



Type: Journal Article

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Source: *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*,  
Volume 43 (2021), pp. vii-xxxii

Published by: The Interpreter Foundation

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# INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT  
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 43 · 2021 · Pages vii - xxxii

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Daniel C. Peterson

Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)  
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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# VARIETY AND COMPLEXITY IN THE WITNESSES TO THE BOOK OF MORMON

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**Daniel C. Peterson**

***Abstract:** This paper examines the testimonies of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon— not only the Three Witnesses and the Eight Witnesses, but many others who experienced and testified of reality of the Book of Mormon plates. Together, these testimonies offer impressive support for the claims of Joseph Smith regarding the Book of Mormon and thus, the Restoration. The variety and complexity of their collective testimony makes finding a single, alternative, non-divine explanation for the witness experiences challenging, indeed.*

[Editor's Note: A very similar version of this essay was delivered as an address at the annual FairMormon Conference in August 2020.]

While listening to a recorded lecture a few months ago, I heard an Evangelical apologist make an observation along roughly the following lines: “Some Christians,” he said, “are too easily talked out of their faith because they had never been talked into it in the first place.” I wish that I could give credit to my source, but I no longer recall his name. However, I’ve been reflecting on that comment since then.

Now, I do not believe that we are very likely to remain in any deep life-altering commitment — whether religious, or romantic, or of any other kind — merely because we’ve been “talked into” doing so. Still, I think that there is something noteworthy in the comment, something pointing to an area in which we Latter-day Saints could do better. (That’s one of the reasons I believe so strongly in the importance of The Interpreter Foundation and why I see value in its sister-organizations, Book of Mormon Central and FAIR.)

We, as a people, tend to focus on experiential support for our beliefs. We seek and value “spiritual experiences,” and we try to help others seek and receive them — in sacrament meetings, firesides, girls’

camps, handcart treks, and a host of other such ventures. This is all well and good, and I enthusiastically support such things. Indeed, our fundamental missionary approach is to lead people to test the promise of Moroni 10:4–5 in order to receive their own individual, personal testimonies as a result of the feelings they receive.

But I am absolutely convinced that we should not neglect a more cognitive support for our faith — one that is intellectually or rationally based.

Commitment to religion should not rely merely upon emotional satisfaction, as important and essential as such fulfillment may be; our moods fluctuate and our emotions are inconstant. We also should be able to articulate reasons in support of our faith. Doing so is in no way a detraction from the importance of spiritual conviction. It may, in fact, be a way of piquing the interest of outsiders who may then be led to develop their own Spirit-infused faith.

“Be ready always,” says 1 Peter 3:15, “to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you.” “In your hearts,” says the English Standard Version<sup>1</sup> of that same verse, “honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.”

The Greek word that the ESV renders as *defense* and that the King James Bible translates as *answer* is *apologia*, from which we derive our words *apologist* and *apologetics*. This suggests that apologetics, in at least some form, may well have an entirely necessary role within the lives of Latter-day Saints and especially in the lives of Latter-day Saints who seek to share the Gospel with others.

The Savior himself was willing to provide evidence for rational belief. We find support for this claim in a well-known account from the gospel of Matthew. It revolves around a man who was cured of palsy (likely paralysis) in the small Galilean fishing village of Capernaum. Jesus had been over on the eastern side of the lake in Galilee called Genesaret (often misnamed “the sea of Galilee”).

And he entered into a ship, and passed over, and came into his own city. And, behold, they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed: and Jesus seeing their faith, said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee. And, behold, certain of the scribes said within themselves, This man blasphemeth. And Jesus, knowing

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1. *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), <https://www.esv.org>. Hereafter referred to as *ESV*.

their thoughts said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts? For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house. And he arose, and departed to his house. But when the multitudes saw it, they marvelled, and glorified God, which had given such power unto men. (Matthew 9:1-8)

In this story, Jesus declared that the sins of the man with palsy were forgiven, but there was clearly no empirical way of testing such a declaration — no medical examination or litmus test could prove it either true or false. So, to provide his audience reason to believe the non-empirical claim that he had the authority (and the requisite status with God) to forgive sins, Jesus performed a very empirical, quite tangible miracle: He healed the man with the palsy. The paralyzed man immediately arose and walked. Seeing this, his observers could rationally infer Jesus’s authority to forgive (and thus, God’s ratification of such forgiveness) from the curing of that paralytic.

When Latter-day Saints attempt to provide rational grounds for belief, however well or poorly we execute the task, it can rightly be said that we are attempting to follow the Savior, for he did that as well.

My work here represents just one partial approach to one of the many reasons that we give for the hope that is in us as believing Latter-day Saints. I emphasize that it is a *partial* approach — much, much more can and should be said. My comments in this essay cover only a small portion of my overall argument respecting the Book of Mormon witnesses.

I choose this particular subject of the witnesses for two specific reasons, one practical and one theological:

- I’ve been involved, over the past several years, in an Interpreter Foundation project on the witnesses to the Book of Mormon. The effort began shortly after we had interviewed the late Richard Lloyd Anderson, for decades the leading authority on the subject.<sup>2</sup> Our project has produced a theatrical film that will, I expect, receive its premiere in just a few weeks from the time this essay

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2. Anderson died in mid-August 2018, at the age of 92, and I’m deeply grateful that we captured that footage in time. I consider him a witness to the witnesses.

appears.<sup>3</sup> It will be accompanied by a documentary or docudrama that features interviews with scholars and other experts, as well as by other online supporting materials, both video and textual.<sup>4</sup>

- Since the Witnesses represent the only evidence for the Book of Mormon (beyond the existence and character of the book itself and the corroborating testimony of the Holy Ghost) that was scripturally promised by the Lord himself and that he has directly provided, it seems to me imperative that we pay careful attention to them.

One might surely ask why the Lord did not simply send an angel to show the plates of the Book of Mormon to a general meeting of everybody in the area of Manchester and Palmyra and then take them on an exhibition tour along the Erie Canal. Plenty of critics (and probably more than a few members of the Church) have asked that question.

The answer appears to be that he does not seem to have ever done things that way. The mortal ministry of Jesus took place in a remote backwater province of the Roman Empire. The miracle that I earlier mentioned occurred in the Galilee, an even more remote backwater area of that remote backwater province. And, when Jesus rose from the dead, although he appeared to a few people in Judea and the Galilee and, later, to people gathered at the temple in Bountiful, he never dropped by the Roman Senate, or made an appearance in the Colosseum or the Circus Maximus where he would receive greatest exposure and renown. The apostle Peter, speaking to the Roman centurion Cornelius and other Gentiles in Caesarea Maritima, explained of Jesus that “Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly; Not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before God, even to us, who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead” (Acts 10:40–41).

The Lord took the same approach in the early days of the Restoration: He chose witnesses.

Why does He do this? The honest answer is that we simply do not know. I suspect, though, that it is related to what Latter-day Saints call the “veil,” and which the late Anglo-American philosopher of religion, John Hick,

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3. See “Witnesses,” An Interpreter Foundation Production, <https://witnessesfilm.com/>.

4. The docudrama has its own website, see Witnesses (website), <https://witnessesundaunted.com/>. As an example of the written, textual, resources that we’re creating, see Witnesses of the Book of Mormon (website), <https://witnessesofthebookofmormon.org/>.

called “epistemic distance.” The Lord will not compel us to believe. He could simply reveal Himself to us, but that would overwhelm our freedom to choose to believe. He wants us to choose Him out of love, out of a desire for goodness and truth, and not because our wills have been coerced.

Søren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher, uses a parable about a king and a maiden to make this point<sup>5</sup> — that, if God were to reveal himself fully and with unmistakable, irresistible clarity, that revelation would overwhelm and destroy our freedom.

In the story, a king falls deeply, passionately in love with a peasant girl. But how can the king reveal his love to a woman of humble parentage — given the huge disparity of rank, status, and wealth between them — without coercing and crushing her? If she were aware of his position, how could he (or she) be certain that her love for him was genuine, unaffected by his status, unintimidated by his power, unmotivated by greed or ambition?

“Not to reveal oneself,” Kierkegaard writes, “is the death of love, to reveal oneself is the death of the beloved.”<sup>6</sup> The only real choice open to the king is to court his beloved indirectly, by descending to her station, by taking on the character of a servant. So he disguises himself.

God, Kierkegaard says, wants us to love Him freely because we come to know Him as lovable, not because He’s powerful, terrifying, incredibly “rich,” or overwhelming. We have abundant reason to do that. In a similar way, though he wants us to develop faith or trust in Him, He does not seek a compelled belief. He does not desire an assent that has been forced upon us because we had no rational alternative or escape.

Accordingly, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, there are hints and clues, but they are not coercive because they were designed not to be. Moreover, questions — even reasons for doubt — definitely exist, and they do so, I believe, by divine intent.

Now let us return from the airy realms of philosophical and theological speculation to the solid ground of history, where I believe the witnesses to the Book of Mormon are firmly rooted.

On 29 March 1830, a young Baptist minister named David Marks attended a meeting in Fayette, New York, “at the house of Mr. Whitmer,” specifically, Peter Whitmer, Sr. and his wife, Mary, where, just one week later, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would be formally

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5. Søren Kierkegaard, “Chapter 2: The God as Teacher and Saviour: An Essay of the Imagination,” in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David F. Swenson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1936), <https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-2-the-god-as-teacher-and-saviour-an-essay-of-the-imagination/>.

6. Ibid.



organized. Writing thereafter, Reverend Marks remembered that “two or three” of the Whitmer sons were among “eight, who said they were witnesses.” Actually, there were four: Christian Whitmer, Jacob Whitmer, Peter Whitmer, Jr., and John Whitmer, along with a Whitmer son-in-law, Hiram Page. (The other three were Joseph Smith, Sr., his eldest surviving son, Hyrum Smith, and Samuel H. Smith, the Prophet Joseph’s immediately younger brother.) Reverend Marks reported that they had seen “certain plates of metal, having the appearance of gold. ... These eight, we understand, were in company with Smith and three others.”<sup>7</sup>

The “three others” were the Three Witnesses — Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer (yet another son of Peter and Mary), and Martin Harris. Altogether, with Joseph Smith, the Witnesses total twelve.

I doubt that number is mere coincidence. Although it was nowhere enshrined in the U.S. Constitution that juries must contain twelve members, and although some American states permit lower numbers of jurors in some cases, the tradition of twelve-member juries has been common, if not dominant, among English-speaking peoples, and particularly in the United States, for many generations. The origin of this customary practice goes back at least to the Welsh king Morgan of Gla-Morgan, who decided upon the number when he established trial by jury in AD 725, comparing the judge and jury to Jesus and his twelve apostles.<sup>8</sup>

The notion that important legal judgments were to be rendered by “twelve good men and true” was well established by at least the first half of the seventeenth century. For example, Thomas Randolph famously had a spokesman in one of his poems declare of another “I had rather ... haue his twelve Godvathers, good men and true, contemne him to the Gallows.”<sup>9</sup> And the concept of a “jury of one’s peers” can be traced to the Magna Carta of 1215, which repeatedly stresses a requirement that judgment be rendered by a defendant’s “equals.”

I will try, in this essay, to illustrate how those phrases, too, shed light on the Witnesses to the Book of Mormon.

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7. David Marks, *The Life of David Marks: To the 26th Year of His Age, Including the Particulars of His Conversion, Call to the Ministry, and Labours in Itinerant Preaching for Nearly Eleven Years* (Limerick, ME: The Morning Star, 1831), 340.

8. Chris Gorski, ed., “The Mathematics of Jury Size,” *Inside Science*, March 23, 2012, <https://www.insidescience.org/news/mathematics-jury-size>.

9. Thomas Randolph, *Poems with the Muses looking-glasse and Amyntas* (Oxford: Leonard Lichfield Printer, 1638), 79, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A10411.0001.001/1:5.4.4?rgn=div3;view=fulltext>.

### The Three Witnesses

As is usually done, let us consider the Three Witnesses first, and examine the variety and complexity of their accounts. Over the course of that two-day interview with us about a year before his death, Richard Anderson emphasized the differences between Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris, viewing them as representative human types:

You've got Oliver Cowdery, who is trained in education equivalently to today. And he's a white-collar man and he's a thinker and analyzer. Now, if you wanted to get the best three representatives of the human race, you certainly include him. But he's in the minority, even today. ... David Whitmer is a tradesman; he's a businessman. ... He ran a business for fifty years and kept his profits in the black instead of in the red. And then there's Martin Harris and he's the religious fanatic — using the terminology of some people who knew him. They have a hard time with Martin Harris because he is a believer. And sometimes he believes in too much — maybe things that we wouldn't now. ... And Martin Harris gets criticized for being a true believer, but that's part of the logic of having three witnesses who were representative of the human race.<sup>10</sup>

So you've got somebody who's what you would call an intellectual, somebody who's a pragmatic businessman, and somebody that is a true believer.<sup>11</sup>

So the very selection of these men as witnesses, to me, is faith promoting as a historian.<sup>12</sup>

[T]he Three Witnesses were in fact a cross section of their community.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, to follow the framework I have introduced, these witnesses were part of a “jury of peers.” The differences between them in education and life experience can be argued as ensuring that representation.

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10. Richard Anderson, interview by Daniel C. Peterson, 9-10 February, 2017, 00:12:23.05.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 00:16:22.25.

13. Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 103.

According to David Whitmer, their encounter with the angel and the plates took place toward the end of June 1829, at about 11:00 am.<sup>14</sup> What was the nature of that encounter? What did these three very different men claim to have seen and heard?

- They saw the plates.
- The audible voice of God declared to them that the plates had been translated by divine gift and power.
- They saw the engravings on the plates.
- They saw an angel who had descended from heaven.
- The voice of God commanded them to bear record of their experience.

The miraculous nature of the claimed experience of the Three Witnesses is clear. They did not simply go into the woods and see an unusual metal object, they saw an angel. Indeed, they heard the voice of God from heaven.

David Whitmer, who lived well past the other witnesses into 1888 (and whom Richard Anderson calls “the most interviewed witness”) described the atmosphere in which all this occurred:

[A]ll at once a light came down from above us and encircled us for quite a little distance around, and the angel stood before us. ... [W]e 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 ... All of a sudden I beheld a dazzlingly brilliant light that surpassed in brightness even the sun at noonday, and which seemed to envelop the woods for a considerable distance around. Simultaneous with the light came a strange entrancing influence which permeated me so powerfully that I felt chained to the spot, while I also experienced a sensation of joy absolutely indescribable.<sup>15</sup>

I beheld the glory of the Lord.<sup>16</sup>

Simple, ordinary mundane forgery — the work, say, of a cunning and conniving blacksmith — could not account for such claims. It could not create an unearthly light, let alone produce an apparent angel or a divine voice from heaven.

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14. *Ibid.*, 80.

15. *Ibid.*, 80-81.

16. *Ibid.*, 90.

Moreover, as Richard L. Anderson points out, “Those who see the witnesses as victims of simple deception have overlooked the complexity of the experience promised to them, and their later spontaneous mention of seeing the other ancient objects with the plates.”<sup>17</sup>

Consider, for instance, the words spoken to the Three Witnesses in a June 1829 revelation given just prior to their experience with the angel and the plates:

Behold, I say unto you, that you must rely upon my word, which if you do with full purpose of heart, you shall have a view of the plates, and also of the breastplate, the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim, which were given to the brother of Jared upon the mount, when he talked with the Lord face to face, and the miraculous directors which were given to Lehi while in the wilderness, on the borders of the Red Sea. And it is by your faith that you shall obtain a view of them, even by that faith which was had by the prophets of old.

And after that you have obtained faith, and have seen them with your eyes, you shall testify of them, by the power of God. And this you shall do that my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., may not be destroyed, that I may bring about my righteous purposes unto the children of men in this work. (D&C 17:1-4)

In fact, even though the official statement doesn’t mention it, they did see all of those things. David Whitmer, for example, said in various interviews:

[The angel] showed to us the plates, the sword of Laban, the Directors [that is, the Liahona], the Urim and Thummim, and other records. ... [T]here appeared, as it were, a table, with many records on it — besides the plates of the Book of Mormon, also the sword of Laban, the Directors, and the Interpreters. I saw them as plain as I see this bed [striking his hand upon the bed beside him]. ... I saw the Interpreters in the holy vision; they looked like whitish stones put in the rim of a bow — looked like spectacles, only much larger.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, they saw a collection of concrete and tangible objects, not just the plates. Not just the *angel* and the plates. Richard Anderson’s comment is appropriate here:

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17. Ibid., 10.

18. Ibid., 80-81. Oliver Cowdery also claimed to have seen the Interpreters (see *ibid.*, 61).

Nothing short of biblical Christianity furnishes such a concrete statement of supernatural reality. One cannot dismiss the experience easily, for each man so testifying impressed his community with his capacity and unwavering honesty, and all three consistently reaffirmed the experience in hundreds of interviews throughout their lives.<sup>19</sup>

The claim of the Three Witnesses is more complex still, as they had these experiences in two distinct groups: First, Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer saw the plates, the angel, the sword, the breastplate, the Urim and Thummim, and the Liahona, and heard the attesting voice of God. And then, separately, Joseph Smith and Martin Harris had the same experience. If it was a hallucination, it had to be generated and experienced not just once, but *twice*.

### The Eight Witnesses

We now turn to the Eight Witnesses, whose statement reflects a very different experience. It is, among other things, far more restrained, matter of fact, cooler, even legalistic, than the statement of the Three — for instance, in their reference to Joseph Smith as “the said Smith.”<sup>20</sup> Notice, too, their almost noncommittal language. They will not go beyond what they saw and what their eyes and their hands had been able to verify:

- They saw the plates, which, they said, “had the *appearance* of gold.”
- They saw the engravings on those plates, which, they said, had “the *appearance* of ancient work, and of curious workmanship.”<sup>21</sup>

They do not claim to have seen the Liahona (the “Directors”), the sword of Laban, the breastplate, the Urim and Thummim (the “Interpreters”), or any collection of other metal plates. They do not claim to have heard an audible divine voice. They do not claim to have received a heavenly confirmation that the translation was correct, nor reported an unearthly light, entrancing influence, or sensation of transcendent joy. No angel appeared to them. They do not even testify to divine power in the translation process. They simply bear witness that they “know of a surety

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19. *Ibid.*, 53.

20. “The Testimony of Eight Witnesses,” in *The Book of Mormon*, trans. Joseph Smith, Jr. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981).

21. *Ibid.*

that the said Smith has got the plates.” They have “handled” those plates, leaf by leaf, “with [their] hands.” They have “seen and hefted” the plates<sup>22</sup>.

The verb *to heft* is worth noting; it’s significant. It means “to lift” or “to carry,” with the clear connotation that what is being lifted or carried is something heavy. (We don’t “heft” goldfish or feathers or tufts of cotton.) It is, in fact, scarcely surprising that the verb contains such a suggestion, since we also use *heft* as a noun to indicate notable weight and since, very distantly, both ultimately derive from the same Proto-Indo-European root. At one point before he saw the plates and the angel, for example, Martin Harris had a chance to lift the box that purportedly contained the plates. His recollection of that test has always struck me as hilarious, whether the humor was intentional or not. But please note the word that he uses: “I knew from the heft that they were lead or gold, and I knew that Joseph had not credit enough to buy so much lead.”<sup>23</sup>

Returning to the Eight Witnesses and their declaration that they had seen, hefted, and handled the plates: “With these simple claims,” Richard Anderson remarks,

eight farmers and artisans publicly reported that Joseph Smith had shown them ancient plates of the Book of Mormon. A practical group who worked with their hands, they were better able to evaluate the “appearance of gold” and the “curious workmanship” than eight picked at random from a modern city.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, there is at least one report that seems to suggest that the Eight Witnesses encountered the plates in two groups of four rather than all together. If that is true — and it may or may not be — the scam, if it were a scam, had to be run not once but *twice*.<sup>25</sup>

These farmers and artisans were, again, members of a “jury of peers,” ordinary, common men. There were many like them on the American frontier in the early nineteenth century. Counting Joseph Smith himself and the Three Witnesses, there were “twelve good men and true.” However, the Eight Witnesses cannot simply be added to the Three for a total of eleven supplemental, confirming witnesses for Joseph. That would be true, but inadequate. They aren’t interchangeable; they’re not

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22. Ibid.

23. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 26.

24. Ibid., 123.

25. See Ronald E. Romig, *Eighth Witness: The Biography of John Whitmer* (Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 2014), 55-56.

fungible or redundant. Their testimony is markedly different — and, I think, designedly so — from that of the Three.

### **The Three and the Eight Taken Together**

B. H. Roberts set out some vitally important analysis of the two sets of witnesses in his classic, *Comprehensive History of the Church*<sup>26</sup>. I can really do no better, I think, than to quote it at considerable, even awkward, length. Members of the Church will profit, in my judgment, from familiarity with his thinking on this issue:

It is to be observed that what may be called two kinds of testimony to the truth of the *Book of Mormon* is found in the statements of the three and eight witnesses respectively; viz: what men would call miraculous testimony, and ordinary testimony. Had there been but one kind of testimony the matter would have been much simplified for the objector. Had the testimony of the three witnesses been the only kind given; that is, if the plates had been exhibited to the eight witnesses in the same manner as they had been revealed to the three, then, perhaps, mental hallucination might have been urged with more show of reason. Or, if the three witnesses had seen the plates in the same manner as the eight did, in a plain, matter-of-fact way, without display of the divine power, then the theory of pure fabrication, with collusion on the part of all those who assisted in bringing forth the work, would have more standing. But with the two kinds of testimony to deal with it is extremely difficult for objectors to dispose of the matter.<sup>27</sup>

It is just at this point that the two kinds of testimony — the testimony of the three witnesses and the eight, respectively, act and react upon each other in a manner quite remarkable. The “mental mirage” theory might offer a possible solution for the vision of the three witnesses, but what of the testimony of the eight witnesses — all so plain, matter-of-fact, straightforward and real? How shall that be accounted for? Here all the miraculous is absent. It is a man to man transaction. Neither superstition, nor expectation of the supernatural can play any part in working up an illusion or “mental mirage” respecting

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26. B. H. Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930)

27. *Ibid.*, 1:149-50.

what the eight witnesses saw and handled. Their testimony must be accounted for on some other hypothesis than that of hallucination. And indeed it is. Some regard it as a mere fabrication of interested parties to the general scheme of deception. This, however, is an arbitrary proceeding, not warranted by a just treatment of the facts involved. Others, being impressed with the evident honesty of the witnesses, or not being able to account for the matter in any other way, admit that Joseph Smith must have had plates which he exhibited to the eight witnesses, but deceived them as to the manner in which he came in possession of them. ... The net result then of the anti-“Mormon” speculations in relation to the testimony of the three witnesses and the eight is the theory of hallucination to account for the testimony of the three witnesses, and pure fabrication, with the possibility of deception by Joseph Smith as to the existence of some kind of plates lurking in the background, to account for the testimony of the eight witnesses.<sup>28</sup>

But the testimony of the three and the eight witnesses, respectively, stands or falls together. If the pure fabrication theory is adopted to explain away the testimony of the eight witnesses, there is no reason why it should not be adopted to explain away the testimony of the three. But every circumstance connected with the testimony of all these witnesses ... cries out against the theory of “pure fabrication.” It is in recognition of the evident honesty of the three witnesses that the theory of mental hallucination is invented to account for their testimony; as it is also the evident honesty of the eight witnesses that leads to the admission by many anti-“Mormon” writers that Joseph Smith must have had some kind of plates which he exhibited to the eight witnesses, though he may not have obtained them through supernatural means.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps I can rephrase Elder Roberts’s point: Let us assume for a moment that the experience of the Three Witnesses — “miraculous testimony,” as he calls it — could be explained as the product of hallucination. (To be clear, I do not believe it could be, but, for purposes of the argument, let us assume that it could.) The very distinct experience

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28. *Ibid.*, 1:152-53.

29. *Ibid.*, 1:153-54.



of the Eight Witnesses — “ordinary testimony,” in Elder Roberts’s terminology — *cannot* plausibly be accounted for by hallucination. It’s too mundane and matter-of-fact. So perhaps, a critic might urge, it was a matter of a cunningly designed stage prop. Fake plates, created to fool the yokels. But who manufactured those golden plates? What was the source of the considerable gold required to make them? And where did it go? Why were the Smiths still poor after the plates disappeared? And, anyway, mere stage-prop plates can’t explain the experience of the Three.

I assert that, with the testimonies of the Three and the Eight Witnesses, we do not simply have an arithmetic sum of two collective testimonies. Rather, given the different nature of the reported experiences, the difficulty for those who want to dismiss the claims of the witnesses is increased geometrically, not merely arithmetically, by the existence of the two kinds of witness. Put simply, the critic’s difficulty isn’t just doubled, it’s quadrupled.

### **The Informal or Unofficial Witnesses**

But the strength of witness testimony does not end there. I will start with perhaps the least interesting of them: Isaac Hale, Joseph Smith’s father-in-law, Emma’s father, a hunter, farmer, and innkeeper. He was anything but a fan of his son-in-law. He disapproved of Joseph’s money-digging past, and he strongly disapproved of the marriage with Emma. A year after their marriage, though, Joseph and Emma left Palmyra, New York, for a small cabin on the Hales’s property in Harmony Township — modern Oakland Township — on the bank of the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania.

Mistrustful of Joseph and skeptical of his claims about the Book of Mormon, Hale confronted him on the subject, demanding to see the plates. Joseph responded that he had been commanded to show them to nobody except by divine command. Still, Joseph permitted Hale to lift the wooden box that, he said, contained the plates. Of this relatively little-known experience, Hale later recalled: “I was allowed to feel the weight of the box, and they gave me to understand, that the book of plates was then in the box — into which, however, I was not allowed to look.”<sup>30</sup>

Holding the box failed to mollify Isaac Hale, who said that:

[He was] dissatisfied, and informed him [Joseph] that if there was any thing in my house of that description [the plates], which I could not be allowed to see, he must take it away; if he

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30. Isaac Hale, quoted in Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 4:286.

did not, I was determined to see it. After that, the Plates were said to be hid in the woods.<sup>31</sup>

Now, as Book of Mormon witness statements go, Isaac Hales's is of only modest significance. Still, it's not without value.

Friendly skeptics and historians of religion who would prefer not to commit themselves on the truth or falsity of Joseph's prophetic claims find it much easier, on the whole, to regard him as a sincere person who was telling the truth (as he perceived or imagined it to be) about his subjective mental and spiritual states.

However, handing a heavy box over to Isaac Hales (a box in which, he claimed, the plates were hidden) gives a tangibility to the matter that makes it more difficult — not quite impossible, but definitely more difficult — to maintain that Joseph's experiences were purely personal and subjective. This palpable object seems to point, instead, to either genuine authenticity or deliberate fraud. It begins to confront us with a very stark either/or choice.

In his very limited and adversarial way, Isaac Hale was a witness to the Book of Mormon.

Late in his life, William Smith, the Prophet's younger brother, described what happened when Joseph entered the family home with the plates from which the Book of Mormon would soon be translated:

When the plates were brought in they were wrapped in a tow frock. My father then put them into a pillow case. ... We handled them and could tell what they were. They were not quite as large as this Bible. Could tell whether they were round or square. Could raise the leaves this way (raising a few leaves of the Bible before him). One could easily tell that they were not a stone, hewn out to deceive, or even a block of wood. Being a mixture of gold and copper, they were much heavier than stone, and very much heavier than wood.<sup>32</sup>

Martin Harris estimated the weight of the plates at somewhere between forty pounds and sixty pounds.<sup>33</sup> Based on his own encounter with the plates in his late teens, William Smith's estimate was roughly similar, though on the high end of Martin's range. (Note, again, the use of the verb *heft*.)

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31. Ibid.

32. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 22-23.

33. Ibid., 114.

I did not see them uncovered, but I handled them and hefted them while wrapped in a tow frock and judged them to have weighed about sixty pounds. I could tell they were plates of some kind and that they were fastened together by rings running through the back.<sup>34</sup>

William Smith was a witness to the Book of Mormon.

Perhaps the first person outside the Smith family to feel and heft the plates — that is, even before the Eight Witnesses — was Josiah Stowell, for whom a very young Joseph sometimes worked as a hired hand.<sup>35</sup>

During Joseph Smith's 30 June 1830 trial for an alleged "breach of the peace" in Broome County, New York, Stowell actually

testified under oath that he saw the plates the day Joseph first brought them home. As Joseph passed them through the window, Stowell caught a glimpse of the plates as a portion of the linen was pulled back. Stowell gave the court the dimensions of the plates and explained that they consisted of gold leaves with characters written on each sheet.<sup>36</sup>

Josiah Stowell was a witness to the Book of Mormon.

Lucy Harris is typically remembered negatively among Latter-day Saints for her opposition to her husband Martin's involvement with the Book of Mormon and, most dramatically, as the leading suspect in the case of the lost 116 pages.

The story is a bit more complex than that, however. Lucy Mack Smith recalled that early in the process of recovering the Book of Mormon, Lucy Harris offered to help Joseph publish it — but "[only] if I can get a witness that you do speak the truth." Joseph reminded her that only God can bestow such a witness, and Mrs. Harris went away "highly displeased." But Lucy Smith's narrative goes on to recount that, on the very next day, Mrs. Harris returned with a very different attitude:

She said that a personage appeared to her, who told her, that as she had disputed the servant of the Lord, and said his word was not to be believed, and had also asked him many improper questions, she had done that which was not right in the sight

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34. Ibid., 24. William Smith gave his estimate of the weight of the plates on several occasions. Examples occur on *ibid.*, 23-24.

35. See Joseph Smith-History 1:56-58.

36. Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2015).

of God. After which he said to her, “Behold here are the plates, look upon them and believe.” After giving us an account of her dream, she described the Record very minutely.<sup>37</sup>

Lucy Harris gave Joseph \$28 — worth more than \$770 in 2021 — which appears to make her the very first donor toward the publication of the Book of Mormon.<sup>38</sup> Unexpectedly, Lucy Harris was a witness.

Lucy Mack Smith herself, the Prophet’s mother, claimed to have “examined” the Urim and Thummim and “found that it consisted of two smooth three-cornered diamonds set in glass, and the glasses were set in silver bows, which were connected with each other in much the same way as old fashioned spectacles.”<sup>39</sup>

She also encountered the breastplate:

It was wrapped in a thin muslin handkerchief, so thin that I could see the glistening metal, and ascertain its proportions without any difficulty. It was concave on one side and convex on the other, and extended from the neck downwards, as far as the centre of the stomach of a man of extraordinary size. It had four straps of the same material, for the purpose of fastening it to the breast, two of which ran back to go over the shoulders, and the other two were designed to fasten to the hips. They were just the width of two of my fingers, (for I measured them,) and they had holes in the ends of them, to be convenient in fastening.<sup>40</sup>

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37. Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy’s Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith’s Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 398-99.

38. For a discussion of several of these women witnesses, see Chris Heimerdinger, “5 Women Who Are Witnesses of the Physical Golden Plates,” *Book of Mormon Central* (blog), March 2, 2018, <https://bookofmormoncentral.org/blog/5-women-who-are-witnesses-of-the-physical-golden-plates>.

39. Anderson, *Lucy’s Book*, 379.

40. *Ibid.*, 390. She estimates that the breastplate “was worth at least five hundred dollars” — presumably in terms of either 1827 or 1828 currency (those being the candidate years for the event) or 1844-1845 currency (those being the years in which she dictated her account). So, in terms of today’s prices, she was guessing that the value of the breastplate was roughly \$13,000.00 to \$14,000.00. If, however, she was thinking of the dollar as it stood in 1844, a translation into today’s prices would put the value of the breastplate at approximately \$17,500.00. Assuming that her estimate is at least roughly accurate, that her account not pure fabrication, and that the object wasn’t authentically ancient, this raises the question, very acutely, of how Joseph Smith was able to procure such an object and what happened to it afterwards.

On 26 August 1838, an Ohio woman named Sally Parker wrote a letter to one John Kempton. The letter has survived, and in it, she describes Lucy Mack Smith, the mother of the Prophet:

I lived by his mother, and [she] was one of the finest of women — always helping them that stood in need. She told me the whole story. . . . I asked her if she saw the plates. She said no, it was not for her to see them, but she hefted and handled them, and I believed all she said, for I lived by her eight months, and she was one of the best of women.<sup>41</sup>

Lucy Mack Smith was a witness; note the indication that she *hefted* the plates.

Emma Smith, too, can be considered a corroborating witness to the plates. She said, “I moved them from place to place on the table, as it was necessary in doing my housework.”<sup>42</sup> At times, she had to “lift and move [the covered plates] when she swept and dusted.”<sup>43</sup> Here is a portion of an interview with her that was conducted by her son Joseph III not very long before her death on 30 April 1879:

Question. Are you sure that he had the plates at the time you were writing for him?

Answer. The plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen tablecloth, which I had given him to fold them in. I once felt of the plates, as they thus lay on the table, tracing their outline and shape. They seemed to be pliable like thick paper, and would rustle with a metallic sound when the edges were moved by the thumb, as one does sometimes thumb the edges of a book.<sup>44</sup>

Emma Smith was a witness to the Book of Mormon.

Joseph Smith’s sister Katharine held and even carried the covered plates on several different occasions.<sup>45</sup> She seems often to have emphasized

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41. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 25.

42. *Ibid.*, 29.

43. John W. Welch, “The Miraculous Timing of the Translation of the Book of Mormon,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820-1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 145, doc. 43.

44. “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” *Saints’ Herald* 26, no. 19 (October 1, 1879): 289-90.

45. “The Prophet’s Sister Testifies She Lifted the B of M Plates,” *Messenger* (October 1954): 1, 6; see also Mary Salisbury Hancock, “The Three Sisters of the

what Chris Heimerdinger calls their “physicality.”<sup>46</sup> Herbert S. Salisbury, grandson of the Prophet’s sister Katharine, recalled his grandmother telling him about Joseph’s first bringing the plates home:

She said he entered the house running and threw himself on a couch, panting from his extraordinary exertion. She told me Joseph allowed her to ‘heft’ the package but not to see the gold plates, as the angel had forbidden him to show them at that period. She said they were very heavy.<sup>47</sup>

Note, yet again, that verb *to heft*.

Katharine remembered Joseph’s arrival home in 1827, when she was fourteen, and that the plates were “wrapped ... up in his frock:”

When he got to the door he said: “Father, I have been followed; look and see if you can see any one.” He then threw himself on the bed and fainted, and when he came to he told us the circumstances; he had his thumb put out of place and his arm was very lame.”<sup>48</sup>

Her grandson, Herbert Salisbury, remembered his grandmother relating that “When [Joseph] came in the house ... he was completely out of breath. She [Katharine] took the plates from him and laid them on the table temporarily, and helped revive him until he got breathing properly, and also examined his hand, and treated it for the bruises on his knuckles.”<sup>49</sup> He had been chased by members of a mob, and:

In striking the last one he dislocated his thumb, which, however, he did not notice until he came within sight of the house, when he threw himself down in the corner of the fence in order to recover his breath. As soon as he was able, he arose and came to the house. He was still altogether speechless from fright and the fatigue of running.<sup>50</sup>

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Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Saints’ Herald* 101 (25 January 1954): 10-11, 23.

46. See Heimerdinger, “5 Women Who Are Witnesses of the Physical Golden Plates.” “The Prophet’s Sister Testifies She Lifted the B of M Plates,” *Messenger* (October 1954): 1, 6; see also Mary Salisbury Hancock, “The Three Sisters of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Saints’ Herald* 101 (Jan. 25, 1954): 10-11, 23.

47. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 83-84.

48. Kyle R. Walker, “Katharine Smith Salisbury’s Recollections of Joseph’s Meetings with Moroni,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 41 no. 3 (July 2002): 15, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3574&context=byusq>.

49. “The Prophet’s Sister Testifies She Lifted The B of M Plates,” *The Messenger* (October 1954): 1, 6. See also “An Angel Told Him: Joseph Smith’s Aged Sister Tells about Moroni’s Talk,” *The Kansas City Times* (11 April 1895): 1.

50. Anderson, *Lucy’s Book*, 386.

Mary Salisbury Hancock, Katharine's granddaughter, remembered Katharine relating that same episode, or a similar one, when Joseph, with the plates in his possession, had been chased by a mob:

Hearing an unusual commotion outside Catherine flew to the door and threw it open just as Joseph came rushing up, panting for breath. He thrust a bundle into her arms, and in a gasping voice whispered hoarsely, "Take these quickly and hide them," then he disappeared into the darkness. Closing the door Catherine ran hurriedly to the bedroom where she and Sophronia slept. Sophronia threw back the bedding and Catherine put the bundle on the bed, quickly replacing the bedding. Both of them lay down on the bed and pretended sleep. The mob, failing to find Joseph outside, returned to the house to search, but they did not disturb the girls since they appeared to be sleeping.<sup>51</sup>

Katharine Smith was a witness to the Book of Mormon.

David Whitmer, one of the Three Witnesses, related that his mother, Mary Musselman Whitmer, saw the plates quite independently of anybody else and under the most matter-of-fact circumstances. The entire family of Peter Whitmer Sr. had become acquainted with Joseph Smith in 1828 through David, the fourth of nine children. Eventually, a substantial part of the translation of the Book of Mormon occurred at the Peter Whitmer farm near Fayette, New York. During that period, the place was a hive of activity; Joseph Smith and his wife, Emma, and Oliver Cowdery were boarding with the Whitmers, and other people (including curiosity-seekers) were constantly coming and going. Much of the burden of coping with them fell upon Peter's wife, Mary.

David later explained:

My father and mother had a large family of their own. The addition to it therefore of Joseph, his wife, Emma, and Oliver very greatly increased the toil and anxiety of my mother. And although she had never complained, she had sometimes felt that her labor was too much, or at least she was perhaps beginning to feel so.

A granddaughter's account, published by Royal Skousen in *Interpreter*, adds specific detail to the story, relating that Mary Whitmer was irritated when Joseph and Oliver took breaks from translating and

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51. Hancock, "The Three Sisters of the Prophet Joseph Smith," 36.

“skated rocks on a pond.”<sup>52</sup> “She thought they might just as well carry her a bucket of water or chop a bit of wood” and she “was about to order them from her home.”<sup>53</sup>

The most interesting aspect of this story is that Mary Whitmer’s difficulty with the household situation was more than just being tired from all the extra work. She was irritated by Joseph and Oliver’s indifference to all the work she was doing, with their not helping out and instead skipping rocks for relaxation, so “she was about to order them out of her home.” Thus Moroni’s intervention was perhaps more purposeful than we might have previously thought. Undoubtedly, many others exerted much effort on behalf of providing help to Joseph and Oliver (such as Emma Smith had just done in Harmony, Pennsylvania, for the previous three months). Here, however, Moroni needed to deal with a more difficult situation, one that could have forced Joseph to find another place – and a secure one – to do the translating. Moroni (and the Lord) weren’t in the habit of just showing the plates to people to encourage them to act as a support team for the work of the translation.<sup>54</sup>

One day, probably in June 1829, when she was going out to milk the cows in the family barn — where, David happened to know, the plates were concealed at the time — she met an “old man,” as she described him, who said to her, “You have been very faithful and diligent in your labors, but you are tired because of the increase of your toil; it is proper therefore that you should receive a witness that your faith may be strengthened.”<sup>55</sup>

“Thereupon,” David said, “he showed her the plates.” This unexpected encounter “completely removed” her feeling of being overwhelmed, said her son, “and nerved her up for her increased responsibilities.”<sup>56</sup>

Afterwards, Mary was able to describe the plates in detail. John C. Whitmer, her grandson, reported that he himself had independently heard his grandmother tell of this event several times. He summarized her experience in more detailed fashion, as follows:

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52. Royal Skousen, “Another Account of Mary Whitmer’s Viewing of the Golden Plates,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 10 (2014): 39.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*, 39-40.

55. *Ibid.*, 36.

56. *Ibid.*



She met a stranger carrying something on his back that looked like a knapsack. At first she was a little afraid of him, but when he spoke to her in a kind, friendly tone and began to explain to her the nature of the work which was going on in her house (that is, the translation of the Book of Mormon), she was filled with unexpressible (sic) joy and satisfaction. He then untied his knapsack and showed her a bundle of plates, which in size and appearance corresponded with the description subsequently given by the witnesses to the Book of Mormon. This strange person 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, promising that if she would do so, she should be blessed; and her reward would be sure, if she proved faithful to the end. The personage then suddenly vanished with the plates, and where he went, she could not tell. From that moment my grandmother was enabled to perform her household duties with comparative ease, and she felt no more inclination to murmur because her lot was hard. I knew my grandmother to be a good, noble and truthful woman, and I have not the least doubt of her statement in regard to seeing the plates being strictly true.<sup>57</sup>

Five of Mary Whitmer's sons and a son-in-law became official witnesses of the Book of Mormon. Hiram Page, one of the Eight Witnesses, had married Catherine Whitmer in 1825. Oliver Cowdery, one of the Three Witnesses and the principal scribe during its dictation, baptized Mary Whitmer into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Seneca Lake on April 18, 1830, when the church was fewer than two weeks old, and he married her daughter, Elizabeth Ann, in December 1832. The Whitmers gathered to Missouri with the Latter-day Saints, and there Mary died at 78 years of age in 1856, still a faithful believer in the divine origin of the gold plates and the book that had been translated from them.

Mary Whitmer was a witness.

So what special significance, if any, do the experiences of the "informal" or "unofficial" witnesses hold? First, as Richard Anderson points out, "These private encounters with the metal book preceded both

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57. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 31-32.

the Three Witnesses' seeing the angel and the plates, and also the Eight Witnesses' handling the plates in natural surroundings."<sup>58</sup>

Interestingly, these informal witnesses reported a mixture of the same kinds of experiences, more or less, that the Three and the Eight had. In B. H. Roberts's language, they received both "ordinary testimony" and "miraculous testimony":

- William Smith, Josiah Stowell, the early Martin Harris, Lucy Mack Smith, Emma Smith, and Katharine Smith had quite mundane encounters with tangible physical objects, much like the Eight Witnesses.
- Lucy Harris and Mary Musselman Whitmer saw the plates as well as an angel or messenger, rather like the Three Witnesses.

These accounts provide additional, corroborating testimony. But I think that they offer more than just that. Again, the informal or unofficial witnesses are not interchangeable — not with each other as individuals nor, collectively, with the Three Witnesses and the Eight Witnesses.

Several arguments that have been deployed against the Three and the Eight, however ineffectually, just cannot be used against the informal witnesses.

Some skeptics have suggested, for instance, that some sort of social dynamic or collective group hysteria explains the experience of the Three and the Eight. But the informal witnesses had their experiences separately. So, collective emotional pressure cannot account for them.

Others have suggested that the Three and the Eight *expected* to have a "spiritual experience," and so, being effectively "programmed" for something extraordinary to happen, they *did* have remarkable experiences — but experiences that were real only in a subjective sense. While this does not seem a plausible or persuasive objection to me, it certainly is not applicable to the unofficial witnesses. Mary Whitmer was in the barn doing the routine chores of a farmwife, and perhaps feeling a bit resentful. She was not expecting an encounter with the plates and the messenger, so religious fervor or spiritual expectation cannot explain her experience. Josiah Stowell and Katharine Smith had a heavy object suddenly thrust at them, under rather tense conditions. Lucy Mack Smith, Martin Harris, Emma Hale Smith, and William Smith handled and examined tangible objects under very mundane circumstances.

Additionally, while Joseph Smith, the Three, and the Eight constitute a kind of jury of "twelve good men and true," in terms comprehensible to

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58. Ibid.

their culture and in accord with its expectations for deciding important matters, women were not permitted to serve as jurors in the 1820s or 1830s, nor, indeed, for many years thereafter. But the Lord called Lucy Mack Smith, Emma Smith, Katharine Smith, Mary Whitmer, and even Lucy Harris to serve as witnesses *beyond* those twelve. The voices of these women and their testimonies deserve to be heard now, alongside those of the men. We owe it to them to make that happen.

Traveling on his way to a mission in England in 1853, David B. Dille stopped by the Martin Harris home in Kirtland, Ohio. The seventy-year-old Harris was in bed at the time, so sick that he hadn't eaten in three days. But, when Elder Dille showed up, he bore spirited testimony of his experience with the angel and the plates. Moreover, reminiscent of several other accounts that tell how, even when he was ill or very old, he became energized when testifying, Harris got out of bed, dressed himself, asked for food, spoke with Elder Dille for hours, and went to hear him preach that evening. Afterwards, he said to Elder Dille, "Just let me go with you to England. ... You do the preaching and I will bear testimony to the Book of Mormon, and we will convert all England."<sup>59</sup>

In the last year of Martin Harris's life, John E. Godfrey visited him. "I am pleased to have you come," said the now nearly-ninety-two-year-old witness, "and I wish I could bear my testimony to the whole world."<sup>60</sup> "I tell you of these things," he told his bishop just a few days before his death, "that you may tell others that what I have said is true, and I dare not deny it; I heard the voice of God commanding me to testify to the same."<sup>61</sup>

In a way, through the distribution of the Book of Mormon in scores of languages around the globe, Martin Harris and the other official witnesses *are* bearing their testimonies to the whole world. Their statements have appeared in every edition of the Book of Mormon since 1830. But it's still not enough — not *nearly* enough. The Interpreter Foundation's *Witnesses* project is an attempt to widen the reach of these invaluable testimonies to the existence of God, the deity of the Savior, and the truthfulness of the Restoration. We hope that you, too, will join forces in sharing the news. "No testimony of direct revelation in the world's history," Richard Anderson quite correctly observed, "is better documented than the testimony of the Book of Mormon witnesses."<sup>62</sup>

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59. Ibid., 113.

60. Ibid., 117.

61. Ibid., 118.

62. Ibid., 79.

It is because of that direct revelation, and because of further revelations that have flowed from it and in its wake, that The Interpreter Foundation exists. I am profoundly grateful to those who, by their gifts of time and effort and money, have made its existence and its flourishing possible. Particularly at this point, I wish to thank the authors, copy editors, source checkers, and others who have created this volume, and I especially want to thank Allen Wyatt and Jeff Lindsay, who have not only devotedly overseen and steered the effort but have themselves been deeply involved in it. They do so for no material compensation, but their dedication is essential to the success of Interpreter and at its very heart.

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