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The Smiths Who Handled the Plates

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Abstract: This article presents many of the Smiths that were witnesses of the gold plates, including Emma Smith, Lucy Mack Smith, William Smith, Joseph Smith, Sr., Hyrum Smith, and Samuel Harrison Smith.



Hiram Smith

Lucy Mack Smith

Emma Smith

THE SMITHS WHO HANDLED THE PLATES

By Dr. Richard Lloyd Anderson

Illustrated by Lynn Freeman

● The first believers in the Book of Mormon were members of Joseph Smith's family. But if three of the eight witnesses were Smiths and the remaining ones in the Whitmer group, it does not follow that family relationship explains away their testimony. The truth of the Book of Mormon story is better attested by those who knew its events personally than by strangers to these proceedings. Including married partners, the Smiths and Whitmers comprised about two dozen adults, none of whom expressed less than complete faith in the genuineness of the translation process.

Like the resurrection appearances of the New Testament, there are unofficial witnesses surrounding those more formally designated. Mother Whitmer reported seeing the plates, and Mother Smith described handling two of the ancient objects found with the plates. Two others reported their physical impressions of handling the ancient record while it was wrapped in a protective covering. Emma, Joseph's wife, felt the thin edges of the record as she moved it in dusting,¹ and Joseph's brother William both felt its shape and lifted the record, estimating the weight at about sixty pounds.²

The three Smiths who formally gave their names as seeing and handling the plates were the Prophet's father, Joseph Smith, Sr.; the Prophet's immediately older brother, Hyrum; and his immediately younger brother, Samuel Harrison. They sometimes joined the other Book of Mormon witnesses to reaffirm their testimony printed in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon regarding lifting and turning the leaves of the plates. After quoting the published statements of the three and eight witnesses, and describing the experience of the latter group, Lucy Smith relates, "The ensuing evening, we held a meeting, in which all the witnesses bore testimony to the facts as stated above. . . ."³ Two years later, in the period of dynamic preaching of the early elders, a conference was held near Cleveland, Ohio, remembered by Luke Johnson as follows: "At this conference the eleven witnesses to the Book of Mormon, with uplifted hands, bore their solemn testimony to the truth of that book, as did also the Prophet Joseph."⁴

A study of the Smith witnesses must stress deeds more than words. Modest and unaffected, these men left few formal statements, but above all they lived consistently

with their commitment to Christian principles and modern revelation. Although not parading their printed testimony, they personally sacrificed for their convictions. Their sincerity is powerful evidence for the existence of the Book of Mormon plates and more. The father and the two brothers nearest Joseph's age constantly lived and worked with him, and from this intimate vantage point completely accepted his report of his visions.

Hyrum and Samuel Smith had joined the Presbyterian Church with their mother, who later related the visit of a church committee to persuade them to abandon their convictions about the Book of Mormon then being printed. The chief spokesman believed that "Joseph never had the plates," and asked Hyrum if he did not think himself deceived. The witness answered simply, "No sir, I do not." After unsatisfactory attempts to break down his story, similar questions were directed to Samuel, who defied his interrogators with scripture about false shepherds.⁵ Local church records confirm the conversation, since they refer to the visit of the committee, which reported that they "received no satisfaction" from talking with Lucy, Hyrum,



and Samuel Smith.⁶ The result was suspension from Presbyterian membership, a symptom of the ostracism inflicted by their community for their faith in the Book of Mormon.

In the face of ridicule and intimidation, the 22-year-old Samuel Smith took copies of the new scripture to neighboring regions of western New York right after the Church was organized in April 1830. Phineas Young later recalled the blend of humility and conviction with which the Prophet's younger brother presented the Book of Mormon. Without introduction, Samuel handed a book to Phineas with the request that he read it. Finding that it claimed to be a revelation, Phineas took the book from Samuel, "and by his request looked at the testimony of the witnesses." The missionary then promised his investigator a witness from God if he would read the book prayerfully. Upon agreeing that he would, Phineas asked the name of the missionary, who only then identified himself as Samuel H. Smith. Young reported the closing words of this conversation: "'Ah,' said I, 'You are one of the witnesses.' 'Yes,' said he, 'I know the book to be a revelation from God, translated by the gift and power of the Holy Ghost, and that

my brother Joseph Smith, Jr., is a Prophet, Seer and Revelator.'"⁷

It is doubtful whether anyone exceeded Samuel Smith's record of active missionary service during the earliest years of the latter-day Church. Moving with the Saints to Ohio in 1831, he left a characteristically concise record of a two-month mission with Reynolds Cahoon in the counties around Cleveland, in which he summarized his own preaching: "I spoke of the testimony which the Lord had given to the people of this generation of his work, the fulness of the gospel, his everlasting covenant, and bore testimony of these things."⁸ Scores of converts accepted the personal assurance of this plain-spoken youth who had known the events of the restoration from the beginning.

Samuel Smith's best-documented mission is one mentioned in the Doctrine and Covenants, which instructed him and Orson Hyde to "take their journey into the eastern countries, and proclaim the things which I have commanded them."⁹ Both men kept journals indicating that the presentation and testimony of the Book of Mormon was one of the major themes of their preaching. The witness was ridiculed periodically for his simple reiteration of his testimony: "The people gathered around us and asked a great many questions about the plates, etc., and many of them used much lightness."¹⁰ Daniel Tyler was converted as a result of this mission and later recalled the missionary visit to Erie County, Pennsylvania:

"In the spring of 1832, Elders Samuel H. Smith and Orson Hyde . . . came to our neighborhood and held a few meetings. Elder Smith read the 29th chapter of Isaiah at the first meeting and delineated the circumstances of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, of which he said he was a witness. He knew his brother Joseph had the plates,

for the prophet had shown them to him, and he had handled them and seen the engravings thereon. His speech was more like a narrative than a sermon."¹¹

Anyone who studies the personality of Samuel H. Smith must admit that he is not likely to have invented such testimony. A dutiful son, loyal brother, and kindly father, his life is the essence of sincerity. Of sufficient capacity to be named to the first high council of the Church in 1834, and be elected by his fellow councilors as president in 1837, yet Samuel was not ambitious. When not in arduous missionary service, he farmed or hired out as a laborer. In Nauvoo he was named a bishop and was elected a city alderman. This public success marks a deep respect for him based on his character, not cleverness. His missionary companion called him "a man slow of speech and unlearned, yet a man of good faith and extreme integrity."¹² His patriarch-father blessed him as "loved of the Lord" because of his "faithfulness and truth."¹³ Samuel H. Smith's inner motivation is best revealed in the minutes of an early speech, indicating that "ever since he had set out to serve the Lord he had concluded not to regard the favor of man but the favor of heaven."¹⁴ The consistency of his testimony and the evident honesty of the man sustain the reality of his experience of handling the plates.

The same may be said of the Prophet's father for similar reasons. A deeply religious and humble man, Joseph Smith, Sr., was not a person who exaggerated his worth. One of his few personal statements was recorded at the crest of his service to the Church, his intense patriarchal ministry of giving blessings at Kirtland. One meets the man himself in this address to his family, just prior to blessing them in 1834. Although he had always held family scripture reading and

“Young Joe (as we called him then)... was a good worker; they were... poor people”

prayer, he referred to his earlier life when the Smiths were unable to agree on the validity of any church:

“I have not always set that example before my family that I ought. I have not been diligent in teaching them the commandments of the Lord, but have rather manifested a light and trifling mind. But in all this I have never denied the Lord. Notwithstanding all this my folly, which has been a cause of grief to my family, the Lord has often visited me in visions and in dreams, and has brought me, with my family, through many afflictions, and I this day thank his holy name.”¹⁵

One so truthful about himself would not likely be a party to a religious hoax. Joseph Smith, Sr., was a practical man who never aspired to public acclaim. He had brief careers in teaching and business, but he worked with his hands most of his life as a cooper or farmer. His candid modesty endeared him to all those who ever had intimate contact with him. His wife characterized him “an affectionate companion and tender father, as ever blessed the confidence of a family.”¹⁶ Edward Stevenson voiced the impression of many a member of the Church: “Naturally Father Smith was not a man of many words, but sober-minded, firm, mild and impressive.”¹⁷ Joseph Smith, Jr., considered him “a great and a good man,” possessing an “exalted, and virtuous mind.” These phrases and the following assessment come from a son who knew his father’s life as few

individuals could: “I now say that he never did a mean act, that might be said was ungenerous in his life, to my knowledge.”¹⁸ If those nearest Joseph Smith, Sr., could invariably rely on his personal goodness and strict integrity, his printed testimony of seeing and handling the plates may not lightly be questioned.

The mainstay of those without facts is ridicule. Obviously a generation whose pious sensibilities were shocked by the Mormon claim of new revelation would not allow the Smith family their just due as honest individuals. So to take certain vindictive testimonials as historical fact is the height of irresponsibility. In 1833 one D. P. Hurlbut (his own spelling) forfeited his LDS membership on the ground of unrepentant adultery.¹⁹ Turning from missionary to lecturer against them, he was employed by an anti-Mormon committee in Ohio to gather material to “completely divest Joseph Smith of all claims to the character of an honest man,”²⁰ a quest with obvious implications for the father and brothers of the Prophet. Whether Hurlbut himself had the integrity to record accurate statements may be doubted. Leading Mormons of the time insisted that his reputation was so notoriously tattered that his work had to be published by the more reputable but equally bitter E. D. Howe, who said in a later interview that “Hurlbut was always an unreliable fellow. . . .”²¹

Non-Mormon writers have admitted the need to treat the Hurlbut-Howe affidavits with extreme caution, because they were “collected by one hostile individual whose style of composition stereotypes the language of numerous witnesses.”²² This is apparent in the main thrust of every Palmyra-Manchester affidavit printed by Howe. Stock phrases allege that the Smith men were “lazy” and “indolent,”

having the “general employment” of “money digging.” “They were a family that labored very little,” so “their great object appeared to be to live without work”; consequently, it was “a mystery to their neighbors how they got their living.”²³

Such phrases are historically meaningless and merely brand the source as unreliable. From the memoirs of Lucy, Joseph, and William Smith, verified by later recollections of non-Mormon neighbors and even census reports at the time, it is known that the family was highly industrious. Their practical dependability is shown by merely listing their economic activities in western New York from 1818 to 1828, which included the following:

(1) Purchasing a hundred acres of densely forested land on installments and clearing substantial portions with hand tools.

(2) Building a moderately large log dwelling, followed by a frame house, farm buildings, and extensive fences.

(3) Raising wheat as a main crop, and caring for 1,500 sugar-producing trees by gathering the sap and processing sugar and molasses.

(4) Extensive manufacturing (mainly by Joseph Smith, Sr.) of cooping products, including baskets and birch brooms.

(5) Supplementing income by regular hiring out as laborers and selling refreshments to crowds on holidays.

This factual reconstruction of the real activities of the Smith men in Palmyra-Manchester is supplemented by the recollections of neighbors who directly contradicted the Hurlbut-Howe testimonials. One clearly in a position to know was Orlando Saunders, who was born two years before the Prophet and worked by the side of the Smith men on the nearby farm owned by his father, Enoch Saun-

ders, whose death in 1825 transferred the property to Orlando. Fortunately, this man was later interviewed by both believers and unbelievers in the claims of the Smith family, and he told the same story.

Reorganized LDS Interview

"[T]hey have all worked for me many a day; they were very good people. Young Joe (as we called him then) . . . was a good worker; they all were. . . [T]hey were poor people. . . ."²⁴

Non-LDS Interview

"Orlando Sanders . . . tells us that the Smith family worked for his father and for himself. He gives them the credit of being good workers, but declares that they could save no money."²⁵

As already mentioned, on several public occasions Joseph Smith, Sr., reiterated his witness of the plates of the Book of Mormon. His private testimony is also a matter of history. Maliciously imprisoned for debt by resentful townsmen, he was offered freedom for renouncing the Book of Mormon but instead accepted four days' starvation and 30 days' imprisonment, a fair test of his sincerity.²⁶ An interview with him about this time was reported from memory some forty years later. Though filled with inaccuracies (as having Joseph instead of Martin Harris take the characters to New York), this 1870 recollection reported that the Prophet's father discussed the weight, dimensions, and appearance of the plates in detail.²⁷ The power of his personal conviction may be measured by the fact that Joseph Smith, Sr., persuaded his parents and most of his brothers of the truth of the new revelation. The impact of his first visit was later related by George A. Smith:

"Some time in August, 1830, my

uncle Joseph Smith and Don Carlos Smith came some two hundred and fifty miles from where the Prophet was residing in Ontario County, New York, and they brought a Book of Mormon with them. I had never seen them before, and I felt astonished at their sayings."²⁸

The unsophisticated honesty of Joseph Smith, Sr., and Samuel H. Smith is mirrored in the sensitive reliability of the Prophet's older brother Hyrum. Somewhat better educated than the rest of his brothers, and a man of marked executive ability, he gave distinguished service from the organization of the Church until his martyrdom a decade and a half later. In the year when he became a Book of Mormon witness he was an independent farmer of 29 with a wife and two children. He was respected by his neighbors, for he served as school trustee in his lo-

cality in 1828.²⁹ Elected to this office in the local school district, he with two other trustees managed school affairs and funds, including hiring of teachers.

The complete dedication of the Prophet's older brother to the restored Church separated him from further success in non-Mormon society. But the power of his leadership was felt in the Mormon community as a missionary, temple builder, migration captain, civic leader, patriarch, and official counselor to his Prophet-brother for about seven years, culminating in his appointment as assistant president in closest relationship to Joseph Smith in directing the Church. No early LDS leader is spoken of in warmer terms than Hyrum Smith. After traveling with him as a missionary, Orson Hyde described Hyrum as "a pleasant and an agreeable companion, a wise

Hyrum Smith, painted in 1842 by Sutcliffe Maudsley



counselor, a father and a guide.”³⁰ The Prophet spontaneously picked two qualities that compelled love for his brother: “the integrity of a Job, and in short, the meek and quiet spirit of Jesus Christ. . . .”³¹ The numerous comments about this Book of Mormon witness generally allude to these dual qualities of honesty and kindness. The candid John Taylor found no flaw: “If ever there was an exemplary, honest, and virtuous man, an embodiment of all that is noble in the human form, Hyrum Smith was its representative.”³²

One this impressive cannot be ignored when he insists that he was not deceived in examining and lifting the Book of Mormon plates. And his descriptions follow the same pattern of consistency of all other witnesses. A brother-in-law of Hyrum Smith, the educated Joseph Fielding, talked personally to the witness’s wife and reported in 1841: “My sister bears testimony that her husband has seen and handled the plates. . . .”³³ A speech of 1844 was recalled by the capable Angus Cannon: “When I was but ten years of age, I heard the testimony of the Patriarch Hyrum Smith, one of the eight witnesses, to the divinity of the Book of Mormon and the appearance of the plates from which it was translated.”³⁴ A public declaration of this witness in Salem, Massachusetts (perhaps 1836), was re-

membered in 1843 and printed by a non-Mormon newspaper editor:

“We have seen Hiram Smith, a brother of Jos., and heard him preach, and conversed with him about his religion, its origin and progress; and we heard him declare, in this city in public, that what is recorded about the plates, &c. &c. is God’s *solemn truth*.”³⁵

As stated, the essence of the Smiths’ witness to the Book of Mormon plates is deeds, not words. The constancy of faithful sacrifice for their testimonies places a force upon their original and reiterating statements that no amount of eloquence may produce. The supernatural power of the angel’s visit to the three witnesses finds its physical foundation in the fact that eight ordinary men insisted all of their lives that they had carefully examined and handled the ancient plates of the Book of Mormon. That practical reality is further reinforced by the sacrifice of their lives by the Smiths who handled the plates. Worn out by middle-aged privation for the cause of the restoration, Joseph Smith, Sr., died of a severe lung condition a year after the Mormon expulsion from Missouri.³⁶ The strain of a dangerous horseback ride in an attempt of Samuel to reach his brothers before their murder and the shock of their deaths brought fatal sickness to this last-surviving witness of the Smiths, who died a month

later.³⁷ With his beloved Prophet-brother, Hyrum earlier faced the guns of a murderous mob in his last moments. And it is clear that his martyrdom meant exactly to Hyrum what the Latter-day Saints made of it. Interviews with the prison companions of Joseph and Hyrum were the basis of historical details that Hyrum read portions of the Book of Mormon the night before the martyrdom, and the next day he bore testimony of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.³⁸

There is a striking parallel between the earlier Missouri imprisonment and that of Illinois. In the former case, Hyrum Smith described why he was willing to make such a sacrifice. This statement without doubt is also Hyrum’s explanation of the meaning to him of his final sacrifice of life itself:

“Having given my testimony to the world of the truth of the Book of Mormon, . . . and the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven, in these last days; and having been brought into great afflictions and distresses for the same, I thought that it might be strengthening to my beloved brethren, to give them a short account of my sufferings, for the truth’s sake, and the state of my mind and feelings, while under circumstances of the most trying and afflicting nature. . . .

“[I] had been abused and thrust into a dungeon . . . on account of my faith. . . . However, I thank God



Mere Verification

By Evalyn M. Sandberg

*Man’s thrusts in space, though they engender awe,
are nothing, held against what Moses saw—
and we through him, because he was disposed
to keep a record of what God disclosed.*

*And Abraham’s holiness also provided
a glimpse of all that God’s great hands have guided,*

*from Kolob, situated near his throne,
to Kokob (star) and Olea (the moon).*

*Oh, early seers, we’re so much in your debt!
This pearl you left illumines darkness yet,
and any facts that are or yet will be
can but confirm what God lets prophets see.*