

## Comments on Doctrine & Covenants 17

In fulfillment of the specific predictions of 2 Ne. 27:12, Ether 5:2-4, and D&C 5:11, the Lord reveals who the three witnesses of the Nephite record are to be. In all three of these passages (cf. 2 Ne. 27, Ether 4-5, D&C 5), the surrounding discussion is largely negative with respect to how the Gentiles will respond to the Nephite record, and the judgement they will face as a result of it. The resurrected Christ generally discusses the same subject in 3 Ne. 16, with the hinge point being the Gentile acceptance or rejection of the fulness of the Gospel.

Regarding the number of witnesses, particularly review the Ether 5 account. A parallel is drawn in Ether 5:4 between the three of the Godhead and the three witnesses, drawing a parallel of earthly witnesses with heavenly witnesses, with the earthly pattern being derived from the heavenly pattern. The context of Ether 5 is invoked by the close parallels between D&C 5:11-12 and Ether 5:2-4 (e.g., "know[ing] for a surety that these things are true" so that they "shall assist to bring forth this work").

For more general "two or three witnesses" references, cp. Deut. 17:6, Deut. 19:15, Matt. 18:16, 2 Cor. 13:1, 1 Tim. 5:19, Hebr. 10:28, 2 Ne. 11:3, D&C 6:28, D&C 128:3. The more general references deal with the legal aspects of testifying for or against and require a minimum of two, preferably three persons in order to rightfully decide a case. The 2 Ne. 11:3 reference is a particularly interesting example as Nephi is holding up Isaiah, himself and his younger brother Jacob as three witnesses who testify Jesus is Christ. Thus, the "two or three witnesses" has a broader application than the strictly legalistic one.

**1 Behold, I say unto you, that you must rely upon my word, which if you do with full purpose of heart, you shall have a view of the plates, and also of the breastplate, the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim, which were given to the brother of Jared upon the mount, when he talked with the Lord face to face, and the miraculous directors which were given to Lehi while in the wilderness, on the borders of the Red Sea.**

v1 The three witnesses will get the opportunity to see all of the artifacts associated with the plate. Interestingly enough the Liahona and the sword of Laban have been preserved as relics even though they do not appear to have received any real after the original Nephi's time.

"Urim and Thummim", Everett Fox, a Jewish commentator,

discussing Exod. 28:30 in the Schocken Bible, Vol. 1, states:

Urim...Thummim: Oracular objects, used for divining God's plans (e.g. learning if it was the right time to go into battle). Their exact shape and mode of operation are the subject of much scholarly debate (see Casuto[, Umberto. A Commentary on the book of Exodus, Jerusalem, 1967], for instance). In 1 Sam. 28:6, Urim are equated with dreams and prophets as a means of answering human queries. Buber and Rosenzweig following Luther, translate the term as Lichtende und Schilichtende ("lights and perfections"), a possible literal but unclear translation. It is also worth noting that Urim begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and Thummim the last, giving rise to the possibility that the names themselves are symbolic.

2 And it is by your faith that you shall obtain a view of them, even by that faith which was had by the prophets of old. 3 And after that you have obtained faith, and have seen them with your eyes, you shall testify of them, by the power of God; 4 And this you shall do that my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., may not be destroyed, that I may bring about my righteous purposes unto the children of men in this work. 5 And ye shall testify that you have seen them, even as my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., has seen them; for it is by my power that he has seen them, and it is because he had faith.

v4 "that my servant...may not be destroyed", probably referring to the same issue addressed in Alma 9:6, Alma 10:12.

v5 Smith was originally granted his position on account of his faith. As he had this faith, he was granted the opportunity to see and use these miraculous objects. Thus, Smith was not a sign-seeker who was seeking for evidence in order to be convinced, cp. D&C 46:9, 63:7-11.

6 And he has translated the book, even that part which I have commanded him, and as your Lord and your God liveth it is true. 7 Wherefore, you have received the same power, and the same faith, and the same gift like unto him; 8 And if you do these last commandments of mine, which I have given you, the gates of hell shall not prevail against you; for my grace is sufficient for you, and you shall be lifted up at the last day. 9 And I, Jesus Christ, your Lord and your God, have spoken it unto you, that I might bring about my righteous purposes unto the children of men. Amen.

v7 states the three witness are not, or are no longer, among the sign-seekers and are therefore permitted to view the artifacts so they may assist in the bringing forth of the Book of Mormon.

v8 "my grace is sufficient for you", this phrase is always used in conjunction with statements dealing with the weaknesses of a person either by self-confession or by divine observation, cp. 2 Cor. 12:9, Ether 12:26-27, Moroni 10:32, D&C 18:31. The general intent is for the Lord to indicate that the person's weaknesses are not such that their salvation is jeopardized by them at present.

v9 The Lord makes it plain that the aforementioned views are granted because it is expedient in him, and not simply for the benefit of the three, to satisfy their curiosity or any other reason.

## **Historical Material Pertaining to Doctrine & Covenants 17**

The first excerpt is a general historical commentary with brief quotations from all three witnesses. Second is Smith's recounting various events surrounding the selection of the Three and Eight Witnesses. The third is Lucy Mack Smith's recounting of the events. The fourth is a series of harmonized quotations of the Three Witnesses from firsthand and secondary sources. The fifth is a historical commentary addressing allegations against David Whitmer's testimony. The sixth is an excerpt from an interview Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith conducted with David Whitmer in 1878 in Richmond, Missouri, which includes the recounting of Mary Whitmer's viewing of the plates. The seventh and eighth excerpts also discuss Mary's viewing of the plates, as retold by a grandson and grand-daughter by marriage. The ninth excerpt is a reprinting of an interview by Joseph Smith III with his mother Emma Smith Bidamon shortly before her death, where Emma states she felt the plates and moved them, but never saw them.

A discussion of the historical significance and restoration of the Peter Whitmer log house can be read [here](#).

This section was not published in the Book of Commandments. It was first published in the Doctrine & Covenants in 1835 on page 171. It was then published in Messenger & Advocate, volume 1, number 12, page 178, dated September, 1835. It was published the Times & Seasons, volume 3, number 21, page 897, dated September 1, 1842. It was published in the Millennial Star, volume 4, number 7, page 97-99, dated November, 1843.

### **Excerpt from The Revelations of Prophet Joseph Smith**

In March 1829, before Joseph Smith became acquainted with Oliver Cowdery, the Lord revealed the following promise: "And the testimony of three witnesses will I send forth of my word" (D&C 5:15). During the translation the Prophet and his scribe discovered Moroni's instruction to the modern translator that he would be privileged to "show the plates unto three." The Prophet noted, "Almost immediately after we had made this discovery, it occurred to Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and the aforesaid Martin Harris, that they would have me inquire of the Lord to know if they might not obtain of him the privilege to be these three special witnesses." Accordingly the Prophet inquired of the Lord and received section 17. David Whitmer stated that the

viewing of the plates occurred about the end of June 1829.

Of this significant event, Oliver Cowdery later said,

I beheld with my eyes. And handled with my hands the gold plates from which it was translated. I also beheld the 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. It contains the everlasting gosple, and came in fulfillment of the revelations of John where he Says he seen an angle come with the everlasting gosple to preach to every nation tunge and people. It contains principles of Salvation. And if you will walk by its light and obey it[s] precepts you will be Saved in the everlasting Kingdom of God.

David Whitmer made the following statement concerning the viewing of the plates:

I was plowing in the field one morning and Joseph and Oliver came along with a revelation stating that I was to be one of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon. I got over the fence and we went out into the woods near by, and sat down on a log and talked awhile. We then kneeled down and Joseph prayed. We then got up and sat on a log and were talking, when all at once a light came down from above us and encircled us for quite a little distance around; and the angel stood before us. He was dressed in white, and spoke and called me by name and said "Blessed is he that keepeth His commandments." This is all that I heard the angel say. A table was set before us and on it the records were placed. The Records of the Nephites, from which the Book of Mormon was translated, the breast plates, the Ball or Directors, the Sword of Laban and other plates. While we were viewing them the voice of God spoke out of heaven saying that the Book was true and the translation correct.

Martin Harris is recorded as saying, "as many of the plates as Joseph Smith translated I handled with my hands, plate after plate." He also affirmed, "The angel did show to me the plates containing the Book of Mormon." (Lyndon W. Cook, The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith, pages 27-28)

### **Excerpt from Times & Seasons**

We found the people of Seneca county in general friendly and disposed to enquire into the truth of these strange matters which now began to be noised abroad: many opened their houses to us in order that we might have an opportunity of meeting with our friends for the purposes of instruction and explanation. We met with many from time to time, who were willing to hear us, and wishful to find out the truth as it is in Christ Jesus, and apparently willing to obey the gospel when once fairly convinced and satisfied in their own minds; and in this same month of June, my brother Hyrum Smith, David Whitmer, and Peter Whitmer, Jr. were baptized in Seneca lake the two former by myself; the latter by Oliver Cowdery. From this time forth many became believers, and were baptized, whilst we continued to instruct and persuade as many as applied for information.

In the course of the work of translation, we ascertained that three special witnesses were to be provided by the Lord, to whom he would grant, that they should see the plates from which this work (the Book of Mormon) should be translated, and that these witnesses should bear record of the same; as will be found recorded, Book of Mormon first edition page and second edition page.

Almost immediately after we had made this discovery, it occurred to Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and the aforementioned Martin Harris (who had come to enquire after our progress in the work) that they would have me enquire of the Lord, to know if they might not obtain of him to be these three special witnesses; and finally they became so very solicitous, and teased me so much, that at length I complied, and through the Urim and Thummim, I obtained of the Lord for them the following Revelation:

*Revelation to Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and Martin Harris, at Fayette, Seneca co. N. Y. June 1829; given previous to their viewing the plates containing the Book of Mormon.*

Behold I say unto you, that you must rely upon my word, which if you do, with full purpose of heart, you shall have a view of the plates, and also the breastplate, the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim, which were given to the brother of Jared upon the mount, when he talked with the Lord face to face

and, the miraculous directors which were given to Lehi while in the wilderness, on the borders of the Red sea; and it is by your faith that you shall obtain a view of them, even by that faith which was had by the prophets of old.

And after that you have obtained faith, and have seen them with your eyes, you shall testify of them, by the power of God; and this you shall do that my servant Joseph Smith, jr. may not be destroyed, that I may bring about my righteous purposes unto the children of men, in this work. And ye shall testify that you have seen them, even as my servant Joseph Smith jr. has seen them for it is by my power that he has seen them, and it is because he had faith: and he has translated the book, even that part which I have commanded him, and as your Lord and your God liveth it is true.

Wherefore you have received the same power, and the same faith, and the same gift like unto him; and if you do these last commandments of mine, which I have given you, the gates of hell shall not prevail against you; for my grace is sufficient for you: and you shall be lifted up at the last day. And I, Jesus Christ, your Lord and your God, have spoken it unto you, that I might bring about my righteous purposes unto the children of men. Amen.

Not many days after the above commandment was given, we four viz: Martin Harris, David Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery and myself agreed to retire into the woods, and try to obtain by fervent and humble prayer, the fulfilment of the promises given in the revelation: that they should have view of the plates &c. we accordingly made choice of a piece of woods convenient to Mr. Whitmer's house, to which we retired, and having knelt down we began to pray in much faith, to Almighty God to bestow upon us a realization of these promises. According to previous arrangements I commenced, by vocal prayer to our heavenly Father, and was followed by each of the rest in succession; we did not yet however obtain any answer, or manifestation of the divine favor in our behalf. We again observed the same order of prayer each calling on, and praying fervently to God in rotation; but with the same result as before. Upon this our second failure, Martin Harris proposed that he would withdraw himself from us, believing as he expressed himself, that his presence was the cause of our not obtaining what we wished for; he accordingly withdrew from us, and we knelt down again, and had not been many minutes engaged in prayer when presently we

beheld a light above us in the air of exceeding brightness, and behold an angel stood before us; in his hands he held the plates which we had been praying for these to have a view of: he turned over the leaves one by one, so that we could see them, and discover the engravings thereon distinctly. He addressed himself to David Whitmer, and said, "David, blessed is the Lord, and he that keeps his commandments." When immediately afterwards, we heard a voice from out of the bright light above us, saying, "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."

I now left David and Oliver, and went in pursuit of Martin Harris, who I found at a considerable distance, fervently engaged in prayer, he soon told me however that he had not yet prevailed with the Lord, and earnestly requested me to join him in prayer, that he also might realize the same blessings which we had just received. We accordingly joined in prayer, and ultimately obtained our desires, for before we had yet finished, the same vision was opened to our view; at least it was again to me, and I once more beheld, and heard the same things; whilst at the same moment, Martin Harris cried out, apparently in ecstasy of joy, "Tis enough; mine eyes have beheld," and jumping up he shouted, hosannah, blessing God, and otherwise rejoiced exceedingly.

Having thus through the mercy of God, obtained these manifestations, it now remained for these three individuals to fulfil the commandment which they had received, viz: to bear record of these things, in order to accomplish which, they drew up and subscribed the following document:

#### THE TESTIMONY OF THREE 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, which is a record of this 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.

Soon after these things had transpired the following additional testimony was obtained:

AND ALSO THE TESTIMONY OF EIGHT WITNESSES.

Be it known unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, unto whom this work shall come, that Joseph Smith, Jr. the translator of this work, has shewn 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 shewn 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, JR.  
JOHN WHITMER,  
HIRAM PAGE,  
JOSEPH SMITH, SEN.,

HYRUM SMITH,  
SAMUEL H. SMITH.

(Joseph Smith, Times & Seasons, Vol. 3, No. 21, September 1, 1842, pages 897-899)

**Excerpt from History of Joseph Smith by His Mother**

As soon as the Book of Mormon was translated, Joseph despatched a messenger to Mr. Smith, bearing intelligence of the completion of the work, and a request that Mr. Smith and myself should come immediately to Waterloo.

The same evening, we conveyed this intelligence to Martin Harris, for we loved the man, although his weakness had cost us much trouble. Hearing this, he greatly rejoiced, and determined to go straightway to Waterloo to congratulate Joseph upon his success. Accordingly, the next morning, we all set off together, and before sunset met Joseph and Oliver at Mr. Whitmer's.

The evening was spent in reading the manuscript, and it would be superfluous for me to say, to one who has read the foregoing pages, that we rejoiced exceedingly. It then appeared to those of us who did not realize the magnitude of the work, as if the greatest difficulty was then surmounted; but Joseph better understood the nature of the dispensation of the Gospel which was committed unto him.

The next morning, after attending to the usual services, namely, reading, singing and praying, Joseph arose from his knees, and approaching Martin Harris with a solemnity that thrills through my veins to this day, when it occurs to my recollection, said, "Martin Harris, you have got to humble yourself before God this day, that you may obtain a forgiveness of your sins. If you do, it is the will of God that you should look upon the plates, in company with Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer."

In a few minutes after this, Joseph, Martin, Oliver and David, repaired to a grove, a short distance from the house, where they commenced calling upon the Lord, and continued in earnest supplication, until he permitted an angel to come down from his presence, and declare to them, that all which Joseph had testified of concerning the plates was true.

When they returned to the house it was between three and four

o'clock p.m. Mrs. Whitmer, Mr. Smith and myself, were sitting in a bedroom at the time. On coming in, Joseph threw himself down beside me, and exclaimed, "Father, mother, you do not know how happy I am: the Lord has now caused the plates to be shown to three more besides myself. They have seen an angel, who has testified to them, and they will have to bear witness to the truth of what I have said, for now they know for themselves, that I do not go about to deceive the people, and I feel as if I was relieved of a burden which was almost too heavy for me to bear, and it rejoices my soul, that I am not any longer to be entirely alone in the world." Upon this, Martin Harris came in: he seemed almost overcome with joy, and testified boldly to what he had both seen and heard. And so did David and Oliver, adding that no tongue could express the joy of their hearts, and the greatness of the things which they had both seen and heard.

Their written testimony, which is contained in the Book of Mormon, is as follows:

[testimony of three witnesses quoted]

The following day, we returned, a cheerful, happy company. In a few days, we were followed by Joseph, Oliver and the Whitmers, who came to make us a visit, and make some arrangements about getting the book printed. Soon after they came, all the male part of the company, with my husband, Samuel and Hyrum, retired to a place where the family were in the habit of offering up their secret devotions to God. They went to this place, because it had been revealed to Joseph that the plates would be carried thither by one of the ancient Nephites. Here it was, that those eight witnesses, whose names are recorded in the Book of Mormon, looked upon them and handled them. Of which they bear record in the following words:

[testimony of eight witnesses quoted]

After these witnesses returned to the house, the angel again made his appearance to Joseph, at which time Joseph delivered up the plates into the angel's hands. That evening, we held a meeting, in which all the witnesses bore testimony to the facts, as stated above; and all of our family, even to Don Carlos, who was but fourteen years of age, testified of the truth of the Latter-day Dispensation--that it was then ushered in. In a few days, the whole company from Waterloo, went to Palmyra to make arrangements for getting the book printed; and they succeeded in

making a contract with one E. B. Grandin, but did not draw the writings at that time. The next day, the company from Waterloo returned home, excepting Joseph, and Peter Whitmer, Joseph remaining to draw writings in regard to the printing of the manuscript, which was to be done on the day following. (Lucy Mack Smith, History of Joseph Smith by His Mother, pages 151-155)

### **Excerpt from Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration**

[The following are a series of excerpts which are harmonizations by Backman of various primary and secondary sources. The printed version contains citations to the original sources, which are too numerous to include here.]

#### David Whitmer - A Harmony of Primary and Secondary Sources

In June 1829, the Lord called Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, and myself as the three witnesses to behold the vision of the Angel, as recorded in the fore part of the Book of Mormon and to bear testimony to the world that the Book of Mormon is true. [I saw] the plates...about 11:00 a.m. ...in the latter part of June 1829. Joseph, Oliver Cowdery and myself were together, and the angel showed them to us...as I supposed to fulfill the words of the book itself. The angel was dressed in white and spoke and called me by name and said, "Blessed is he that keepeth His commandments. [As] the angel stood before us, he turned the leaves one by one [of] that part of the book which was not sealed. Martin Harris, the other witness, saw them the same day, and the eight witnesses...saw them [the] next day...or the day after. The plates...appeared to be of gold, about six by nine inches in size, about as thick as parchment, a great many in number, and bound together like the leaves of a book by massive rings passing through the back edges. The engravings upon them were very plain and of very curious appearance.... We not only saw the plates of the Book of Mormon, but he [the angel] also showed us the brass plates of the Book of Ether and many others.

They [the plates] were shown to us in this way. Joseph and Oliver and I were sitting on a log, when we were overshadowed by a light more glorious than that of the sun...It extended away round us, I cannot tell how far, but in the midst of this light...there appeared as it were, a table with many records or plates upon it, besides the plates of the Book of Mormon, also the Sword of Laban, the directors-i.e., the ball which Lehi had,

and the Interpreters. The Interpreters...which I saw...in the holy vision...looked like whitish stones put in the rim of a bow...like spectacles, only much larger. The heavenly messenger brought the several plates and laid them on the table before our eyes. I saw them just as plain as I see this bed...and the angel told us we must bear testimony to the world.... I [also] heard the voice of the Lord, distinctly as I ever heard anything in my life, declaring that the records of the plates of the Book of Mormon were translated by the gift and power of God. Our testimony as recorded in the Book of Mormon is absolutely true, just as it is there written.

It is recorded in the American Cyclopaedia and the Encyclopaedia Britannica, that I, David Whitmer, have denied my testimony as one of the three witnesses to the divinity of the Book of Mormon; and that the other two witnesses, Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris, denied their testimony to that Book. I will say once more to all mankind, that I have never at any time denied that testimony or any part thereof. I also testify to the world, that neither Oliver Cowdery or Martin Harris ever at any time denied their testimony. They both died reaffirming the truth of the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

I wish now, standing as it were, in the very sunset of life, and in the fear of God, once [and] 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 of my statements, as then made and published.

"He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear;" it was no delusion! What is written is written, and he that readeth let him understand.

Beware how you hastily condemn that book which I know to be the word of God; for his own voice and an angel from heaven declared the truth of it unto me, and to two other witnesses who testified on their death-bed that it was true.

And if these things are not true, then there is no truth; and if there is no truth, there is no God; and if there is no God, there is no existence. But I know there is a God, for I have heard His voice and witnessed the manifestation of his power.

Oliver Cowdery — Interview

In company with the Prophet Joseph Smith and David Whitmer, [I]...beheld the plates, the leaves being turned over by the angel, whose voice I heard, and...we were commanded as witnesses to bear a faithful testimony to the world of the vision that we were favored to behold, and that the translation from the plates in the Book of Mormon was accepted of the Lord, and that it should go forth to the world and no power on earth should stop its progress.

Martin Harris

I now solemnly state that as I was praying unto the Lord that I might behold the ancient record, lo there appeared to view a holy angel, and before him a table, and upon the table the holy spectacles or Urim and Thummim, and other ancient relics of the Nephites, and lo, the Angel did take up the plates, and turn them over so as we could plainly see the engravings thereon, and lo there came a voice from heaven saying "I am the Lord," and that the plates were translated by God and not by men, and also that we should bear record of it to all the world, and thus the vision was taken from us.... No man ever heard me in any way deny the truth of the Book of Mormon [or] the administration of the angel that showed me the plates. The Lord has shown me these things by his Spirit.

Martin Harris - Interview

The Prophet Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer and myself went into the woods to pray that we might have the privilege of seeing the golden plates. We bowed our heads in prayer, but we seemed to be praying with no results. The Prophet was the spokesman. He prayed with no results twice, then I withdrew from them, telling them that it was on my account that their prayer was not answered. After they had been visited by the angel, the Prophet then came over to me where I was praying, and I asked the Prophet to pray with me so that I might have the privilege also of seeing the golden plates; and after praying, I saw the angel descend from heaven. The angel stood on the opposite side of the table on which were the plates...took the plates in his hand and turned them over...one by one. I [also] saw the Urim and Thummim, the Breastplate, and the Sword of Laban. The angel declared that the Book of Mormon was correctly translated by the power of God and not of man, and that it contained the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Nephites, who were a branch of the lost sheep of the House of

Israel and had come from the land of Jerusalem to America. When he [the angel] had finished his message, I saw him ascend up into heaven. Then...I heard the voice of God declare that everything the angel had told us was true and that the Book of Mormon was translated correctly. I was [then] commanded by God's voice to testify to the whole world what I had seen and heard. Following the vision, I cried out in...ecstasy.

[I have] never failed to bear testimony to the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon. I know of a surety that the work is true. It is not a matter of belief...but of knowledge. Just as surely as the sun is shining on us and gives us light, and the sun and stars give us light by night, just as surely as the breath of life sustains us, so surely do I know that Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God, chosen of God to open the last dispensation of the fulness of times; so surely do I know that the Book of Mormon was divinely translated. I saw the plates; I saw the angel; I heard the voice of God. I know that the Book of Mormon is true, and that Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God. I might as well doubt my own existence as to doubt the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon or the divine calling of Joseph Smith.

[My] testimony [which] has accompanied every copy of the Book [of Mormon], 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...has not varied...in 41 years. (Milton V. Backman, *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration*, pages 155-159)

### **Excerpt from *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration***

The witness who was interviewed on more occasions than any other individual who examined the plates was David Whitmer. David was the last of the eleven witnesses to die and, following his excommunication in 1838, lived among non-members in Missouri for more than fifty years. During this half century, he served as a city councilman and mayor of Richmond and earned a living by farming and operating a transportation business (furnishing customers with horses and carriages). While living in Richmond, he was constantly interviewed by members and non-members alike. Many elders of the Church who were traveling east on missions stopped in Richmond specifically to visit him, desiring to hear from David's own lips his account of seeing the angel, the plates, and hearing a voice from heaven. During one of these interviews held in 1883, David Whitmer said that he had been "visited by thousands of people, believers and unbelievers, men

and ladies of all degrees." He said that he had been interviewed as many as fifteen times in a single day, and that never he had failed to bear his testimony to those questioning him. "They will know some day," he predicted, "that my testimony is true."

An opportune occasion for David Whitmer to have denied his testimony occurred in 1833. While Latter-day Saints were being persecuted in Jackson County, Missouri, an armed mob threatened his life. After placing a loaded rifle next to David's chest, one of the mobsters told Whitmer that if he did not deny his testimony, he would shoot. This same mobster offered him a reward for renouncing his testimony. He said that by complying with his demands he would not only save his life, but that he would allow him to remain in the county and retain his property. Instead of repudiating his conviction in the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, David Whitmer raised his hands before the angry crowd and declared that the Book of Mormon was "the word of God." "The testimony I bore [to] the mob," David recalled, "made them tremble before me."

Although there is no reliable evidence that David Whitmer repudiated his testimony as published in the Book of Mormon, a few interviewers assumed that he was contradicting his published declaration when he told them that he saw the plates with his spiritual rather than his natural eyes. Explaining what he meant by this statement, David Whitmer wrote in 1887:

Of course we were in the spirit when we had the view, for no man can behold the face of an angel, except in a spiritual view, but we were in the body also, and everything was as natural to us, as it is at any time. Martin Harris...called it "being in vision"... A bright light enveloped us where we were...and there in a vision, or in the spirit, we saw and heard just as it is stated in my testimony in the Book of Mormon.

Some skeptics who did not endorse David Whitmer's published testimony suggested that he must have been deceived. When a military officer informed Whitmer that he must have been mentally disturbed or suffered an hallucination which caused him to think that he saw an angel, plates, and other objects, Whitmer replied emphatically that he "was not under any hallucination," nor was he "deceived." "I saw with these eyes, and I heard with these ears!" he asserted. "I know whereof I speak."

In partial response to accusations that he had denied his testimony and that he suffered some type of mental disturbance,



David Whitmer published a pamphlet in 1887 entitled *An Address to All Believers in Christ* in which he emphasized that he and the other witnesses who examined the plates had never denied their testimonies as published in the Book of Mormon. Moreover, he insisted, "It was no delusion." (Milton V. Backman, *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration*, pages 138-140)

**Excerpt from Deseret News**

Joseph sent for me (D.W.) to come to Harmony to get him and Oliver and bring them to my father's house. I did not know what to do, I was pressed with my work. I had some 20 acres to plow, so I concluded I would finish plowing and then go, I got up one morning to go to work as usual, and on going to the field, found between 5 and 7 acres of my ground had been plowed during the night.

I don't know who did it; but it was done just as I would have done it myself, and the plow was left standing in the furrow.

This enabled me to start sooner.... When I was returning to Fayette with Joseph and Oliver all of us riding in the wagon, Oliver and I on an oldfashioned wooden spring seat and Joseph behind us, while traveling along in a clear open place, a very pleasant, nice-looking old man suddenly appeared by the side of our wagon who saluted us with, "good morning, it is very warm," at the same time wiping his face or forehead with his hand. We returned the salutation, and by a sign from Joseph I invited him to ride if he was going our way. But he said very pleasantly, "No, I am going to Cumorah." This name was something new to me, I did not know what Cumorah meant. We all gazed at him and at each other, and as I looked round enquiringly of Joseph the old man instantly disappeared, so that I did not see him again.

J. F. S. [Joseph F. Smith] - Did you notice his appearance?

D. W. [David Whitmer] - I should think I did, he was, I should think, about 5 feet 8 or 9 inches tall and heavy set, about such a man as James Vancleave there, [a newspaperman from Chicago, was among several people present during the interview at David's request] but heavier, his face was as large, he was dressed in a suit of brown woolen clothes, his hair and beard were white like Brother Pratt's, but his beard was not so heavy. I also remember that he had on his back a sort of knapsack with something in, shaped like a book. It was the messenger who had the plates, who had taken them from Joseph just prior to our starting from

Harmony. Soon after our arrival home, I saw something which led me to the belief that the plates were placed or concealed in my father's barn. I frankly asked Joseph if my supposition was right, and he told me it was. Sometime after this, my mother was going to milk the cows, when she was met out near the yard by the same old man (judging by her description of him) who said to her, "You have been very faithful and diligent in your labors, but you are tired because of the increase of your toil, it is proper therefore that you should receive a witness that your faith may be strengthened?" Thereupon he showed her the plates. My father and mother had a large family of their own, the addition to it therefore of Joseph, his wife Emma and Oliver very greatly increased the toil and anxiety of my mother. And although she had never complained she had sometimes felt that her labor was too much, or at least she was perhaps beginning to feel so. This circumstance, however, completely removed all such feelings, and nerved her up for her increased responsibilities.

Report of Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith, Deseret News, November 27, 1878, page 2 (Citations of this 1878 newspaper article have created three oft-repeated errors. The report was printed on November 27, 1878, not November 16. The newspaper states that Moroni said to Mary Whitmer, "You have been very faithful and diligent in your labors, but you are tired because of the increase of your toil, it is proper therefore that you should receive a witness that your faith may be strengthened?" "Tired" has been incorrectly reported as "tired," and the question mark has been omitted.)

#### **Excerpt from The Historical Record**

I have heard my grandmother (Mary Musselman Whitmer) say on several occasions that she was shown the plates of the Book of Mormon by a holy angel, whom she always called Brother Nephi. (She undoubtedly refers to Moroni, the angel who had the plates in charge.)

It was at the time, she said, when the translation was going on at the house of the elder Peter Whitmer, her husband. Joseph Smith with his wife and Oliver Cowdery, whom David Whitmer a short time previous had brought up from Harmony, Pennsylvania, were all boarding with the Whitmers, and my grandmother in having so many extra persons to care for, besides her own large household, was often overloaded with work to such an extent that she felt it to be quite a burden.

One evening, when (after having done her usual day's work in the house) she went to the barn to milk the cows, she met a stranger carrying something on his back that looked like a knapsack. At first she was a little afraid of him, but when he spoke to her in a kind, friendly tone and began to explain to her the nature of the work which was going on in her house, she was filled with unexpressible joy and satisfaction. He then untied his knapsack and showed her a bundle of plates, which in size and appearance corresponded with the description subsequently given by the witnesses to the Book of Mormon. This strange person turned the leaves of the book of plates over, leaf after leaf, and also showed her the engravings upon them; after which he told her to be patient and faithful in bearing her burden a little longer, promising that if she would do so, she should be blessed; and her reward would be sure, if she proved faithful to the end. The personage then suddenly vanished with the plates, and where he went, she could not tell.

From that moment my grandmother was enabled to perform her household duties with comparative ease, and she felt no more inclination to murmur because her lot was hard. I knew my grandmother to be a good, noble and truthful woman, and I have not the least doubt of her statement in regard to seeing the plates being strictly true. She was a strong believer in the Book of Mormon until the day of her death. (Statement of John C. Whitmer quoted in Andrew Jenson, [The Historical Record](#) 7, Nos. 8-10 (October 1888), 621)

### **Excerpt from Interpreter**

Here is what Carl Cox writes:

This same experience with Mother Whitmer and the plates is a part of my family history. Elvira Pamela Mills Cox heard the story before she was married. Christian Whitmer, one of the Book of Mormon witnesses and the eldest son of Peter Whitmer, had married Anna Schott in 1825. They must have lived in close proximity to Peter Whitmer while the Book of Mormon was being translated. When Christian died in Clay County, Missouri, in 1835, Anna was left a widow. Sylvanus Hulet married the widowed Anna, and also had care of his orphaned niece, Elvira Mills. The experience of Mother Whitmer would have been known by family members, and Elvira was an interested teenager at that time. This is the way the story appears in our family history:

"Elvira Pamela Mills", Cox Bulletin II (1958), written by Orville Cox Day (O C Day):

Grandma stopped telling a story of Mother Whitmer till 1900 when B. H. Roberts printed it in his "New Witness for God." Then she said, "I'm so glad I can tell it again."

David Whitmer had invited Joseph and Oliver to live in his father's home while translating the Book of Mormon. When Oliver's hand and Joseph's eyes grew tired they went to the woods for a rest. There they often skated rocks on a pond.

Mary Whitmer, with five grown sons and a husband to care for, besides visitors, often grew tired. She thought they might just as well carry her a bucket of water or chop a bit of wood as to skate rocks on a pond.

She was about to order them out of her home.

One morning, just at daybreak, she came out of her cow stable with two full buckets of milk in her hands, when a short, heavy-set, gray-haired man carrying a package met her and said,

"My name is Moroni. You have become pretty tired with all the extra work you have to do. The Lord has given me permission to show you this record:" turning the golden leaves one by one!

The most interesting aspect of this story is that Mary Whitmer's difficulty with the household situation was more than just being tired from all the extra work. She was irritated by Joseph and Oliver's indifference to all the work she was doing, with their not helping out and instead skipping rocks for relaxation, so "she was about to order them out of her home." Thus Moroni's intervention was perhaps more purposeful than we might have previously thought. Undoubtedly, many others exerted much effort on behalf of providing help to Joseph and Oliver (such as Emma Smith had just done in Harmony, Pennsylvania, for the previous three months). Here, however, Moroni needed to deal with a more difficult situation, one that could have forced Joseph to find another place - and a secure one - to do the translating. Moroni (and the Lord) weren't in the habit of just showing the plates

to people to encourage them to act as a support team for the work of the translation.

There is independent evidence that during the translation process Joseph Smith liked to skip rocks on water as a form of relaxation. Martin Harris tells of one such occasion in the spring of 1828 when he was acting as scribe when Joseph was translating the book of Lehi (the 116 manuscript pages that were later lost). In an interview with Edward Stevenson and published in the Deseret News on 30 November 1881 and republished in the Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star (30 January and 6 February 1882), Martin says (on page 87 of the Millennial Star) that "after continued translation they would become weary, and would go down to the river and exercise by throwing stones out on the river, etc."

There are a few other differences in this account. The plates were in a package rather than a knapsack. Mary had already done the milking, and it was in the morning rather than the evening. As with all independent accounts of historical events, there will be minor additions, omissions, and variants. But the reason for Moroni's intervention is clearly a significant difference - and probably accurate. (Royal Skousen [\*Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship\*](#) 10 (2014): 35-44)

#### **Excerpt from The Saints' Herald**

##### LAST TESTIMONY OF SISTER EMMA.

In a conversation held in the Herald office during the early days of the present year, between Bishop Rogers, Elders W. W. Blair, H. A. Stebbins and a few others, leading minds in the Church, it was thought advisable to secure from Mother Bidamon, (Sister Emma Smith), her testimony upon certain points upon which various opinions existed; and to do this, it was decided to present to her a few prominent questions, which were penned and agreed upon, the answers to which might, so far as she was concerned, settle these differences of opinion. In accordance with this understanding the senior editor of the Herald visited Nauvoo, in February last, arriving on the 4th and remaining until the 10th. Sister Emma answered the questions freely and in the presence of her husband, Major Lewis C. Bidamon, who was generally present in their sitting-room where the conversation took place. We were more particular in this because it had been frequently stated to us: "Ask your mother, she knows." "Why

don't you ask your mother; she dare not deny these things." "You do not dare to ask your mother!"

Our thought was, that if we had lacked courage to ask her, because we feared the answers she might give, we would put aside that fear; and, whatever the worst might be, we would hear it. The result is given below; it having been decided to give the statements to the readers of the *Herald*, in view of the death of Sister Emma having occurred so soon after she made them, thus giving them the character of a last testimony.

It is intended to incorporate these questions and answers in the forthcoming history of the reorganization.

[...]

Question. What of the truth of Mormonism?

Answer. I know Mormonism to be the truth; and believe the Church to have been established by divine direction. I have complete faith in it. In writing for your father I frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table close by him, he sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us.

Question. Had he not a book or manuscript from which he read, or dictated to you?

Answer. He had neither manuscript nor book to read from.

Question. Could he not have had, and you not know it?

Answer. If he had had anything of the kind he could not have concealed it from me.

Question. Are you sure that he had the plates at the time you were writing for him?

Answer. The plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen tablecloth, which I had given him to fold them in. I once felt of the plates, as they thus lay on the table, tracing their outline and shape. They seemed to be pliable like thick paper, and would rustle with a metallic sound when the edges were moved by the thumb, as one does sometimes thumb the edges of a book.

Question. Where did father and Oliver Cowdery write?

Answer. Oliver Cowdery and your father wrote in the room where I was at work.

Question. Could not father have dictated the Book of Mormon to

you, Oliver Cowdery and the others who wrote for him, after having first written it, or having first read it out of some book?

Answer. Joseph Smith (and for the first time she used his name direct, having usually used the words, "your father" or "my husband") could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter, let alone dictate a book like the Book of Mormon. And, though I was an active participant in the scenes that transpired, and was present during the translation of the plates, and had cognizance of things as they transpired, it is marvelous to me, "a marvel and a wonder," as much so as to anyone else.

Question. I should suppose that you would have uncovered the plates and examined them?

Answer. I did not attempt to handle the plates, other than I have told you, nor uncover them to look at them. I was satisfied that it was the work of God, and therefore did not feel it to be necessary to do so;

Major Bidamon here suggested: Did Mr. Smith forbid your examining the plates?

Answer. I do not think he did. I knew that he had them, and was not specially curious about them. I moved them from place to place on the table, as it was necessary in doing my work.

Question. Mother, what is your belief about the authenticity, or origin, of the Book of Mormon?

Answer. My belief is that the Book of Mormon is of divine authenticity - I have not the slightest doubt of it. I am satisfied that no man could have dictated the writing of the manuscripts unless he was inspired; for, when acting as his scribe, your father would dictate to me hour after hour; and when returning after meals, or after interruptions, he could at once begin where he had left off, without either seeing the manuscript or having any portion of it read to him. This was a usual thing for him to do. It would have been improbable that a learned man could do this; and, for one so ignorant and unlearned as he was, it was simply impossible.

[...]

These questions and the answers she had given to them were read to my mother by me, the day before my leaving Nauvoo for home, and were affirmed by her. Major Bidamon stated that he had frequently conversed with her on the subject of the translation of the Book of Mormon, and her present answers were

substantially what she had always stated in regard to it.

JOSEPH SMITH.

([The Saints' Herald, Vol. 26, No. 19, Oct. 1, 1879, page 289](#))

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