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## Direct External Evidences - The Testimony of the Three Witnesses

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## CHAPTER XV:

### DIRECT EXTERNAL EVIDENCES.

#### THE TESTIMONY OF THE THREE WITNESSES.

*In the mouth of two or three Witnesses shall every word be established.—Paul.*

Of the external evidences to the truth of the Book of Mormon, the testimony of the Three Witnesses is of first importance. Speaking in the way of prophecy the first Nephite says:

At that day, when the book shall be delivered unto the man of whom I have spoken,<sup>a</sup> the book shall be hid from the eyes of the world, that none shall behold it save it be that Three Witnesses shall behold it by the power of God, besides him to whom the book shall be delivered;<sup>b</sup> and they shall testify to the truth of the book and the things therein. And there is none other which shall view it, save it be a few according to the will of God, to bear testimony of his word unto the children of men; for the Lord God hath said, that the words of the faithful should speak as if it were from the dead. Wherefore the Lord God will proceed to bring forth the words of the book; and in the mouth of as many witnesses as seemeth him good, will he establish his word; and wo be unto him that rejecteth the word of God.<sup>c</sup>

Moroni, who had in his care the Book of Mormon, who was God's messenger to Joseph Smith, and gave into his possession the gold plates from which the book was trans-

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<sup>a</sup>Having reference to the man who should bring forth the Nephite Record to the world, that is, to Joseph Smith.

<sup>b</sup>That is, Joseph Smith.

<sup>c</sup>II. Nephi ch. xxvii: 12-14.

lated, says, in his abridgment of the book of Ether, addressing the one who should be commissioned to translate the Nephite Record:

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, in the which shall be shown forth the power of God, and also his word, of which the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost beareth record—and all this shall stand as a testimony against the world at the last day.<sup>d</sup>

From these passages in the Book of Mormon itself, it appears that there are to be two classes of special Witnesses to its truth, besides the one who shall bring forth the book:

I. Three Witnesses who shall behold the plates of the record “by the power of God.”

II. A “Few” others, according to the will of God, shall behold them, that they may bear testimony to the word of God unto the children of men.

There seems to be indicated this distinction between the first and second class of these Witnesses—between the “Three” and the other “Few:” the first are to see the plates under some circumstance attended by a demonstration of the power of God; while no promise of such a demonstration is given to the second class.

As these special Witnesses, according to the prophecy, were to be chosen from among those who would assist in bringing forth the work, meaning the Book of Mormon, it is not surprising that Oliver Cowdery, David Witmer and Martin Harris desired to be the Three Special Witnesses,

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<sup>d</sup>Ether ch. v: 2-4. .

as they were most prominent in assisting to bring forth the work. They besought the Prophet Joseph Smith, therefore, to inquire of the Lord if they might attain unto this honor, and for an answer the following revelation was received for them:

Behold, I say unto you, that you must rely upon my word, which, if you do with full purpose of heart, you shall have a view of the plates, and also the breast plate, the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim, which were given to the brother of Jared<sup>e</sup> upon the mount when he talked with the Lord face to face, and the miraculous directors<sup>f</sup> which were given to Lehi while in the wilderness on the border of the Red Sea; and it is by your faith that you shall obtain a view of them, even by that faith which was had by the prophets of old.

And after you have obtained faith, and have seen them with your eyes, you shall testify of them by the power of God; and this you shall do that my servant Joseph Smith may not be destroyed, that I may bring about my righteous purposes unto the children of men in this work. And ye shall testify that you have seen them, even as my servant Joseph Smith, Jr., has seen them; for it is by my power that he has seen them, and it is because he had faith; and he has translated the book, even that part which I have commanded him; and as your Lord and your God liveth, it is true.

Wherefore, you have received the same power, and the same faith, and the same gift like unto him; and if you do these last commandments of mine, which I have given you, the gates of

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<sup>e</sup>The great prophet who led a colony from the Tower of Babel to the western hemisphere.

<sup>f</sup>This was a curious instrument called by the Nephites "Liahona." It was found by the prophet Lehi at the door of his tent one morning, in the wilderness, not long after the departure of his colony from Jerusalem. It was a round ball of fine brass with two spindles in it, one of which indicated the course to be traveled by the colony. But the instrument worked according to the faith and diligence with which the colony gave heed to it. From time to time also there appeared upon it written instructions or reproofs according as the colony required the one or the other.

hell shall not prevail against you for my grace is sufficient for you and you shall be lifted up at the last day. And I, Jesus Christ, your Lord, and your God, have spoken it unto you, that I might bring about my righteous purposes unto the children of men.<sup>g</sup>

As soon as the translation of the book was completed the Prophet Joseph dispatched a messenger from the home of the Whitmers, at Fayette, near Waterloo, in Seneca county, to his parents, still living at Manchester, with the pleasing intelligence that the work of translation was completed, and asked them to come to him. This information they conveyed to Martin Harris, who determined to accompany the Prophet's parents to the home of the Whitmers. Accordingly the little party started the next morning, and before sunset met with the Prophet and Oliver at the residence of Peter Whitmer, the father of David.<sup>h</sup> According to the statement of Lucy Smith, mother of the Prophet, it was the day following the arrival of the above party from Manchester that the Three Witnesses obtained their view of the plates, but neither in her work nor in any of our annals is the date of the occurrence given.<sup>i</sup> Lucy Smith, however, relates the following circumstance connected with Martin Harris becoming one of the Three Witnesses:

The next morning (i. e. following the arrival of the party from Manchester), after attending to the usual services, namely, reading from the scriptures, singing, and praying, Joseph arose from his knees, and approaching Martin Harris with a solemnity that thrills through my veins to this day, when it occurs to my recollection, said: Martin Harris, you have got to humble yourself before your God this day, that you may obtain a forgive-

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<sup>g</sup>History of the Church, Vol. I., p. 53, and also Doc. and Cov., Sec. xvii

<sup>h</sup>History of the Prophet Joseph (by Lucy Smith) ch. xxxi.

<sup>i</sup>Ibid.



ness 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.<sup>j</sup>

When the pride, egotism, and stubbornness of Martin Harris is taken into account, this preliminary admonition of the Prophet to him is eminently fitting and necessary and in harmony with all the circumstances of Martin's character and the subsequent facts to be related.

Lucy Smith, continuing her narrative, says:

In a few minutes after this, Joseph, Oliver, and David, repaired to a grove, a short distance from the house, where they commenced calling upon the Lord and continued in earnest supplication, until he permitted an angel to come down from his presence and declare to them, that all Joseph testified of concerning the plates was true. When they returned to the house, it was between three and four o'clock p. m. Mrs. Whitmer, Mr. Smith and myself were sitting in a bedroom at the time. On coming in 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 work. Upon this Martin Harris came in: he seemed almost overcome with joy, and testified boldly to what he had both seen and heard. And so did David and Oliver, adding, that no tongue could express the joy of their hearts, and the greatness of the things which they had both seen and heard.<sup>k</sup>

From this statement it will be seen that the Prophet and the Three Witnesses were from some time in the morning

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<sup>j</sup>Joseph Smith, the Prophet (by Lucy Smith) ch. xxxi.

<sup>k</sup>Joseph Smith, the Prophet (by Lucy Smith) ch. xxxi.

until three or four o'clock in the afternoon in obtaining the testimonies.

The Prophet's own account of the circumstances attendant upon the revelation to the Three Witnesses, is both interesting and important. After making reference to the revelation already quoted, which promised the three men named, Cowdery, Whitmer and Harris, that they should view the plates of the Book of Mormon, and the other sacred things named, the Prophet in his history says:

Not many days after the above commandment was given, we four, viz., Martin Harris, David Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery and myself agreed to retire into the woods, and try to obtain by fervent and humble prayer the fulfillment of the promises given in the revelation, that they should have a view of the plates, etc. We accordingly made choice of a piece of woods convenient to Mr. Whitmer's house, to which we retired, and having knelt down we began to pray in much faith to Almighty God to bestow upon us a realization of these promises. According to previous arrangements, I commenced by vocal prayer to our heavenly Father, and was followed by each of the rest in succession. We did not, however, obtain any answer or manifestation of the divine favor in our behalf. We again observed the same order of prayer, each calling on and praying fervently to God in rotation, but with the same result as before. Upon this our second failure, Martin Harris proposed that he should withdraw himself from us, believing, as he expressed himself, that his presence was the cause of our not obtaining what we wished for; he accordingly withdrew from us, and we knelt down again, and had not been many minutes engaged in prayer, when presently we beheld a light above us in the air of exceeding brightness; and, behold, an angel stood before us; in his hands he held the plates which we had been praying for these to have a view of, he turned over the leaves one by one, so that we could see them and discover the engravings thereon distinctly. He then addressed himself to David Whitmer, and said, "David, blessed is the Lord, and he that keeps his commandments." When immediately afterwards, we heard a voice from

out of the bright light-above us, 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."

I now left David and Oliver, and went in pursuit of Martin Harris, whom I found at a considerable distance fervently engaged in prayer. He soon told me, however, that he had not yet prevailed with the Lord, and earnestly requested me to join him in prayer, that he also might realize the same blessings which we had just received. We accordingly joined in prayer, and ultimately obtained our desires, for before we had yet finished, the same vision was opened to our view, at least it was again to me, and I once more beheld and heard the same things, whilst at the moment Martin Harris cried out, apparently in ecstasy of joy, "'Tis enough; mine eyes have beheld," and jumping up, he shouted hosannah, blessing God and otherwise rejoiced exceedingly.<sup>1</sup>

Concerning the manner in which the plates and other sacred things were shown to him, beyond what is stated in the testimony of the Three Witnesses published in the first and every subsequent edition of the Book of Mormon, Oliver Cowdery, so far as I know, has left nothing on record further than to say:

I beheld with my eyes and handled with my hands the gold plates from which it (the Book of Mormon) was transcribed. I also saw with my eyes and handled with my hands the holy interpreters (the Urim and Thummim.)<sup>m</sup>

Martin Harris, so far as any direct personal statement is concerned, is silent as to the manner in which the plates were shown to him; but Elder Edward Stevenson, of the

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<sup>1</sup>History of the Church, Vol. I., pp. 54, 55.

<sup>m</sup>Statement by Oliver Cowdery, Deseret News of 13th April, 1859.



First Council of the Seventy of the Church, who was much interested in Mr. Harris during the closing years of that gentleman's life, states that at a gathering of friends at his (Stevenson's) house, in Salt Lake City, Harris was asked to explain the manner in which the plates containing the characters of the Book of Mormon were exhibited. The response he made is thus described:

Brother Harris, said that the angel stood on the opposite side of the table on which were the plates, the interpreters, etc., and took the plates in his hand and turned them over. To more fully illustrate this to them, Brother Martin took up a book and turned the leaves over one by one. The angel declared that the Book of Mormon was correctly translated by the power of God, and not of man, and that it contained the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Nephites, who were a branch of the House of Israel and had come from the land of Jerusalem to America. The Witnesses were required to bear their testimony of these things, and of this open vision, to all people, and he [Harris] testified not only to those present, but to all the world, that these things were true, and before God, whom he expected to meet in the day of judgment, he lied not."

David Whitmer made a statement to Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith in the course of an interview at Richmond, Missouri, on the 7th of September, 1878, in which he gives quite a minute description of the manner in which the plates and the other sacred things were shown to himself and Oliver Cowdery in the presence of Joseph Smith. Mr. Whitmer's account of the event as related by Elders Pratt and Smith is as follows:

Elder Orson Pratt: Do you remember what time you saw the plates?

David Whitmer: It was in June, 1829—the latter part of the

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"Letters of Edward Stevenson to Mill. Star, Vol. XLVIII., pp. 367-389.

month, and the Eight Witnesses saw them, I think, the next day or the day after (i. e. one or two days after). Joseph showed them the plates himself, but the angel showed us (the Three Witnesses the plates, as I suppose) to fulfill the words of the book itself. Martin Harris was not with us at this time; he obtained a view of them afterwards (the same day). Joseph, Oliver and myself were together when I saw them. We not only saw the plates of the Book of Mormon, but also the brass plates, the plates of the Book of Ether, the plates containing the records of the wickedness and secret combinations of the people of the world down to the time of their being engraved, and many other plates. The fact is, it was just as though Joseph, Oliver and I were sitting just here on a log, when we were overshadowed by a light. It was not like the light of the sun nor like that of a fire, but more glorious and beautiful. It extended away round us, I cannot tell how far, but in the midst of this light about as far off as he sits (pointing to John C. Whitmer, sitting a few feet from him), there appeared, as it were, a table with many records or plates upon it, besides the plates of the Book of Mormon, also the sword of Laban the directors—i. e., the ball which Lehi had, and the interpreters. I saw them just as plain as I see this bed (striking the bed beside him with his hand), and I heard the voice of the Lord, as distinctly as I ever heard anything in my life, declaring that the records of the plates of the Book of Mormon were translated by the gift and power of God.

Elder Orson Pratt: Did you see the angel at this time?

David Whitmer: Yes, he stood before us. Our testimony as recorded in the Book of Mormon is strictly and absolutely true just as it is there written.<sup>o</sup>

As a result of this revelation, given under such remarkable circumstances and demonstrations of the power of God, the Three Witnesses who had viewed the plates and the engravings thereon, and who had heard the voice of God from the midst of the glorious light surrounding them at the

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<sup>o</sup>Mill. Star, Vol. XL., Nos. 49, 50, report of Pratt and Smith, is signed by them and bears date of Sept. 17th, 1878.

time declare that the plates had been translated by the gift and power of God—published the following statement to the world:

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 shewn 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

This testimony was published in the first and in every subsequent edition of the Book of Mormon. It has never been refuted. From the very nature of the testimony it cannot be refuted. No one can rise up and say these men did not receive this revelation; that they did not see an angel from heaven; that he did not show to them the plates; that they did not see the glorious light in which the angel stood; that they did not hear the voice of God saying that the translation of the record was true, and was accomplished through the gift and power of God. No one can say any one of these things. An argument may be formulated against the probability of such an occurrence. It may be alleged that they were ignorant, uncritical, incompetent and therefore unworthy of belief. All this may be done, nay, it has been done; but no one can stand up and say that he knows what they say is not true, that what they say they saw, they did not see.