



Type: Magazine Article

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## L.D.S. Church History, Lesson 5: Witnesses

Editor(s): Belle S. Spafford

Source: *Relief Society Magazine*, Vol. 26, No. 11 (November 1939),  
pp. 799–801

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

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**Abstract:** No abstract available.

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# Mission Lessons

## L. D. S. CHURCH HISTORY

### Lesson 5

### Witnesses

**H**AVE you ever stopped to think how it is that you come to believe certain things which you have not yourself actually experienced in some way?

Of course, what we experience we accept as true. There is nothing else that we can do about it. Experience is the only way in which we can really know anything. That is, we see or hear or feel or taste or smell something, and we may then truly say that we know it, instead of merely that we believe it. A great deal of what we accept in our lives comes to us in this way.

But there are many things that we accept on the testimony of others. That is the way we put it. Someone tells us that a certain thing happened to him, and we accept that as true—unless, of course, we have reason to believe it to be unlikely or untrue. For someone else may have an experience which we have never had, and we are not safe in saying that he either did or did not have that experience. It will surprise you if you try to find out the number of things in your life which you accept on the mere say-so of other people.

Historians will tell you, if you ask them, that every event in the past can be proved or disproved by the testimony of eye or ear witnesses. We cannot go back, say, to the time of George Washington in America or to the time of Alfred the Great in

England, to see and hear things for ourselves. The best that we can do is to study what people in those times said or wrote about what happened. Now, when we do actually make a study of a letter or a diary or some other document that comes to us out of the past, we subject it to a certain test. The test set up by a very wise historian is this: Was the writer of that letter, journal, or what-not able, and was he willing, to tell the truth? If he was, we accept the document as the truth.

You may remember having read in St. Matthew (18:16) the advice of Jesus to persons who offend each other: "If he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." This rule applies even to miracles. For even a miracle is witnessed by someone, if it is a miracle at all.

**H**ERE, then, is the *Book of Mormon*. It did not write itself. Someone wrote it. Who was that someone?

Joseph Smith says that he did not write it—that is, that he did not make it up out of his head, as Hawthorne composed the *Scarlet Letter* or Scott *Ivanhoe*. He tells us, as we have seen, that he translated it by means of the urim and thummim from some gold plates given him by a heavenly messenger, who was a resurrected person.

That is quite an unusual statement to make. To believe Joseph's story, we must believe several important things. We must believe that this heavenly messenger was a real angel. We must accept the resurrection as a fact. We must believe in the actual existence of the gold plates, of the urim and thummim, and of the ancient breastplate. And we must believe that an unschooled boy, through the power of God, could be able to read, to understand, and to translate a language which he had never studied. All this we must accept if we are to believe in the *Book of Mormon*.

Now, many people there are today who find it hard to believe such things. Hence, they ask that we give them some evidence that these things are true.

Well, we have just such evidence. We have eleven men who say that they saw the gold plates, that they handled them, and that they examined the engravings on the leaves. And we have three men who declare, in addition, that they saw the angel Moroni, and that they heard the voice of God "bearing testimony" that the translation was correct.

Do you know that we do not have a single witness to any event in the Bible—outside the one who tells it? Paul had a vision of Jesus after the resurrection. There were others with him at the time, but these have left us nothing by way of testimony. What would we not give now for a bit of confirmation of Paul's statements! Yet, the whole Christian world today accepts without question his account of the great vision.

**S**UPPOSE you turn now to the fly-leaf of the *Book of Mormon* and

read aloud the testimony of the Eight Witnesses.

The names of these eight men are: Christian Whitmer, Jacob Whitmer, Peter Whitmer, Jr., John Whitmer, Hiram Page, Joseph Smith, Sr., Hyrum Smith, and Samuel H. Smith. Three of them, as you will see, belong to the Smith family and four to the Whitmer family. Page was a son-in-law of Peter Whitmer, Sr. The reason why others were not chosen as witnesses is that there were no others. But the fact of the relationship of the witnesses is nothing against their testimony.

You will notice that the testimony of these eight men is to a matter-of-fact showing of the gold plates. They were shown the plates by Joseph Smith, Jr. They "hefted" the plates, which had "the appearance of gold." This is a careful statement, as you see. The men were anxious to tell the facts only as they saw things. Then, too, they "handled with our hands as many of the leaves as the said Smith has translated." That is a careful statement, also. This scene took place in the woods. There was nothing miraculous about this showing of the gold plates. It was as if a group of men were passing around among them any other object which they had never seen before.

Turn now to the testimony of the Three Witnesses, and read it aloud. These three men tell us (1) that they saw the angel, (2) that they saw the golden book, (3) that they looked at the engravings on the plates, and (4) that they heard the "voice of God" declaring that the book had been translated by "the



power of God." This was a miraculous scene, a vision.

The question now is, What about the testimony of these eleven men in confirmation of Joseph Smith's story? How does it measure up to the test of a witness?

**L**ET us look for a moment at the character and the possible motives of these men.

Oliver Cowdery was a school teacher. Later he studied law and was a district attorney in the State of Michigan. He was, therefore, rather well educated. David Whitmer was a farmer, first in New York and then in Missouri. All his life he was respected by those who knew him. Martin Harris was a well-to-do farmer in Palmyra, and, until he became a witness, was highly regarded by his neighbors. The Smiths and the Whitmers among these witnesses were also farmers. Hiram Page was an herb doctor. Except in their connection with Mormonism nothing has ever been said against the character of any of them.

Some people, as you may know, are inclined to be imaginative. That was not so of these men. Always they were sober, industrious, Christian. There is, therefore, no reason to believe that they were making up this testimony to the existence of the gold plates. Besides, they had no motive to do so. They had nothing to gain. Indeed, they had much to lose—and did lose. For they were reviled, scorned, and persecuted because of their testimony.

Although some of the eleven left the Church, not one of them ever hinted a denial of their testimony. If they had entered upon an agreement with the Prophet to say what they did, they would most certainly have broken that agreement when they became offended with him. To the very last day of their lives they persisted in saying that they were not deceived or deceiving when they spoke of the plates or the angel or the engravings.

One thing more: In this case everyone may know for himself whether these men were telling the truth or not. They may know "by the power of the Holy Ghost". Moroni says that, in the *Book of Mormon* itself (Moroni 10:4, 5). Read it.

### Questions

1. How do we know anything? How is it that we believe others' statements? What is the test of a witness?
2. Tell the main items in the testimony of the Eight Witnesses. In the testimony of the Three Witnesses.
3. Give as many details as you can about these Eleven. What had they to gain by telling an untruth? By telling the truth? Why, then, should they be believed?
4. How may anyone know the truth of these testimonies?

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Note: Map printed in July issue of the *Magazine* is to be used in teaching Church History lessons.