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Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon

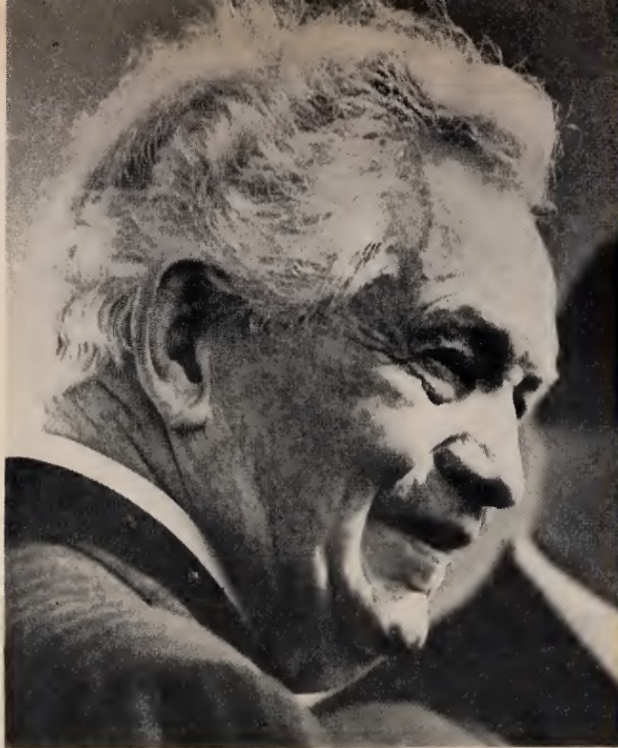
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Abstract: This article is a review of the lives of Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris, the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon. Although the Three Witnesses later left the Church, none of them ever denied their testimony of the Book of Mormon.



EDITOR'S PAGE



WITNESSES OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

BY PRESIDENT DAVID O. MCKAY

The Book of Mormon is one of four distinctive features of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Not infrequently, our friends ask: "In what way does your church differ from churches of Christendom?" In reply, we can always name these four: first, we believe in divine authority by direct revelation. That is a distinguishing feature. Second, the organization of the Church—there is nothing like it anywhere in the world, because it is divinely organized. Third, the eternal nature of covenants and ceremonies; for example, we believe that the priesthood given once will remain with that individual forever unless he proves himself unworthy of it. And fourth, the Book of Mormon is of divine origin and is what it purports to be, the history of God's dealing with the men and women anciently in the New World, as the Bible is the history of God's dealings with his people in the Old World.

The Book of Mormon was translated from engraved plates by the Prophet Joseph Smith. The plates were a physical substance. They could be seen and handled. The claim that they existed, that they were found in a certain place and delivered to Joseph Smith, could be verified by sight or feeling.

In addition to Joseph, there were three special witnesses and eight additional witnesses to the Book of Mormon plates, making a total of twelve witnesses.

The three and the eight signed solemn statements which appear in every copy of the Book of Mormon. Let us examine "The Testimony of Three Witnesses":

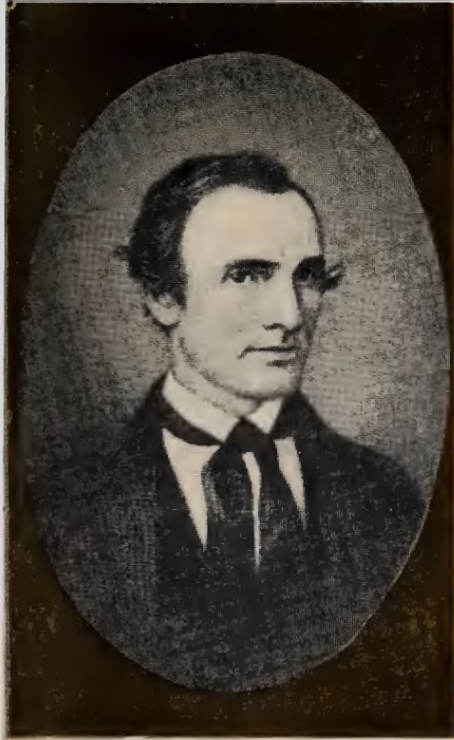
"BE IT KNOWN unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, unto whom this work shall come: That we, through the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, have seen the plates which contain this record. . . ."

Analyze that. Why would they tell a thing like that if it were not true?

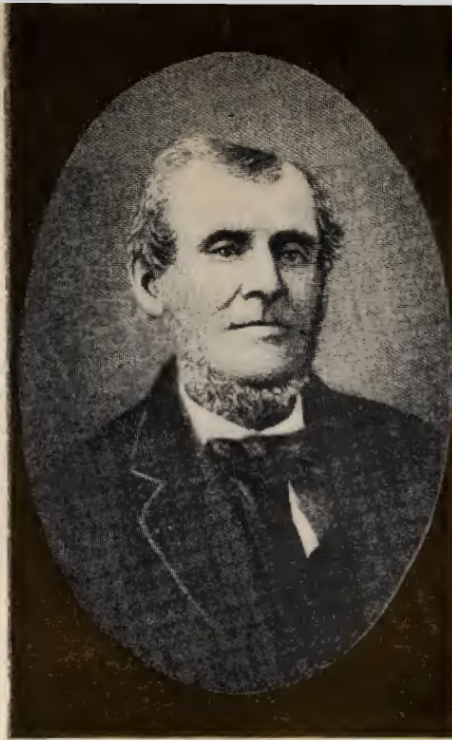
". . . which is a record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites, their brethren, and also of the people of Jared, who came from the tower of which hath been spoken. And we also know that they have been translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice hath declared it unto us; wherefore we know of a surety that the work is true. And we also testify that we have seen the engravings [the details] which are upon the plates; and they have been shown unto us by the power of God, and not of man. . . ."

Just how reliable were these witnesses? Did they tell the truth, or was there some collusion or deception? Let us consider the character of each of these men.

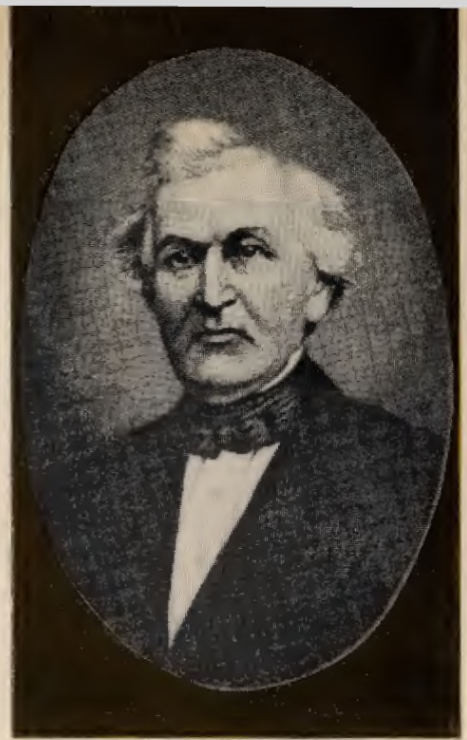
Oliver Cowdery was a young schoolteacher. In the course of events he did not sustain the Prophet and fell out of harmony with the Church. Had there been collusion in his testimony then would have been the



Oliver Cowdery



Martin Harris



David Whitmer

time to confess and proclaim it, and by so doing, expose any chicanery or fraud.

Following his excommunication, Oliver Cowdery practised law. During the ten years he was away from the Church he maintained that his testimony was true. On one occasion an opposing lawyer in court accused him of having signed his name to a document stating that an angel appeared to him and showed him the Book of Mormon plates. Oliver calmly replied:

"May it please your honor and gentlemen of the jury, this I say: I saw the angel and heard his voice—How can I deny it? It happened in the daytime when the sun was shining bright in the firmament; not in the night when I was asleep. That glorious messenger from heaven, dressed in white, standing above the ground, in a glory I have never seen anything to compare with—the sun insignificant in comparison—and this personage told us that if we denied that testimony there is no forgiveness in this life nor in the world to come. Now how can I deny it—I dare not: I will not!"

He came back into the Church later, and said: "I don't ask for any position; I was wrong," and he re-entered the Church by baptism.

Oliver Cowdery died at Richmond, Ray County, Missouri, March 3, 1850, and is buried in a cemetery

there which is now maintained by our Church.

David Whitmer was excommunicated because he was out of harmony. Did he ever deny his testimony? There is one encyclopedia which falsely states that he did, and the editors corrected it at his insistence in their next edition.

I had a personal friend, Charles C. Richards, who was on the Sunday School board in Weber Stake, who as a graduate from law school, accompanied his father, Elder Franklin D. Richards, of the Council of the Twelve, and they called upon David Whitmer. I give you his words:

"When Father explained to him the object of our visit, he received us very cordially. He was, apparently, sound and well-preserved physically, and in excellent spirits. He was alert, mentally, and possessed a wonderful recollection of the sacred events in regard to which we were interviewing him. Mr. Whitmer was then eighty years of age; my father was sixteen years younger; and I was a youngster of twenty-five. My father did most of the visiting with Mr. Whitmer, while I sat quietly listening to them discuss the important events that had transpired. I said that we would appreciate being told, if Mr. Whitmer felt like telling us, some of the incidents connected with the vision he had at the time the plates were shown to him and to the other (Continued on page 855)

The Book of Mormon and the Three Witnesses

(Continued from page 791)

witnesses. Mr. Whitmer turned his large, kind, but penetrating eyes upon me and, in a very pleasant and considerate, but firm and steady voice said, 'Read the printed testimony of the three witnesses which you will find on one of the front pages of the Book of Mormon, and I say to you that every word is true.'

David Whitmer did not rejoin the Church. He died in Richmond, Missouri, January 25, 1888, maintaining his testimony to the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon.

He was the last of the three wit-

WHISPER SOFTLY TO NOVEMBER

BY BEULAH HUISH SADLEIR

Whisper softly to November
Through her shutters newly closed;
Whisper lest the sounds offend her,
Sounds predicting early snows.

Whisper reverence as November
Recollects the Pilgrims' ways—
Each new generation's versing
Of a nation's hardy days.

nesses to die. He lies buried in Richmond, in a different cemetery from that of Oliver Cowdery.

Martin Harris, the third of the three witnesses, was likewise excommunicated during the difficult days of Kirtland. He came West later, rejoined the Church, and spoke in the Salt Lake Tabernacle. My father and mother were present on that occasion. Mother often told us, in my childhood and youth, what he had said and how he looked. She heard his testimony in the Salt Lake Tabernacle that his testimony in the Book of Mormon is true.

The last five years of his life were spent at Clarkston, Cache County, Utah. He died July 10, 1875, when he was ninety-two years of age. His honored grave is in the Clarkston cemetery.

There you have your witnesses and their reputability. Although all three of them left the Church during their lifetimes, none ever denied his testimony to the divinity of the Book of Mormon. It is a wonderful book. It is one of the vital cornerstones of the restored Church.

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