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David Whitmer

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Abstract: This article reviews the life of David Whitmer who retained his testimony of the Book of Mormon until his death in 1888.

THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS' MILLENNIAL STAR.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 1888.

DAVID WHITMER.

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FROM our Utah exchanges we learn that David Whitmer died at his residence in Richmond, Missouri, on the 25th of January. Our readers understand that David Whitmer was one of the three witnesses to the existence of the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated, they being exhibited to him, Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris by an angel from heaven who had them in his charge, while the voice of God proclaimed to them that the plates had been translated by the power of God, and commanded them to bear record of what they had seen and heard. This they did, and their testimony was given to the world, printed on the fly-leaf of the first edition of the Book of Mormon, and has also accompanied every edition that has since been published. These three witnesses are now dead, and their testimony is left with the world. Whatever faults they possessed as men, whatever laws of God they violated in their lives, they have been unwavering in their faithfulness to the testimony they received and were commanded to bear to the world. And though the Church found it necessary to disfellowship them for misconduct, they still remained faithful to their testimony; and no amount of persuasion or force of circumstances could be brought to bear upon them sufficiently to make them deny the testimony they had received and published to the world.

Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris returned to the Church and died in full fellowship with the Saints; David Whitmer, however, never returned; but to the last he was faithful to the trust which God had committed to his keeping. Within three weeks of his death, in the presence of his grandson and Angus M. Cannon, President of the Salt Lake Stake of Zion, with hand uplifted to heaven he solemnly reaffirmed the testimony he has so often repeated to men in this generation. It was our privilege to call upon him at his home a few years ago and listen to his testimony. He stated that the Book of Mormon was true, that his statement in connection with that of Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris was strictly correct, he had nothing to add to it, nor to diminish from it; and to that testimony he adhered until death called him from this earth.

David Whitmer was born Jan. 7, 1805, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, so that he was eighty-three years old at the time of his death. His father is des

cribed as a God-fearing, hard-working man, "that after the most straitest sect of religion" he lived a Presbyterian, and was also a soldier of the American Revolution. While David was an infant his father and family removed to the western part of New York, about twenty-five miles from Palmyra, where they lived until 1831.

The first David Whitmer heard of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon was in the year 1828, through Oliver Cowdery, a young school teacher in Palmyra, near where the family of the Prophet Joseph lived, and with whom Cowdery was acquainted. Through the excitement in that neighborhood, and what he heard respecting the finding of the plates, David and Oliver became interested in the subject, and finally Cowdery decided to go to Harmony, Pennsylvania, to which place Joseph Smith had removed because of the persecution of his neighbors; and he promised the Whitmers that if there was any truth about Joseph having the plates he would write them.

Meeting with the prophet in Harmony, and becoming convinced that he had the plates, he remained to act as scribe in the work of translation, and shortly afterwards wrote to David Whitmer, and called upon him to come to Harmony and take the prophet and himself to his father's house, that they might there complete the work of translation. This David did, and Joseph, his wife and Oliver Cowdery lived with the Whitmers until the work of translation was completed.

In the course of the work of translating they came to these words respecting the coming forth of the book:

At that day when the book shall be delivered unto the man of whom I have spoken, the book shall be hid from the eyes of the world, that the eyes of none shall behold it save it be that three witnesses shall behold it by the gift and power of God, besides him to whom the book shall be delivered; and they shall testify to the truth of the book and the things therein (II Nephi xxvii, 12).

Learning from this that there were to be three special witnesses to behold the plates by the power of God and bear testimony of their truth to the world—Cowdery, Whitmer and Harris desired the Prophet Joseph to inquire of the Lord if they might not become those witnesses. Joseph inquired and received through the Urim and Thummim a [revelation from which we quote the following:

Behold, I say unto you, that you must rely upon my word, which if you do, with full purpose of heart, you shall have a view of the plates, and also of the breastplate, the sword of Labao, the Urim and Thummim, which were given to the brother of Jared upon the mount, when he talked with the Lord face to face, and the miraculous directors which were given to Lehi while in the wilderness, on the borders of the Red Sea; and it is by your faith that you shall obtain a view of them, even by that faith which was had by the prophets of old. And after that you have obtained faith, and have seen them with your eyes, you shall testify of them, by the power of God; and this you shall do that my servant Joseph Smith, jun., may not be destroyed, that I may bring about my righteous purposes unto the children of men in this work. And ye shall testify that you have seen them, even as my servant Joseph Smith, jun., has seen them, for it is by my power that he has seen them, and it is because he had faith; and he has translated the book, even that part which I have commanded him, and as your Lord and your God liveth it is true (Doc. & Cov., sec. xvii, 1—6).

The circumstances connected with these witnesses obtaining a view of the plates, etc., we learn from the words of the Prophet Joseph:

Not many days after the above commandment was given, we four, viz., Martin Harris, David Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery and myself, agreed to retire into the woods, and try to obtain by fervent and humble prayer, the fulfillment of the promises given in the revelation, that they should have a view of the plates, etc. We accordingly made choice of a piece of woods convenient to Mr. Whitmer's house, to which we retired, and having knelt down, we began to pray in much faith to Almighty God to bestow upon us a realization of these promises. According to previous arrangements I commenced by vocal prayer to our heavenly Father, and was followed by each of the rest in succession. We did not, however, obtain any answer or manifestation of the 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. 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 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; in his hand 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 discover 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 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." 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 to me, and I once more beheld and heard the same things, whilst, at the same moment, Martin Harris cried out, apparently in ecstasy of joy, "'Tis enough; mine eyes have beheld," and jumping up he shouted "Hosannah," blessing God, and otherwise rejoiced exceedingly.

This event took place in June 1829, and in the same month David Whitmer was baptized, and was one of the six members with which the Church was organized in April 1830, and he accompanied the Prophet Joseph on some of his missions in those early days. In 1830 he also moved to Missouri, and settled on the Big Blue River not far from Independence, where, during the three years following, he suffered in common with the Saints from the cruel persecutions heaped upon them by their enemies, and was with the rest of the Saints driven from the county under circumstances of heartlessness unparalleled in history. Like most of the Saints he settled, temporarily, in Clay County, and in July 1834 was appointed President of the High Council organized there, and when two years later the Saints removed to Caldwell County, Missouri, he was appointed President of the Saints, which position he held until the winter of 1838, when he was rejected by the Church in Far West, and in April of the same year was finally excommunicated by the High Council. The following was the charge preferred and sustained against him:

1st. For not observing the Word of Wisdom. 2nd. For unchristianlike conduct in neglecting to attend meetings, in uniting with and possessing the same spirit as the dissenters. 3rd. In writing letters to the dissenters in Kirtland, unfavorable to the cause, and to the character of Joseph Smith, jun. 4th. In neglecting the duties of his calling, and separating himself from the Church, while he had a name among us. 5th. For signing himself President of the Church of Christ, after he had been cut off from the Presidency.

Soon after this event he removed to Richmond, where he has continued to reside until the time of his death.

In March 1881, one John Murphy represented that David Whitmer had denied to him the truthfulness of his testimony to the Book of Mormon, and this statement brought from the Witness the following, which was published in the Richmond (Mo.) *Conservator* of the 25th of March 1881:

Unto all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, unto whom these presents shall come:

It having been represented by one John Murphy, of Polo, Caldwell County, Missouri, that I, in a conversation with him last summer, denied my testimony as one of the Three Witnesses of 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.

Accompanying this statement was the names of some twenty of Richmond's leading citizens, testifying that from a long and intimate acquaintance with him they knew David Whitmer to be "a man of the highest integrity and of undoubted truth and veracity;" and the *Conservator* made the following comments editorially:

There is no doubt that Mr. Whitmer, who was one of the Three Witnesses of the authenticity of the gold plates, from which he asserts that Joe 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 efforts to obtrude his views or belief, 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 lilies 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 of its fulfillment.

The Witness has now ended his earthly career, and has gone to meet his record behind the veil. It can be said of him that for more than half a century he has stood a faithful witness for God in the midst of an unbelieving and proud generation, and has never faltered so far as his testimony to the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon is concerned. R]