



Type: Magazine Article

A New Witness for God: Chapter VII

Author(s): B. H. Roberts

Source: *The Latter-Day Saints' Millennial Star*, Vol. 50, No. 26 (25 June 1888)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 408–413

Abstract: This article gives an explanation of why Joseph Smith never displayed the golden plates for public view to prove their authenticity. The Lord works by faith and establishes truth through the testimony of witnesses. Roberts includes the testimonies and stories of the Three Witnesses and Eight Witnesses.

THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS' MILLENNIAL STAR.

MONDAY, JUNE 25, 1888.

A NEW WITNESS FOR GOD.

—O—

CHAPTER VII.

In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established (2 Cor. xiii, 1).

Without doubt human testimony is to be duly and strictly sifted, and every defect in its quantity or quality is to be recorded in the shape of a deduction from its weight. But as there is no proceeding more irreverent, so there is none more strictly irrational than its wholesale depreciation. Such depreciation is an infallible note of shallow and careless thinking, for it generally implies an exaggerated and an almost ludicrous estimate of the capacity and performances of the present generation as compared with those which have preceded it.—GLADSTONE.

It may well be supposed by the reader that in giving such an important volume of revelation to the world as the Book of Mormon is, the Lord has given to us more than one witness to testify of its truthfulness. He who gave the law that "in the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established," will surely not require mankind to receive the Book of Mormon on the testimony of one witness alone. No indeed! He has given other witnesses, and their testimony, I think, scrutinize it as closely as you may, will be lacking neither in quantity nor quality. Before adducing the testimony of these other witnesses, however, a few remarks about a question that some unbelievers have asked about the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated may not be out of place.

"If Joseph Smith really had in his possession the plates on which the history of ancient America was written," it is asked, "why, after he had translated them, did he not place them in some museum, or institution of learning, that the whole world might have examined them? This would have dispelled all doubts respecting the matter." In the first place Joseph Smith was at liberty to pursue no such course. The heavenly messenger who gave the plates into his keeping, charged him strictly not to allow them to go out of his hands; he was required to keep them sacred and allow no one to see them but they to whom God should command him to show them. This covenant under which the Prophet Joseph was placed, he kept; and after the work of translation was completed the plates were given to Moroni, who doubtless has them to this day in his possession. Secondly, a part of the

book of plates was sealed up, and according to the words of the angel the time for it to be translated had not yet come. Thirdly, it would appear that the Lord designs that men should walk by faith, and not by sight in this probation: that they should only come to a knowledge of things through exercising the power of faith. In proof of this we may refer to the history of the past: when the Son of God was suffering upon the cross, his tormentors, the Scribes and Pharisees, mockingly said to him—"Thou that destroyest the temple and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God come down from the cross. . . . He saved others, himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him" (Matt. xxvii, 40—42). The writer in conversation with unbelievers in the New Testament, has frequently been told by them, that Jesus in not accepting that challenge lost His grand opportunity of at once proving His divinity. If He was the Son of God, in their judgment, He ought to have come down from the cross, and by that act convinced His traducers that His pretensions were valid. But the world seems slow to learn that the ways of God are not man's ways, nor His thoughts as our thoughts. Failing to come down from the cross at the demand of His murderers, unbelievers think at least that after He arose from the dead He should have shown Himself to the whole people. Instead of that, however, after His resurrection, He associated only with a few of His faithful disciples, for a limited period, and then departed. Respecting this matter the Apostle Peter says:

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power, . . . and we are witnesses of all things which he did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem: whom they slew and hanged on a tree: him God raised up on 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 arose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is he which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead (Acts x, 38—42).

So it is with the Book of Mormon. The Lord did not shew the original records to everybody, but He caused them to be exhibited to certain witnesses, and gave commandment that they should testify of these things to the world.

In the Book of Mormon itself is contained a statement that when it should be brought forth it should be shown by the power of God unto a number of witnesses—the prophetic language of Nephi is—

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 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. And there is none other which shall view it, save it be a few according to the will of God, to bear testimony of His word unto the children of men (II Nephi, xxvii, 12, 13).

Moroni says, in one of those numerous explanatory passages to be found in connection with his abridgement of the Book of Ether:

Ye may be privileged that ye may shew the plates unto those who shall assist to bring forth this work. And unto three shall they be shown by the

power of God; wherefore they shall know of a surety that these things are true (Ether v, 2, 3).

When the work of translation was in progress, and those engaged in it learned that it was to be the privilege of three to behold those plates by the power of God, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and Martin Harris desired to be those witnesses. It was ascertained by a revelation from the Lord through the Urim and Thummim that they might be on condition of their faith. A few days afterwards they retired to the woods, and after calling on the Lord in faith and mighty prayer, received an open vision in which they beheld the heavenly messenger and the plates and the engravings thereon, and at the same time they heard the voice of God breaking through the silence, saying: "These plates have been revealed by the power of God, and they have been translated by the power of God. The translation which you have seen of them is correct, and I command you to bear record of what you now see and hear."

In obedience to that commandment those three men published to the world on the fly-leaf of the Book of Mormon, and it is printed with every copy that has been issued, the following statement:

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; 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 shewn 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 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.

The subsequent history of those witnesses gives a peculiar force to their testimony.

Let us here observe that seeing a heavenly messenger or hearing the voice of God, by no means places men beyond the power to do evil, or gives them an immunity from the temptations of the Adversary. Noah received revelation from God, and yet after being preserved from the flood, he so far forgot himself as to get drunk: David, a man after God's own heart, after enjoying sweet communion with God, and receiving many revelations from Him, was at last guilty of the heinous sin of defiling another man's wife: Peter, after going into the mountain and witnessing the glorious ministration of Moses

and Elias to the Messiah, and hearing the voice of God declare that Jesus was His beloved Son, was so weak that he afterwards denied having any knowledge of Him. I do not refer to these incidents in the lives of these characters to weaken the esteem any one may have for them, but to show that neither a revelation from God nor the visitation of angels takes from man the power of doing wrong. It was so in the case of Oliver Cowdery and his fellow witnesses. They transgressed the laws of God, and the Church was in duty bound, and did withdraw fellowship from them.

The theory of the world in relation to the Book of Mormon is, that Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery and the others conspired to deceive mankind by palming off upon them this book as a revelation. Suppose for a moment, in order to bring out the force of the testimony of these witnesses, that that theory is correct. Then when these men were in transgression, violated Church discipline, 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 impostor by the whole world, and shall be driven out from 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 all 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, Joseph Smith nor the Church would any longer fellowship them, but boldly excommunicated them.

By that act Joseph Smith virtually said to them—"Gentlemen, God has made you witnesses for Him 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 this work to destroy it; Satan may put it into your hearts to deny the testimony you have borne; but I know you received that witness from God, I was with you when you received it, I saw the glorious messenger from heaven show you the plates; I 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 weakness—you are cut off from our association—do your worst." That is what that action said; but though Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer became the pronounced enemies of Joseph Smith, and sought his overthrow, yet they never denied that testimony they bore to the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. Through all the vicissitudes of life they remained true to that trust committed to them of God. In my opinion they dared not deny that which God had revealed; it drew with it consequences too weighty for them to meet—the eternal perdition of their souls!

Both Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery just previous to their death hum-

bly repented of their sins and returned to the Church, and died in it. David Whitmer never sought his way back, but always remained true to his first statement. The writer called upon him some three years ago, and heard his testimony from his own lips, and many particulars connected with the coming forth of that marvelous work. He said that he had nothing to add to his statement on the fly-leaf of the Book of Mormon; nor had he anything to take from it—"There it is," said he, "and it is true in every particular." He died on the 25th of January, 1888, in his 84th year, and to the last was faithful to his trust. On the 22nd of January he called his family and a number of his friends to his bedside that they might hear his last testimony. Addressing his attendant physician, when all had gathered around him, he said: "Dr. Buchanan, I want you to say whether or not I am in my right mind, before I give my last testimony?" The Doctor answered: "Yes, you are in your right mind, for I have just had a conversation with you." He then directed his words to all who surrounded him, saying:

Now you must all be faithful in Christ. I want to say to you all that the Bible and the record of the Nephites (Book of Mormon), are 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, worlds without end. Amen.

The Richmond *Democrat* of January 26, 1888, in giving an account of David Whitmer's last testimony concerning the visitation of the angel and his revealing the plates, says:

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 beautified 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 could 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.

Such is the testimony of the three witnesses. But in addition to their statement is the one made by eight other witnesses to whom Joseph Smith was permitted to show the plates. That, too, is found on the fly-leaf of the Book of Mormon, and is as follows:

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 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,
JACOB WHITMER,
PETER WHITMER,
JOHN WHITMER,

HIRAM PAGE,
JOSEPH SMITH, Sen.
HYRUM SMITH,
SAMUEL H. SMITH.

This testimony is of peculiar force for the reason that those who bear it could not have been overawed by the dazzling splendor of an angel from heaven. Joseph Smith whom they well knew, and with no demonstration of supernatural powers, showed to them the plates which they handled and examined to their heart's content; they could not have been deceived, and they solemnly testified to what they had seen and handled.

It seems to me that if human testimony can establish anything, then the fact of the existence of the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated is established, and he who will not allow belief to take hold of him from such testimony, would not believe though one should raise from the dead and declare the same things. What these men say they saw, heard and handled cannot be resolved into delusion or mistake. They could not have been deceived in the appearance of the angel, his visitation was in the open-air—in a wood convenient to the home of David Whitmer, and in the broad light of day; they heard his voice and distinctly saw his person, and stood near enough to him to see the characters that were engraven upon its plates. Nor could the eight be mistaken, since they held in their hands the plates and examined them for themselves. Let the testimony of these eleven witnesses be scrutinized as closely as it is possible to examine testimony, and it will be found unassailable and utterly irrefutable. It lacks nothing, neither in quantity nor quality, and for that reason it will condemn those who reject it. R.

By dispatch we learn that the Swiss and German company of Saints that left Liverpool on the 9th inst., arrived at New York in safety, and embarked for Norfolk on the 20th. All well.

FACTS AND EVENTS.

The world's annual consumption of wheat is estimated at about 2,165,000,000 bushels.

During the first five months of the present year nearly 8,000 more emigrants of British origin left the United Kingdom than in the same period of last year.

President Cleveland, on the 6th inst., was nominated by the Democratic Convention at St. Louis as the candidate of the party for the Presidency of the Republic.

The organised Militia force of the United States includes 8,210 commissioned officers and 92,627 men; while the men available for military duty throughout the country, constituting the national reserve, number 7,920,768.

After making a 120-ton gun, and subsequently a 140-ton gun, Herr Krupp, of Essen, is now manufacturing a 150-ton gun. The latter is similar to that weighing 140 tons, but is longer, and will have a greater range. The Essen establishment is reported to be very busy at present on an order from the Austrian Government for 150 heavy siege guns. One of the 120-ton guns made for the Italian Government has been fired more than two hundred times, and is said to be still in good condition.

M. Marambet, in a communication to the Paris Academy of Medicine, states that after examining 3,000 convicted criminals, he found that of the vagabonds and the mendicants 79 per cent. were drunkards; of the assassins and incendiaries, 50 and 57; of robbers, 71. Of those convicted of crimes against the person, 88 per cent.; and those guilty of attacks on property, 77 per cent. were alcoholics. Of 100 criminal youths under twenty, 64 are already drunkards. Drunkenness has greatly increased in France since the consumption of spirits has supplemented that of wine.