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David Whitmer and the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: This is an article reprinted from the Chicago Times, written after a reporter interviewed David Whitmer. David Whitmer confirms his testimony of the Book of Mormon and says that the Spaulding Theory is false. Sidney Rigdon did not know of the Book of Mormon until after it was published. Whitmer also showed the reporter the printer's manuscript of the Book of Mormon.

THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS' MILLENNIAL STAR.

Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrha in the day of judgment, than for that city.—MAT. x, 15.

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Monday, December 12, 1881.

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DAVID WHITMER AND THE BOOK OF MORMON.

We present below an interesting letter to the *Chicago Times*, in relation to the testimony of the last of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon. Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris, who, as well as David Whitmer, saw the angel who exhibited to them the plates, and heard the voice of God bearing witness to the correctness of the translation, are both dead, having maintained the truth of their testimony until the last, under all circumstances, whether in the Church or out of the Church. They were excommunicated for transgression, but returned repentant and were received into fellowship, dying with a repetition of their first testimony recorded in connection with the Book of Mormon. David Whitmer remains, but is aged and feeble. Reports have been received that he also had passed away, but we have no reason to believe that they are correct. The letter following contains some inaccuracies, which we will correct at the close of this article:

RICHMOND, Mo., Oct. 14.—In the beautiful shire town of Richmond, Ray County, Mo., there has resided

for well nigh a half of a century David Whitmer, known to the world as one of the three witnesses who testified to the validity and reality of the golden plates from which it has been asserted that Joseph Smith translated the "Book of Mormon," the original manuscript of which Mr. Whitmer has in his possession, which shows by finger-marks and where it has been cut into "takes"—a printer's term—that it has passed through the hands of the type-setters. As a citizen of his town he stands deservedly high, having filled the office of mayor and councilman, is a good scholar, and thoroughly posted in Biblical lore. During the past two years he has been slowly declining, and is now confined to his home, carefully attended to by his wife, children and grandchildren. Born in the State of New York from Revolutionary ancestors, he brought with him to the West his habits of thrift and hospitality. To the stranger or the unfortunate his home and purse have ever been open, and his name is a synonym of probity and integrity. Knowing that he was approaching the full term allotted for man's stay on earth, and that the

readers of the *Times* would like to hear what he had to say concerning the origin of the "Book of Mormon," I called at his residence—a plain and unpretentious frame building—was ushered into his chamber by his granddaughter, and found the old patriot reclining on his bed. Upon being told the object of my visit, he promptly responded to my questions, and after an hour's interview I gleaned the following valuable information from him—he speaking freely and unreservedly—in regard to the origin and rise of the Mormon Church, as well as the authenticity of the "Book of Mormon."

THE PLATES

from which the book was translated, supposed to be gold, were found in the latter part of the year 1827 or 1828, prior to the acquaintance, on Mr. Whitmer's part, with Joseph Smith, and he was loth to believe in their actuality, notwithstanding the community in which he lived (Ontario County, New York,) was alive with excitement in regard to Smith's finding a great treasure, and they informed him that they knew that Smith had the plates, as they had seen the place where he had taken them from, on the hill Cumorah, about two miles from Palmyra, N.Y. It was not until June, 1828, that he met the future Prophet, who visited at his father's house, and while there completed the translation of the Book of Mormon, and thus he became conversant with its history, having witnessed Smith dictate to Oliver Cowdery the translation of the characters that were inscribed on the plates, said by Mr. Anthon, our Egyptian scholar, to resemble the characters of that ancient people. Christian Whitmer, his brother, occasionally assisted Cowdery in writing, as did Mrs. Joseph Smith, who was a Miss Hale before she was married.

In regard to finding the plates, he was told by Smith that they were in a stone casket, and the place where it was deposited, in the hill Cumorah, was pointed out to him by a celestial personage, clad in a dazzling white robe, and he was informed by him that it was the history of the Nephites, a

nation that had passed away, whose founders belonged to the days of the Tower of Babel. The plates which Mr. Whitmer saw were in the shape of a tablet, fastened with three rings, about one-third of which appeared to be loose, in plates, the other solid, but with perceptible marks where the plates seemed to be sealed, and the guide who pointed it out to Smith very impressively reminded him that the loose plates alone were to be used, the sealed portion was

NOT TO BE TAMPERED WITH.

After the plates had been translated, which process required about six months, the same heavenly visitant appeared and reclaimed the gold tablets of the ancient people, informing Smith that he would replace them with other records of the lost tribes that had been brought with them during their wanderings from Asia, which would be forthcoming when the world was ready to receive them. At that time Mr. Whitmer saw the tablets, gazed with awe on the celestial messenger, heard him speak and say: "Blessed is the Lord and he that keeps His commandments;" and then, as he held the plates and turned them over with his hands, so that they could be plainly visible, a voice that seemed to fill all space, musical as the sighing of a wind through the forest, was heard, saying: "What you see is true; testify to the same." And Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer, standing there, felt, as the white garments of the angel faded from their vision, and the heavenly voice still rang in their ears, that it was no delusion—that it was a fact, and they so recorded it. In a day or two after the same spirit appeared to Martin Harris while he was in company with Smith, and told him also to bear witness to its truth, which he did, as can be seen in the book. Harris described the visitant to Whitmer, who recognized it as the same which he and Cowdery had seen.

The tablets or plates were translated by Smith, who used a small oval or kidney-shaped stone, called Urim and Thummim, which seemed endowed with the marvelous power of converting the characters on the

plates, when used by Smith, into English, who would then dictate to Cowdery what to write. Frequently one character would make two lines of manuscript, while others made but a word or two words. Mr. Whitmer emphatically asserts, as did Harris and Cowdery, that while Smith was dictating the translation he had

NO MANUSCRIPT NOTES OR OTHER
MEANS OF KNOWLEDGE,

save the Seer-stone and the characters as shown on the plates, he being present and cognizant how it was done.

In regard to the statement that Sidney Rigdon had purloined the work of one Spaulding, a Presbyterian preacher, who had written a romance entitled "The Manuscript Found," Mr. Whitmer says there is no foundation for such an assertion. The "Book of Mormon" was translated in the summer of 1829, and printed that winter at Palmyra, New York, and was in circulation before Sidney Rigdon knew anything concerning the Church of Christ as it was known then. His attention was specially brought to it by the appearance at his church, near Kirtland, Ohio, in the fall of 1830, of Parley Pratt and Oliver Cowdery, he being at that time a Reformed or Christian preacher, they having been sent west by the Church in New York during that summer as evangelists, and they carried with them the printed book, the first time that he knew such a thing was in existence. Upon being appealed to by Pratt and Cowdery for the use of his church, he informed them that as he was endeavoring to establish the rules and get back into the ancient usages of Christianity, and desired all the light that he could get that was of benefit to his fellow-men, he would do so, and would like to hear them. Then they gave him a copy of the book that it has been asserted he was the progenitor of. The result of that meeting was that 101 persons were received into the Church at Kirtland; that Rigdon and Partridge, two influential preachers, were sent as delegates to New York to see Joseph Smith, and they were so much impressed with his history of the book

and his connection therewith, that they became firm believers, and started back home as evangelists, preaching the new religion. In a short time thereafter Smith, Whitmer and others, learning of the beautiful country in Ohio, moved west, and the Church increased rapidly, and would have so continued had it not strayed from the true path, to preach only Christ and him crucified, as it had begun. Mr. Whitmer emphatically asserts that he has heard Rigdon, in the pulpit, and in private conversation, declare that the Spaulding story, that he had used a Book called "The Manuscript Found" for the purpose of preparing the "Book of Mormon," was as false as were many other charges that were then being made against the infant Church, and he assures me that the story is as

UNTRUTHFUL AS IT IS RIDICULOUS.

In his youth Joseph Smith was quite illiterate, knew nothing of grammar or composition, but obtained quite a good education after he came West; was a man of great magnetism, made friends easily, was liberal and noble in his impulses, tall, finely-formed and full of animal life, but sprung from the most humble circumstances. The first good suit of clothes he had ever worn was presented to him by Christian Whitmer, brother of David.

As an evidence of their belief in the divine origin of the book, Martin Harris, one of the witnesses, mortgaged his farm for \$1,500 for the purpose of having it printed, and the sale of the book soon reimbursed him for the outlay. Now millions of copies are being published and sent to the furthestmost ends of the earth. A few years since I was present at an interview between Mr. Whitmer and Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith, who had been sent from Utah to Richmond to secure the original manuscript, and after a careful examination Elder Pratt pronounced it the writing of Oliver Cowdery, and informed those present that it was the original manuscript from which the "Book of Mormon" had been printed, and in a conversation with the writer he assured me that the archives of the Church at

Salt Lake were incomplete without it; that they would pay Father Whitmer, as he termed him, any reasonable price for it, but that Whitmer would not part with it under any circumstances regarding it as a sacred trust. Mr. Whitmer also had a number of other records of the early Church, ere it had, as he says, 'broke loose from the teachings of Christ, and acknowledged nothing as divine save as it was taught from the Bible and 'Book of Mormon.'"

Mr. Whitmer's beliefs have

UNDERGONE NO CHANGE

since his early manhood; he has refused to affiliate with any of the various branches that have sprung up through false teachings, and rests his hopes of the future "in the teachings of Christ, the Apostles and the Prophets, and the morals and principles enunciated in the Scriptures; that the 'Book of Mormon' is but the testimony of another nation concerning the truth and divinity of Christ and the Bible, and that is his rock, his Gospel and his salvation." Seeing, with him, is believing. He is now as firm in the faith of the divinity of the book that he saw translated as he was when the glory of the celestial visitant almost blinded him with the gleam of its glowing presence, fresh from the Godhead; and the voice, majestic, ringing out from the earth to the mighty dome of space, still lingers in his ears like a chime of silver bells.

Then follows the "proclamation" or testimony of David Whitmer, given March this year, and which was published in the *Deseret Evening News* of April 7th.

The foregoing is not only valuable evidence directly in favor of the Book which has caused so much controversy in the world, but also against the foolish story in relation to the connection of Sidney Rigdon and that divine record, with the manuscript alleged to have been written by Solomon Spaulding.

The errors which appear in the letter to the *Times* are evidently those of the writer, not Mr. Whitmer. They are quite pardonable, being merely mistakes likely to be made by a person

not familiar with the facts, but learning of them from another.

The first is that the founders of the Nephites "belonged to the tower of Babel." The Nephites sprang from Nephi, the son of Lehi, who came to this land from Judea, in the reign of King Zedekiah. The Jaredites, whose history is briefly given in the Book of Mormon, were a distinct and preceding race; they descended from a colony that peopled this country after the dispersion from Babel. The term "lost tribes" is also incorrect, as the Nephites had no identity with the lost tribes of Israel, being descendants of Joseph, the son of Jacob.

The next mistake is that "In a day or two after" David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery saw the angel and the plates, "the same spirit appeared to Martin Harris." The truth is that it was shortly after, on the same day. Martin Harris was with Joseph, Oliver and David, but there was no answer to their prayers until Martin, who felt that his lack of faith was a hindrance, withdrew. Then the angel appeared, and after the vision closed, Joseph Smith went to the place where Martin Harris was, a little distance off, and joined with him in prayer, when the angel again appeared, and Martin rejoicingly bore testimony that he had seen and heard as the others.

The next error is that the Seer stone which Joseph used in the translation "was called Urim and Thummim." The instrument thus denominated was composed of two crystal stones "set in the two rims of a bow." The Seer stone was separate and distinct from the Urim and Thummim. The latter was delivered to the angel as well as the plates after the translation was completed; the former remained with the Church and is now in the possession of the President.

The statement that "millions of copies" of the Book of Mormon are being sent to the ends of the earth is an exaggeration. It has been extensively published in several languages and will be sent eventually to "all nations, tongues and people."

The next mistake is that Orson Pratt stated that the manuscript in possession of David Whitmer was "the original manuscript, from which

the Book of Mormon was printed." Strike out the word "original" and the remark will be correct. David's copy is no doubt that from which the book was printed, but it is not the original transcript of the Book of Mormon, to which is appended the names of the three witnesses, *in their own handwriting*, while Mr. Whitmer's copy has the names all in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery, which Apostle Orson Pratt identified.

The remarks about the Church having "broke loose from the teachings of Christ," are probably those of Mr. Whitmer, and correctly given. But it is easy to perceive wherein that gentleman has erred, from the words which follow; he "acknowledged nothing as Divine save as it was taught from the Bible and the Book of Mormon." Both those sacred records teach that things not written therein are to be revealed to mankind, and Mr. Whitmer's doctrine—which is merely an extension of the sectarian theory on the canon of scripture—

would bar the reception of those divine and important truths. Man is not to be confined to ancient prophecy, but to "live by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." And the Book of Mormon promises, "Whoso receiveth this record and shall not condemn it because of the imperfections which are in it, the same shall know of greater things than these." Many thousands of people in different nations have proven the truth of the record. By these means they have a knowledge for themselves of its divinity, independent of David Whitmer's testimony or that of any other person, living or dead.

We are pleased to reproduce the letter to the *Times* for the benefit of our readers, and look upon it—those few errors excepted—as a valuable addition to the cloud of witnesses to the divine origin of a Book which is a stumbling-block to the worldly wise, but a joy and a blessing to the humble and meek of the earth.—*Deseret News*.

LEAVES FROM MY JOURNAL.

BY APOSTLE WILFORD WOODRUFF.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HOW TO OBTAIN REVELATIONS FROM GOD—JOSEPH SMITH'S COURSE—SAVED FROM DEATH BY A FALLING TREE, BY OBEYING THE VOICE OF THE SPIRIT—A COMPANY OF SAINTS SAVED FROM A STEAMBOAT DISASTER BY THE SPIRIT'S WARNING—PLOT TO WAYLAY ELDER C. C. RICH AND PARTY FOILED BY THE SAME POWER.

In order to obtain revelation from God, and in order to know when we do obtain a revelation, whether it is from God or not, we must follow the teachings of the revelations of God unto us. St. James says: "If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him." Again it is said, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you."

It was upon this promise that Joseph Smith went before the Lord and prayed in the name of Jesus Christ, and asked for knowledge, wisdom and understanding, in order to know what to do to be saved; and he proved the promise of St. James before the Lord, and the heavens were opened to his view, and the Father and Son were revealed unto him, and the voice of the great Eloheim unto him was: "This is my beloved Son, hear ye Him."

This was the first revelation of God to him. He did hearken to the voice of Jesus Christ all his life afterwards, and received a code of revelations and the word of the Lord unto him as long as he dwelt in the flesh.

Joseph Smith left as strong a testimony as was ever given to the human family, and sealed that testament with his own life and blood.

We all have to pursue the same course in order to obtain revelations