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Seventh Principle: The Lord Provides Whatever Help He Understands We Need

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MARY WHITMER SEES MORONI AND THE PLATES

While Joseph and Oliver were house guests, the men of the family liked having them around and were glad to help whenever they could. The visitors had little effect on the routine of their farm work, but for David's mother, Mary Whitmer, that was not the case at all. In addition to her usual chores, like gathering the eggs, feeding the chickens, and milking the cows, she now had to fix extra for meals, bake more bread, and wash all her guests' clothes—by hand on a scrub board. It made a great deal of difference to her that there were two more grown men living in her home.¹³⁴

Joseph had kept his promise to Moroni and had not shown the plates to anyone, so Mary didn't know he really had them. It may have seemed unfair to Mary that she should have the burden of looking after these two self-invited guests. She may have complained; if she didn't, she probably wanted to.

One day, Mary went out into the barn. She was startled when she first saw an angel standing there with a knapsack over his shoulder, but his kindly appearance soon caused all her fear to go away. Her description of him was like the

description of the old gentleman Joseph, Oliver, and her son David had talked with when they were riding in the wagon.

He said to her, “You have been very faithful and diligent in your labors, but you are tired because of the increase in your toil; it is proper, therefore, that you should receive a witness that your faith may be strengthened.” He then untied his knapsack and showed her the golden plates. The angel “turned the leaves of the book of plates over, leaf after leaf, and also showed her the engravings upon them; after which he told her to be patient and faithful in bearing her burden a little longer.”¹³⁵

After Mary examined the plates, the angel left the barn. She followed him because she wanted to ask him a question, but he was gone.

The angel’s showing Mary the plates teaches about how the Lord looks after His children. The Three Witnesses and the Eight Witnesses saw the plates and they were given the responsibility of testifying that they had seen them and they were told never to deny that testimony. But Mary was not given that responsibility. She was shown the plates because the Lord wished to give her peace and to help her understand.

THE TESTIMONY OF SARAH CONRAD

Mary Whitmer never wavered in her support for Joseph Smith after she saw the angel and the plates. But she did do

something to lighten her burden and make it easier to care for her family and guests.

The angel had suggested that she hire someone to help her, so she hired her niece, a girl named Sarah Conrad,¹³⁶ to live at the house and help with the chores. She did not tell Sarah what Joseph and Oliver were doing, but it did not take long for Sarah to discover that something unusual was going on. Sarah noticed that the Prophet and his friend “would go up into the attic, and they would stay all day. When they came down, they looked more like heavenly beings than they did just ordinary men.”¹³⁷

At first Sarah was curious, but in time their luminous appearance actually frightened her. She told her aunt how she felt and asked what made those men “so exceedingly white.”¹³⁸

When Mrs. Whitmer explained to Sarah about the Book of Mormon, she “told her what the men were doing in the room above and that the power of God was so great in the room that they could hardly endure it. At times angels were in the room in their glory which nearly consumed them.”¹³⁹ The light that shone from Joseph and Oliver’s faces came from their having been with the angels.

This explanation was reasonable enough and satisfied Sarah. She not only stayed with the Whitmers, but she also became one of Joseph’s good friends. She was baptized, and much later, after she and the other Saints were driven from Nauvoo, she settled with them in Provo, Utah.¹⁴⁰

Joseph never told his readers how he translated the Book of Mormon except to say that he used the Urim and

Thummim and that he did it “by the gift and power of God.” But there are some interesting indications that he had help from other angels besides Moroni.¹⁴¹

Sarah’s is the earliest of a number of accounts that testify that at times, when the Prophet was receiving revelation or was in the presence of heavenly beings, he, like Moses, actually glowed.¹⁴² Wilford Woodruff tried to describe the Prophet’s appearance on one of those occasions. He said, “His face was clear as amber.”¹⁴³ Philo Dibble, who was present when the Prophet received the revelation that is now the 76th section of the Doctrine and Covenants, reported, “Joseph wore black clothes, but at this time seemed to be dressed in an element of glorious white.”¹⁴⁴

Sarah’s testimony that the men who were working on the translation of the Book of Mormon “looked so exceedingly white,” combined with Mrs. Whitmer’s explanation that “angels were in the room in their glory which nearly consumed them,” gives a valuable key to understanding the Book of Mormon and to knowing how it was translated. One may assume that if there were angels in the room, they had some purpose for being there other than just to pass the time of day. Their presence in the translating room certainly had an impact upon the ultimate outcome of Joseph’s work.

ANGELS HELP JOSEPH TRANSLATE

Neither Joseph Smith, nor Oliver Cowdery, nor the Whitmers, nor Sarah Conrad left any record identifying who

the angels were, but others also knew, and they have given some important information about who the angels might have been.

Elder Parley P. Pratt did not identify the angels by name, but he testified that through Joseph Smith “and the ministration of holy angels to him, that book came forth to the world.”¹⁴⁵ His brother Orson added that during those years, Joseph “was often ministered to by the angels of God, and received instruction” from them.¹⁴⁶

President John Taylor, who was a dear friend and confidant of the Prophet Joseph mentioned some of the angels by name. He said:

Again who more likely than Mormon and Nephi, and some of those prophets who had ministered to the people upon this continent, under the influence of the same Gospel, to operate again as its representatives? Who more likely than those who had officiated in the holy Melchisedec priesthood to administer to Joseph Smith and reveal unto him the great principles which were developed? Well, now, do I believe that Joseph Smith saw the several angels alleged to have been seen by him as described, one after another? Yes, I do.¹⁴⁷

On another occasion, when President Taylor was discussing the restoration of the gospel, he said, “I can tell you what he [Joseph] told me about it.” Then he told this story:

Afterwards the Angel Moroni came to him and revealed to him the Book of Mormon, with the history of which you are generally familiar, and also with the statements that I am now making pertaining to these things. And then came Nephi, one of the ancient prophets, that had lived upon this continent, who had an interest in the welfare of the people that he had lived amongst in those days.¹⁴⁸

President Taylor was even more explicit in another address to the Saints:

And when Joseph Smith was raised up as a Prophet of God, Mormon, Moroni, Nephi and others of the ancient Prophets who formerly lived on this Continent, and Peter and John and others who lived on the Asiatic Continent, came to him and communicated to him certain principles pertaining to the Gospel of the Son of God. Why? Because they held the keys of the various dispensations, and conferred them upon him, and he upon us. He was indebted to God; and we are indebted to God and to him for all the intelligence that we have on these subjects.¹⁴⁹

Similarly, President George Q. Cannon once assured his listeners:

[The Prophet Joseph] had doubtless, also, visits from Nephi and it may be from Alma and others. He was visited constantly by angels.... Moroni, in the beginning, as you know, to prepare him for his mission, came and ministered and talked to him from time to time, and he

had vision after vision in order that his mind might be fully saturated with a knowledge of the things of God, and that he might comprehend the great and holy calling that God has bestowed upon him.¹⁵⁰

Joseph said very little about his meeting with Book of Mormon prophets other than Moroni. However, in the famous letter to John Wentworth, the one in which he wrote the Articles of Faith, the Prophet explained that the Book of Mormon came forth only “after having received many visits from the angels of God unfolding the majesty and glory of the events that should transpire in the last days.”¹⁵¹ The “many visits” could, of course, have all been from Moroni. But Moroni is only one angel and Joseph wrote that he had received “many visits from the angels.” That statement by the Prophet, coupled with those of his friends, leads one to conclude that the translation of the Book of Mormon was something of a joint effort between Moroni; Joseph Smith, who used the Urim and Thummim; Nephi (probably more than one Nephi); Alma; Mormon; and other original authors of the Book of Mormon.

One cannot read the Book of Mormon without noticing the Lord’s promises to the prophets that their messages would be passed on to people in the last days.¹⁵² It is not surprising, then, that those same prophets who wrote those messages should be present with Joseph while he was translating their own writings. If the original authors did help in the translation of their own parts of the book, that would guarantee that the English version of the Book of Mormon says just exactly what the authors wanted it to say.

If it were that important that the words in the Book of Mormon say precisely what they were intended to say, then it is just as important that when one reads the book, one reads to learn—with real accuracy—what it says.

Many who read newspapers, magazines, or novels, have trained their eyes to fly quickly over the words, hesitating only long enough to harvest the gist of the sentences. This reading habit costs them little in understanding. It efficiently lets them know what the authors mean without troubling the reader with knowing exactly what the author says. But if we bring that habit into play when we read the scriptures, it may prevent us from knowing any but the most superficial of meanings. If we do not take into conscious account the fact that its words were selected with extraordinary care, we may be caught making incorrect assumptions about the Book of Mormon by asking vital questions in the wrong order. If one asks, “What is the meaning of this passage?” before one has asked, “What do the words actually say?” the real meaning may ever evade this casual reader. The reason for that is that if we read too casually and assume a meaning before reading the real intent of the words, we may miss that intent entirely. Here is an example:

Quickly read the closing words of Helaman’s letter to Captain Moroni.

41. And now, my beloved brother, Moroni, may the Lord our God, who has redeemed us and made us free, keep you continually in his presence; yea, and may he favor this people, even that ye may have success in obtaining the possession of all that which the Lamanites

have taken from us, which was for our support. And now, behold, I close mine epistle. I am Helaman, the son of Alma. (Alma 58:41).

Now consider the four following scriptures. The first is the story of the Savior's coming to the brother of Jared:

13. And when he had said these words, behold, the Lord showed himself unto him, and said: Because thou knowest these things ye are redeemed [present tense] from the fall; therefore ye are brought [present tense] back into my presence; therefore I show [present tense] myself unto you.

14. Behold, I am he who was prepared from the foundation of the world to redeem my people. Behold, I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son. In me shall all mankind have life, and that eternally, even they who shall believe on my name; and they shall become my sons and my daughters. (Ether 3:13-14).

In that scripture the brother of Jared's redemption happened at the same time as he saw the Savior. In the next example, Lehi is talking to his son Jacob who is redeemed because he had seen the Savior in the past:

1. And now, Jacob, I speak unto you: Thou art my first-born in the days of my tribulation in the wilderness. And behold, in thy childhood thou hast suffered afflictions and much sorrow, because of the rudeness of thy brethren.

2. Nevertheless, Jacob, my first-born in the wilderness, thou knowest the greatness of God; and he shall consecrate thine afflictions for thy gain.

3. Wherefore, thy soul shall be blessed, and thou shalt dwell safely with thy brother, Nephi; and thy days shall be spent in the service of thy God. Wherefore, I know that thou art redeemed [present tense], because of the righteousness of thy Redeemer; for thou hast beheld [past tense] that in the fulness of time he cometh to bring salvation unto men.

4. And thou hast beheld [past tense] in thy youth his glory; wherefore, thou art blessed even as they unto whom he shall minister in the flesh; for the Spirit is the same, yesterday, today, and forever. And the way is prepared from the fall of man, and salvation is free. (2 Nephi 2:1-4).

The third example is spoken by Lehi about himself.

But behold, the Lord hath redeemed [past tense] my soul from hell; I have beheld his glory, and I am encircled about eternally in the arms of his love. (2 Nephi 1:15).

The final example is Samuel, the Lamanite, explaining the Savior's atonement and the last judgment.

15. For behold, he surely must die that salvation may come; yea, it behooveth him and becometh expedient that he dieth, to bring to pass the resurrection of the dead, that

thereby men may be brought into the presence of the Lord.

16. Yea, behold, this death bringeth to pass the resurrection, and redeemeth all mankind from the first death—that spiritual death; for all mankind, by the fall of Adam being cut off from the presence of the Lord, are considered as dead, both as to things temporal and to things spiritual. (Helaman 14:15-16).

So, in the Book of Mormon, a meaning of the word “redeem” is that one has come into the presence of the Savior. Now, in that context, re-read the last words of Helaman’s letter:

41. And now, *my beloved brother*, Moroni, may the Lord our God, who has redeemed [past tense] us [both of them] and made us free [probably not a reference to political freedom].

—may the Lord our God, who has redeemed us and made us free, *keep you continually in his presence*; yea, and may he favor this people, even that ye may have success in obtaining the possession of all that which the Lamanites have taken from us, which was for our support. And now, behold, I close mine epistle. I am Helaman, the son of Alma. (Alma 58:41).

With this second reading, one discovers not only a wonderful new facet of both men’s biographies, but also an entirely enhanced sense of the meaning of Helaman’s greeting, “my beloved brother, Moroni.”

The Savior struggled with his contemporaries over the problem of their hearing his words, but not their meaning. He asked, “Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word.” (John 8:43).

The words in the Book of Mormon can be relied on to convey the correct message if one will read them to discover what they actually say. Then, having first learned what the words say, one can, with the help of the Spirit, also discover what they mean.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE THREE WITNESSES

After Joseph and Oliver moved to the Whitmers’ home, it took only about a month for them to finish the translation. Joseph worked on it almost constantly. Occasionally, when Oliver got tired, one of David’s younger brothers, usually John, took his place at the writing table.

Even though Martin Harris could no longer write for Joseph, he was still interested in the project and sometimes visited his young friend at the Whitmer farm. One of those visits occurred about the time Joseph translated the fifth chapter of Ether, which contains the promise that God would appoint three witnesses to see the plates and testify “of a surety that these things are true.” (Ether 5:2-4; See also 2 Nephi 11:3).

After Joseph read this promise, Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer said they wanted to be those witnesses. In their enthusiasm, they asked—then begged—

Joseph to ask the Lord for permission to show them the plates. Joseph did so and was told that his friends could see them if they had sufficient faith and a great desire to assist in the work of the Lord. In this revelation the Savior also promised that they might see other things that they had not asked to see. He mentioned the Urim and Thummim, the breastplate, the Liahona, and the sword of Laban. (D&C 17:1). But they could not see them now. They had to wait until the translation was finished.

So Joseph and Oliver went on with their work, Martin returned home, and David continued to attend to his duties on the farm.

On the day when the translation was completed, Joseph and Oliver walked together into the field where David was plowing and told him they were finished.¹⁵³ Joseph sent a message to his parents, telling them the good news and inviting them to join him at the Whitmer farm. They, in turn, told Martin Harris; for, as Mrs. Smith observed, they still loved him even though his weaknesses had caused them many troubles.¹⁵⁴ When Martin heard the news, he asked the Smiths if he could go with them, and the next morning they all set out together.

The evening they arrived at the Whitmer farm, they all read together from the completed translation of the Book of Mormon. The next morning they gathered again to continue to read. After “the usual services, namely, reading, singing and praying,” Joseph arose from his knees and said to Martin Harris, “You have got to humble yourself before God this day, that you may obtain a 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.”¹⁵⁵

A few minutes later those four—Joseph, Martin, Oliver, and David—left the others and walked together into the woods near the house. Joseph did not carry the plates with him. Moroni had them and would show them to the Three Witnesses himself.

Joseph Smith, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris each left detailed accounts of what they saw and heard that morning. They are dissimilar enough to enable one to see the event from their different perspectives, but near enough alike that they confirm each other’s testimonies. Joseph Smith’s account reads as follows:

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 fulfilment of the promises given in the above revelation—that they should have a view of the plates. 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 arrangement, I commenced prayer to our Heavenly Father, and was followed by each of the others in succession. We did not at the first trial, however, obtain any answer or manifestation of 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 discern 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 opened to me, and I once more beheld and heard the same things; whilst at the same moment, Martin Harris cried out, apparently 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 rejoiced exceedingly.¹⁵⁶

Even though David Whitmer was an old man when he was interviewed by Orson Pratt, he described his experience with vivid memory.

It was in June, 1829, the latter part of the 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,¹⁵⁷ 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.

Pratt: Did you see the angel at this time?

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."¹⁵⁸

Martin Harris was not present when David and Oliver saw Moroni and the plates, but his account, also given in an interview, was essentially the same as David's.

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 lost sheep 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.¹⁵⁹

After they had seen the plates, Joseph may not have jumped up and shouted for joy as Martin did, but his happiness was no less exquisite. Now there were three men who knew, as surely as Joseph knew, the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. Joseph's mother gave a feel for what that meant to the young prophet. She recalled,

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 world." 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.¹⁶⁰

One can sense Joseph's feeling of relief where his history records that the Three Witnesses were now obliged "to fulfill the commandment which they had received, viz., to bear record of these things."

To formally do this, "they drew up and subscribed" to "The Testimony of Three Witnesses" which is published in every copy of the Book of Mormon.¹⁶¹

THE TESTIMONY OF THE EIGHT WITNESSES

The day after the Three Witnesses saw the plates, Joseph's parents and Martin Harris returned to their homes in Palmyra. The Prophet, anxious to make arrangements to have the Book of Mormon published, followed them about a week later. Oliver and all the Whitmer family went with him to Palmyra and were guests at the Smith home.

Not long after they arrived, all the men among the visitors, along with Joseph, his father, and his brothers Samuel and Hyrum, walked to a place in the woods near the Smith home. It was a special place to the family, for they often met there for prayer. After the men had gathered, Joseph left them and went deeper into the woods, where he met Moroni. The angel gave Joseph the plates to carry back to his friends. The twelve men present were Joseph, the Three Witnesses, plus eight others who had not previously seen the plates. Joseph let each one take the golden book into his hands and examine it carefully. They paid especial attention to the delicate writing that had been engraved into

the metal pages. They did not see the angel or hear the voice, but they knew the plates were real and that Joseph actually had them.¹⁶² The eight who had not previously seen the plates signed their names to “The Testimony of Eight Witnesses,” that is also printed in each copy of the Book of Mormon.

After they had seen the plates, the eleven men returned to the Smith home, but Joseph remained behind to return the plates to Moroni.¹⁶³

The Eight Witnesses were: Christian Whitmer, Hiram Page, Jacob Whitmer, Joseph Smith, sen., Peter Whitmer, jun., Hyrum Smith, John Whitmer, and Samuel H. Smith.