



Type: Book

The Case of the Book of Mormon Witnesses

Author(s): Eldin Ricks

Published: Orem, UT; Orion Publishing, 2002

Abstract: No abstract available.

BOOK OF MORMON STUDY GUIDE SUPPLEMENT

THE CASE OF THE
BOOK OF MORMON WITNESSES



By

ELDIN RICKS



© ELDIN RICKS
1963

THE CASE OF THE BOOK OF MORMON WITNESSES

ELDIN RICKS

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

I want to tell a story. It is a true story. It is also an amazing one. Even in a day of inter-continental missiles and earth girdling satellites it is amazing. In my opinion, it is the prologue to the most significant drama of our age.

The event that forms the basis of my story is corroborated by witnesses. My story, in fact, is merely their story with observations of my own relative to its credibility. It has to do mainly with three men, an angel, and a book. I call it, "The Case of the Book of Mormon Witnesses."

The best way I know to present the story would be for the witnesses to tell it with their own lips. Since they are deceased, however, we shall "inter-

view" them by way of recorded statements that they have left behind in published and unpublished sources.

To properly set the stage for this inquiry I shall ask my readers to play the role of a jury — as, indeed, they are part of the "jury" of world opinion that finally must decide on the merits of the case. I shall assume the role of an investigator acting in their behalf. Together, then, we shall exercise the quite exceptional prerogative of calling various people who claim some knowledge of the facts to the "witness stand" for questioning. *And the answers that they give will be assertions made by them in real life without the least variation.* Only the method of presenting them will be improvised.

CHAPTER 2

The Background of the Case

Here is the background of the case. On the night of September 21, 1823, a seventeen year old boy, living with his parents on a farm in up-state New York, had a remarkable experience. His name was Joseph Smith. He later described the experience and certain subsequent developments in the following words:

"On the evening on the 21st of September, A.D. 1823, while I was praying unto God, and endeavoring to exercise faith in the precious promises of Scripture, on a sudden a light like that of day, only far purer and more glorious appearance and brightness, burst into the room, indeed the first sight was as though the house was filled with consuming fire; the appearance produced a shock that affected the whole body; in a moment a personage stood before me surrounded with a glory yet greater than that with which I was already surrounded. This messenger proclaimed himself to be an angel of God, sent to bring the joyful tidings that the covenant which God made with ancient Israel was at hand to be fulfilled, that the preparatory work for the second coming of the Messiah was speedily to commence; that the time was at hand for the Gospel in all its fullness to be preached in power, unto all nations that a people might be prepared for the Millennial reign. I was informed that I was chosen

to be an instrument in the hands of God to bring about some of His purposes in this glorious dispensation.

"I was also informed concerning the aboriginal inhabitants of this country and shown who they were, and from whence they came; a brief sketch of their origin, progress, civilization, laws, governments, of their righteousness and iniquity, and the blessings of God being finally withdrawn from them as a people, was made known unto me; I was also told where were deposited some plates on which were engraven an abridgment of the records of the ancient Prophets that had existed on this continent. The angel appeared to me three times the same night and unfolded the same things. After having received many visits from the angels of God unfolding the majesty and glory of the events that should transpire in the last days, on the morning of the 22nd of September, A.D. 1827, the angel of the Lord delivered the records into my hands.

"These records were engraven on plates which had the appearance of gold, each plate was six inches wide and eight inches long, and not quite so thick as common tin. They were filled with engravings, in Egyptian characters, and bound together in a volume as the leaves of a book, with three rings running through the whole. The volume was some-

thing near six inches in thickness, a part of which was sealed. The characters on the unsealed part were small, and beautifully engraved. The whole book exhibited many marks of antiquity in its construction, and much skill in the art of engraving. With the records was found a curious instrument, which the ancients called "Urim and Thummim," which consisted of two transparent stones set in the rim of a bow fastened to a breast plate. Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record by the gift and power of God.

"In this important and interesting book the history of ancient America is unfolded, from its first settlement by a colony that came from the Tower of Babel, at the confusion of languages to the beginning of the fifth century of the Christian Era. We are informed by these records that America in ancient times has been inhabited by two distinct races of people. The first were called Jaredites, and came directly from the Tower of Babel. The second race came directly from the city of Jerusalem, about six hundred years before Christ. They were principally Israelites, of the descendants of Joseph. The Jaredites were destroyed about the time that the Israelites came from Jerusalem, who succeeded them in the inheritance of the country. The principal nation of the second race fell in battle

towards the close of the fourth century. The remnant are the Indians that now inhabit this country. This book also tells us that our Savior made His appearance upon this continent after His resurrection; that He planted the Gospel here in all its fulness, and richness, and power, and blessing; that they had Apostles, Prophets, Pastors, Teachers, and Evangelists; the same order, the same priesthood, the same ordinances, gifts, powers, and blessings, as were enjoyed on the eastern continent, that the people were cut off in consequence of their transgressions, that the last of their prophets who existed among them was commanded to write an abridgment of their prophecies, history, &c, and to hide it up in the earth, and that it should come forth and be united with the Bible for the accomplishment of the purposes of God in the last days. . . .

"As soon as the news of this discovery was made known, false reports, misrepresentations and slander flew, as on the wings of the wind, in every direction; the house was frequently beset by mobs and evil designing persons. Several times I was shot at, and very narrowly escaped, and every device was made use of to get the plates away from me; but the power and blessing of God attended me, and several began to believe my testimony."¹

CHAPTER 3

The Claim of the Witnesses

Three of the "several" who began to believe Joseph Smith's testimony were David Whitmer and Martin Harris, farmers, and Oliver Cowdery, a young schoolteacher. There were others, but we shall concern ourselves primarily with these three.

In the month of June, 1829, Joseph Smith finished his translation of the Book of Mormon. He was then staying at the home of David Whitmer's parents in the township of Fayette, a few miles south of Waterloo, New York. Immediately after completing the task, he sent the good news to his own parents in Manchester township near Palmyra, New York, and asked them to join him. They promptly responded to his invitation; and, accompanied by Martin Harris, who earlier had assisted Joseph in a secretarial capacity, they journeyed to the Whitmer home. Here they met their son Joseph and also David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery. These three were young men in their twenties. Martin Harris was forty-six.

It was the day after the arrival of Joseph's father and mother and Martin Harris that it happened. That was the day that the "three witnesses" claim that they, in company with Joseph Smith, viewed the sacred plates. Such an assertion might not be exciting if it weren't for the additional fact that they say they were shown them by an angel of God and heard the voice of God declare that they were correctly translated.

At this point, of course, the superficial investigator, who is trying his hand at the riddle of the Book of Mormon's origin, turns away muttering

something about some people's astonishing gullibility. But the man whose curiosity is not so easily satisfied and lingers after the crowd has gone home presently finds that the show has just begun.

Now, inasmuch as we are going to interrogate people whose recorded statements give evidence of some knowledge of the circumstances connected with the viewing of the plates, it seems to me that this is a good place to begin. Let's commence by calling upon Joseph Smith's mother.

Lucy Mack Smith, will you kindly come to the "witness stand."

Mrs. Smith, I note, in an account of your son's life which you once wrote, that after your arrival in Fayette you and your friends spent the evening reading the Book of Mormon manuscript and that you greatly rejoiced. Will you please now tell us the details of anything that afterwards happened at or near the Whitmer residence which you consider pertinent to this inquiry?

"The next morning, after attending to the usual services, namely, reading, singing and praying,

Joseph arose from his knees, and approaching Martin Harris with a solemnity that thrills through my veins to this day, when it occurs to my recollection, said, 'Martin Harris, you have got to humble yourself before God this day, that you

<p>Testimony of Lucy Mack Smith</p>
--

¹Joseph Smith, "The Wentworth Letter," *History of the Church*, Vol. 4, pp. 536-538.

may obtain a forgiveness of your sins. If you do, it is the will of God that you should look upon the plates, in company with Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer.’

“In a few minutes after this, Joseph, Martin, Oliver and David, repaired to a grove, a short distance from the house, where they commenced calling upon the Lord, and continued in earnest supplication, until he permitted an angel to come down from his presence, and declare to them, that all which Joseph had testified of concerning the plates was true.”²

Mrs. Smith, that is very interesting. Since you do not claim to have been yourself an eyewitness to the angel’s visit, however, I trust you won’t mind if we ask you to step aside while we call upon someone else to tell us what took place there.

Joseph Smith, Jr., will you take the “witness stand.”

Mr. Smith, will you kindly explain to us precisely what occurred in the woods that morning in 1829.

“According to previous arrangements, I commenced by vocal prayer to our Heavenly Father, and was followed by each of the others in succession. We did not at the first trial, however, obtain any answer or manifestation of divine favor in our behalf. We again observed the same order of prayer, each calling on and

praying fervently to God in rotation, but with the same result as before.”³

In other words, you are saying, Mr. Smith, that you prayed aloud, and after you had prayed each of the other three prayed aloud in turn. Then all four of you prayed aloud once more. What happened then?

“Upon this, our second failure, Martin Harris proposed that he should withdraw himself from us, believing, as he expressed himself, that his presence was the cause of our not obtaining what we wished for. He accordingly withdrew himself from us, and we knelt down again, and had not been many minutes engaged in prayer, when presently we beheld a light above us in the air, of exceeding brightness; and behold, an angel stood before us.”⁴

What did he do? What did he say?

“In his hands he held the plates which we had been praying for these to have a view of. He turned over the leaves one by one, so that we could see them, and discern the engravings thereon distinctly. He then addressed himself to David Whitmer, and said, ‘David, blessed is the Lord, and he that keeps His commandments,’ when immediately afterwards, we heard a voice from out of the bright light above us, saying, ‘These plates have

²Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith*, pp. 151-152 (1945 edition).

³Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, Vol. 1, p. 54.

⁴*Ibid.*

been revealed by the power of God, and they have been translated by the power of God. The translation of them which you have seen is correct, and I command you to bear record of what you now see and hear.”⁵

I see. What did you do then?

“I now left David and Oliver, and went in pursuit of Martin Harris, whom I found at a considerable distance, fervently engaged in prayer. He soon told me, however, that he had not yet prevailed with the Lord, and earnestly requested me to join him in prayer, that he also might realize the same blessings which we had just received. We accordingly joined in prayer, and ultimately obtained our desires, for before we had yet finished, the same vision was opened to our view, at least it was again opened to me, . . .”⁶

That’s right, Mr. Smith, we want you to tell us precisely what you saw and what you heard.

“ . . . and I once more beheld and heard the same things; whilst at the same moment, Martin Harris cried out, apparently in an ecstasy of joy, ‘Tis enough; tis enough; mine eyes have beheld; mine eyes have beheld;’ and jumping up, he shouted, ‘Hosanna,’ blessing God, and otherwise rejoiced exceedingly.”⁷

Thank you, Mr. Smith. You may step down.

Now, it seems to me that it would be advantageous to ascertain the attitude of these men as they returned to the house. Were they whistling a popular tune? Were they laughing? Were they discussing the livestock on the farm? Were they talking about the crops or the weather? Or did they speak and look and act as if something wonderful had taken place? Let’s call on Joseph Smith’s mother again to see if she can illuminate our minds on this point.

Mrs. Smith, I understand that you were in the house when Joseph, Oliver, David, and Martin returned. Will you tell us what they said and what they did when they came in.

“When they returned to the house it was between three and four o’clock p.m. Mrs. Whitmer, Mr. Smith and myself, were sitting in a bedroom at the time. On coming in, Joseph threw himself down beside me, and exclaimed, ‘Father, mother, you do not know how happy I am: the Lord has now caused the plates to be shown to three

more besides myself. They have seen an angel, who has testified to them, and they will have to bear witness to the truth of what I have said, for now they know for themselves, that I do not go about to deceive the people, and I feel as if I was relieved of a burden which was almost too heavy for me to bear, and it rejoices my soul, that I am not any longer to be entirely alone in the world.’”⁸

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith*, p. 152.

Testimony
of
Joseph
Smith

Further
Testimony
of
Lucy
Mack Smith

What about the other men, Mrs. Smith? What about Mr. Cowdery, Mr. Whitmer, and Mr. Harris?

“Upon this, Martin Harris came in: he seemed almost overcome with joy, and testified boldly to what he had both seen and heard. And so did David and Oliver, adding that no tongue could express the joy of their hearts, and the greatness of the things which they had both seen and heard.”⁹

Thank you, Mrs. Smith. You have been very helpful.

I believe that fairness impels us to acknowledge that the attitude of these men, as described by Mrs. Smith, is exactly what we should expect it to have been if they had had such a marvelous experience as they claim they had.

Later, to meet the requirements of a sophisticated modern world, the three witnesses presented their joint testimony in a formal statement that has appeared in each edition of the Book of Mormon since its first publication. I quote it in full for the record.

“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, 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.

**Statement
of the
Three
Witnesses**

“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 which are upon the plates; and they have been shown unto us by the power of God, and not of man.

“And we declare with words of soberness, that an angel of God came down from heaven, and he brought and laid before our eyes, that we beheld and saw the plates, and the engravings thereon; and we know that it is by the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, that we beheld and bear record that these things are true. And it is marvelous in our eyes.

“Nevertheless, the voice of the Lord commanded us that we should bear record of it; wherefore, to be obedient unto the commandments of God, we bear testimony of these things.

“And we know that if we are faithful in Christ, we shall rid our garments of the blood of all men, and be found spotless before the judgment-seat of

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 152-153.

Christ, and shall dwell with him eternally in the heavens. And the honor be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, which is one God. Amen.

Oliver Cowdery

David Whitmer

Martin Harris”¹⁰

Concerning the experience about which these three men testify, B. H. Roberts, attorney, Church leader, and long-time student of the Book of Mormon concludes:

“An argument may be formulated against the probability of such an occurrence. It may be alleged that they were ignorant, uncritical, incompetent and therefore unworthy of belief. All this may be done, nay, it has been done; but no one can stand up and say that he knows what they say is not true, that what they say they saw, they did not see.”¹¹

There were others besides the three who claim they looked at the plates. Eight men maintain they saw and handled them a few days after Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris did. There is, however, one important difference. Whereas the three affirm that they were shown them by a heavenly visitant, Joseph Smith is reported to have personally displayed them to the eight. Their viewing of the record took place in Manchester soon after the return of Joseph’s parents from Fayette. It occurred in the woods not far from the Smith home at a spot where, as Mother Smith explains, members of her family “were in the habit of offering up their secret devotions to God.”¹² Here the eight, accompanied by Joseph Smith, examined the ancient record with their own eyes and handled it with their hands. Later the same day, all of the witnesses, the eight as well as the three who were also now in Manchester, met for a religious service in the Smith home where each bore testimony to the rest concerning the wonderful experience that he had had. Even Joseph’s fourteen year old brother, Don Carlos, although not himself an eyewitness, declared his conviction that a new dispensation of the gospel had been ushered in.¹³ And nine months later, in March 1830, when the Book of Mormon came off the press, it carried not only the testimony of the three witnesses but also the testimony of the eight. Here is their published declaration:

“Be It Known unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, unto whom this work shall come: That Joseph Smith, Jun., the translator of this work, has shown unto us the plates of which hath

¹⁰“The Testimony of Three Witnesses” in the forepart of the *Book of Mormon*. (The paragraph arrangement above is the author’s.)

¹¹B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, Vol. 2, p. 281.

¹²Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith*, p. 154.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 155.

**Statement
of
Eight
Witnesses**

been spoken, which have the appearance of gold; and as many of the leaves as the said Smith has translated we did handle with our hands; and we also saw the engravings thereon, all of which has the appearance of ancient work, and

of curious workmanship.

“And this we bear record with words of soberness, that the said Smith has shown unto us, for we have seen and hefted, and know of a surety that the said Smith has got the plates of which we have spoken. And we give our names unto the world, to witness unto the world that which we have seen. And we lie not, God bearing witness of it.

Christian Whitmer	Hiram Page
Jacob Whitmer	Joseph Smith, Sen.
Peter Whitmer, Jun.	Hyrum Smith
John Whitmer	Samuel H. Smith” ¹⁴

It is not our purpose in this reexamination of the documents to consider the implications of the testimony of the eight witnesses. It is sufficient simply to note that their affirmation corroborates the claim of Cowdery, Whitmer, and Harris respecting the single fact that Joseph Smith had access to an antique looking metal volume of some kind. **The testimony of the three is the proper subject of our inquiry, for upon the truth of their words hinges the question of whether all men everywhere should not stop immediately and read the book. Admittedly if their statement be true that an angel showed them the record and God declared its truth, then it stands to reason that it contains a message of transcendent importance for our generation. In fact, if their statement be true, reason also declares that it contains—as adherents of the volume maintain—the solution to mankind’s problems of war and peace¹⁵ and sin and salvation. Yes, the truth of the testimony of the three witnesses argues forcefully for the claim that God has preserved a textbook for our times that all men everywhere should prayerfully and carefully read without delay.** Let us, then, continue our investigation of the testimony of the three.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized officially April 6, 1830, and eight years later it was in the throes of a crisis. By then a considerable body of the membership of the Church had been driven out of Jackson County, Missouri, by an armed mob, and an economic depression was sweeping the nation. In the course of this business recession the Kirtland Safety Society, the bank in which most of the members of the Church in Ohio had their savings, failed, and a storm of criticism was directed at Joseph Smith. During this tumultuous period most of the Prophet’s friends deserted him, and—what at first blush appears disastrous to the case of the Book of Mormon witnesses—among

¹⁴“The Testimony of Eight Witnesses” in the forepart of the *Book of Mormon*. (The paragraph arrangement above is the author’s.)

¹⁵As a case in point see Ether 2: 11-12, p. 481.

them were Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris. This is not to say that they had had differences with Joseph Smith regarding the Book of Mormon. Nor is it to say that they left the Church because they chose to do so. They were expelled. They were expelled because they had become openly critical of the Church’s leadership, which mainly means critical of Joseph Smith. There were other reasons, too, such as negligence in the matter of Church attendance or, as in the case of Oliver Cowdery, “For leaving his calling in which God had appointed him by revelation, for the sake of filthy lucre, and turning to the practice of law,”¹⁶ and in David Whitmer’s case, “For not observing the Word of Wisdom,”¹⁷ the Church’s health code. It was, of course, a time when great loyalties were demanded. Either men stood solidly behind the Church and its leadership, its principles, and its practices or else they were required to step aside.

One can only guess how differently things might have turned out if the founder of “Mormonism” and his erstwhile three associates had conspired to perpetrate a fraud. Says Roberts:

“Suppose, for a moment. . . collusion did exist. In that event, if the Three Witnesses fell into transgression—as they evidently did—and violated Church discipline ever so flagrantly, would Joseph Smith dare to break friendship with them by excommunicating them? Would he not, on the contrary, say in his heart: It matters not what these men may do, I dare not raise my hand against them; for if I do they will divulge our secret compact, and I shall be execrated as a vile imposter by the whole world, I shall be repudiated by my own people, and driven out from all society a vagabond. At whatever cost I must cover up their iniquity, lest I myself by them be exposed to shame. Such, doubtless, would have been his course of reasoning; and had he with them conspired to deceive mankind, such, doubtless, is what would have taken place; for I maintain that men who would be base enough to concoct such a deception would also be base enough to expose it and become traitors when they became disaffected towards each other. But nothing of the kind took place. When these men violated the law of God and would not repent and forsake the evil they did, neither Joseph Smith nor the Church would any longer fellowship with them, but boldly excommunicated them.

“By the act of excommunication, Joseph Smith virtually said to the Three Witnesses: Gentlemen, God has made you witnesses for himself in this age of spiritual darkness and unbelief, but you refuse to keep his laws, therefore we must withdraw the hand of fellowship from you. This may fill you with anger and malice; you may raise your hand against me and the work of God to destroy it; Satan may put it into your hearts to deny the testimony you have borne; but I know you received that wit-

¹⁶“History of Joseph Smith,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star*, Vol. 16. No. 9, March 4, 1854, p. 133.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

ness from God. I was with you when you received it, I saw the glorious messenger from heaven show you the plates; I, myself heard the voice of God bear record to you that the translation was correct and the work true—now deny that testimony if you dare—this work is of God, and he can sustain it even if you should turn against it; therefore we

will not fellowship you in your wickedness—you are cut off from our association—do your worst!”¹⁸

Let us now follow these men after their dismissal from the Church and see what happens to their testimony of the angel and the book.

We shall first consider Oliver Cowdery.

CHAPTER 4

Oliver Cowdery

Oliver Cowdery was expelled from the Church at Far West, Missouri, April 12, 1838 and from 1838 to 1848 practiced law. Brigham Young once said of him, and I quote his statement for the record:

“He saw and conversed with the angel, who showed him the plates, and he handled them. He left the Church because he lost the love of the truth; and after he had travelled alone for years, a gentleman walked into his law office and said to him, ‘Mr. Cowdery, what do you think of the Book of Mormon now? Do you believe that it is true?’ He replied, ‘No, sir, I do not.’ ‘Well,’ said the gentleman, ‘I thought as much; for I concluded that you had seen the folly of your ways and had resolved to renounce what you once declared to be true.’ ‘Sir, you mistake me: I do not believe that the Book of Mormon is true; I am past belief on that point, for I KNOW that it is true, as well as I know that you now sit before me.’ ‘Do you still testify that you saw an angel?’ ‘Yes, as much as I see you now; and I know the Book of Mormon to be true.’”¹⁹

**Statement
of
Brigham
Young**

A somewhat similar experience of Oliver Cowdery’s is related by former Juvenile Court Judge C. M. Nielsen of Murray, Utah. Let’s invite Mr. Nielsen to the “witness stand” to give us an account of the incident.

Mr. Nielsen, will you tell us what you know about Oliver Cowdery once stating in court that he had seen the Book of Mormon plates.

“In the year 1884 I was traveling as a missionary in Minnesota. I had most of the eastern part of the state to myself. I was without purse or scrip and one night slept in a haystack. Next day I came to a city and wandered up and down the streets. I had no money, no friends and didn’t know where to go. I passed a large store called the Emporium, something like our Z.C.M.I. I was attracted by it, but didn’t know why. There were about 25 teams hitched near the place, owned by farmers in town on business. Something told me to ‘Go over and see a certain man.’ The street was full of people and I wondered which man. Then one man seemed to

me as big as three ordinary men. The spirit whispered: ‘Go over and speak to him!’ I hesitated to approach this entire stranger, but the same voice came to me a second and third time. Then I went.

**Testimony
of
C. M.
Nielsen**

“He was a prosperous looking farmer with a fine two-seated buggy, which he was ready to enter, and was a prominent man, I afterwards learned. Not knowing what else, I said: ‘How far are you going?’ ‘Home; where are you going?’ ‘I have no certain place; I am from Utah.’ ‘You are not a Mormon, are you?’ he asked, anxiously. ‘Yes.’ ‘Then God bless you!’ he replied, reaching out his arms and dropping the lines. ‘Get into this buggy as fast as you can. When we get home, my wife will rejoice as I rejoice now. I will then explain all. But you are not one of these make-believers are you?’ ‘No, I’m a real live Mormon from Utah.’

“Reaching the home, he called, ‘Mother, here’s a real live Mormon elder.’ I’m afraid I didn’t look very fine, as I had slept in a haystack the previous night. They took me by the hand and led me into the house. I was very hungry and begged for something to eat. After my hunger was satisfied, they called in their sons and daughters and we sat around the table. My new found friend then said:

“Now, young man, you thought it strange how I acted when you spoke to me. When I get through you will realize the importance of your coming to us. When I was 21 years of age I was working my father’s farm in Michigan. I had worked hard on the farm that summer and decided to take a day off, so went to the city. Near the courthouse I saw a great many people assembling and others walking that way, so I went over to see what was up. There was a jam in the courtroom, but being young and strong, I pushed my way close up to the center, where I found the prosecuting attorney addressing the court and jury in a murder trial. The prosecuting attorney was Oliver Cowdery, and he was giving his opening address in behalf of the state. (After he was cut off from the Church, Oliver Cowdery studied law, practicing in Ohio, Wisconsin and then Michigan, where he was elected prosecuting attorney.) After Cowdery sat down the attorney

¹⁹“Remarks by President Brigham Young, delivered in the Bowery, Provo, June 27, 1858.” *Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 7, page 55.

¹⁸B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses For God*, Vol. 2, pp. 307-308.

representing the prisoner arose and with taunting sarcasm said: "May it please the court and gentlemen of the jury, I see one Oliver Cowdery is going to reply to my argument. I wish he would tell us something about the Mormon Bible; something about that golden Bible that Joe Smith dug out of the hill; something about the great fraud he perpetrated upon the American people whereby he gained thousands of dollars. Now he seems to know so much about this poor prisoner, I wonder if he has forgotten all about Joe Smith and his connection with him." The speaker all the while sneering and pointing his finger in scorn at Cowdery in the hope of making him ridiculous before the court and jury.

"Everybody present began to wonder if they had been guilty of making such a mistake as choosing a Mormon for prosecuting attorney. Even the judge on the bench began looking with suspicion and distrust at the prosecuting attorney. The prisoner and his attorney became elated at the effect of the speech. People began asking, "Is he a Mormon?" Everybody wondered what Cowdery would say against such foul charges."²⁰

Please excuse me, Mr. Nielsen, if I interrupt you at this crucial point. Some writers have suggested that the fact that these three men continued to affirm the truth of their story means only that they didn't want to admit they were liars. After all, no one wants to go through life labeled a liar. There is, I think, an easier way of squirming out of a situation of that kind than saying "I lied." It would be to say, "I was mistaken," or "I was deceived." These men surely would have been bitter toward those who had expelled them from their racket. The normal human reaction would be to strike back. If the Book of Mormon were a fraud, may we not suppose that Oliver Cowdery, on the occasion in question, would have denounced Joseph Smith as a crook, a scoundrel, and a deceiver—the more so to clear his own name from any suspicion of sympathy for the things he stood for? Can we not imagine his waxing eloquent about deluded "Mormons" being led astray by false leaders and then, maybe, in a self-righteous display declaring that he wanted nothing more in life than to correct the error to which he had been a party in his youth?

Now Mr. Nielsen, will you kindly tell us what Oliver Cowdery actually said on this occasion, as related by your informant?

"Finally Oliver Cowdery arose, calm as a summer morning. I was within three feet of him. There was no hesitation, no fear, no anger in his voice, as he said: "May it please the court, and gentlemen of the jury, my brother attorney on the other side has charged me with connection with Joseph Smith and the golden Bible. The responsi-

bility has been placed upon me, and I cannot escape reply. . . . Before God and man I dare not deny what I have said, and what my testimony contains and as written and printed on the front page of the Book of Mormon. 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 these personages told us 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!"²¹

Thank you, Mr. Nielsen, for your thought-provoking testimony. You may step down.

There is a happy ending to the story of Oliver Cowdery's expulsion from the Church. He rejoined the Church. After being on the outside looking in for ten years he humbly sought to be baptized into membership again. The year was 1848. As far as his testimony while he was out of the Church is concerned, therefore, we are dependent upon neither the reference to the law office incident nor Nielsen's account of the courtroom episode. For the purpose of our inquiry, his years of separation from the Church are overshadowed by the fact that he voluntarily sought and gained membership anew in the organization from which he had been cast aside.

Now, may I ask our "jury" of Book of Mormon investigators to consider what he was getting back into. Was it a rich, well-established, and widely accepted institution? Did he have reason to expect that it could offer him power, station, wealth? One would hardly think so, for just two years earlier the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had been driven out of the United States of America and into the Indian Territory westward. The migration to the Rocky Mountains was still under way, and the Church was passing through one of its darkest hours.

Oliver Cowdery journeyed to Kanessville, Iowa, with his wife and daughter in October of 1848. Many of the "Mormons" there were preparing for the move westward. On October 21 he was invited to address a Church conference attended by about two thousand people. His words were recorded as he spoke by Bishop Reuben Miller. We are now going to call Bishop Miller to the "witness stand" and ask him to give us a verbatim account of that portion of Cowdery's address that applies to the Book of Mormon.

Bishop Miller, will you come forward.

Bishop Miller, will you please tell us exactly what Oliver Cowdery told the conference in Kaness-

²⁰"Oliver Cowdery and His Testimony: An Address Delivered by Judge C. M. Nielsen in the Twenty-fourth Ward Meeting House, Salt Lake City, Utah, February 20, 1910." *Liahona The Elder's Journal*, Vol. 8, August 30, 1910, pp. 162-163.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 163. Although Oliver Cowdery is here reported as speaking of a single angel he mentions "these personages," evidently an allusion both to the angel, whom the three witnesses saw, and to the Lord whose voice they heard but saw not.

ville, Iowa, on the occasion of his asking for permission to become a member of the Church once more? We request the part that relates to the Book of Mormon.

“Following is a verbatim report: ‘Friends and Brethren: — My name is Cowdery, Oliver Cowdery. In the early history of this Church I stood identified with her, and one in her councils. True it is that the gifts and callings of God are without repentance; not because I was better than the rest of mankind was I called; but, to fulfill the purposes of God, he called me to a high and holy calling.

“I wrote, with my own pen, the entire Book of Mormon (save a few pages) as it fell from the lips of the Prophet Joseph Smith, as he translated it by the gift and power of God, by the means of the Urim and Thummim, or, as it is called by that book, “Holy interpreters.” I beheld with my eyes, and handled with my hands, the gold plates from which it was transcribed. I also saw with my eyes and handled with my hands the “holy interpreters.” That book is true. Sidney Rigdon did not write it; Mr. Spaulding did not write it. I wrote it myself as it fell from the lips of the Prophet. It contains the everlasting gospel, and came forth to the children of men in fulfillment of the revelations of John, where he says he saw an angel come, with the everlasting gospel to preach to every nation, kindred, and people. It contains the principles of salvation; and if you, my hearers, will walk by its light and obey its precepts, you will be saved with an everlasting salvation in the kingdom of God on high.’”²²

We appreciate this information very much, Bishop Miller. Will you also tell us what Oliver Cowdery said at a subsequent meeting of the High Council at Kanesville that, as I understand, met to give final approval to his request for readmission in the early part of November.

“Brethren, for a number of years I have been separated from you. I now desire to come back. I wish to come humbly and to be one in your midst. I seek no station; I only wish to be identified with you. I am out of the Church. I am not a member of the Church; but I wish to become a member of it. I wish to come in at the door. I know the door. I have not come here to seek precedence. I come humbly and throw myself upon the decisions of this body, knowing as I do that its decisions are right and should be obeyed.’

“Brother George W. Harris, President of the Council, moved that Brother Cowdery be received. Considerable discussion took place in relation to a certain letter which, it was alleged, Brother Cowdery had written to David Whitmer. Brother Cowdery again rose and said:

“If there be any person that has aught against me, let him declare it. My coming back and humbly asking to become a member through the door, covers the whole ground.—I acknowledge this authority.’

“Br[other] Hyde moved that br[other] Oliver Cowdery be received into the Church by baptism, and that all old things be dropped and forgotten. Seconded and carried unanimously.”²³

Thank you, Bishop Miller. That will be all.

Returning now to the Kanesville conference of October 21, 1848, we have another witness, George A. Smith. Mr. Smith was also present at the assembly and has left a written account of the event. George A. Smith, will you come forward.

Mr. Smith, not quite two and a half months after Cowdery’s public plea for readmission into the Church the *Millennial Star*, a Latter-day Saint periodical published in England, printed a letter bearing your name that evidently was written by you to Orson Pratt October 31, 1848. That would be just ten days after the Kanesville conference, wouldn’t it? Will you please give us further light on Cowdery’s speech as set forth in that letter.

“Oliver Cowdery, who had just arrived from Wisconsin with his family, on being invited, addressed the meeting. He bore testimony in the most positive terms of the truth of the Book of Mormon—the restoration of the priesthood to the earth, and the mission of Joseph Smith as the Prophet of the last days; and told the people if they

wanted to follow the right path, to keep the main channel of the stream — where the body of the Church goes, there is the authority; and all these lo here’s and lo theres have no authority; but this people have the true and holy priesthood; ‘for the angel said unto Joseph Smith, Jr., in my hearing, that this priesthood shall remain on the earth unto the end.’” His testimony produced quite a sensation among the gentlemen present, who did not belong to the Church, and it was gratefully received by all the Saints. Last evening, President Hyde and myself spent the evening with Brother Cowdery. He told us he had come to listen to our counsel and would do as we told him. He had been cut off from the Church by a council; had withdrawn himself from it; stayed away eleven years; and now came back, not expecting to be a leader, but wished to be a member and have a part among us. He considered that he ought to be baptized; and did not expect to return without it. He said that Joseph Smith had fulfilled his mission faithfully before God until death. He was determined to rise with the Church, and if it went down he was willing to go down with it. I saw him to-day, told him I was going to write to you. He sends his respects to you; he says, ‘tell Brother Orson I am advised by the brethren to remain here this winter, and assist Brother Hyde

**Testimony
of
Bishop
Reuben Miller**

**Testimony
of
George A.
Smith**

²²*Deseret News*, April 13, 1859.

²³*Ibid.*

in the printing office, and as soon as I get settled I will write him a letter.'—I remain, as ever, your brother in the kingdom of patience.

GEO. A. SMITH.²⁴

Thank you very much, Mr. Smith.

Two months later—in January 1849—Cowdery and his wife decided to visit one of the other excommunicated witnesses, David Whitmer, who was his brother-in-law, and on the way were obliged to seek shelter from a severe snow storm at the home of one Samuel W. Richards. As it turned out they were snowbound for two weeks, during which time Richards seized the opportunity to ask him many questions about his life. I think it would be most interesting to call Mr. Richards to the "witness stand" to tell us what he was able to learn from Cowdery during his interviews that lasted half a month.

Mr. Richards, will you be kind enough to tell what you learned about the Book of Mormon through your conversations with Oliver Cowdery during the fortnight that he was your guest.

"I had but the fall before returned from my first mission to the British Isles, and was in the spirit of inquiry as to all matters of early history and experiences in the Church, and soon found there was no reserve on the part of Oliver in answering my many questions. In doing so his mind seemed as fresh in recollection of events which occurred more than a score of years before as though they were but of yesterday.

"Upon carefully inquiring as to his long absence from the body of the Church, he stated that he had

**Testimony
of
Samuel W.
Richards**

never met the Prophet Joseph, after his expulsion from the Church, while he lived, apparently feeling that the Prophet could with equal propriety inquire after him as for him to visit the Prophet, and as his pride would seemingly not allow him to become suppliant

without that inquiry, it was never made; while he felt quite sure that had he ever met the Prophet there would have been no difficulty in effecting a reconciliation, as a feeling of jealousy towards him, on the part of his accusers, had entered largely into their purpose of having him removed, which he thought Joseph must have discovered after going up to Missouri."²⁵

I see. Now, Mr. Richards, there is a question that I can't resist the temptation to ask you that is a little afield from our inquiry, although related to it in principle. Joseph Smith says that Oliver Cowdery was not only with him when the Angel Moroni displayed the plates, but that he also was

²⁴"Letters to the Editor," *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star*, Vol. 11, No. 1, January 1, 1849, p. 14.

²⁵Elder Samuel W. Richards, "Oliver Cowdery," *The Improvement Era*, Vol. 2, December 1898, p. 94.

with him on several other occasions when heavenly beings appeared. My question is this: Did he ever speak to you about any of these other visitations during his prolonged stay. If so, what was your reaction to it?

"To hear him describe in his pleasant but earnest manner the personality of those heavenly messengers, with whom he and the Prophet had so freely held converse, was enchanting to my soul. Their heavenly appearance, clothed in robes of purity; the influence of their presence so lovely and serene; their eyes that seemed to penetrate to the very depths of the soul, together with the color of the eyes that gazed upon them, were all so beautifully related as to almost make one feel that they were then present; and as I placed my hands upon his head where these angels had placed theirs, a divine influence filled the soul to that degree that one could truly feel to be in the presence of something that was more than earthly; and from that day to this—now almost fifty years ago—the interest of those glorious truths upon the mind has never been lost, but as a beacon light ever guiding to the home of their glory for a like inheritance."²⁶

Thank you, Mr. Richards, we are grateful for your testimony. You may step down.

Oliver Cowdery planned to go west to Utah, but while visiting at the home of his father-in-law, Peter Whitmer, later that same year, he contracted tuberculosis and died March 3, 1850. Among those present were Phineas H. Young and his wife, Lucy P. Young (Cowdery's half-sister), and, appropriately enough, David Whitmer, one of the other expelled witnesses.

At this juncture I should like to enter into the record two quotations from Andrew Jenson's *L.D.S. Biographical Encyclopedia*. Jenson quotes Phineas

**Statement
of
Andrew
Jenson**

Young as saying of Cowdery:

"... his last moments were spent in bearing testimony of the truth of the gospel revealed through Joseph Smith, and the power of the holy Priesthood which he had received through his administrations."²⁷

Jenson explains, as follows, Lucy P. Young's version of Cowdery's last moments:

"... Oliver Cowdery just before breathing his last, asked his attendants to raise him up in bed that he might talk to the family and his friends, who were present. He then told them to live according to the teachings contained in the Book of Mormon, and promised them, if they would do this, that they would meet him in heaven. He then said, 'Lay me down and let me fall asleep.' A few moments later he died without a struggle."²⁸

To the foregoing I add a statement by David

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 95.

²⁷Andrew Jenson, *L.D.S. Biographical Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1, p. 251.

²⁸*Ibid.*

Whitmer. Although himself outside the Church at the time he wrote these words, Whitmer says, "I was present at the death of Oliver Cowdery, and

his last words were, 'Brother David, be true to your testimony to the Book of Mormon.' He died here in Richmond, Mo. on March 3d, 1850."²⁹

CHAPTER 5

David Whitmer

Let us now shift the spotlight from Oliver Cowdery to David Whitmer. David Whitmer was cut off from the Church at Far West, Missouri, April 13, 1838. In time he moved from Far West, Missouri, to Richmond, Missouri, where he spent the remainder of his life. Here he was affiliated with a little splinter group of "Mormonism," which called itself the Church of Christ. Although he never returned to the Church, it is sufficient for our purpose to note that to the day of his death he belonged to a faction—indeed, was one of its leaders—that affirmed the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon; so regardless of his differences with the leadership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in other particulars, he appears to have been at one with them on the question of the truth of the Book of Mormon. Now, from the several incidents in his out-of-the-Church career that bear upon his testimony of the angel and the book there are a few representative ones to which I should like to call the "jury's" attention. I now ask David Whitmer to take the "witness stand."

Mr. Whitmer, the *Kansas City Daily Journal* of June 5, 1881, carries the report of an interview between you and a newspaper man who allegedly had been sent to your home in Richmond to converse with you. The reporter found you somewhat pale and feeble in the wake of a recent illness. He introduced himself and, according to the article in question, began the conversation as follows:

"Mr. Whitmer, knowing that you are the only living witness to the translation of the Book of Mormon and also that you were a resident of Jackson County during the Mormon troubles in 1833, I have been sent to you by the *Journal* to get from your lips the true statement of facts in regard to these matters. For nearly half a century the world has had but one side only, and it is now our desire to present to our readers for the first time the other side."³⁰

The journalist says you replied:

"Young man, you are right. I am the only living witness to the Book of Mormon, but I have been imposed upon and misrepresented so many times by persons claiming to be honorable newspaper men, that I feel a delicacy in allowing my name to come before the public in newspaper print again."³¹

The reporter maintains that he assured you that the interview would be published exactly as it took place and that your statements would not be garbled or distorted in any manner. Will you now give us the

main elements of your story as you related it to the *Kansas City Daily Journal* man.

"I first heard of what is now termed Mormonism in the year 1828. I made a business trip to Palmyra, N.Y., and while there stopped with one Oliver Cowdery. A great many people in the neighborhood were talking about the finding of certain golden plates by one Joseph Smith, Jr., a young man of that neighborhood. Cowdery and I, as well

as others, talked about the matter, but at that time I paid but little attention to it, supposing it to be only the idle gossip of the neighborhood. Cowdery said he was acquainted with the Smith family, and he believed there must be some truth in the story of the plates, and that he intended to investigate the matter. I had conversations with several young men who said that Joseph Smith had certainly had golden plates, and that before he attained them he had promised to share with them, but had not done so, and they were very much incensed with him. Said I, 'how do you know that Joe Smith has the plates?' They replied: 'we saw the . . . [place] in the hill that he took them out of just as he described it to us before he obtained them.' These parties were so positive in their statements that I began to believe there must be some foundation for the stories then in circulation all over that part of the country. I had never seen any of the Smith family up to that time, and I began to inquire of the people in regard to them, and learned that one night during the year 1827, Joseph Smith, Jr., had a vision, and an angel of God appeared to him and told him where certain plates were to be found, and pointed out the spot to him, and that shortly afterward he went to that place and found the plates which were still in his possession. After thinking over the matter for a long time, and talking with Cowdery, who also gave me a history of the finding of the plates, I went home, and after several months Cowdery told me he was going to Harmony, Pa.—whither Joseph Smith had gone with the plates on account of persecutions of his neighbors—and see him about the matter. He did go and on his way stopped at my father's house and told me that as soon as he found out anything either truth or untruth he would let me know. After he got there he became acquainted with Joseph Smith, and shortly after, wrote to me telling me that he was convinced that Smith had the records and that he (Smith) had told him that

²⁹David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, p. 8.

³⁰*Kansas City Daily Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 300, June 5, 1881, p. 1.

³¹*Ibid.*

it was the will of heaven that he (Cowdery) should be his scribe to assist in the translation of the plates. He went on and Joseph translated from the plates and he wrote it down. Shortly after this Cowdery wrote me another letter in which he gave me a few lines of what they had translated, and he assured me that he knew of a certainty that he had a record of a people that inhabited this continent, and that the plates they were translating gave a complete history of these people. When Cowdery wrote me these things and told me that he had revealed knowledge concerning the truth of them, I showed these letters to my parents, and brothers and sisters. Soon after I received another letter from Cowdery, telling me to come down into Pennsylvania and bring him and Joseph to my father's house, giving as a reason therefor that they had received a commandment from God to that effect. I went down to Harmony, and found everything just as they had written me. The next day after I got there they packed up the plates and we proceeded on our journey to my father's house where we arrived in due time, and the day after we commenced upon the translation of the remainder of the plates. I, as well as all of my father's family, Smith's wife, Oliver Cowdery, and Martin Harris were present during the translation."²²

That is very interesting, Mr. Whitmer, very interesting, indeed. Will you kindly also tell us when and under what circumstances you saw the Book of Mormon plates from which Joseph Smith translated.

"It was in the latter part of June, 1829. Joseph Oliver Cowdery and myself were together, and the angel showed them to us. We not only saw the plates of the Book of Mormon, but he also showed us the brass plates of the book of Ether and many others. They were shown to us in this way. Joseph and Oliver and I were sitting on a log when we were overshadowed by a light more glorious than that of the sun. In the midst of this light but a few feet from us appeared a table upon which were many golden plates, also the sword of Laban and the directors. I saw them as plain as I see you now, and distinctly heard the voice of the Lord declaiming that the records of the plates of the Book of Mormon were translated by the gift and the power of God."²³

Mr. Whitmer, approximately at this point in your interview with the representative of the *Kansas City Daily Journal*, the reporter says he asked you a question that we consider highly significant to this inquiry. I am going to restate the question very carefully and shall appreciate it if you answer just as carefully. Mr. Whitmer, "Did you see the angel?"

"Yes; he stood before us. Our testimony as recorded in the Book of Mormon is absolutely true, just as it is written there."²⁴

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

Thank you very kindly, Mr. Whitmer. We welcome this contribution. There is now another matter that, with your help, I should like to bring to the "jury's" attention. About two and a half months before your interview with the reporter of the *Kansas City Daily Journal* there appeared in the *Richmond Conservator* a strongly worded statement of protest written by you. It was directed at someone who apparently had misquoted you regarding your testimony of the Book of Mormon. Will you please tell us what you wrote in the *Richmond Conservator* at that time. The date was March 24, 1881.

"Unto all Nations, Kindred Tongues and People, unto whom these presents shall come:

"It having been represented by one John Murphy, of Polo, Caldwell County, Mo., that I, in a conversation with him last summer, denied my testimony as one of the three witnesses to the 'Book of Mormon.'

"To the end, therefore, that he may understand me now, if he did not then; and that the world may know the truth, I wish now, standing as it were in the very sunset of life, and in the fear of God, once for all to make this public statement:

"That I have never at any time denied that testimony or any part thereof, which has so long since been published with that Book, as one of the three witnesses. Those who know me best, well know that I have always adhered to that testimony. And that no man may be misled or doubt my present views in regard to the same, I do again affirm the truth of all my statements as then made and published.

"'He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear;' it was no delusion! What is written is written, and he that readeth let him understand."²⁵

That is certainly plain enough, Mr. Whitmer. That will be all.

There is more to David Whitmer's statement in the *Richmond Conservator*, but only this much of it bears upon our investigation at this point. Whitmer's printed testimony is followed by an endorsement of his personal integrity and veracity signed by twenty-one public officials, judges, doctors, businessman, and other prominent citizens. It looks as if he went to a great deal of effort, indeed, to set the record straight about his testimony.

In the same issue of the *Richmond Conservator* of March 24, 1881, the following editorial appeared. I offer it as a supplement to Whitmer's testimony. It is entitled, "An Explanation."

"Elsewhere we publish a letter from David Whitmer, an old and well-known citizen of Ray [County], as well as an indorsement of his standing as a man, signed by a number of the leading citizens of this community, in reply to some unwarranted aspersions made upon him.

"There is no doubt that Mr. Whitmer, who was

²⁵*Richmond Conservator*, March 24, 1881; as quoted in David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, pp. 8-9.

one of the three witnesses of the authenticity of the gold plates, from which he asserts that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon (a fac simile of the characters he now has in his possession with the original records), is firmly convinced of its divine origin, and while he makes no effort to obtrude his views or beliefs, he simply wants the world to know that so far as he is concerned there is no 'variableness or shadow of turning.' Having resided here for near a half of a century, it is with no little pride that he points to his past record with the consciousness that he has done nothing derogatory to his character as a citizen and a believer in the Son of Mary to warrant such an attack on him, come from what source it may, and now with the lillies of seventy-five winters crowning him like an aureole, and his pilgrimage on earth well nigh ended, he reiterates his former statements, and will leave futurity to solve the problem that he was but a passing witness to its fulfillment."³⁶

Our next witness is the Honorable James H. Moyle, who for twenty-five years was United States Commissioner of Customs. With the help of Mr. Moyle we shall seek to gain additional insight into the story of the angel and the Book of Mormon plates as related by David Whitmer in July, 1885, forty-seven years after his expulsion from the Church and just three years before his death.

Mr. Moyle, will you be so kind as to tell us the details of your 1885 interview with David Whitmer.

"I was always deeply interested in the Book of Mormon, and had been on a mission to the Southern

**Testimony
of
James H.
Moyle**

States before I entered the University of Michigan. During my three years' residence at the University I learned that David Whitmer was still living and in good health. I concluded to visit him on the way home to Salt Lake City. I graduated the latter part of June, 1885,

and arrived in Richmond, Missouri, early in July.

"Richmond is a small, rural town. I talked with the hack driver (that is what they called them) who took me to the hotel, and learned from him that David Whitmer was a highly respected citizen of the city. I likewise questioned the clerk of the hotel with the same results. I made such inquiry as I could concerning him during my visit of part of a day."³⁷

I am not surprised to hear you say that the hack driver and others informed you that he was highly respected, Mr. Moyle. Despite calumny heaped upon the other witnesses to the Book of Mormon, David Whitmer seems to have come away relatively free from criticism. Now, please, continue with your narrative.

"I found David Whitmer seated under a fruit

tree in front of his home, which was located near the street and surrounded by an orchard. I understood that he had been bothered a good deal by curiosity seekers, and to make him feel more at home with me, I presented him with an appropriate book. I said that I had just graduated as a law student and was on my way home, and was extremely anxious to obtain from him whatever he would be good enough to tell me about the Book of Mormon, the plates from which it was translated and his testimony concerning the same which he had given to the world.

"I entered in a little diary which I kept the mere fact that I had visited David Whitmer and that he had verified all that had been published to the world concerning the Book of Mormon by him in his testimony, and that was about all. In making that visit I had no thought of anything but my personal knowledge and did not contemplate publishing anything concerning it—it was purely an individual matter with me at the time. I told my friends about it and spoke of it in the ward, but at that time it seemed to be common knowledge. David Whitmer died about three years after I saw him. My memory of the main facts is perfectly clear. I have always enjoyed good health, never better than at the present."³⁸

Mr. Moyle, pardon me if I break into your story, but would you mind giving us a description of David Whitmer?

"David Whitmer was a man above medium height, slender rather than stout and was in his shirt sleeves. His hair was white, as was his long, patriarchal beard. As I remember, he was a man of fairly intellectual appearance, for the plain citizen that he was, and of good countenance. I am quite sure he was a serious-minded man."³⁹

Mr. Moyle, can you tell us how you led up to the question about the angel and the plates.

"I told him that I had been born in the Church, my mother also; that my father joined the Church when he was a boy in his teens; that I had grown up believing implicitly in the Book of Mormon; that I was about to commence life's activities as he was getting ready to lay them down, and pleaded with him to tell me the truth—not to permit me to go through life believing in a falsehood—that meant so much to me. I told him that he knew the facts and urged him to tell me just what happened in connection with the introduction of the Book of Mormon. I seemed to gain his confidence and felt free to ask him questions, and in fact did everything I could think of that would bring out the facts, particularly all of the circumstances and details of his seeing the Angel, seeing and handling the plates and where the interview with the Angel Moroni took place and the conditions and circumstances surrounding the same."⁴⁰

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷James H. Moyle, "David Whitmer's Testimony," *Liahona The Elders Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 7, September 13, 1938, p. 150.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

Good. And what was his answer?

"He said that they (Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and Martin Harris) were out in the primitive woods in western New York; that there was nothing between them and the Angel except a log that had fallen in the forest; that it was in the broad daylight with nothing to prevent either hearing or seeing all that took place. He then repeated to me that he did see and handle the plates; that he did see and hear the Angel and heard the declaration that the plates had been correctly translated; that there was absolutely nothing to prevent his having a full, clear view of it all. I remember very distinctly asking him if there was anything unnatural or unusual about the surroundings or the atmosphere. He answered that question. I do not remember exactly the words he used, but he indicated that there was something of a haze or peculiarity about the atmosphere that surrounded them but nothing that would prevent his having a clear vision and knowledge of all that took place. He declared to me that the testimony which he had published was true and that he had never denied any part of it."⁴¹

Coinciding with your testimony at this point, Mr. Moyle, is a statement made by Whitmer seven years before to Joseph F. Smith and a party of visitors. Since the statement bears upon the peculiar light that attended the angel's visit, I should like to insert it into the record at this point. I quote:

"The fact is, it was just as though Joseph, Oliver and I were sitting just here on a log, when we 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, but in the midst of this light about as far off as he sits (pointing to John C. Whitmer, sitting a few feet from him), there appeared, as it were, a table with many records or plates upon it, besides the plates of the Book of Mormon, also the Sword of Laban, the directors—i.e., the ball which Lehi had, and the Interpreters. I saw them just as plain as I see this bed (striking the bed beside him with his hand), and I heard the voice of the Lord, as distinctly as I ever heard anything in my life, declaring that the records of the plates of the Book of Mormon were translated by the gift and power of God."⁴²

And now returning to your story, Mr. Moyle, you were saying that Whitmer declared to you "that the testimony which he had published was true and that he had never denied any part of it." What did you ask him after that?

"I asked him why he had left the Church. He replied that he had never left the Church, that he had continued with the branch of the Church that was originally organized in Richmond and still pre-

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 150-151.

⁴²"Report of Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith," *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star*, Vol. 40, No. 49, December 9, 1878, p. 772.

sided over it. In answer to my questions, he said, in an unqualified, emphatic way, that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God, but had become a fallen prophet through the influence which Sidney Rigdon exercised over him; that he accepted everything that was revealed to the Prophet down to the year 1835, but rejected everything thereafter because he did not know whether it came from the Lord or from Sidney Rigdon."⁴³

We are curious to know whether you gained any clue during your visit, Mr. Moyle, as to why his attitude toward Joseph Smith had become altered.

"He manifestly had become embittered against Sidney Rigdon due to his promotion to second place in the Church over men like himself who had been with the Prophet from the beginning and who had done so much for the Church. I then concluded, as I now believe, that jealousy and disappointment had soured his soul, but nothing could obliterate his testimony of the divinity of the Book of Mormon."⁴⁴

Did you ask him any further questions?

"I asked him about the manuscript from which the Book of Mormon was published. He said that he had the original of the three copies⁴⁵ that were made before the Book of Mormon was printed. I asked him if he would sell the manuscript. He said, 'No.' I then asked him if he wouldn't sell it at any price. He said, 'No,' that he would not part with it. He also said, pointing to his home, that when a cyclone struck Richmond a few years before every room in his house was destroyed except the one in which that manuscript was kept. He seemed to regard the manuscript sacredly. As he appeared to be a poor man, at least in very ordinary circumstances, I was greatly impressed by the fact that he would not even talk about selling it and with the fact that he seemed to regard the care of the manuscript as being something of a sacred trust. Neither did he seek a reconciliation with the Church, although that would have inevitably increased his worldly comfort, and made him a highly honored personage among Latter-day Saints.

"President Joseph F. Smith had previously interviewed him and had seen the manuscript. He said to me that it was not the original, but a copy made by Oliver Cowdery."⁴⁶

Thank you, Mr. Moyle; thank you very much. You may step down.

I urge the "jury" of investigating readers to ponder for a moment on Whitmer's notion that the manuscript had been miraculously saved from the

⁴³James H. Moyle, "David Whitmer's Testimony," *Liahona The Elders Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 7, September 13, 1938, p. 151.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid. We assume this allusion to "three copies" to be an error, either of David Whitmer's or James H. Moyle's (or else a typographical mistake), as only two manuscript copies are mentioned by Joseph Smith and others associated with the publication of the work.

⁴⁶James H. Moyle, "David Whitmer's Testimony," *Liahona The Elders Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 7, September 13, 1938, p. 151.

cyclone. You and I do not know whether the manuscript was providentially preserved. The important fact for our purpose, though, is that Whitmer felt that it was. He thought God had saved it from destruction and, with it, the room in which it lay. Plainly he believed there was something sacred about the book. Sometimes little out-of-the-way details like this are worth more than the obvious and big things in evaluating the sincerity of a man's convictions. Incidentally, the interview between Joseph F. Smith and David Whitmer, alluded to by Moyle, was held about three months after the cyclone, which swept through Richmond in June, 1878. In President Smith's report of the visit, which was published not long afterwards, he seems to have been intrigued not only with the fact that David Whitmer believed that the manuscript had been miraculously saved from the cyclone but also with the fact that:

"The whole Whitmer family are deeply impressed with the sacredness of this relic. And so thoroughly imbued are they with the idea and faith that it is under the immediate protection of the Almighty that, in their estimation, not only are the Mss. themselves safe from all possible contingencies, but that they are a source of protection to the place or house in which they may be kept, and, it may be to those who have possession of them."⁴⁷

David Whitmer died January 25, 1888, at eighty-three years of age. The ensuing week's issue of the *Richmond Democrat* carried an account of his death and of several incidents connected with his final illness. I wish to enter into the record several quotations from the newspaper in question. One of these involves, once more, an explanation of the angel and the book. Here is the newspaper reporter's version of his claim:

"Repairing to the woods they engaged in prayer for a short time, when suddenly a great light shone round about them far brighter and more dazzling than the brilliancy of the noon day sun, seemingly enveloping the wood for a considerable distance.

A spirit of elevation seized him as of joy indescribable and a strange influence stole over him which so entranced him that he felt that he was chained to the spot. A moment later and a divine personage clothed in white raiment appeared unto

them, and immediately in front of the personage stood a table on which lay a number of gold plates, some brass plates, the 'urim and thummim' and the 'sword of Laban.' All of these they were directed to examine carefully and after their examination they

**Statement
of the
Richmond
Democrat**

⁴⁷"Report of Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith," *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star*, Vol. 40, No. 49, December 9, 1878, p. 774.

were told that the Lord would demand that they bear witness thereof to all the world."⁴⁸

The newspaper account also adds this informative detail:

"While describing this vision to us, all traces of a severe cold from which he was suffering disappeared for the time being, his form straightened, his countenance assumed almost a beatified expression and his tones became strangely eloquent. Although evidently no studied effort, the description was a magnificent piece of word painting and he carried his hearers with him to that lonely hill by the old farm and they stood there with him awed in the divine presence. Skeptics may laugh and scoff if they will, but no man can listen to Mr. Whitmer as he talks of his interview with the Angel of the Lord, without being most forcibly convinced that he has heard an honest man tell what he honestly believes to be true."⁴⁹

In the same issue of the *Richmond Democrat* is a report of what evidently was Whitmer's last formal testimony concerning the truth of the Book of Mormon. It was uttered just three days before his death.

"On Sunday evening at 5:30, January 22, 1888, Mr. Whitmer called his family and some friends to his bedside, and addressing himself to the attending physician, said: 'Dr. Buchanan I want you to say whether or not I am in my right mind, before I give my dying testimony.'

"The doctor answered: 'Yes you are in your right mind for I have just had a conversation with you.'

"He then addressed himself to all around his bedside in these words: 'Now you must all be faithful in Christ. I want to say to you all the Bible and the record of the Nephites, (Book of Mormon) is true, so you can say that you have heard me bear my testimony, on my death bed. All be faithful in Christ and your reward will be according to your works. God bless you all. My trust is in Christ forever, world without end.—Amen.'"⁵⁰

The aforementioned article in the *Richmond Democrat* pays this tribute to David Whitmer:

"He lived in Richmond about half a century, and we can say that no man ever lived here, who had among our people, more friends and fewer enemies. Honest, conscientious and upright in all his dealings, just in his estimate of men, and open, manly and frank in his treatment of all, he made lasting friends who loved him to the end."⁵¹

⁴⁸*Richmond Democrat*, Vol. 16, No. 6, February 2, 1888.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹*Ibid.*

CHAPTER 6

Martin Harris

We now turn our attention to the third witness, Martin Harris. According to a letter by John Smith to his son, George A. Smith, dated at Kirtland, Ohio, January 1, 1838, Harris was cut off from the Church during the last week of December, 1837.⁵² A second letter written at Kirtland by Justin Brooks to Joseph Smith and dated November 7, 1842, states, "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."⁵³ Notwithstanding his rebaptism, however, when the Church began its westward trek in 1846 Martin Harris remained behind and was for many years regarded as being, at least in spirit, an outsider.

Just as I think it significant that David Whitmer, though expelled from the Church, remained a member of an offshoot group that affirmed the truth of the Book of Mormon, so too, I think it counts for something that Martin Harris, during his years of separation from the body of the Church, used to show visitors through the "Mormon" temple at Kirtland. Evidently he continued to feel some kind of attachment for the Church.

Of the many people who visited Mr. Harris in Ohio during this period of his life none provides us a more detailed and informative account than William Harrison Homer. Homer was returning from a mission for the Church in 1869 and decided to visit the Kirtland Temple. He seems to have been unaware of the fact that the custodian was Martin Harris, his sister's father-in-law. But let me not tell Homer's story, when, according to the rules of this investigation, we are free to call upon Mr. Homer himself.

Mr. Homer, will you please take the "witness stand" and tell our "jury" of inquiring readers about your encounter with Martin Harris.

"I first saw Martin Harris in Kirtland, Ohio, about the last of December, 1869. On my return

**Testimony
of
William
Harrison Homer**

from a mission in England I stopped to visit some of my relatives in Pennsylvannia. On resuming my journey, one of my cousins, James A. Crockett, who was not a member of the Church, came as far as Kirtland, Ohio, with me. We remained in Kirtland over night and the next morning after breakfast, we asked the landlord who was custodian of the Mormon Temple at Kirtland and he informed us that Martin Harris was custodian, and pointed out to us where we could find the old gentleman. Accordingly we went to the door and

knocked. In answer to our knock there came to the door of the cottage a poorly clad, emaciated little man, on whom the winter of life was weighing heavily. It was Martin Harris."⁵⁴

Would you be so kind as to give us details about Harris's appearance, Mr. Homer? What did he look like?

"In his face might be read the story of his life. There were the marks of spiritual upliftment. There were the marks of keen disappointment. There was the hunger strain for the peace, the contentment, the divine calm that it seemed could come no more into his life. It was a pathetic figure, and yet it was a figure of strength. For with it all there was something about the little man which revealed the fact that he had lived richly, that into his life had entered such noble experiences as come to the lives of but few."⁵⁵

Now, Mr. Homer, although we asked for details we must also ask you to try to keep your testimony, as far as possible, free from personal opinion. Tell us merely what you said and saw and heard.

"I introduced myself modestly as a brother-in-law of Martin Harris, Jr.—as he had married my eldest sister—and as an Elder of the Church who was returning from a foreign mission."⁵⁶

What was the effect of the introduction? Was he glad to see his son's brother-in-law or glad to see someone from Utah?

"The effect of the introduction was electric[al]. The fact of relationship was overwhelmed by the fact of Utah citizenship. The old man bristled with vindictiveness. 'One of those Brighamite Mormons, are you?' he snapped. Then he railed impatiently against Utah and the founder of the 'Mormon' commonwealth. It was in vain that I tried to turn the old man's attention to his family. Martin Harris seemed to be obsessed. He would not understand that there stood before him a man who knew his wife and children, who had followed the Church to Utah."⁵⁷

May I ask the "jury" whether it wouldn't have been strange for the excommunicated Martin Harris to have allowed his son to go west with the "Mormons" if this thing had been a monstrous fraud? Surely the father would have informed the son that there was no angel and that there were no plates and thus have prevented him from chasing delusion and false leaders into a barren desert? But apparently the elder Harris had told him nothing of the sort. This we infer from the simple fact that the son had gone west with the Church.

Please continue, Mr. Homer.

⁵²Wayne Cutler Gunnell, *Martin Harris — Witness and Benefactor to the Book of Mormon: A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Department of Religion, Brigham Young University, June 1955*, p. 50.

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴William Harrison Homer, "The Passing of Martin Harris," *The Improvement Era*, Vol. 29, March 1926, pp. 468-469.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 469.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

"After some time, however, the old man said, 'You want to see the Temple, do you?' 'Yes, indeed,' I exclaimed, 'if we may.' 'Well, I'll get the key.' From that moment, Martin Harris, in spite of occasional outbursts, radiated with interest. He led us through the rooms of the Temple and explained how they were used. He pointed out the place of the School of Prophets. He showed where the Temple curtain had at one time hung. He related thrilling experiences in connection with the history of the sacred building."⁵⁸

An unthinkable thing for him to be doing unless he believed God had had something to do with it all! Please go on, Mr. Homer.

"In the basement, as elsewhere, there were many signs of dilapidation; the plaster had fallen off the ceilings and the walls; windows were broken; the woodwork was stained and marred. Whether it was the influence of these conditions or not, it is difficult to tell, but here again, Martin Harris was moved to speak against the Utah 'Mormons'. An injustice, a gross injustice had been done to him. He should have been chosen President of the Church."⁵⁹

Mr. Homer, we would be very much interested to know whether you asked him about his testimony of the Book of Mormon, and if so, how you approached the question.

"When the old man was somewhat exhausted, I asked, 'Is it not true that you were once very prominent in the Church, that you gave liberally of your means, and that you were active in the performance of your duties?' 'That is very true,' replied Martin Harris. 'Things were alright then. I was honored while the people were here, but now that I am old and poor it is all different.'

"'Really,' I replied, 'how can that be? What about your testimony to the Book of Mormon? Do you still believe that the Book of Mormon is true and that Joseph Smith was a Prophet?' Again the effect was electric[al]. A changed old man stood before me. It was no longer a man with an imagined grievance. It was a man with a message, a man with a noble conviction in his heart, a man inspired of God and endowed with divine knowledge. Through the broken window of the Temple shone the winter sun, clear and radiant.

"'Young man,' answered Martin Harris with impressiveness, 'Do I believe it! Do I see the sun shining! Just as surely as the sun is shining on us and gives us light, and the . . . [moon] and stars give us light by night, just as surely as the breath of life sustains us, so surely do I know that Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God, chosen of God to open the last dispensation of the fulness of times; so surely do I know that the Book of Mormon was divinely translated. I saw the plates; I saw the Angel; I heard the voice of God. I know that the Book of Mormon is true and that Joseph Smith was

a true Prophet of God. I might as well doubt my own existence as to doubt the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon or the divine calling of Joseph Smith.' It was a sublime moment. It was a wonderful testimony. We were thrilled to the very roots of our hair. The shabby, emaciated little man before us was transformed as he stood with hand outstretched toward the sun of heaven. A halo seemed to encircle him. A divine fire glowed in his eyes. His voice throbbed with the sincerity and the conviction of his message. It was the real Martin Harris whose burning testimony no power on earth could quench. It was the most thrilling moment of my life."⁶⁰

The "most thrilling moment of your life," you say? We can well imagine. Now, kindly tell us what happened after that.

"I asked Martin Harris how he could bear so wonderful a testimony after having left the Church. He said, 'Young man, I never did leave the Church the Church left me.'

"Martin Harris was now in a softer mood. He turned to me and asked, 'Who are you?' I explained again our relationship. 'So my son Martin married your sister,' repeated the old man, shaking my hand. 'You know my family, then?' 'Yes,' I replied. 'Wouldn't you like to see your family again?' 'I should like to see Caroline and the children,' mused Martin, naming over the children, 'But I cannot, I am too poor.' 'That need not stand in the way,' I answered, 'President Young would be only too glad to furnish means to convey you to Utah.' 'Don't talk Brigham Young,' warned Harris; 'he would not do anything that was right.' 'Send him a message by me,' I persisted, now deeply concerned in the project. 'No,' declared Harris emphatically, 'yet I should like to see my family.' 'Then entrust me with the message,' I pleaded. Martin paused. 'Well,' he said slowly, 'I believe I will. You call on Brigham Young. Tell him about our visit. Tell him that Martin Harris is an old, old man, living on charity with his relatives. Tell him I should like to visit Utah, my family, my children—I would be glad to accept help from the Church, but I want no personal favor. Wait! Tell him that if he sends money, he must send enough for the round trip. I should not want to remain in Utah.' For 25 years he had nursed the old grudge against the leaders of the Church, probably because nobody had had the patience with him that I had shown.

"After we had bidden Martin Harris goodbye, and had taken a few steps from the Temple, my cousin placed his hands on my shoulders and said, 'Wait a minute.' Looking me squarely in the eyes, he said, 'I can testify that the Book of Mormon is true. There is something within me that tells me that the old man told the truth. I know the Book of Mormon is true.'"⁶¹

That is extremely interesting, Mr. Homer. Your

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid., pp. 469-470.

⁶¹Ibid., pp. 470-471.

testimony adds much to our inquiry. You may skip, now, if you wish, the intervening details and tell us whether Martin Harris ever got to Utah.

"During the summer of 1870, Elder Edward Stevenson was authorized to collect money by subscription to bring Martin Harris to Utah. About two hundred dollars were raised; and on August 30, 1870, Martin Harris arrived in Salt Lake City, in the company of Elder Stevenson.

"When Martin reached Salt Lake City, he visited Brigham Young at his home. They became reconciled, and Martin Harris was invited to speak in the Tabernacle, and he bore a faithful testimony. He went to Smithfield, and later to Clarkston and made his home with his son, Martin Harris, Jr., and in course of time he returned to full fellowship and communion with the Saints."⁶²

Thank you, Mr. Homer. You may step down; but please do not go away. We shall wish to call on you again.

Mr. Homer spoke of an Elder Edward Stevenson as the one who actually escorted Harris to Utah in the summer of 1870. We shall call upon Mr. Stevenson to testify.

Mr. Stevenson, we should appreciate the privilege of asking you a few questions. Will you kindly tell us when and where you first came into contact with Martin Harris?

"While I was living in Michigan, then a Territory, in 1833, near the town of Pontiac, Oakland Co., Martin Harris came there and in a meeting where I was present bore testimony of the appearance of an angel exhibiting the golden plates, and commanding him to bear a testimony of these things to all people whenever opportunity was afforded him to do so; and I can say that his testimony had great effect in that vicinity. Martin had a sister living in our neighborhood. About this time Oliver Cowdery, one of the other three witnesses also, in company with Joseph Smith the Prophet bore the same testimony, and further, Joseph the Prophet promised those who with honest hearts obeyed the Gospel should receive the Holy Ghost, and signs would follow them."⁶³

I see. Is it not also true that you met Martin Harris thirty-six years afterwards in 1869, the same year that Homer did?

"In the year 1869 I was appointed to a mission to the United States. Having visited several of the Eastern States, I called at Kirtland, Ohio, to see the first Temple that was built by our people in this generation. While there, I again met Martin Harris, soon after coming out of the Temple. He took from under his arm a copy of the Book of Mormon, the first edition, I believe, and bore a faith-

ful testimony, just the same as that I heard him bear 36 years previous. He said that it was his duty to continue to lift up his voice as he had been commanded to do in defence of the Book that he held in his hand, and offered to prove from the Bible that just such a book was to come forth out of the ground, and that, too, in a day when there were no prophets on the earth, and that he was daily bearing testimony to many who visited the Temple."⁶⁴

Good. Now, Mr. Homer has said that you were authorized by your Church leaders to collect money by subscription to bring Martin Harris to Utah and that you raised about two hundred dollars for this purpose. Will you proceed to add any details about the journey to Salt Lake City that you think interesting to our "jury."

"On the 21st of August, Martin was with me in Chicago, and at the American Hotel bore testimony to a large number of people, of the visitation of the angel, etc."⁶⁵

Is it also true that he addressed a group in Iowa?

"While in Des Moines, the capital of Iowa, brother Harris had opportunity of bearing testimony to many, and at a special meeting held in a Branch of our Church, brother James M. Ballinger, President, brother Harris bore testimony as to viewing the plates, the angel's visit, and visiting professor Anthon, with characters from the plates, who after giving him a certificate, etc., as to the correctness of the characters, asked him to fetch the plates for him to see. Martin said that they were sealed, and that an angel had forbidden them to be exhibited. Mr. Anthon then called for the certificate, tore it up and consigned it to the waste basket, saying, that angels did not visit the earth in our day, etc.

"On the following day I baptized a sister of President Ballinger, in the Des Moines River. The Branch here contributed a new suit of clothes to Brother Harris, for which he felt to bless them. On the 29th of August we landed in Ogden, and the Ogden Junction said:

"Martin Harris arrived whose name is known almost throughout the world as one of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon. They left Kirtland on the 19th of August."⁶⁶

The arrival of Martin Harris and Edward Stevenson in Salt Lake City on August 30 was announced in the local newspapers. The *Salt Lake Herald* reported it briefly on Tuesday, August 31, and ran the following story Friday of the same week. I introduce it into this inquiry as a reminder of Harris' constancy in respect to his testimony of the angel and the book.

"We had a call yesterday morning from Elder Edward Stevenson, who introduced Martin Harris, one of the 'three witnesses' to the Book of Mormon. Mr. Harris is now eighty-eight years of age, and is

⁶²Ibid., pp. 471-472.

⁶³"Incidents in the Life of Martin Harris," *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star*," Vol. 44, No. 5, January 30, 1882, p. 78.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 79.

⁶⁶Ibid.

remarkably lively and energetic for his years. He holds firmly to the testimony he has borne for over forty years, that an angel appeared before him and the other witnesses, and showed them the plates upon which the characters of the Book of Mormon were inscribed. After living many years separated from the body of the Church, he has come to spend the evening of life among the believers in that Book to which he is so prominent a witness. Mr. Harris, who has a number of relatives in the Territory, came from the east under the care of Elder Edward Stevenson.⁶⁷

**Statement
of the
Salt Lake Herald**

The Sunday after Harris reached Salt Lake Brigham Young invited him to make a public address. I have in my possession a photostatic copy of a handwritten statement by one Charlotte H. Adams, who was present on that occasion. I offer her statement also for the "jury's" consideration.

"In 1870 I had the privilege of hearing Martin Harris, one of the three witnesses of the Book of Mormon, testify to the truth of its restoration. He

**Statement
of
Charlotte
H. Adams**

was an average size man [and] looked rather frail. It was in the old Tabernacle, which stood where now stands the Assembly Hall in Salt Lake City. President Brigham arose and took Martin Harris by the arm and introduced him to the congregation, saying, 'Brother Harris wishes to bear testimony regarding the plates of the Book of Mormon.' He gave greetings, which I do not recall. What struck me most was [that] he stretched his right arm and said, 'I would rather have my right arm cut off than deny the knowledge of seeing and handling the plates and hearing the words of the angel regarding the truth of the records.' [I] also had the privilege of shaking hands with him, the privilege which I esteem."

Martin Harris spent the last five years of his long life—a time when a man usually seeks to make peace with his maker—visiting congregations of the Saints and bearing testimony to what he had seen and heard. I have personally talked to a woman who heard him give his testimony at a Church service when she was a very young girl. She told how impressed everyone was with his story about seeing the angel and the Book of Mormon plates; and I must admit that to me it was moving even to hear her second hand account of his experience. This matter of the impressiveness of Martin Harris's testimony, by the way, calls to mind the fact that even after he reached his nineties and in the face of imminent death he still went on testifying that he had seen the angel and the book. It seems to me that this very zeal, that failed to dim with the passing

⁶⁷*Salt Lake Herald*, September 3, 1870. The *Herald* gives Martin Harris' age as eighty-eight. In fact, he was eighty-seven.

years, is a point that should not be overlooked.

Edward Stevenson, will you return to the "witness stand" please. Mr. Stevenson, it occurs to me that you might be able to make a further contribution to our inquiry by commenting on the zeal or enthusiasm that Martin Harris is said to have had for the Book of Mormon even to the end of his very long life. Can you offer any comment or observation in reference to this matter?

"I will give one or two instances of Martin's enthusiasm. When President George A. Smith and others of us were being driven by John Henry Smith in a carriage to take a bath in the Warm Springs, near Salt Lake City, while passing over a high hill, President Smith directed the curtains of the carriage to be raised, giving a magnificent

**Further
Testimony
of
Edward
Stevenson**

*view of the city below. The immense Tabernacle and the Temple—and in fact the beautiful city in full view—looked wonderful to Brother Harris, who seemed wrapped in admiration and exclaimed, 'Who would have thought that the Book of Mormon would have done all this?' On one occasion while celebrating a baptism, several persons being in attendance, Brother Harris with joyful feelings said, 'Just see how the Book of Mormon is spreading.'"*⁶⁸

We welcome this additional information, Mr. Stevenson. And before you leave the "witness stand" we wonder if you would also tell us about the occasion, when, in the presence of a number of guests at your home in Salt Lake, Mr. Harris was asked again to relate the circumstances attending the viewing of the plates.

*"At an evening visit of some of my friends at my residence in Salt Lake City, to see and hear Brother Harris relate his experience (which always delighted him) Brother James T. Woods . . . asked him to explain the manner in which the plates containing the characters of the Book of Mormon were exhibited to the witnesses. Brother Harris said that the angel stood on the opposite side of the table on which were the plates, the interpreters, &c., and took the plates in his hands and turned them over. To more fully illustrate this to them, Brother Martin took up a book and turned the leaves over one by one. The angel declared that the Book of Mormon was correctly translated by the power of God and not of man, and that it contained the fullness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Nephites, who were a branch of the lost sheep of the House of Israel, and had come from the land of Jerusalem to America. The witnesses were required to bear their testimony of these things, and of this open vision to all people, and he (Harris) testified, not only to those present but to all the world, that these things were true, and before God whom he expected to meet in the day of judgment he lied not."*⁶⁹

⁶⁸"The Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon," *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star*, Vol. 48, No. 25, June 21, 1868, p. 390.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, p. 136.

We thank you, Mr. Stevenson. It has been a real privilege to have you with us. You may step down. Oh, just a moment, Mr. Stevenson. As you know, during the days of the westward migration it was customary for Latter-day Saints arriving in Utah to renew their baptismal covenant. Now, notwithstanding the fact that Martin Harris was rebaptized into the Church in 1842 is it not true that Harris was rebaptized in Utah by you?

“ . . . I baptized him, and President Geo. A. Smith, and Apostles John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, Jos. F. Smith and Orson Pratt confirmed him by the laying on of hands, Orson Pratt being mouth.”⁷⁰

Thank you, Mr. Stevenson. Thank you for your informative testimony.

After spending some time in Salt Lake, Martin Harris, as noted earlier by William Harrison Homer, established himself in Smithfield, Utah, and afterwards moved to Clarkston, where he made his home with his son, Martin Harris Jr. It was here that, at the age of ninety-two, he incurred the illness that was to be his last. We are going to call on three people who were present during different periods of that illness to inform us whether he said anything on his deathbed that sheds light on or shows variation in his testimony of the Book of Mormon. The first person that I shall invite to testify is George Godfrey, one of a number of neighbors and friends who sat with Mr. Harris during the final stages of his sickness.

Mr. Godfrey, will you tell us whether you heard Martin Harris say anything about the Book of Mormon during the last hours of his life and, if so, what he said.

“Prior to his death and in his last sickness I sat up nights with him in connection with my brothers John E. and Thomas Godfrey, both of whom now reside at Clarkston. They can both make affidavit to the things I am herein stating. Many times I have heard Martin Harris bear witness to the truthfulness and genuineness of the Book of Mormon at times when he was enjoying good health and spirits and when he was on his deathbed. His testimony never varied. I have seen others, and I, myself, have tried to entrap him relative to the testimony which he bore by cross questioning him relative to the scenes and events which are Church History in connection with the bringing forth of the Book of Mormon, and that upon all of these questions his mind was as clear as it is possible for the human mind to be. His testimony has left no trace of doubt in my mind that he actually conversed with an angel who bore testimony to him of the truthfulness of the records contained in the Book of Mormon, that he saw and handled the gold plates from which the records were taken.

“A few hours before his death and when he

⁷⁰“Incidents in the Life of Martin Harris, *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star*, Vol. 44, No. 6, February 6, 1882, p. 87.

was so weak and enfeebled that he was unable to recognize me or anyone, and knew not to whom he was speaking, I asked him if he did not feel that there was an element at least, of fraudulence and deception in the things that were written and told of the coming forth of the Book of

**Testimony
of
George
Godfrey**

Mormon, and he replied as he had always done so many, many times in my hearing and with the same spirit he always manifested when enjoying health and vigor and said: ‘The Book of Mormon is no fake. I know what I know. I have seen what I have seen and I have heard what I have heard. I have seen the gold plates from which the Book of Mormon is written. An angel appeared to me and others and testified to the truthfulness of the record, and had I been willing to have perjured myself and sworn falsely to the testimony I now bear I could have been a rich man, but I could not have testified other than I have done and am now doing for these things are true.’

“I prepared the grave and assisted in the burial of Martin Harris in the Clarkston graveyard where the remains now rest.”⁷¹

Thank you, Mr. Godfrey.

Our next witness is Martin Harris, Jr., son of the deceased.

Mr. Harris, shortly after your father’s death on July 10, 1875, the *Deseret Evening News* gave a synopsis of his life. In the course of it you were quoted. The particular part that I want to ask you to re-tell is the part about your bishop’s visit during your father’s sickness.

“The Bishop told father that he had something of importance to tell him in relation to the publishing of the Book of Mormon in the Spanish language, by the request of the Indians in Central America. Upon learning this, my father brightened up, and his pulsation improved, and although very weak, he began to talk as he formerly had

**Testimony
of
Martin
Harris, Jr.**

done previous to his sickness, and I think that he spoke about two hours, so that you may see by this that the mere mention of the Book of Mormon seemed to put new life into him.”⁷²

Thank you, Martin Harris, Jr.

I should like to recall to the “witness stand” William Harrison Homer, brother-in-law of Martin Harris, Jr. Homer and his mother were attending Martin Harris, Sr., when death came.

Mr. Homer, will you please tell us any remarks, questions, or responses uttered by Mr. Harris during his final illness that bear upon our investigation. We should particularly like to know whe-

⁷¹George Godfrey, “Testimony of Martin Harris.” From an unpublished manuscript copy in the possession of his daughter, Florence (Godfrey) Munson of Fielding, Utah.

⁷²*Deseret Evening News*, July 17, 1875.

ther anything akin to a deathbed testimony or confession was forthcoming.

"Early in July, 1875, five years after he had come to Utah, Martin Harris was stricken with a kind of paralysis. It was the venerable witness' last illness, but through it all he remained true to his faith. At that time I and my small family lived in Clarkston. With other members of the Clarkston Ward, I called at the Harris home to relieve them in the care of the old man.

"We began to think that he had borne his last testimony. The last audible words he had spoken were something about the Book of Mormon, but we could not understand what it was, but these were not the aged witness' last words.

"The next day, July 10, 1875, marked the end. It was in the evening. It was milking time,

and Martin Harris, Jr., and his wife, Nancy Homer Harris, had gone out to milk and to do the evening's chores. In the house with the stricken man were left my mother, Eliza Williamson Homer, and myself, who had had so interesting a day with Martin

Further
Testimony
of
William
Harrison Homer

Harris at Kirtland. I stood by the bedside holding the patient's right hand and my mother at the foot of the bed. Martin Harris had been unconcious for a number of days. When we first entered the room the old gentleman appeared to be sleeping. He soon woke up and asked for a drink of water. I put my arm under the old gentleman, raised him, and my mother held the glass to his lips. He drank freely, then he looked up at me and recognized me. He said, 'I know you. You are my friend.' He said, 'Yes, I did see the plates on which the Book of Mormon was written; I did see the angel; I did hear the voice of God; and I do know that Joseph Smith is a Prophet of God, holding the keys of the Holy Priesthood.' This was the end. Martin Harris, divinely-chosen witness of the work of God, relaxed, gave up my hand. He lay back on his pillow and just as the sun went down behind the Clarkston mountains, the soul of Martin Harris passed on. When Martin Harris, Jr., and his wife returned to the house they found that their father had passed away, but in the passing, Martin Harris, favored of God, repeated an irrefutable testimony of the divine inspiration and the prophetic genius of the great Prophet, Joseph Smith."⁷³

CHAPTER 7

Summation

In retrospect and by way of summary I should like to observe that God's use of eyewitnesses to implement his work is not without precedent. Consider the manner in which the divinity of Jesus was attested in connection with his birth and resurrection. Mary testified that an *angel* appeared to her and informed her that she was to be the mother of the Son of God. Joseph testified that an *angel* confirmed to him the truth of Mary's claim. A group of sheep herders said that an *angel* informed them that the infant Jesus was the Christ; and three gift-bearing foreigners affirmed that they, too, had seen a miraculous sign in the heavens that signified his Messiahship. Of course, everyone then on earth might have been pleased to have had such special proofs of his divinity; but evidently the Lord gave only enough evidence of this sort to prompt sincere seekers of truth to investigate the teachings and claims of the Savior himself.

In similar fashion the Bible tells us that eyewitness testimony supported the fact of Christ's resurrection. It was not to the world at large that Jesus appeared after his resurrection, even though unbelievers might have demanded—as, indeed, many still demand—such proof as the price of their acceptance. In the words of the Apostle Peter, "Him God raised up the third day and shewed him openly; Not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before of God, even to us, who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead."⁷⁴

It was these handpicked special witnesses, whose

faith had already been tried during his ministry, that Jesus permitted to see with their eyes and hear with their ears and touch with their hands his resurrected body. From direct, first-hand, face-to-face experience these men knew that He was risen from the grave.⁷⁵

And what is accomplished by such testimony? Again I say—and we need but look into the hearts of believers for this answer—sincere men are motivated to investigate the Savior's message. And as the lover of truth earnestly studies, and prays, and seeks to know the truth of that message, there comes to him something more precious than proof to the mind alone. It is the testimony of the Holy Spirit that transforms the soul and makes sinners saints. Simply stated, the Lord makes a few men eyewitnesses that he might make many men soul witnesses.

There is self-evident consistency between the manner in which the Lord used eyewitnesses to attest the Savior's divinity anciently and the manner in which He has used eyewitnesses to attest the divinity of the Book of Mormon today. It is my conviction that in both instances He has presented to all men, even the busiest of men, enough evidence of the truth as to leave them without excuse if they fail to investigate it.

Let us now take a final look at the evidence presented by the Book of Mormon witnesses. In so doing, we again quote B. H. Roberts:

⁷³William Harrison Homer, "The Passing of Martin Harris," *The Improvement Era*, Vol. 29, March 1926, p. 472.

⁷⁵Luke 24:36-43.

⁷⁴Acts 10:40-41. Italics are the author's.

“In the Church and while out of it they steadfastly maintained what they first published to the world respecting the Book of Mormon. The plates existed, they saw them, and the engravings upon them. An angel of God appeared before them, and laid the records before their eyes. The record was translated by the gift and power of God; for his voice had declared it unto them, hence they knew it. No evidence exists that they ever denied that testimony. They never attempted to resolve the appearance of the angel, the exhibition of the plates, or hearing the voice of God into hallucination of the mind; nor did they ever attempt to refer this really great event to some jugglery on the part of Joseph Smith. They never allowed even the possibility of their being mistaken in the matter. They saw; they heard; the splendor of God shone about them; they felt his presence. . . . It was a simple, straightforward fact that had taken place before their eyes. The visitation of the angel was in the broad light of the day. Moreover it occurred after such religious exercises as were worthy to attend upon such an event, viz.: after morning devotional exercises common to all really Christian families of that period—the reading of a scripture lesson, singing a hymn, and prayer; and after arriving at the scene of the revelation, devout prayer again by the Prophet and each of the then-to-be Witnesses. The revelation then followed under the circumstances already detailed, which circumstances were of such a nature that the Witnesses could not be mistaken. There exists no possibility of resolving their testimony into delusion or mistake. Either they spoke the truth in their published Testimony to the world, or they were wilful, conscious liars, bent upon a wicked scheme of deception relative to a subject—religion—which, as it is the most sacred, so should it also be the furthest removed from the practice of deceptions.”⁷⁶

“What motive, then, prompted these Witnesses to enter into a wicked collusion to deceive mankind in a matter so grave? Did they become vil-

lains that they might preach righteousness? Did they wickedly conspire to deceive mankind in order that they might spend their lives in toil, and suffering; and invite the opposition of the world as expressed in ridicule, scorn, vituperation, to say nothing of actual violence through malicious prosecutions before courts, illegal imprisonment, repeated acts of mob violence, ending in house-burning, in drivings, in cruel whippings, in other brutal assaults, and often in outright murder—if not of the Witnesses themselves, then of their dearest friends and neighbors; and, of course, with reference to the Prophet Joseph and his brother Hyrum (who must have been necessarily members of the conspiracy, if one existed), their persecutions ended in their martyrdom. I refer to the well-known history of these men and to the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for proof that the results just enumerated followed the testimony of the Three Witnesses; that they endured all these things in consequence of their testimony. I refer to the whole body of doctrine held by the Church, brought into existence, under God, by Joseph Smith and these Witnesses; to the Book of Mormon in particular; to the periodicals published by the Church, and to the letters and other writings of these men, in proof of the facts that their motives were pure, their purposes honest, their efforts praiseworthy, and having for their sole object the attainment of righteousness by themselves and by their fellow men. Why, I ask again, should they become rogues and villains only to pursue a course that makes for righteousness, for a more exalted morality, for a higher spiritual life than at the time was known among men.”⁷⁷

“The possibility of their being mistaken set aside, every circumstance connected with their relationship to the Book of Mormon favors the theory of their being true witnesses, their testimony standing not only unimpeached but unimpeachable; it must follow that they are God’s solemn Witnesses of a great truth—the verity of the Book of Mormon.”⁷⁸

CHAPTER 8

What Does It Mean?

Well, that’s it, ladies and gentlemen of the “jury”. That’s the case of the Book of Mormon witnesses.

Now, what does it mean?

I should like to think that it means you are now convinced that the Book of Mormon is true, convinced that through its sacred pages the Lord God of Israel has spoken to mankind again; but I know that belief does not always come so easily or so soon.

Even the most casual reader, though, must agree that the weight of evidence supports the *possibility* that a merciful God, foreseeing the dilemma of our times, may have chosen such an avenue as a book to communicate his will to his perplexed children. Certainly all will agree that no generation in recorded history has needed the help of Providence more desperately than does ours today.

And recognizing the possibility—the barest chance—that the Book of Mormon contains a mes-

⁷⁶B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses For God*, pp. 304-305.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 312-313.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, p. 314.

sage from God means that the conscientious investigator will leave no stone unturned until he reads the Book of Mormon and earnestly prays to God to know for himself whether it be of God. It also means that he must not let a day pass by until he has learned for himself whether it offers the secret of survival to a world bent on suicide. It means, too, that he must set every non-essential task aside until he knows—and this is the most important thing—whether it be genuine new evidence that Jesus of Nazareth is the Savior and Redeemer of the world with a timely and timeless message for men today.

A secondhand knowledge of the Book of Mormon's contents—whether from proponents or opponents—is not enough. In the final analysis, one does not even have to take the word of Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris—although I trust that their testimony will be weighed on the same scale upon which Christendom generally weighs the testimony of the ancient apostles concerning the resurrection of Christ. There is no substitute, however, for coming to grips with the book itself, face to face and heart to heart. Anything less cannot bring peace of mind. So the case of the Book of Mormon witnesses means that sincere seekers after truth everywhere must recognize a compelling moral obligation, that transcends all other obligations, to study the book prayerfully, carefully and without delay.

And what assurance is there that the reader will discover that the Book of Mormon is true even if he reads it with prayer? The last of the ancient writers of the volume provides the answer in these words:

“And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a *sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ*, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost” (Moroni 10:4, page 520).

He also says:

“And I exhort you to remember these things; for the time speedily cometh that ye shall know that I lie not, for ye shall see me at the bar of God; and the Lord God will say unto you: Did I not declare my words unto you, which were written by this man, like as one crying from the dead, yea, even as one speaking out of the dust?

“I declare these things unto the fulfilling of the prophecies. And behold, they shall proceed forth out of the mouth of the everlasting God; and his word shall hiss forth from generation to generation.

“And God shall show unto you, that that which I have written is true” (Moroni 10:27-29, page 521).