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Valid Testimony of the Three Witnesses

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Abstract: Pack discusses the men who are the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon, their continued testimony after leaving the Church, and the reconversion of Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris.

THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS'
MILLENNIAL STAR

ESTABLISHED IN 1840

“The first fruits of repentance is baptism; and baptism cometh by faith unto the fulfilling the commandments; and the fulfilling the commandments bringeth remission of sins.” BOOK OF MORMON, MORONI 8: 25.

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VALID TESTIMONY OF THE THREE WITNESSES*

ELDER FREDERICK J. PACK

ON THE FLY LEAF of the Book of Mormon is a statement, over the signature of three men, attesting to the divine authenticity of the book. This statement sets forth that an angel of God appeared to them, showed them the plates from which the book was translated and permitted them to examine the characters; moreover, that they know of a surety that the book was revealed by God, our Heavenly Father. I should like to direct your thoughts to a consideration of the validity of the testimony of these men.

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Soon after Joseph Smith had reached Harmony, Martin Harris followed him, manifestly for the purpose of obtaining information concerning Joseph's purported revelations—particularly those relating to the Book of Mormon. A short time thereafter, Joseph, under the inspiration of God, began the translation of the records, written upon the plates of gold. Martin Harris became the scribe. One-hundred sixteen pages of manuscript were translated. In the meantime, Martin Harris' wife, who remained at Palmyra, had become impatient because of her husband's persistent absence from home. She repeatedly appealed to him to leave what she characterized as an ethereal thing and return to the more basic pursuits of life, but Martin had not seen fit so to do. When the one-hundred sixteen pages of manuscript were translated, however, Martin Harris asked the Prophet if it would be possible to take the manuscript home,

*From an address delivered in the Tabernacle, Salt Lake City, Utah, U.S.A., on Sunday, July 8th, 1928.

that he might show it to his wife and thus allay her apprehensions. Upon inquiry of the Lord, a negative reply was received. A second inquiry was followed in the same manner. Finally the Prophet was told that Martin might take the manuscript home under very definite instructions. These instructions related principally to the individuals to whom the manuscript could be shown. Martin returned to Palmyra with the translated part of the record, but in some manner it was lost and never recovered. Martin received severe rebuke from the Lord because of his negligence.

Nearly a year had elapsed, and in the meantime, back at Joseph's home town, a young school teacher by the name of Oliver Cowdery, entered into contract with the trustees of that district. Hyrum Smith, Joseph's older brother, was one of the trustees. He secured a boarding place for Oliver Cowdery at his mother's home. The principle subject of conversation at the Smith home was Joseph and the revelations of the Lord to him. Oliver became satisfied that the reports were well worthy of investigation, and, accordingly, in the spring of 1829, when his contract for teaching had terminated, he immediately departed for Harmony, Pennsylvania. Two days after his arrival, he had become convinced of the genuineness of Joseph's claims, and offered himself as scribe. For the next ten weeks Joseph translated diligently and Oliver acted as his amanuensis.

THESE THREE MEN

Persecution made it necessary to move. Joseph had no home of his own; he could not return to the home of his father; neither could he remain longer at the home of his wife's father. A very serious difficulty confronted them. Oliver Cowdery informed Joseph that when he was on his way from Palmyra to Harmony, he met a young man named David Whitmer, with whom he talked concerning the purported claims of Joseph, and which he himself was about to investigate. He further stated that the young man had requested of him that if he found Joseph Smith interesting, and his claims reliable, that he, Oliver Cowdery, would inform him. Oliver said that in his judgment it would be well to write David Whitmer and ask if Joseph and Oliver might come to the home of his father. A letter containing some such request was sent, and a favourable reply was almost immediately received.

A short time later, David Whitmer came into Harmony and took Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery back to his father's home, in the township of Fayette, some forty miles southeasterly from the village of Palmyra. At the home of the Whitmers, in the summer of 1829, the translation of the Book of Mormon was completed.

I have mentioned the foregoing phases of early Church history

in order to familiarize you, my hearers, with three outstanding individuals, namely: Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer. These are the three men whose names are attached to the statement contained in the Book of Mormon.

DIVINE MANIFESTATION

About the time of the completion of the translation of the Book of Mormon, one morning immediately after home service, three men: Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and Martin Harris, appeared by the side of Joseph Smith and said to him: "We have read a statement in the manuscript to the effect that three witnesses would be called to testify of the truth of the record; and we have wondered if we would be acceptable to the Lord." Joseph, an unusually large man, laid his hand upon the shoulder of Martin Harris, a man slightly below normal size, and directing his attention to him, said: "Martin, you will be tested more fully to-day, than you have ever been tested before." Whereupon the four men retired to a beautiful spot in a wooded place near by. They knelt upon the ground, and each in turn petitioned God the Eternal Father to manifest His will unto them.

Each had prayed in turn three times without results; whereupon Martin Harris, perhaps remembering his past disobedience or neglect, arose and said: "The fault is mine; I will leave." Almost immediately after he had gone, an angel of God, Moroni, the custodian of the ancient records, appeared before them with the plates in his hands. He requested them to examine the characters, gave them certain instructions, and then departed. The first words uttered by Joseph after the vision had closed, were: "But where is Martin?" He sought for him and found him at a distant place, prone upon the ground, praying to God for a forgiveness of his sins. Joseph joined him in prayer. The Angel Moroni appeared to them, holding the plates in his hands, as he had done in the former case. He gave them similar instructions and departed. The four men went back to the Whitmer home and wrote the testimony now present on the fly leaf of the Book of Mormon.

IN RESPONSIBLE POSITIONS

At that time, critics of the Church said that of course it would be an easy matter for any man to obtain the testimony of three of his bosom friends. It was further stated that if the time should come when lack of unity existed between Joseph and the three witnesses, they would turn upon him and tell the truth. So the critics merely sat back and said: "We will wait and see."

The Church moved from Fayette and Palmyra to Kirtland, Ohio, a beautiful little village some fifteen to twenty miles east of Cleveland. Here a large number of individuals were added to

the faith. Simultaneous with the development and growth of the Church at Kirtland, a similar branch arose at Independence, Missouri. Means of communication between remote places were very slow, and, accordingly, it was often quite unsatisfactory for members of the Church at Missouri to be under the necessity of referring matters for decision to Kirtland, practically a thousand miles away. Because of this condition it became apparent that some strong man, of great wisdom and sound judgment, must be placed in charge of the Church at Independence, while the headquarters remained at Kirtland. Joseph east about for such a man, and chose David Whitmer, one of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon. He, in turn, chose Oliver Cowdery as one of his associates.

In the meantime, at Kirtland, Ohio, a High Council had been organized, and Martin Harris had been selected as one of its members. Thus, the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon, each in turn, had been placed in a responsible position. Further time passed; trouble arose. Disaffection spread rapidly. David Whitmer, the President of the Church in Missouri, himself became alienated. An inquiry and trial resulted in finding David Whitmer and his associate, Oliver Cowdery, unworthy of further membership.

If the Prophet Joseph had connived with these men to obtain their signatures to the testimony of the Book of Mormon, he would not have dared to approve the documents that severed them from him; but in substance, he said: "It makes no difference who men are, if they will not obey the counsels of God they cannot have membership with us."

LISTENED IN VAIN

At practically the same time, it became necessary to turn attention to Martin Harris, the last remaining of the witnesses, for he also had manifested an unchristianlike conduct. Then the critics said: "Now is the time of denial"—for it is well known that men may connive in bonds of friendship, but never in bonds of disfellowship. But the critics listened in vain, for the denial did not come.

Years passed—a decade and more. The Mormon people had migrated to Utah and had established themselves here in these valleys. Large numbers of missionaries had been sent out to tell the world of the message imposed upon us. A certain missionary, upon his way home from Great Britain, decided to visit Kirtland, for the purpose of seeing the temple which had been built there a generation before. He remained over night at a little inn, and the next morning told the keeper of his desire to see the temple, and asked to whom he should apply for admittance. He was informed that an old man by the name of Harris, who lived in a little house a short distance away, had the key. The Elder knocked gently at

the door, and an old man, bent with the cares of years, answered. The Elder said: "My name is Homer. I am a 'Mormon' Elder. I have just returned from a mission to Great Britain. I have a great desire to see the temple, and am informed that you have the key." The old man, somewhat impatient for the boy to close his statement, immediately replied: "I care nothing for you nor for your people." The boy said: "I am sure you are misinformed." "Misinformed? Not at all. You should be ashamed of yourself to be associated with such a class of people." The young man said: "Really, I had not intended to bring about such a conversation. All I want is to see the temple."

"EVERY WORD TRUE"

The old man took the key from a nail, inside the door, and he and the boy crossed the street to the temple. The old man was Martin Harris—he who had remained in Kirtland while the Saints had gone to the Rocky Mountains. The two men entered the temple. In the meantime, the old man continued to berate the "Mormon" people to the full extent of his ability. Finally they reached the basement of the temple. Through the windows the sun was shining. The old man was standing in such a position that its rays covered his person. The young man said to him: "I suppose that inasmuch as you so thoroughly dislike the 'Mormon' people you are prepared to deny your testimony contained in the Book of Mormon." The old man rose to the full height of his stature and said: "Boy, as there is a God in heaven and as the sun shines, every word I have said in that testimony is true."

The visit was completed. The two men re-crossed the street. The young man said to the older one: "Why don't you go to Utah and learn for yourself? I tell you that you are misinformed." Finally, after much discussion, the old man admitted that he had no means with which to go. His clothing was ragged; his hair was unkempt. The boy said: "Permit me to ask President Young to send you the money." The old man finally responded: "I will agree to go to Utah, with the understanding that you send me a round-trip ticket, because I don't propose to stay among the 'Mormons.'"

When Elder Homer reached Salt Lake City, he went immediately to President Young. He told his story, and the President said: "Send for Martin Harris? We would send for him if it took the last dollar that there is in this land; for well we remember that it was he who rendered the first financial aid to the Prophet Joseph; moreover, when the manuscript for the Book of Mormon was ready for the printer, it was he who came forward and made its publication possible."

Martin Harris was sent for. He came to Salt Lake City; he visited President Brigham Young. His mind was disabused of the lurid stories that formerly were told so freely about the "Mor-

mon" people. Later Martin Harris came to the Tabernacle where I now stand, and bore testimony that the Angel Moroni did appear to him, that he saw his face, that he examined the golden plates, that he knew with all his heart and soul that God lives, that Joseph Smith was a prophet and that the Book of Mormon is true. He died a few years later in one of the northern counties of this state.

"A STRANGER AMONG YOU"

I shall now direct your attention to an earlier decade in Church history when our people were emigrating from the middle west to the Rocky Mountains. After having been ejected by mob violence from Nauvoo, Illinois, many of our people temporarily settled in Iowa. A certain meeting was in progress. The preliminaries had passed; a stranger had taken his seat just inside the door. At what appeared to him to be an opportune time, he arose and said: "Pardon me. I am a stranger among you, but I desire to say a word. Formerly I was a member of the Church, but through disobedience I lost my standing. I returned to my practice of law and tried to bury my knowledge of the revelations of God to me, but the memory of it has been gnawing at my soul all these years. Oh, my name? Cowdery—Oliver Cowdery. I am he whose name is attached to the testimony of the three witnesses. Yes, it is true that formerly I held a prominent position in the Church; but I am not seeking its return. All I ask is that you will permit me to come back, to be one with you and to partake of your sorrows and pleasures. Yes," he said, "I have one other request. If you will admit me to membership, I want to go to the valleys of the mountains and see the Saints established there. Then I desire to go to Great Britain and tell that mighty people what I know, for I have stood side by side with Joseph, the slain prophet, and probably know more concerning him than any other living man." Oliver Cowdery was readmitted. An emigrant train bound for Utah, was scheduled to pass that way within the next two months. He decided to join the party, but he said that in the meantime he would go to Missouri and visit David Whitmer, and that when the wagon train arrived he would be back and join it.

What he said when he met his brother-in-law, David Whitmer, was doubtless somewhat as follows: "David, the Church has taken me back; won't you come back also?" But the precise nature of what he said will never be known, for soon after Oliver Cowdery reached Missouri he became sick and died.

WITH ALL CANDOR

David Whitmer never did return to the Church. He was reputed to have been an outstanding citizen in the community in which he lived. A short time before he died it was reported that

he had denied his testimony, but when the word was carried to him, he responded with all the emphasis of his soul: "It is not so. I want to bear a final testimony to the effect that never in my life have I denied my statement concerning the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon, for God knows that it is true, and I know that it is true."

Now, in closing, I ask you people who are strangers among us to consider with all candor the claims of the Book of Mormon. It matters not whether you be philosophers, scientists or historians, whether you be laymen or ecclesiasts, if you will faithfully consider this modern scripture you will find in it the truth of the everlasting God.

I bear you my testimony that the Lord has given me a knowledge that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God and that the claims of the Book of Mormon are true.

In the name of Jesus Christ, the Master. Amen.

IRELAND HEARS THE GOSPEL

ELDER RICHARD L. EVANS

THE LORD'S LATTER-DAY WORK was well started in England and Scotland. There was work enough to keep all hands busy—and to spare—on the English side of the Irish Sea; but there were millions in Ireland still waiting in darkness, thousands of whom were prepared for the advent of truth. The privilege of carrying Gospel tidings to those who waited on the "Emerald Isle" fell to the lot of Elder John Taylor.

The Church in Liverpool was growing rapidly. There were demands upon every available hour of Elder Taylor's time; but to say unqualifiedly that John Taylor was popular in Liverpool would be to utter an untruth. True servants of the Lord are seldom popular with the majority. Those who did seek his ministrations, however, sought earnestly, as if their soul's salvation depended upon it—which, indeed, was the case. It is plain, however, that this wholesome popularity did not extend to the gentleman of the clerical garb. Of them he wrote:

We called upon many of the leading ministers of different denominations, and delivered our testimony to them. Some received us kindly, some otherwise; but none would let us have their chapels to hold forth in. They were so good in general, and so pure, that they had no room for the Gospel. They were too holy to be righteous, too good to be pure, and had too much religion to enter into the kingdom of heaven.*

(Continued on page 780)

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