



Type: Magazine Article

Testimonies of the Witnesses to the Book of Mormon

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Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 30, No. 11 (September 1927)

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

Page(s): 948–954

Abstract: This article sets forth the Lord's law of witnesses as recorded in the scriptures. The provision for witnesses to testify regarding the reality of the gold plates perfectly fits the scriptural pattern and the Book of Mormon itself predicted that there would be such witnesses. The Book of Mormon witnesses remained true to their testimonies all of their lives.

to print five thousand copies for the sum of three thousand dollars.”

I think we may conclude that the copyright was not secured until the translation was completed, and these words of the Prophet Joseph indicate that this is the case. The copyright bears the date of June 11, 1829.

Book Ready for Distribution

After completing the translation it took some time to make arrangements with Mr. Grandin and to raise the sum required to print the book, the funds being furnished by Martin Harris through the sale of his personal property. In the meantime Oliver Cowdery, at the request of Joseph Smith, made a complete copy of the manuscript, and it was this manuscript copy that was taken to the printer, sheet at a time, until the Book of Mormon was printed. Mr. Grandin commenced the printing in August, 1829, and the Book of Mormon was ready for distribution about the first of March, 1830.

We may conclude from the evidence that the actual time of translating the record, as we have it in the Book of Mormon, was between April 7, 1829, and the first week of June of that same year, or, not to exceed two full months.

TESTIMONIES OF THE WITNESSES TO THE BOOK OF MORMON

BY ELDER JOSEPH FIELDING SMITH, OF THE COUNCIL OF THE
TWELVE, AND CHURCH HISTORIAN

The question has been asked many times of our Elders:

Where are the Plates?

“Does the Church have in its possession the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated by Joseph Smith?” When the answer is given that the plates were received again by the Angel Moroni, who through the centuries since they were “hid up unto the Lord” has been their special guardian, the reply is generally made: “What a wonderful aid it would be to your people in convincing the world of the truth of your story if you could show the plates to prove that Joseph Smith really had them.”

Perhaps it is natural for a man who hears for the first time the story of Joseph Smith and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon to propound such a question, and to think that the plates, if they had been placed in some museum where the public could examine them, would have added much to prove the authenticity of the Prophet’s story. With deeper reflection we discover that this would not have been the case, for, it is not the way the Lord proves his truth, now or at any other time. However, in surprise, and in some cases with an

incredulous smile, the propounder of this question turns away feeling that such an answer as he has received is an admission that Joseph Smith never had the plates and practiced a fraud upon the public.

It is well in considering this matter to remember the words of the Lord to Isaiah:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord.

“For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Isaiah 55:8-9.

If the Lord had followed the thoughts of men and had commanded Joseph Smith to place the plates in some repository where they could have been inspected by the curious public, it would have led to endless disputations. Enemies of the Church would not have been convinced and would have contended most bitterly that the plates were spurious. No one could have read them for the characters engraved on them are unknown to the savants of the present age.

The Lord does not convince men of his truth by placing before their eyes and in their hands tangible evidence, as a lawyer may do before the court, marking it “exhibit A” and “exhibit B,” and then expect it to be accepted. The Lord expects the searcher after truth to approach him with a contrite spirit and with sincerity of purpose; if he will do this and keep the commandments of the Lord he shall receive the witness through the Holy Spirit, and shall know the truth. This testimony will come with such force and clearness that it cannot be denied. For this reason the Lord said, “Whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.”

All truth connected with the Plan of Salvation is reasonable and comprehensible. At least it may be comprehended by those who trust in the Lord and put themselves in an attitude to receive the revelation he may give them. The Lord does not leave man to discover truth without any guidance. Never has he performed any important work for the salvation of the people without first sending among them his specially appointed witnesses who are empowered to speak in authority and with knowledge of the things of which they testify. “Surely the Lord God will do nothing until he revealeth the secret unto his servants the prophets,” said Amos many centuries ago. This does not mean that the prophets of old have prophesied and predicted everything to be revealed concerning our times; but prophets and witnesses are always raised up at the time of the important event, or just preceding it, to give proper instruction and warning to the people. Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and many other prophets, predicted events that were to take place in these last days; among other things they prophesied of the making of new covenants by the Lord with his people, and the coming of messengers to instruct and warn them, preparing the way before the second coming of the Savior.

Testimony and the Appointment of Witnesses

There is a law definitely stated in the scriptures governing testimony and the appointment of witnesses. This law the Lord has always followed in granting new revelation to the people. The Jews understood this law very well, but in their blindness of soul failed to apply it to the ministry of the Son of God. One day as our Lord was endeavoring to teach them, they challenged him by saying: "Thou bearest record of thyself; thy record is not true!" As much as to say, "Since you are the only one who testifies of your mission, we do not have to accept what you say for you do not fulfil the requirements of the law pertaining to witnesses." The Lord has declared to them previously that he is the bread of life and the water of life, which would bring them eternal life if they would receive him. He had confessed to them that he is the Son of God; but they rejected all that he said and did among them, manifesting a spirit of murderous opposition.

On this occasion when they challenged his authority he answered them:

"Though I bear record of myself, yet my record is true; for I know whence I came, and whither I go; but ye cannot tell whence I come, and whither I go.

"Ye judge after the flesh; I judge no man. And yet if I judge, my judgment is true: for I am not alone, but I and the Father that sent me.

"It is also written in your law, that the testimony of two men is true.

"I am one that bear witness of myself, and the Father that sent me beareth witness of me."

"Then said they unto him, Where is thy Father?"

"Jesus answered, Ye neither know me, nor my Father: if ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also."

The point to be considered here is this: The Jews as well as Jesus recognized the law given by our Father governing his witnesses and their testimony to the world. The Savior tried to convince these hardened Jews that he had complied with this law. There could be no greater witnesses than his Father and himself to testify of his mission. And why should not the Son be entitled to have his Father as his witness? The Father had acknowledged his Son on several occasions, in the presence of witnesses, not always openly to the world, although the appearance of the New Star was a general sign. Jesus had freely declared himself among the Jews to be the Son of God. He had performed many mighty miracles and wonderful works and had spoken in authority, but his words and deeds failed to penetrate the stony hearts and the calloused brains of the sons of Judah. He made no effort to teach the Gentile world, declaring that he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel, but finally he did send his specially appointed witnesses unto all the world, carrying the message of the gospel to every creature.

Joseph Followed the Divine Plan

Presenting the Book of Mormon to the world, Joseph Smith, under the direction of the Lord, followed strictly the plan that had been

divinely adopted; and that is in sending authorized witnesses who could testify with him of the sacred message he had to deliver to the unbelieving world. Joseph Smith translated but a portion of the golden record, for part of it was sealed, and he was commanded not to break the seals, for that part of the record was not to be given to the world until some future time. Nephi said nearly six hundred years B. C., of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon:

"And behold the book shall be sealed; and in the book shall be a revelation from God, from the beginning of the world to the ending thereof.

"Wherefore, because of the things which are sealed up, the things which are sealed shall not be delivered in the day of the wickedness and abominations of the people. Wherefore the book shall be kept from them." II Nephi 27:7-8.

We learn more of the reason for this from Mormon, four centuries after Christ, when he was compiling the record, when he said:

"And these things have I written, which are a lesser part of the things which he taught the people; and I have written them to the intent that they may be brought again unto this people, from the Gentiles, according to the words which Jesus hath spoken.

"And when they shall have received this, which is expedient that they should have first, to try their faith, and if it shall so be that they shall believe these things then shall the greater things be made manifest unto them.

"And if it so be that they will not believe these things, then shall the greater things be withheld from them, unto their condemnation." III Nephi 26:8-10.

Purpose of the Book of Mormon

The purpose of the Book of Mormon is that it may be a witness for the Hebrew Scriptures—the Bible—and a means of convincing both the Jews and the Gentiles that Jesus is the Christ who manifests himself to all nations; also to bring back to a knowledge of God the remnant of the House of Israel on this American Continent. As a volume of scripture containing the fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Book of Mormon is of the greatest value to the world. For this reason the Lord said he would establish its truth by the mouth of witnesses:

"Wherefore, 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; for the Lord God hath said that the words of the faithful should speak as if it were from the dead.

"Wherefore, the Lord God will proceed to bring forth the words of the book; and in the mouth of as many witnesses as seemeth him good will he establish his word; and woe be unto him that rejecteth the word of God!"

It was essential that other witnesses should be called to stand

with Joseph Smith in testifying of the restoration of the Church and the coming forth of this new revelation from God. Had he testified alone of these important things the world could have called him in question, and properly so, for he would not have fulfilled the requirements of the law. It is doubtful that Joseph Smith in his early youth, while translating the Book of Mormon, had any idea of what is written in the Bible concerning witnesses, yet he followed it faithfully. Moreover, in a revelation he received in March, 1829, the Lord said to him:

“But this generation shall have my word through you;

“And in addition to your testimony, the testimony of three of my servants, whom I shall call and ordain, unto whom I will show these things, and they shall go forth with my words that are given through you.

“Yea, they shall know of a surety that these things are true, for from heaven will I declare it unto them.” D. and C. 5:10-12.

The Three Witnesses

The three men called to serve as special witnesses of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon by the power of God, are Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris. It is not the purpose of this article to enter into the biographies of these men, it is enough to state that they were associated with Joseph Smith in the establishing of this marvelous work in this dispensation. Later all three witnesses became estranged and left the Church. Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris came back humbly seeking membership in the Church and both died in full fellowship. David Whitmer remained out of the Church; however, all three of these men remained faithful to the testimony they gave to the world which is found in each copy of the Book of Mormon.

Their testimony is that they received a visitation of an angel from the presence of the Lord, who laid before them the golden record from whence the Book of Mormon was translated and instructed them. They beheld the engravings upon the plates as the leaves were turned one by one before them, and the voice of God was heard by them declaring from the heavens that the translation was by the gift and power of God, and commanding them to bear record of it to all the world. These three witnesses, through adversity, persecution, and all the vicissitudes of life, always remained true to their testimony that they beheld the plates in the presence of an angel and heard the voice of God speaking to them from the heavens.

The Eight Witnesses

There were eight other witnesses who also beheld the plates, handled them, examined carefully the engravings upon them as they were shown them by Joseph Smith. Their testimony is also given to the world and appears in each issue of the Book of Mormon. All of these eight men remained true to this testimony until death.

These twelve witnesses, four of whom beheld angels and had heavenly visions, and eight who beheld the record as it was shown to

them by Joseph Smith, are all, it appears, that the Lord deemed necessary to establish the truth of the Book of Mormon, as he promised through Nephi that he would do. "And wo be unto him that rejecteth the word of God!" The testimonies of these men more than satisfy the law.

Other Witnesses by the Thousands

These are not all the witnesses who can speak of the divine mission of Joseph Smith, or of the truth of the Book of Mormon. The promise is made in the Book of Mormon that all who desire to know whether it is true and contains the word of the Lord may know that it is true if they will ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, for he will reveal it to them by the power of the Holy Ghost. There are hundreds of thousands who have put this promise to the test and can in all sincerity say that they have received that knowledge.

Methods of the Prophet in Harmony with the Ways of the Savior

We see then, that the methods adopted by Joseph Smith—and that by revelation—in bringing forth the Book of Mormon and in organizing the Church, are in perfect harmony with the work of the Lord in all other generations. We can easily imagine some prominent scribe, lawyer, or Pharisee, saying to Peter and the apostles when they declared that they were witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus Christ: "If what you say is true, why did not Jesus show himself to us and to the world? What a wonderful thing it would be in convincing people of your story if you could only show him to the people that they might know that he is risen from the dead!"

In fact, the contemptuous cry of the chief priests and scribes to the Savior when he was on the cross was:

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.

He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God.

They knew he saved others. They had been witnesses that he raised the dead, healed the sick and was a benefactor to the afflicted, but they sought a great sign, and how true are the words of the Lord: "A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign."

Our Savior after his resurrection, did not appear to the non-believing Jews, to Herod, or Pilate; he did not go before the Sanhedrin in triumph to convince them that he had risen. It was only to his disciples to whom he appeared, and then he sent them into all the world as witnesses declaring to every nation that he was in very deed the Resurrection and the Life. Said he to the apostles, "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you; and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." Again he said as he

appeared to them in his glorified body: "Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: and ye are witnesses of these things."

Does it not appear that when Peter and the other disciples went forth, as they had been commanded, as witnesses having the perfect knowledge that Jesus Christ was risen from the dead and is verily the Son of God, that the people who heard their testimony and rejected it were under condemnation? Moreover, was it not sufficient for these disciples to testify to the world of this truth, to leave men without excuse who would not believe, without the Lord giving a direct manifestation, or making a personal appearance to each individual upon the face of the earth?

The course taken by Joseph Smith is in perfect harmony with this course adopted by our Savior. In truth it is the only consistent course that could be taken. In this life we are expected to walk by faith and not by sight, and yet the Lord sends among us witnesses who have seen and heard and who can speak with direct knowledge to encourage us to seek and find the truth, as Paul says: "That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might find him, though he be not far from every one of us." It is the duty of all men to heed the message of the divinely appointed witnesses of the Lord and to prove their words by obeying the will of God which will be the means, through the guidance of the Spirit of the Lord, in convincing us of the truth.

Yet, how many accepted the story told by Peter, James and John, while they lived and testified? How many have accepted the testimony of Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, Martin Harris and other witnesses who have testified in this generation?

The world today, like the world in the day of our Lord's ministry, have before them Moses and the prophets whom, if they will not hear, "neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead."

Sonnet To Autumn

Through hazy mists the mountains now are seen,
 Their snow-capped steeples rising in the blue.
 The valleys that so late were bright and green
 Have changed their color to a darker hue.
 The Autumn wind's forlorn and mournful sound
 Is like a sad farewell to Summer days.
 The leaves have spread their carpet on the ground,
 No more to murmur in the breezes gay.
 No more we hear the Summer bird's sweet song;
 No more, their song of gladness and of cheer.
 For, to the sunny South they now have flown,
 To escape Winter blasts so cold and drear.
 But soon the snow will cover all the earth.
 And air resound with Christmas joy and mirth.

Ridgedale, Idaho

RUTH BURTON PIERCE