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Can We Believe the Witnesses to the Book of Mormon?

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Abstract: This article provides several reasons to believe the testimony of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon.

EVIDENCES AND RECONCILIATIONS

cv. Can We Believe the Witnesses to the Book of Mormon?

THREE men, and later eight men, declared in two formal, signed testimonies that they saw and handled the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated.

The great importance of these statements in establishing faith in the divine mission of Joseph Smith the Prophet, has been recognized by all students of the restored gospel. To Latter-day Saints these affidavits, published in every authorized edition of the Book of Mormon, have been and are a source of faith.

Unbelievers in the divine origin of the Book of Mormon have been forced, on the other hand, to stand baffled and perplexed before the testimonies of these witnesses.

The evidences for the truth of the witnesses are convincing. They cannot be denied. Here are some of these proofs:

1. *It was prophetically foretold that three witnesses should see the plates and bear witness of their experience.*

It is a remarkable fact that this prophecy was received by the Prophet in March 1829, before the Book of Mormon had been translated. It reads in part as follows:

... 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. I will give them power that they may behold and view these things as they are. (D. & C. 5:11-13.)

The united testimony of the three witnesses is a literal fulfilment of this prophecy. It cannot be explained away, for the prophecy and its fulfilment actually occurred. It leads directly to the divine purpose to which the Prophet said he was called.

2. *The events which led to the testimonies of the witnesses are described in circumstantial detail.*

Soon after the announcement, the three men who became the first group of witnesses—Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris—asked that they be selected to see the plates. While very different in temperament, they were alike in having minds of their own and doubts of their own. They wanted to make sure for themselves that Joseph's story was true.

About two months later, in June 1829, the plates were shown to the three witnesses. On the day set, Joseph Smith and the three witnesses, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris, sought a secluded spot in the forest. After prayer by each one, when nothing happened, Martin Harris withdrew, feeling that his lack of faith was preventing the manifestation. After his withdrawal, a heavenly being stood before them in the midst of a bright light, with the plates in his hands.

He turned the leaves, and spoke to them. Then, they heard a voice declaring that

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.

Joseph then went in pursuit of Martin Harris, whom he joined in prayer. To the great joy of Martin Harris, the same vision opened to him. Thus, the three witnesses had realized their desires. (See *History of the Church* 1:54-56.)

True, the record of this event was written by Joseph Smith, but the witnesses were still living, and could have corrected any errors in the account. This they did not do.

A detailed account of any event is always an evidence of its truth. Deceivers are careful to deal in few details and many generalities. The whole event occurred in full daylight. All of them were vigorous young men in good health.

3. *Eight witnesses corroborated the testimony of the three witnesses.*

As if to make assurance doubly sure, the plates were later shown to eight other men. Whether all eight saw the plates at the same time is not known. However, the men, Christian Whitmer, Jacob Whitmer, Peter Whitmer, Jr., John Whitmer, Hiram Page, Joseph Smith, Sen., Hyrum Smith, and Samuel H. Smith, unitedly signed the testimony in which they describe the plates and the engravings on them, and further declared that they actually handled and "hefted" the plates.

Such corroboration of the testimony of the three, under different conditions, and at different times, certifies immeasurably to the truth of the events.

4. *The witnesses remained true to their testimonies to the end of their days.*

Some of the witnesses left the Church, others were excommunicated, but their testimonies for the truth of the Book of Mormon remained unchanged.

Of the three witnesses, Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer were excommunicated. Martin Harris drifted away. Cowdery, of undisputed high intelligence, and Harris, holding stubbornly to his views, both returned and were again baptized into the Church. Whitmer, hugging old grievances and remaining unaffiliated with the Church, bore frequent testimony to the truth of the translation of the Book of Mormon from the Nephite plates. Oliver Cowdery practiced law. Several times, before the courts, his integrity was impugned because of his acceptance of the Book of Mormon. Each time he bore powerful testimony to the truth of the Nephite record. Wherever he went, he was looked upon as a man of honor. He died with his testimony upon his lips.

David Whitmer remained in Richmond, Missouri, to the end of his life. He lived to be a very old man. Many persons called on him to ask about his testimony to the Book of Mormon. Orson Pratt, Joseph F. Smith, James H. Moyle, and C. C. Richards were among these visitors. To each and all he reaffirmed his testimony. He died with his testimony upon his lips.

Martin Harris, after various misadventures, remained for many years in the East near the Kirtland Temple. Visitors there would quiz him about his belief in the Book of Mormon. Among them were Edward Stevenson and W. H. Homer. His answer was invari-

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A THREE-ACT FARCE

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about? Our boys are now returning from charging up the ramparts, giving their lives for freedom, and we at home in a wholesome way in our attitude are fairly gnawing at the pillars sustaining liberty and justice. While thousands with the fervor that should prompt all of us to sacrifice for liberty, are giving, as it were, a good pail of milk, thousands are kicking the white liquid over.

Too many at home are scratching their heads scheming how they can, in the shrewdest way, tear the wing feathers from the American eagle. America is going to turn one of the most spectacular somersaults ever recorded in the history of nations if we don't tumble to the seriousness of this bleeding that is going on. To say we are in the process right now in a gigantic way to kill the hen that lays the golden egg expresses it in language as weak as skimmed milk.

SOME of us pretend to be really religious. Now you folks, whether the sons and daughters or parents, parties to these selfish manipulations, how can you reconcile your conduct with the lives of your pioneer or pilgrim forebears whom you pretend to honor for their sacrifices, with this double-crossing act that is being played on the stage of this wonderful land?

Let's have before us eternally, acting as a magnetic pole to our compasses of life, this simple word "honesty." Like a mariner going through the tempest of life, let it be our North Star. We can't go very wrong if we keep our bearings accordingly.

At our old home we always kept a cow. I remember Father always used to buy hay by the wagonload. He went to the market, chose his particular load, and in a few hours it was stuffed into the hayloft. It was always sold by official weight. If a farmer were unscrupulous enough to add a lot of water, sprinkled in the center of the load where it would not be easily detected, he might get away with it. (Of course, nobody in those days liked to

pay \$10.00 a ton for just plain water.) A farmer, of the type we are talking about, in the course of getting ready for marketing his hay one early morning, was heard to call out to his son in the yard, "John, put a dozen more buckets of water on the hay and hurry in to prayers."

Now that poor fellow was just thinking "bowlegged." His religion had a terrible case of malnutrition.

It doesn't make any difference what your religion is, when you kneel in prayer to give your thanks and offer your supplications, you want to do it with "clean hands."

Maybe I can make myself a little clearer by telling a story I heard one of my associates tell a year or so ago. It seemed that a man lived near the railroad tracks and used to get his winter's coal by going along the tracks with his wagon and picking up little pieces of coal, which had been knocked off the coal cars in the course of switching. Now it helped the man materially, and nobody objected.

But our friend wasn't willing to let well enough alone. One early morning while it was yet dark he was down near the coalyard and the old Nick really tempted him. Satan found him entirely off guard. (I really think sometimes we blame the devil too much for our weaknesses.) Here's what happened:

The subject of our story had his team, and the wagon they were pulling was empty. Nobody seemed to be around on such a dark and frosty morning. He spied the chute whence the coal avalanched in the wagons by releasing the lever. It was just too much temptation. In a jiffy the team had been wheeled around and the wagon was right in the path of the coal supply. In less time than it takes to tell it, he pulled the lever, and the coal flooded the wagon box. It came down that chute so fast and furious that the load broke the axle of the old fellow's wagon. Yes, he was stuck and with no way to unload. Out of the darkness appeared as if by magic, the night watchman with

his police badge fluttering in tune with his lantern. The officer had nothing else to do than his duty even if one of his friends was caught hands down. "John," said he, "I've just called the police station, but they may not get down here for half an hour. Let's go over to the depot. It's nice and warm over there, and we can have a warm cup of coffee while we're waiting."

John's eyes flashed, he raised up in his boots and looked defiantly into the face of the administrator of the law. His indignation broke loose, "I want you to know that drinking coffee is against my religion."

Again: "Oh, consistency, thou art a jewel."

What I am trying to say is, if you pretend to be devout you can't ride some items of your religion to death and leave honesty out of the picture. No man is really religious who isn't honest.

THEY tell a story of a negro's coming face to face with a strange inscription on a tombstone. It read, "I am not dead but sleeping." Looking down philosophically on that sacred spot the old fellow observed, talking aloud to his friend under six feet of ground, "Well, pal, you're just fooling yourself, that's all."

Now you folks that are in this skin game we are talking about, with one hand fleecing the government and with the other petitioning for a ringside reservation in the realms above, if I read the scriptures right, "Well, pal, you're just fooling yourself, that's all."

I am talking to you sons and daughters of these folks under fire as well as to the old folks themselves. Do you ever imagine your grandfathers and grandmothers or your great-grandparents looking down on you from above as you stoop to this dishonesty? They gave their "all" for their country and some for their religion. No sacrifice was too great either for their country or their religious convictions. What do you suppose they think of you, their flesh and blood!

EVIDENCES AND RECONCILIATIONS

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able, that he was as certain of his testimony as he was of the sun in the high heavens. He finally settled, in his old age, in Clarkston, Utah. He died with his testimony upon his lips.

The lives of the eight witnesses tell the same story. One of the witnesses, John Whitmer, was excommunicated from the Church. Two, Jacob Whitmer and Hiram Page, withdrew from the Church. The other five, Christian Whitmer, Peter Whitmer, Jr., Joseph Smith, Sen., Hyrum Smith, and Samuel H. Smith, remained faithful, useful

members of the Church during their whole lives.

All of the eight witnesses, whether in or out of the Church, maintained to their last breath that they saw and handled the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated.

Every one of the eleven witnesses remained true to his testimony concerning the Book of Mormon plates.

5. *The explanation by the witnesses alone is acceptable.*

The facts connected with the Book of Mormon witnesses are so unanswerable that they have been disconcerting

stumbling blocks to unbelievers. Unfriendly critics have usually tried to draw attention away from them, as being of little significance.

More honest unbelievers have attempted two explanations, and two only.

The first suggestion is that the witnesses were dishonest, and in collusion with the Prophet. That is, the whole story of seeing the plates was invented, and had no basis in fact. That explanation has long since fallen to the ground. This is admitted by most anti-Mormon writers. The well-attested life histories of the witnesses show every one of

them to have been honest and honorable in his dealings with his fellow men. If their testimonies had been untrue, one or the other would have revealed his perfidy. Many opportunities were given them. Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and John Whitmer were excommunicated from the Church, improperly, as they thought. They then soured upon the Prophet and the Church. That would have given them a chance to declare the whole thing a fraud. Instead they remained true to their testimony. Even anti-Mormons have conceded that collusion among Joseph Smith and the witnesses is most improbable.

The second explanation, conceived in desperation by those who will not believe the truth, has been that Joseph Smith was endowed with great hypnotic power, which enabled him to make the eleven witnesses think they saw things which did not exist. This explanation is much like the drowning man clutching at a straw.

This far-fetched explanation asks us to believe that eleven very dissimilar men, all of them questioning the claims of the Prophet, could be made to see, hear, and touch, alike, figments of nothingness. It is an absurd request to make of intelligent people. The testimonies of the witnesses rest upon three senses: seeing, hearing, touching. Even the confirmed believer in hypnotism would hardly dare cover so big a territory. Moreover, though it is conceded that the Prophet had a magnetic personality, there is nothing in his well-documented life to credit him with such, or any, hypnotic power.

The more the witnesses are studied the more certain the student becomes that their testimonies are true and irrefutable.

They were honest men, clear headed, hard headed, not easily influenced. They had seen and handled the Nephite plates. They had heard a voice from heaven, declaring the work to be true. They could do nothing else than to bear witness to their glorious experience. The testimonies of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon is an unanswerable proof of the divine mission of Joseph Smith the Prophet.—J. A. W.

For further reading and proofs of the above statements see:

History of the Church, Volume I, chapter VI.


Stevenson, Edward, *Reminiscences of the Prophet Joseph Smith*.





Lang, W., *History of Seneca County*, pp. 364, 365.



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Jenson, Andrew, *Church Encyclopedia*, Vol. I: Oliver Cowdery, pp. 246-51; Martin Harris, pp. 271-76; David Whitmer, pp. 263-71.


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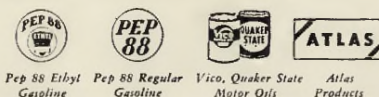
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