



Type: Magazine Article

"... Publish It upon the Mountains": The Story of Martin Harris, Chapter IV: Activities in Kirtland

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Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 58, No. 6 (June 1955)

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

Page(s): 387, 462–463

Abstract: This series reviews Martin Harris' role in bringing forth the Book of Mormon, and discusses Harris' testimony of the Book of Mormon. The fourth part discusses Harris' estrangement from the Church.

Activities in Kirtland

CHAPTER IV

STUDENTS of Church history have long debated the membership status of Martin Harris. Writers and speakers, almost to the man, have said that while Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer were excommunicated from the Church, such formal action was never taken against the other witness, Martin Harris, who also drifted away from the teachings and the practices of the Church.

Perhaps this view is taken because Elder William Harrison Homer saw Martin Harris in Kirtland, Ohio, in December 1869, as Elder Homer returned from a mission in England. Upon reaching Salt Lake City, Elder Homer, accompanied by his father, reported to Brigham Young that Martin Harris desired to come to Utah. The President was pleased. He spoke of Martin Harris' contribution to the Church, and ended with this statement: "... when the Church came West, Martin Harris remained behind. It is true that Martin Harris did not apostatize; he was never tried for his fellowship; he was never excommunicated."

Research at the Church Historian's Office in Salt Lake City in recent years has turned up evidence that seems to prove otherwise. There is a letter dated January 1, 1838, written by Elder John Smith from Kirtland, Ohio, to his son Elder George A. Smith, then serving a mission in Shinnston, Harrison County, Virginia. (It is now West Virginia.) It is a newsy letter, the kind that missionaries like to receive from home. Here are two paragraphs from it:

... The spiritual condition at this time is gloomy also. I called the High Council together last week and laid before them the case of dissenters. Twenty-eight persons were, upon mature discussion, cut off from the Church. The leaders were Cyrus Smalling, Joseph Coe, Martin Harris, Luke S.

¹THE IMPROVEMENT ERA (Salt Lake City 1926) 29:471.



The Kirtland Temple, dedicated in March 1836, was the first temple built by the Latter-day Saints.

Johnson, John F. Boynton, and W. W. Parrish.

We have cut off between forty and fifty from the Church since you left. Thus you see the Church has taken a mighty pruning, and we think she will soon rise in the greatness of her strength. . . .²

John Smith and his son, George A. Smith, were the great-grandfather and grandfather of the late President George Albert Smith.

Difficult times abounded both in the land and in the Church in 1837.

²Journal History, January 1, 1838. Luke S. Johnson and John F. Boynton, listed in this letter, were members of the Council of the Twelve.

Apostasy was running rampant in the Church, one of the contributing factors being the financial panic in the land.

In 1836, the Saints in Kirtland undertook to form the Kirtland Safety Society. It was to be an industrial stock company, with the management placed in the hands of respective occupations: agriculture, mechanical arts, and merchandising. The articles of incorporation included some farseeing principles which would have been very beneficial to the stockholders had this society continued. Paper currency, or due bills, was issued by the society as was the custom in that day. When the financial panic broke in 1837, this company collapsed before it had really begun to operate fully. The collapse was hurried by dishonest employees. Each stockholder was obligated, under the terms of the agreement, to redeem the currency issued to the extent of his holdings in the concern. But many of the shareholders had obtained their stock by pledging lands at their prevailing inflated values.³ The "bubble had broken" and other values had evaporated overnight and conditions in Kirtland, as elsewhere in the nation, were bad. In Kirtland the leaders of the Church were blamed by the "man on the street."

During the financial panic of 1837, when apostasy ran so high in Kirtland and several of the Twelve Apostles turned against the Prophet with false accusations and sought his overthrow, it was Brigham Young who stood firm and loyal, declaring that Joseph Smith was the Prophet of God. So intense was the hatred against Brigham Young for this bold stand that he had to leave Kirtland for his own safety. He departed December 22, 1837, and arrived among the Saints in Far West, Missouri, March 14, 1838. The headquarters of the Church was soon transferred from Ohio to Missouri.⁴ Brigham Young was not in Kirtland at the time that John Smith wrote that letter, nor had he been for about ten days. Certainly he must have been told of such action against Martin Harris, but the fast-moving events between 1838 and 1870 could have crowded it from his memory.

(Continued on page 462)

³John A. Widtsoe, *Gospel Interpretations—Evidences and Reconciliations II* (Salt Lake City 1947), p. 143.

⁴Andrew Jensen, *LDS Biographical Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City 1901), 1:10.

"...publish it upon the mountains"

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by William H. Homer, Jr.



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Just the Groom

(Concluded from preceding page)

moment, there was a lull. Julia's glance skimmed past her husband, the best man, the bride. Then, her eyes rested on her son, wondering how it could be that now he was hers no longer.

As though he felt her eyes, he turned, looked into them. She smiled, and he straightened the maroon tie, shrugged his shoulders to better fit the rented white tux.

He winked at her as he lifted his hand and swept it across his dark hair—just above the left ear—and she noticed, with shock, with surprise, how suddenly large his hand looked with the wide wedding band upon it.

He was indeed a man. And, he was *still* her boy, but he was Rosemary's more. And, God willing, the father of proud generations yet to come.

The Story of Martin Harris

(Continued from page 387)

In the Nauvoo period of the Church, we had the publication, *Times and Seasons*. On January 2, 1843, there was printed a letter from Justin Brooks to the Prophet Joseph Smith which had been written from Kirtland, Ohio, November 7, 1842. Brother Brooks says in part:

Twelve persons were baptized yesterday and information has just reached me that Brother Martin Harris has been baptized and is now on his way home from the water.⁵

The Daughters of Utah Pioneers have published a letter dated from Nauvoo July 18 (no year date) and addressed to "Remembered Friend." It is signed by Laura Pitkin and carries this postscript:

Brother Joseph received a letter from Kirtland last week. Martin Harris has come into the church. Oliver Cowdery is very friendly and have prosperous times in that place. W. W. Phelps has also written to Brother Joseph, makes a humble confession and wishes to be received into the church.⁶

In the fall of 1846 Martin Harris was preaching in England against the Church, but accomplished little. Back

⁵*Times and Seasons* (Nauvoo, Ill. 1843), IV:63.
⁶*Heart Throbs of the West*, (Salt Lake City, 1944), V:382. The original letter is the property of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers.

in the United States, on January 23, 1847, at a meeting of the Whiterites, it was moved by William E. M'Lellin and seconded by Martin Harris that this group, forty-two in number, take upon them the name of "The Church of Christ," "and wear it henceforth—shorn of all appendages or alterations."⁷

This report from Elder Thomas Colburn was published in the *St. Louis Luminary*, May 5, 1855.

We called at Kirtland, found a few that called themselves Saints, but very weak, many apostates who had mostly joined the rappers. We had a lengthy interview with Martin Harris. . . . He confessed that he had lost confidence in Joseph Smith, consequently his mind became darkened, and he was left to himself; he tried the Shakers, but they would not do, then tried Gladden Bishop, but no satisfaction; had concluded he would wait until the Saints returned to Jackson County, and then he would repair there. He gave us a history of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon; his going to New York and presenting the characters to Professor Anthon, etc., concluded before we left that "Brigham Young was Governor," and that the authorities were there and that he should go there as soon as he could get away.⁸

And this report in Salt Lake City some three years later:

Dr. John Clinton gave President Young an account of his trip across the plains. Included in the report was the statement that Martin Harris and William Smith were at Kirtland, Ohio, and had organized a church of their own.⁹

Little wonder then, that when Martin Harris did come to the valley of the mountains in his eighty-eighth year, in 1870, the *Deseret News* consistently called him "Mr. Harris," until he had re-entered the waters of baptism. In one editorial, Elder George Q. Cannon wrote:

Mr. Harris saw fit to withdraw himself from the cause, but its course, owing to the workings of Divinity through faithful agents, has been onward to a most remarkable degree. The Saints, by thousands, have been gathered from the nations, a territory has been peopled and the foundation of a kingdom laid which will never again be uprooted from the earth; and Martin Harris, no longer able to resist the conviction that God still guides and controls the destinies of His kingdom and people, gladly returns to share in their blessings and privileges of that kingdom.¹⁰

⁷*Ibid.*, IV:433.

⁸*St. Louis Luminary*, May 5, 1855, p. 2. Letter is dated May 2, 1855.

⁹*Journal History*, May 18, 1858.

¹⁰*The Deseret News* (weekly) Salt Lake City, September 7, 1870.

(To be concluded)

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