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## Credibility of the Witnesses

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**Abstract:** The author of this article defends the reliability of both the Three and the Eight Witnesses to the Book of Mormon. The witnesses consistently adhered to their testimony and each had an unassailable reputation.

# Credibility of the Witnesses

By J. M. Sjodahl

The Book of Mormon bears the signatures of eleven witnesses, who testify solemnly to the miraculous origin of the volume.

Three, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris, affirm that they *saw* the plates, because an angel came down from heaven and laid the volume before them and showed them the engravings; they also affirm that they *heard* a voice say that the translation was made "by the gift and power of God;" and that they were commanded, by the Lord, to "bear record of it."<sup>a</sup>

Three facts are set forth here: (1) The witnesses saw the angel, the plates, and the engraved characters; (2) they heard a voice declaring that the translation was divinely inspired; and (3) they were commanded to testify of what they had seen and heard.

Eight witnesses, Christian, Jacob, Peter, and John Whitmer, Hiram Page, Joseph Smith, Sr., and Hyrum and Samuel Smith, testify that Joseph Smith showed them the plates, and that they handled them and examined the engravings.<sup>b</sup>

Too much importance cannot be attached to these testimonies. St. Paul, speaking of the resurrection of our Lord, which miracle was denied by many and ridiculed by some at that time, gives utterance, with tremendous earnestness, to these thoughts: "If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are also found false witnesses of God" ( Cor. 15:14, 15.) In the same spirit we may say, with the miracle of Cumorah in view: If there were no Book-of-Mormon plates, our preaching would be vain, our faith would be vain, and the witnesses would be false witnesses. Hence an inquiry into the authenticity of the Book of Mormon naturally begins with a consideration of the character of the witnesses and the nature of their testimony.

## *Oliver Cowdery*

Oliver Cowdery, like Joseph Smith, was a native of Vermont. He was born Jan. 7, 1805, the same year as the Prophet,

<sup>a</sup>This important event transpired one day in the latter part of June, 1829, while the translation was being made in the home of David Whitmer.

<sup>b</sup>This happened a day, or perhaps two days, after the three witnesses had seen the plates.

but the two had not met before the 5th of April, 1829, when Cowdery visited him at his home near Harmony, Pa. Shortly before that time the young Oliver had taught school at Manchester, N. Y., and while thus engaged, he had become acquainted with the Smith family and had heard of the golden plates. Being deeply impressed by the story as related to him, he made it a subject of private prayer, and then he decided to visit the Prophet and investigate the matter for himself. Two days after his first interview with the Prophet, he became his private scribe.

As a member of the Church, Oliver Cowdery, later, held important positions. He preached the first sermon to the world; he was one of the first missionaries to the Lamanites; he was an editor and publisher; he was a member of the High Council at Kirtland, and served in that body, first as clerk, and then as its president, and when the prophet Joseph left, with Zion's Camp, for Missouri, he and Sidney Rigdon were given charge of the affairs of the Church, in the absence of the Prophet himself. In 1835 he assisted in the selection of twelve men for the Apostleship, and was one of those who officiated in setting them apart for that high and holy calling. He was one of the trustees of the school in Kirtland, and with others he studied Hebrew and other languages. In 1837 he was assistant counselor to the First Presidency. After 1838, when he had lost his membership in the Church, he practiced law in Michigan, and was quite successful in that profession. Oliver Cowdery returned to the Church in 1848. He passed away in the Whitmer home in Richmond, Mo., not having been able to join the Saints in Utah, as was his intention. In 1878, David Whitmer related the story of the death of Oliver Cowdery, to Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith. He said in part:

"Oliver died the happiest man I ever saw. After shaking hands with the family and kissing his wife and daughter, he said, 'Now I lay me down for the last time; I am going to my Savior;' and he died immediately, with a smile on his face."—*Mill. Star*, Vol. 40, p. 774.

### *David Whitmer*

David Whitmer was born Jan. 7, 1805, the same year as the Prophet and Oliver. His father was one of the sturdy veterans of the revolutionary war and a faithful member of the Presbyterian church.

In 1828 David, on a business trip to Palmyra, met Oliver Cowdery, and as the story of the finding of the golden plates was the common topic of conversation of the people in the little country villages at that time, he naturally heard of it. He,

possibly, met some of the young men who claimed they had seen the plates in the hill.

Shortly after this, Oliver Cowdery came to Fayette, where the Whitmers lived, and paid them a visit. He was then on his way to Harmony, to see the Prophet, and David made him promise to advise him, as soon as he should find out whether the story was true or not. Oliver kept his promise, and, as has already been stated, the Prophet was invited to come to Fayette, and the translation of the plates was finished there, at the home of the Whitmers. David was baptized in 1829, and became one of the original members of the Church, when it was organized, April 6, 1830.

As a Church member David Whitmer was entrusted with important positions. In 1838, however, he was expelled from the Church. The complaint preferred against him was that he had failed to keep the Word of Wisdom; that he had neglected his meetings and other religious duties and affiliated with "dissenters," but especially that he had arrogated to himself the title of president of the Church of Christ.

Severed from the Church, David located at Richmond, Mo. where he lived until he passed away, Jan. 25, 1888. That he was honored and respected, by his friends and neighbors, as a citizen and Christian gentleman, is evident from a statement that appeared in the *Richmond Conservator*, March 25, 1881:

"We, the undersigned citizens of Richmond, Ray Co., Mo., where David Whitmer, Sr., has resided, since the year, A. D. 1838, certify that we have been long and intimately acquainted with him and know him to be a man of the highest integrity and of undoubted truth and veracity."

This public acknowledgement of the trustworthiness of one of the witnesses to the authenticity of the Book of Mormon was signed by twenty-one prominent citizens of Richmond. Among them were two judges, a bank president, an editor, lawyers, a postmaster, a doctor, and some business men. Such was his reputation in the city where he lived for half a century.

#### *Martin Harris*

Martin Harris was somewhat older than Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer. He was born May 18, 1783, at East Town, N. Y. At the time of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon he was about forty-four years old. His judgment was that of a mature man. At that time he lived in Palmyra, N. Y.

Martin Harris met the Prophet in 1827, shortly after the latter had received the plates and when the excitement among the rabble seemed about to break out in violence. He promptly came to the financial aid of the Prophet and enabled him to

settle his affairs in Manchester and to move to Harmony, in Pennsylvania, where he found peace and time to devote to the work in hand.

In February, 1828, Martin visited Joseph in Harmony, and the specimens of Book-of-Mormon letters, or characters, as they are more generally called, which he submitted to the inspection of Professor Anthon in New York, were then given him.

Martin Harris was, evidently, anxious to learn the truth, but at the same time he was cautious. There was in him a great deal of the disposition of Thomas, who said, "Except I shall see \* \* \* I will not believe." (John 20:25.) It was owing to this disposition, however, that the remarkable prophecy of Isaiah<sup>c</sup> was literally fulfilled.

Martin Harris remained with the Church until, by the persecution in Missouri, the Saints were scattered. In September, 1837, he was released from his position in the Kirtland High Council, but no action was ever taken against him with the view of excommunicating or depriving him of his fellowship in the Church.

It appears, however, that at one time, while drifting about he approached the so-called Shakers, but their creed had no light that could guide his storm-tossed bark to a safe place of anchorage. At another time he fell in with Strangites and, in 1846, accompanied two of their missionaries to England<sup>d</sup> in all probability not knowing that they represented an apostate organization. At least, he publicly denied that he was a Strangite, or that he was in any way connected with Strang.

In 1870 Martin Harris came to Utah. He died at Clarkston Cache Co., July 10, 1875, a little over 92 years of age.

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Now, suppose that the testimony of these three men had been given in a U. S. court; what facts or circumstances would an intelligent jury consider in passing on its credibility?

Judge Charles H. Hart answers that question<sup>e</sup> as follows:

"What are jurors instructed to do when they are considering the weight to be attached to testimony? \* \* \* They are charged that they may consider the demeanor of the witness, his means of information, the opportunities he has had for knowing the truth of which he testifies; the interest; if any, which he has in the case, his intelligence; or lack of intelligence; and from all the circumstances appearing upon the trial, determine what credence should be given to his testimony, and to give weight accordingly."

<sup>c</sup>"And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed."—Isa. 29:11.

<sup>d</sup>*Mill. Star*, Vol. 8, pp. 124, 128, 137.

<sup>e</sup>*Conf. Rep.*, April 6, 1920, p. 141.

This is in perfect accord with the principles of law and of common sense. If a number of witnesses agree in all essential particulars; if they are of mature age and of sound mind; if they enjoy the confidence of their fellowmen; if they know whereof they speak; if they are not financially, or otherwise, interested in misrepresentation, and if there is no collusion to deceive, an impartial jury must accept the testimony as true, and enlightened public opinion must do the same.

Test the declaration by the witnesses by these principles that govern whenever evidence is considered. They were responsible, intelligent men, having a standing in the communities in which they lived. Their word was as good in business dealings and in the courts, as that of any other citizen of irreproachable character, and they gave their testimony at a time when to do so was to risk all worldly prospects and life itself.

The theory that the prophet Joseph and the witnesses were in collusion with each other to deceive the world can not be entertained for a moment, if it is considered in the light of reason. Judge Hart, in the conference sermon just referred to, April 1920, quoted an eminent jurist on the question of conspiracy to deceive, as follows:

"Where several persons conspire to commit perjury, there must be concert; they must first be persons so depraved that they are willing to join in the commission of high crime and so lost to all sense of shame as to be willing to confess their infamy one to another. They must likewise agree not only upon the main body of their story, but upon its details and upon the order in which they occurred, and if, while they are undergoing the ordeal of cross-examination, defects in their story are exposed, they will not dare to change it for if they do, they will run the risk of being contradicted by their associates, and if they adhere to it, they know they will incur the hazard of detection together with all its dangerous consequences."

In the light of these self-evident truths, the supposition of a conspiracy between the prophet Joseph and the witnesses is seen to be impossible. Dr. Prideaux, in his *Letter to the Deists*<sup>f</sup>, in defence of the Bible, discussing the question from a theological point of view, uses this forceful argument:

"There never was an imposture in the world that had not the following characteristics:—(1) It must always have for its end some *carnal interest*. (2) It can have none but *wicked men for its authors*. (3) Both of these must necessarily appear in the very contexture of the imposture itself. (4) It can never be so framed that it will not contain some *palpable falsities*, which will discover the falsity of all the rest. (5) Wherever it is first propagated, it *must be done by craft and fraud*. (6) When entrusted to *many persons* it cannot be long concealed."

By this test the Book of Mormon can no more than the Bible be the product of imposture.

But is there no possibility that both the prophet Joseph

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<sup>f</sup>Dr. Clark, Com., Vol. 1, p. 394.

and the witnesses were utterly and unaccountably mistaken?

Two reasons force us to reject this suggestion. In the first place, the witnesses testify that they *saw* and *handled* the plates, that they *saw* the angel, and that they *heard* his voice. On this testimony there could have been no hallucination<sup>g</sup>.

In the second place,—and this argument will appeal to all whose Christian experience has taught them to believe in the promises of God regarding prayer—these men were earnestly praying to God for light and guidance. They received their testimony in answer to prayer. Would God deceive them? Would he lead them astray? Does our heavenly Father ever give his children a stone, when they ask for bread?

One more question remains to be considered in this connection. The three witnesses were not always loyal to the Prophet or faithful in the Church. Does not that prove that they, themselves, repudiated their earlier testimony?

No. The fact is that none of them ever denied that Joseph was an inspired messenger from God at the time he received the sacred plates. Even David Whitmer to the day of his death regarded Joseph as a true Prophet in the beginning of the work, though he maintained that the Prophet fell, later. Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery never questioned the integrity of Joseph.

Oliver Cowdery, while practicing law in Michigan, being outside of the Church had an opportunity to declare himself, and did so, on that point:

"A gentleman in Michigan said to him, when he was pleading a case, 'Mr. Cowdery, I see your name attached to this book;<sup>h</sup> if you believe it to be true, why are you in Michigan?' The gentleman read over the names of the witnesses, and said, 'Mr. Cowdery, do you believe this book?'

"'No sir,' replied Oliver Cowdery.

"'That is very well, but your name is attached to it, and you say here that you saw an angel and the plates from which this book is said to have been translated, and now you say that you do not believe it; which time was you right?'

"Mr. Cowdery replied, 'There is my name attached to that book, and what I have there said that I saw, I know that I saw, and belief has nothing

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<sup>g</sup>"It would be impossible for four men to be together and all of them deceived in seeing an angel descend from heaven, and in regard to the brightness of his countenance and the glory of his person, hearing his voice and seeing him lay his hands upon one of them, namely David Whitmer, and speaking these words: 'Blessed be the Lord and they who keep his commandments.' \* \* \* If it were to be maintained that in their case it was hallucination of the brain, \* \* \* then with the same propriety it might be asserted that all other men, in every age, who profess to have seen angels, were deceived."—Orson Pratt; *Jour. of Dis. Vol. 4*, p. 158.

<sup>h</sup>The Book of Mormon.

to do with it, for knowledge has swallowed up the belief I had in the work, since I know it is true.'"<sup>i</sup>

Before a special conference at Kaneshville, Oct. 21, 1848, when Oliver Cowdery applied for membership in the Church after an absence of more than ten years, he said, in part, of the Book of Mormon:

"I beheld with my eyes and handled with my hands the gold plates from which it was translated. 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."

This was Oliver Cowdery's testimony to the last— his "Farewell Address" to the Saints and the world; for on March 3, 1850, he passed away in peace at Richmond, Mo., in the home of the Whitmers.<sup>j</sup>

Martin Harris lived the last five years of his sojourn on this earth at Clarkston, Cache Co., Utah. While there, visitors came from near and far to hear him speak of his early experiences, and he was never happier than when he had an opportunity to bear his testimony. One of his visitors was Elder Ole A. Jensen, then a resident of Clarkston, but later of Fairview, Wyoming. One day in the month of July, 1875, he and others heard the aged witness repeat his wonderful story. After having related how the Prophet and the three friends went into the grove to pray and how he did not see the heavenly messenger until Joseph had interceded for him, he said:

"The angel stood before me and said, 'Look!!' When I gazed upon him I fell to earth, but I rose to my feet again and saw the angel turn the golden leaves over and over, and I said, that is enough, my Lord and my God. Then I heard the voice of God say, 'The book translated from those plates is true and translated correctly.'"

He added, solemnly:

"As sure as you are standing here and see me, just as sure did I see the angel with the gold plates in his hand as he showed them to me. I have promised that I will bear witness of this both here and hereafter."

In a letter to President George A. Smith, dated July 9, 1875, the day before the venerable witness to the Book of Mormon died, the writer, Martin Harris, Jr., says of his father, in part:

"He was taken ill a week ago yesterday with some kind of a stroke.  
\* \* \* He has continued to talk about and testify to the truth of the Book of Mormon, and was in his happiest mood when he could get somebody to

<sup>i</sup>Brigham Young; *Jour. of Dis.*, Vol. 2. p. 258. Judge C. M. Nielsen of Salt Lake City, while on his mission in Michigan, met a gentleman who was present in the court room when this incident happened, and he related it to Elder Nielsen, substantially as Pres. Young told it.

<sup>j</sup>Joseph Fielding Smith, *Essentials in Church History*, p. 490.

listen to his testimony. \* \* \* The last audible words he has spoken were something about the three witnesses of the Book of Mormon."

In 1869 Elder Edward Stevenson met Martin Harris in Kirtland. Elder Stevenson writes concerning the interview, in part:

"He took from under his arm a copy of the Book of Mormon, the first edition, I believe, and bore a faithful testimony, just the same as that I had heard him bear thirty-six years previously. He said it was his duty to lift up his voice as he had been commanded to do in defense of the book he held in his hand."<sup>k</sup>

David Whitmer, in 1881, as reported in the *Richmond Conservator*, of March 25, that year, made this statement:

"Those who know me best know well 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."

\* \* \*

"In the spirit of Christ, who hath said, 'Follow thou me, for I am the Life, the Light, and the Way,' I submit this statement to the world; God in whom I trust being my Judge as to the sincerity of my motives and the faith and hope that is in me of eternal life."

In 1886 David Whitmer said to Elder Edward Stevenson:

"As sure as the sun shines and I live, just so sure did the angel appear unto me and Joseph Smith, and I heard his voice and did see the angel standing before us."<sup>l</sup>

On Sept. 7, 1878, David Whitmer, in the presence of Elder Joseph F. Smith, Elder Orson Pratt, and a number of other persons, including his eldest son, a grandson, and a son of Jacob Whitmer, bore this testimony:

"He [the angel] stood before us. Our testimony, as recorded in the Book of Mormon is strictly and absolutely true."

David Whitmer passed away Jan. 25, 1888. The day following, the *Richmond Democrat* had this in its obituary:

"On the evening of Sunday, January 22, at 5:30, Mr. Whitmer called his family and a number of his friends to his bedside, and to them delivered his dying testimony. Addressing his attending physician, he said: Dr. Buchanan, I want you to say whether or not I am in my right mind. 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 (the Book of Mormon) are true, so you can say that you have heard me bear my testimony on my death bed.

\* \* \* My trust is in Christ for ever, worlds without end. Amen.'"<sup>m</sup>

It is, I hope, sufficiently clear from this, that the three

<sup>k</sup>*Mill. Star*, Vol. 44, p. 78.

<sup>l</sup>Letter by Edward Stevenson to Pres. Daniel H. Wells, dated Feb. 16 1886.

<sup>m</sup>*Mill. Star*, Vol. 50, p. 139.

witnesses, instead of at any time retracting or in any way modifying their testimony, re-affirmed it at all times. They maintained the truth of it in the face of ridicule and persecution. They passed through the very portals of death, bearing their testimony with joy, as long as their voices could be heard by mortal ear.

The testimony of the eight witnesses differs from that of the three in this respect, that it deals with what we may call the material or temporal aspect of the case.

What I mean to say by that is, that they did not see an angel. They did not hear a voice from beyond. But they, nevertheless, saw the plates and handled them, and they examined the engraved signs and noted the "curious" workmanship. It was the prophet Joseph, himself, who showed them the ancient record. Those are the facts of which they bear witness. In other words, they testify that, to their actual knowledge, the prophet Joseph really had the plates in his possession. The story concerning the recovery of that record, they assure us, was not a myth; it was not fiction, but *Truth*.

What has been said of the character of the three witnesses is applicable also to the eight. They were men of irreproachable character, competent witnesses, and they never retracted their first statements. Joseph Smith, Sr., who was the first to receive the message of his chosen son as from the Lord, passed away Sept. 18, 1840, after having endured all trials and hardships, for the sake of the gospel. He was, at the time of his departure from this world, the Patriarch of the Church. Hyrum Smith, as is well known, sealed his faithful testimony with his blood, June 27, 1844, the day of the martyrdom of the Prophet, his brother, and the two, united in life, were not separated in death. Samuel Smith also passed away in 1844, faithful to the last. Of the Whitmers, Christian died in 1835 and Peter Jr., in 1836, both in full fellowship. Jacob Whitmer and John Whitmer were separated from the Church in 1838, but neither of them retracted his testimony at any time. The latter died forty years later, at Far West, maintaining the truth of his testimony to the last. Hiram Page, was one of the prominent men of the Church, who fell by the way side in the year 1838. In the early days of the Church he sought to obtain revelations for the Church through a "seer stone" of his own, and even Oliver Cowdery and some of the Whitmers came very near being deceived by him.<sup>n</sup> The error was corrected by revelation, but it is to be feared that, in the case of Hiram Page, the spirit of apostasy prevailed; but he did not deny his testimony. He

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<sup>n</sup>Doc. and Cov. 28:11-14.

died in 1852, rejoicing to the last that he had been privileged to view the plates of the Book of Mormon.

Among the opponents of "Mormonism" whose attitude is not due to bigotry or wilful hostility, the real objection to the testimony of the witnesses is, that they consider any account of the appearance of angels in our day improbable, not to say impossible. People do not want to believe in the appearance of angels, because they, themselves, have not seen any. They do not want to believe in tangible connection between the world of spirit and of matter, because they have never consciously come in contact with the former.

But that is not a valid objection.

Who has ever seen an electron? Or an atom? Who had ever seen a microbe before the microscope revealed them? How many of the millions that inhabit the earth, or any city, say New York or London, have ever seen one, although there are microscopes to be obtained? If we must discard, as incredible, our belief in the existence of everything but that little which we are conscious of through the medium of our senses, our knowledge will not be much more extensive than that of the wild beast. The fact is that most of what we "know" is what we accept on the testimony of others. Why, then, should we refuse to give credence to competent testimony concerning existences beyond the limits of tangible matter, merely because we have not been able to reach them? There is after all, no unbridgeable gulf between spirit and matter. In fact, "All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes."<sup>o</sup>

Brigham Young tells us<sup>p</sup> that the spirit world is incorporated within this celestial system. It cannot, he says, ordinarily be seen by our natural eyes, but if God should "touch our eyes," which is equivalent to saying, if our field of vision should be enlarged as by means of a divine microscope, figuratively speaking, then we could see spirits as plainly as we see each other.

There is nothing improbable in this. There must be "matter" beyond that which we generally recognize as such,<sup>q</sup> for there are many "natural" phenomena which cannot be accounted for by what little is known of nature and natural laws.<sup>q</sup> Scientists have, therefore, assumed the existence of ether, to account for electric, magnetic, and other mysterious phenomena. It was generally described as a material substance of more

<sup>o</sup>Doc. and Cov. 131:7.

<sup>p</sup>Jour. of Dis. Vol. 2, p. 368.

<sup>q</sup>Just as there are light waves beyond those which we see, and sound waves beyond the range of our hearing.

subtle kind than material bodies, and filling even "empty space." However, some years ago Sir Oliver Lodge claimed that he had demonstrated that ether is the most solid substance in existence—a medium in which solid bodies, so called, and matter in general, float and move as air bubbles in water. Is it not just as easy to believe in a world of spirit in which spirits move and have their being?<sup>s</sup>

The following from a sermon by Pres. Brigham Young is pertinent to this discussion:

"Spirits, when they leave the bodies, do not pass out of the organization of this earth on which we live."

"Where is the spirit world? It is right here. Do the good and evil spirits go together? Yes, they do. \* \* \* Do they go to the sun? No. Do they go beyond the boundaries of this organized earth? No, they do not. They are brought forth upon this earth, for the express purpose of inhabiting it to all eternity. Where else are you going? Nowhere else, only as you are permitted."—*Jour. of Dis., Vol. 3, p. 368.*

<sup>r</sup>In his little treatise on *The Ether of Space.*

<sup>s</sup>There was formerly some talk about the "fourth dimension," as an explanation of some mysteries of nature; but the theory was never generally accepted, probably not even understood, except by experts in philosophy. The discussion seems about to be revived, for exponents of Relativity have taken it up and added TIME to our three dimensions, as the fourth. See *Relativity*, by Albert Einstein, a good translation of which has been made by Robert W. Lawson, pp. 65 and 146. Those who regarded the spirit world as one of the four dimensions used to say that beings moving in the fourth dimension could not be seen by us who have only three; just as we would be invisible to beings moving in a flat world with only two dimensions—length and breadth and no height.—S.

## Discontent Divine

O what is this that steals our sweet content,  
That bids us not to rest on laurels won,  
But with an urge persistent and austere,  
Persuades us to press onward, ever on?

It is God's way, eternal as the stars,  
To fill us with a discontent divine;  
A wish to gain that something just ahead,  
Which will the dross within our souls refine.

A reaching for the fruits of tasks well done,  
A grasping for the best there is in sight,  
A firm desire to tread the thorny path  
Which leadeth on to wisdom, power and light.

'Tis well, for through this means, by slow degrees,  
Each step in time will make a mighty hum,  
Until at length we scale the glorious height,  
And as our God now is, we may become.

Raymond, Canada.

Helen Kimball Orgill.