

Book of Mormon Witnesses

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 . . . 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; . . . wherefore, to be obedient unto the commandments of God, we bear testimony of these things.—A portion of the testimony of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon, which is printed as a preface to the book.

IT WILL surprise you, if you will think a moment, to discover how much of what you know is dependent on the testimony of someone else. We rely on the record of witnesses to establish the facts of history which we have not experienced, the existence of persons and places we have never seen. We rely on witnesses to convict or acquit those charged with crimes or misdemeanors in a court of law. We depend on witnesses to establish the signatures on wills and other legal documents. When Jesus wanted to establish the fact of his resurrection, he committed that testimony to twelve faithful witnesses. To some it is given to know, and to others it is given to believe on the testimony of others.

There are good reasons why the golden plates on which the Book of Mormon was inscribed could not be shown promiscuously to the public. They were of great intrinsic value. They were fascinating to idle curiosity seekers. Persistent attempts were made to destroy them. But most of all, those plates were sacred. God had a purpose to be achieved in their translation and publication to the world. They were written in a language which no man could read, so there could have been no purpose in submitting them to learned men for translation. God therefore provided that the existence of these plates should be witnessed by chosen witnesses, that men might believe in their testimony, just as they believe in the testimony of their fellowmen for countless of the commonly acceptable facts of everyday life.

ELEVEN WITNESSES

While Joseph Smith was translating the Book of Mormon, he came to a passage which promised that certain men would be chosen to bear witness to the book. He inquired of the Lord, and was given the names of three men and later of eight others who were to share this responsibility with him. The testimony of these two groups has been printed as a preface to every copy of the Book of Mormon that has ever been published. It is extremely difficult to explain away the testimony of eleven men of soberness, intelligence, and good reputation in the community, when they state that they saw the plates, handled them leaf by leaf, hefted them, and examined the characters inscribed thereon.

First, let us inquire as to whether the eight witnesses remained true to their testimony. (1) Christian Whitmer died in 1835, still faithful to his testimony. (2) Jacob Whitmer and (3) John Whitmer separated from the church in 1838, but never denied their testimony. The last recorded statement from John Whitmer was written to Mr. Heman C. Smith, historian for the Reorganized Church, December, 1876. In

reply to a letter asking for information about his testimony of the Book of Mormon, Mr. Whitmer wrote: "From what you have written I conclude that you have read the Book of Mormon, together with the testimonies that are thereto attached, in which testimonies you read my name subscribed as one of the eight witnesses to said book. That testimony was, is, and will be true, henceforth and forever. Respectfully yours, John Whitmer" (*Church History*, Vol. 1, page 57).

(4) Peter Whitmer, Jr., died in 1836, in full fellowship with the church. (5) Hiram Page became disaffected in 1839, but did not deny his testimony of the Book of Mormon. (6) Joseph Smith's father, Joseph Smith, Sr., died loyal to his son and to the church his son had established, spending his last days in that son's home. (7) Hyrum Smith, Joseph's brother, was martyred with his brother; and (8) Samuel Smith, another brother, died a month later, all still faithful to their testimony concerning the Book of Mormon. Not a single one of the eight witnesses ever denied or retracted his testimony of the Book of Mormon.

OLIVER COWDERY

The *three* witnesses, to whom we turn now, were Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris. Oliver Cowdery was the first to sign the document, and was one of the six original members who organized the church on April 6, 1830. He was expelled from the church in 1838 by a rather high-handed court procedure, which in all probability would have been reversed had he taken the trouble to appeal to proper authority. Ten years later, in 1848, at Council Bluffs, Iowa, he made the following public statement: "I wrote with my own pen, the entire Book of Mormon (save a few pages), as it fell from the lips of the Prophet Joseph Smith, as he translated it by the gift and power of God. . . . I beheld with my eyes and handled with my hands the gold plates from which it was translated. . . . That book is true" (*Story of the Church*,

Inez Smith Davis, 1959, pp. 72, 73). Oliver Cowdery ended his days in the home of David Whitmer, his long-time friend and brother-in-law. David Whitmer testifies that he was present at the death of Oliver Cowdery, and that his last words to him were, "Brother David, be true to your testimony of the Book of Mormon" (*Church History*, Vol. 1, page 50). Because of his confidence in David Whitmer's integrity, Cowdery turned over to him the manuscript of the Book of Mormon which he had written at the dictation of Joseph Smith. Descendants of David Whitmer later gave it into the custody of the Reorganized Church, where it remains to this day, the only complete manuscript copy of the Book of Mormon in existence.

MARTIN HARRIS

The third man to sign the testimony of the three witnesses and the second for our consideration is Martin Harris. Martin Harris was the owner of a well-improved and prosperous farm which he mortgaged for \$5,000 to pay for the first edition of the Book of Mormon. That was a considerable sum in the year 1829.

Mr. Harris wrote to Mr. H. B. Emerson on November 23, 1870, in response to query by Mr. Emerson, "I do say the angel did show to me the plates containing the Book of Mormon." The following January Mr. Emerson wrote again asking Mr. Harris whether he had ever lectured against the church in England, and Mr. Harris replied, "I answer emphatically, No, I did not;—no man ever heard me in any way deny the truth of the Book of Mormon" (*Saints' Herald*, Vol. 22, page 630).

On September 15, 1853, Mr. David B. Dille paid a call on Mr. Harris at Kirtland, Ohio. Mr. Harris stated during this interview that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God, that the Book of Mormon is true, that the plates had been translated by the gift and power of God, that at one time he held the

plates on his knee for an hour and a half while in conversation with Joseph Smith, and that he had handled them, plate after plate. He described the appearance and dimensions of the plates. He denied an oft-repeated rumor that he had lost \$3,000 by financing the first edition of the Book of Mormon, stating that all he had advanced had been repaid.

After his retirement from farming, Mr. Harris went to live with relatives in Clarkston, Utah, where he died on July 10, 1875. Four days before his death he was interviewed by Mr. Simon Smith, a minister, who had known him as a friend and close neighbor for about two years previously. Mr. Smith takes some pains to deny the rumor that a body of ministers had visited Mr. Harris on his deathbed and that to them he denied his testimony. Mr. Smith says he was the only minister in the town and that Mr. Harris' dying statement was that his testimony in connection with the Book of Mormon was true.

DAVID WHITMER

The second man to sign the testimony of the three witnesses was David Whitmer, who was the last survivor of the three. From 1838 until his death in 1888, over fifty years, David Whitmer was a highly respected citizen of Richmond, Missouri. He was the first mayor of Richmond, and its first city attorney; he served as Ray County School Commissioner, as circuit attorney of the Fifth Judicial District, as judge of the Ray County Court of Common Pleas.

David Whitmer, like Oliver Cowdery, had been somewhat high-handedly dealt with by a church court in 1838, and expelled from the church. Yet he never wavered from his testimony of the Book of Mormon and was ever ready to repeat that testimony to any who asked him concerning it. In the later years of his life, after he had repeatedly been misquoted and misrepresented by careless reporters and sensation seekers, he was careful always to have competent witnesses present when he was being interviewed. We therefore have record of

many of his later testimonies of the Book of Mormon. We shall mention three or four very briefly.

On February 8, 1875, he was interviewed by E. C. Brand, an elder in the Reorganized Church, to whom he said that he would rather suffer death than deny his testimony. "I did see the angel of God," he said, "and was commanded to testify concerning these things" (*The Story of the Church*, Davis, 1959, p. 73). In March of the same year, he wrote to Mark H. Forscutt as follows: "My testimony to the world is written concerning the Book of Mormon, and is the same that I gave at first and it is the same as shall stand to my latest hour in life, linger with me in death and shine as gospel truth beyond the limits of life, among the tribunals of heaven" (*The Story of the Church*, p. 75).

September 7, 1878, David Whitmer was interviewed by a number of visitors. After a vivid description of the experience in which he was shown the Book of Mormon plates, he concluded with these words: "Our testimony as recorded in the Book of Mormon is strictly and absolutely true, just as it is here written" (*The Story of the Church*, p. 71). April 25, 1884, four years before his death, he was interviewed by E. C. Briggs and Rudolph Etzenhouser, to whom he again described the experience and said in conclusion, "My testimony in the Book of Mormon is true; I can't deviate from it" (*The Story of the Church*, p. 71).

On March 19, 1881, David Whitmer published a pamphlet setting forth his views on church government and organization, which he called, "An Address to All Believers in Christ." In this pamphlet he included this statement: "It is recorded in the American Cyclopaedia and the Encyclopedia Britannica, that I, David Whitmer, have denied my testimony as one of the three witnesses to the divinity of the Book of Mormon; . . . I will say once more to all mankind, that I have never at any time denied that testimony or any part thereof" (pp. 8, 9).

Also included in the above pamphlet was a "Proclamation"

from David Whitmer, accompanied by a statement by twenty-two citizens of Richmond attesting to Mr. Whitmer's "integrity, undoubted truth, and veracity." This proclamation was also widely distributed by Mr. Whitmer as a leaflet, and was printed in the *Richmond Conservator* for March 24, 1881, and copied by the *Chicago Times*. It reads, in part:

"It having been represented by one John Murphy, of Polo, Caldwell County, Mo., that I, in conversation with him last summer, denied my testimony as one of the three witnesses to 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."

January 22, 1888, David Whitmer lay on his deathbed at Richmond. He summoned his physician and was assured that he was in his right mind. Mr. Whitmer then addressed those at his bedside as follows:

"Now you must all be faithful in Christ. I want to say to you all, the Bible and the record of the Nephites (Book of Mormon) is 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 for

ever, world without end. Amen."—*Church History*, Vol. 4, 587.

Three days later, on January 25, he died and was buried in the new cemetery on the western borders of Richmond. By his direction, a simple monument was erected over his grave, a straight shaft some five feet high, surmounted by two books chiseled in stone, the Bible, and the Book of Mormon. On the shaft by David Whitmer's direction there were cut these words: "The record of the Jews and the record of the Nephites are one. Truth is eternal." Thus, in death as in life, David Whitmer bears witness to the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon.

We have shown that the testimony of these eleven witnesses of known probity and veracity was firm to the end of their days, that they had seen and hefted the plates, and that they knew the Book of Mormon to be true. No man has a right to impugn or deny their testimony, given in soberness and solemnity, and maintained until death, for "in the mouth of two or three witnesses shall all things be established."