to bear record of what you now see and hear."

Joseph Smith then went in search of Martin Harris, whom he found in earnest prayer. Martin implored Joseph to join him, and they were soon rewarded by the identical manifestation which the others had witnessed—beheld the same scene and heard the same words. Martin Harris cried out in an ecstasy of joy, "'Tis enough! 'Tis enough! Mine eyes have beheld; mine eyes have beheld!" And jumping up, he shouted, "Hosanna," blessing God, and otherwise rejoicing exceedingly.⁶

The scene that followed their return to the Whitmer home is de-

scribed by the mother of the Prophet: "Joseph threw himself down beside me and exclaimed, 'Father, Mother, you do not know how happy I am: the Lord has now caused the plates to be shown to three more besides myself. They have seen an angel who has testified to them, and they will have to bear witness to the truth of what I have said; for now they know for themselves, that I do not go about to deceive the people, and I feel as if I was relieved of a burden which was almost too heavy for me to bear, and it rejoices my soul that I am not any longer to be entirely alone in the world.' Upon this, Martin Harris came in. He seemed almost overcome with joy. He testified boldly to what he had both seen and heard. And so did David and Oliver, adding that no tongue could express the joy in their hearts and the greatness of the things they had both seen and heard."⁷

Having thus, through the mercy of God, obtained these glorious manifestations these three individuals fulfilled the commandment which they had received, to bear record of these things, by drawing up and subscribing to the document found in every copy of the Book of Mormon.

Immediately following these events Joseph Smith began making arrangements for publishing the Book of Mormon. He arranged to obtain a copyright for the book, and Oliver Cowdery was instructed to make a copy for the use of the printer. Some printing firms positively refused to have anything to do with a book which dealt with God, angels, and devils. One, Thurlow Weed, publisher of the *Rochester Telegraph*, wrote

About 1829 a stout, round, smooth-faced young man between twenty-five and thirty, with the air and manners of a person without occupation, came into the *Rochester Telegraph* office and wanted a book published. . . .

He came again accompanied by Martin Harris (a substantial farmer residing in Palmyra), . . . who offered to become security for the expense of printing. But I again declined.⁸

Mr. Egbert B. Grandin of Palmyra, publisher of the *Wayne Sentinel*, who was personally acquainted with Martin Harris and his circumstances, tried repeatedly to dissuade Martin from his avowed intention of financing the proposed publication. Final-

ly, when Mr. Grandin found his advice to his friend disregarded, he accepted the manuscript for publication, upon Martin's assurance that \$3000.00 would be paid for 5000 copies of the book. A mortgage was given by Martin Harris on his farmland, guaranteeing payment of the obligation to the printer.

The printing of the Book of Mormon began in August 1829, but it did not come off the press until March 1830, after numerous delays and difficulties were overcome. During the course of the printing, agitation among the citizens of Palmyra aroused violent opposition. A meeting was held and a resolution was adopted pledging not to purchase the Book of Mormon when published and to influence others against purchasing it. This caused Mr. Grandin to suspend printing until Joseph Smith returned from Harmony, and, together with Martin Harris, gave renewed assurance that the amount promised would be paid.⁹

It was in March 1830—the month that the Book of Mormon came from the press and the payment was due—that the revelation contained in section nineteen of the Doctrine and Covenants was given to Martin Harris through Joseph Smith. The first twelve verses were extremely important in that they declared, even before the Church was legally organized, some gospel fundamentals which were contrary to beliefs then taught by its Christian sects of the day.

Beginning with the thirteenth verse, Martin Harris was specifically commanded to repent and to preach repentance, to refrain from sin, to give liberally for the purpose of enabling Joseph Smith to have the Book of Mormon released. The Lord warned Martin that this was the last word regarding payment for the printing of the Book of Mormon—that he would be miserable if he failed to obey, but blessed if he complied. He was admonished and warned against his weaknesses and given specific instructions:

Wherefore, I command you to repent, and keep the commandments which you have received by the hand of my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., * * *

. . . I command thee that thou shalt not covet thine own property, but impart it freely to the printing of the Book of Mormon, which contains the truth and the word of God— . . .

⁹B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church* (Salt Lake City, 1930), I:161 ff.

⁴Lucy Mack Smith, *History of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, 1902), p. 138.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶D. H. C., *op. cit.*, I:54-55.

⁷Lucy Mack Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

⁸E. Cecil McGavin, *Cumorah's Gold Bible* (Salt Lake City, 1948), pp. 246-247.

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And thou shalt declare glad tidings, yea, publish it upon the mountains, and upon every high place, and among every people that thou shalt be permitted to see.

And thou shalt do it with all humility, trusting in me, reviling not against revilers. . . .

And misery thou shalt receive if thou wilt slight these counsels, yea, even the destruction of thyself and property.

Impart a portion of thy property, yea, even a part of thy lands, . . .

Pay the debt thou hast contracted with the printer. Release thyself from bondage. (D. & C. 19:13, 26, 29-30, 33-35.)

Elder John D. Giles, business manager of THE IMPROVEMENT ERA, spent three years in on-the-spot investigations and research in the historically important localities of Palmyra and Kirtland. Here he searched court records, interviewed the oldest residents, and obtained a vast treasure of information pertinent to the early history of the Church.

He learned much about the life and activities of Martin Harris. He has confirmed as fact that Martin Harris was a man of considerable wealth and could have paid three thousand dollars without embarrassment, had he so chosen. Instead, he dickered and bargained and handled the transaction in his own way. Belatedly he arranged for the money to be paid the printer, all right, but not in the straightforward way he was commanded to do by the Lord.

Note the exact language of the revelation addressed directly to Martin Harris, given at Manchester in March 1830:

And again I command thee that thou shalt not covet thine own property, but impart it freely to the printing of the Book of Mormon, which contains the truth and the word of God—

Impart a portion of thy property, yea, even part of thy lands, and all save the support of thy family.

Pay the debt thou hast contracted with the printer. Release thyself from bondage. . . . (D. & C. 19:26, 34-35.)

From this it is apparent that Martin Harris had other properties besides his farm lands, and it was only *part* of his *land* he was called upon to impart for financing the publication of the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Mormon came off the press in late March 1830. Mr. Grandin, the printer, held a mortgage on approximately two hundred forty acres of farm land given by Martin Harris as security for the payment of the cost of printing—\$3000.00.

Mr. Grandin would not release the books until payment in full was made. Martin Harris contacted a friend—one Thomas Rogers II—whom he persuaded to purchase the mortgage note. The printer was paid the full amount. A satisfactory agreement for reimbursement was arrived at between Martin Harris and Mr. Rogers whereby enough of the mortgaged land was sold to satisfy the obligation.¹⁰

Martin Harris disposed of his farm lands and properties at Palmyra over a period of fifteen years. When he moved to Kirtland, Ohio, he accumulated extensive holdings, and for a time prospered financially; but when he withdrew from the Church and joined in the activities of dissenters, his worldly possessions gradually slipped from his grasp until they entirely and completely disappeared.

Herein we see the literal fulfillment of the words of the Lord as foretold in the warnings given to Martin Harris:

And misery thou shalt receive if thou wilt slight these counsels, yea, even the destruction of thyself and property. (D. & C. 19:33.)

After the Book of Mormon was published, Martin Harris paid a second visit to Professor Anthon in New York City. The rebuff with which his first visit to the famed scholar had met rankled in his memory. Martin was now equipped with the material evidence to prove the learned man had been mistaken when he declared there was no such thing now as ministering angels. He had with him a printed volume of the Book of Mormon, which he first offered to sell to the professor, and when this offer was refused, he proffered the volume gratis.

Martin was then told very bluntly and with vehemence to depart and take his book with him—if he persisted in leaving it, the book would be thrown after him.¹¹ Here again Martin was acting in character, proving his persistence and determination, as would have been expected of him. Probably he had in mind Doctrine and Covenants, Section 5:18: “And their testimony [that of the three witnesses] shall also go forth unto the condemnation of this generation if

they harden their hearts against them.”

On one occasion, after he had moved to Ohio, Martin Harris was in the company of a number of acquaintances who attempted to get him intoxicated. They plied him with wine until they thought his tongue was properly loosened, then said to him, “Martin, you are one of us. We are old friends and acquaintances, and we are distressed to see the course you are following with these Mormons. Now please tell us frankly that it is all a mistake, that you do not believe what you have signed your name to.” Martin’s reply was, “No, gentlemen, I do not believe it.” Whereupon his hearers were elated. But their pleasure was short-lived. Martin hesitated just long enough for his answer to impress them fully, then he continued, “No gentlemen, I do not believe it. It has become a matter of knowledge with me. Belief has been swallowed up in absolute knowledge that what I have testified to is the truth.”¹²

Practically all of our Church history commentators have been loath to criticize Martin Harris. They have taken the charitable view that his praiseworthy deeds so overbalanced his indiscretions, that the latter are deserving of scant comment. Indeed, Joseph Smith himself set the example; he was slow to condemn and quick to forgive Martin’s missteps. Brigham Young’s attitude was the same. He was generous in his praise of Martin’s good works and maintained a stony silence regarding his transgressions.

Elder Giles voices a realistic view, in which I concur, based upon all the information I have been able to assemble.

He characterizes Martin Harris as “one of the most stubborn men in the Church.” This was fortunate for the Prophet. When Martin’s family, friends, and business associates turned against him for his association with and support of Joseph Smith, they were unable to swerve him from his purpose. While his stubbornness caused him much difficulty at times and finally took him away from the Church for a time, it served the purpose of carrying him through troublesome times in the early days of the Church.

(To be continued)

¹⁰The above incidents regarding the payment of the debt contracted for the printing of the first edition of the Book of Mormon were given to me by Elder Giles.

¹¹Kirkham, *op. cit.*, p. 370.

¹²Cited in Preston Nibley, *Witnesses of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, 1953), p. 133.