

## The Eleven Witnesses

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Throughout the spring of 1829, Joseph Smith translated and dictated the text of the Book of Mormon, pausing at times to preach to inquiring neighbors. By mid-June 1829, Joseph learned of the Lord's intent to provide three witnesses to the gold plates and apparently completed the translation through Moroni's words to his Lamanite brethren. Scribe Oliver Cowdery had penned what would become the book's beginning pages, listening to Nephi introduce himself, his family, and his various sets of plates (see D&C 5:11–15, 24–26, Ether 5:4).<sup>1</sup>

As the translation neared completion, Joseph learned more about the Lord's long-standing plan to show the plates to handpicked witnesses. "At that day when the book shall be delivered unto the man of whom I have spoken," Joseph said to his scribe, quoting Nephi, who was quoting the Lord's revelation to Isaiah, "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." No one

else would see it, the Lord continued, “save it be a few according to the will of God, to bear testimony of his word” (see 2 Nephi 27:12–13).

As the translation neared completion, Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer, along with Martin Harris, who had come from Palmyra to the Whitmer’s Fayette, New York, home to check the translation’s progress, began begging to be the Three Witnesses. Joseph asked the Lord and looked in the stones, revealing a yes—if they relied on the Lord wholeheartedly and understood that they were committing themselves to testify, they could see.<sup>2</sup> For Martin, there was an added condition, the earlier revelation’s requirement (see D&C 5:24). “You have got to humble yourself before your God this day,” Joseph told him, “and obtain if possible a forgiveness of your sins.”<sup>3</sup>

Joseph led the three men to the woods, where they knelt together and took turns asking God to show them the plates. But he didn’t. Not the first time they prayed, nor the second. It wasn’t until Martin stood up and confessed that he was the reason the heavens remained closed. He left the others to retreat further into the woods, and then the vision the men sought was opened. Joseph testified that an angel stood before them with the plates in his hands, turning the leaves one by one so they could see the engraved writing.<sup>4</sup> Oliver and David later declared, “An angel of God came down from Heaven & he brought & laid before our eyes that we beheld & saw the plates & the engravings thereon.”<sup>5</sup>

Afterward, Joseph followed Martin’s path and found him in prayer, contrite, complying with the instructions he had received. When Martin saw Joseph, he asked him to join his earnest prayer that he could have the same experience. Their prayer was only half uttered, Joseph said, when “the same vision was opened to our view” and he heard and saw the same angel with the engraved plates, while Martin began to cry joyfully, “Mine eyes have beheld, mine eyes have beheld.”<sup>6</sup>

Joseph later showed the plates to his father, to his brothers Hyrum and Samuel, and to several of David’s brothers: Christian, Jacob, Peter, and John, as well as to David’s sister Catherine’s husband, Hiram Page, each man handling the plates himself, each man later testifying that they saw the plates Joseph had, hefted them, and examined the engravings on them.<sup>7</sup> Then, when Joseph had finished translating, he returned the plates to the angel and gathered the witnesses and their families for an evening of testifying and celebration.<sup>8</sup> “I bless God in the sincerity of my soul,” Martin said, “that

he has condescended to make me, even me, a witness of the greatness of his work.” Oliver and David added their amens.<sup>9</sup> (For other less-formal witnesses, see the chapter by Amy Easton-Flake and Rachel Cope herein.)

## Evaluating the Book of Mormon Witnesses

The testimonies of the Three and Eight Witnesses printed in each copy of the Book of Mormon are some of the most compelling evidence in favor of its miraculous revelation and translation. It is remarkable to have depositions by eleven men of the gold plates’ existence, including three who testified of an angelic visitation. The three saw and the eight “hefted” the plates. For believers, that approaches proof of Joseph Smith’s miraculous claims. But some have questioned the nature of the witnesses’ experiences, arguing that they were supernatural and visionary.<sup>10</sup> The witnesses, this argument asserts, did not see or touch ancient artifacts as we see or handle trees or chairs, but saw only through unreliably subjective “spiritual eyes,” rendering their statements null and void.

Advocates of this thesis cite visionaries including Joseph Smith, who spoke of seeing with an “eye of faith” and distinguished between the kinds of seeing done with “spiritual” and “natural” eyes.<sup>11</sup> They claim Martin Harris saw only “with the spiritual eye” and rely on hearsay accounts that Harris disclaimed he saw the Book of Mormon artifacts with his natural eyes.<sup>12</sup> Skeptics also note reasons to suspect the testimony of the Eight Witnesses, citing Stephen Burnett’s 1838 claim that Martin Harris said that “the eight witnesses never saw them.”<sup>13</sup> The suggestion that the Eight Witnesses never actually saw or hefted the plates and that the Three Witnesses viewed them solely supernaturally leads some to wonder if the witnesses saw anything substantive at all, opening to question the plates’ existence and the Book of Mormon’s truthfulness.<sup>14</sup>

The evidence left by the Book of Mormon witnesses is rich, varied, and uneven, including the following: The earliest documented statement of the Three Witnesses—Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris—is their statement in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery subsequently published in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon. For the Eight Witnesses, it is their statement in the printer’s manuscript of the Book of Mormon, also in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery. The known historical record includes direct statements by two of the Three Witnesses and three of the

Eight Witnesses that affirm their original testimonies. In addition, there are statements from people who heard—or heard of—one or more witnesses describing their experiences.

This last kind of evidence is both the most plentiful and the most problematic because it is hearsay. It is not personal knowledge of a witness but filtered through someone else. These statements were heard, written, and sometimes published by persons with vested interests either in affirming the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon or undermining it. These statements are most valuable as evidence of how a variety of people have chosen to interpret and respond to the Book of Mormon witnesses. From a historical perspective, they are less valuable as evidence of what the witnesses experienced. The best evidence comes from the witnesses' direct statements.

To arrive at an independent judgment, seekers need to examine the evidence for themselves and draw their own conclusions about its meaning and importance. This chapter is designed to facilitate that process by providing the witnesses' own statements that are not in the Book of Mormon and then providing a sampling of the wide variety of hearsay accounts. Then, with particular attention to the assumption that seeing with spiritual eyes negates one's witness, I will analyze the statements as an historian who chooses to believe in the testimonies of the Book of Mormon witnesses and end with an invitation to my readers to join me in making that informed choice.

Joseph Smith's history is the primary historical source that tells how the Book of Mormon prophesied of witnesses, how he received a subsequent revelation inviting Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris to become the Three Witnesses (see D&C 17) and how, after an angel showed them the plates, eight other men gathered to see and heft the plates themselves.<sup>15</sup> Joseph's mother's later memoir presents a later version of Joseph's earlier account.<sup>16</sup>

Beside Joseph's history and the statements of the Three and Eight Witnesses in the Book of Mormon, there are a few direct statements by witnesses themselves in which they affirmed their June 1829 experience seeing the plates. For example, Martin Harris wrote to Hannah Emerson in 1870: "Concerning the plates, I do say that the angel did show to me the plates containing the Book of Mormon. Further, the translation that I carried to Prof. Anthon was copied from these same plates; also, that the Professor did testify to it being a correct translation. I do firmly believe and do know

that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God; for without I know he could not [have] had that gift; neither could he have translated the same. I can give if you require it one hundred witnesses to the proof of the Book of Mormon.”<sup>17</sup>

David Whitmer wrote *An Address to All Believers in Christ* in 1881 in response to what he felt was a misrepresentation of his testimony by John Murphy. Echoing the statement of the Three Witnesses in the Book of Mormon, David wrote:

A PROCLAMATION. Unto all Nations, Kindred Tongues and People, unto whom these presents shall come:

It having been represented by one John Murphy, of Polo, Caldwell County, Mo., that I, in a 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 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.<sup>18</sup>

As the last surviving of the Three Witnesses, David Whitmer spoke for all of them in 1887: “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 was present at the deathbed of Oliver Cowdery, and his last words were, *Brother David, be true to your testimony of the Book of Mormon.*”<sup>19</sup>

Besides their formal testimony in the Book of Mormon, three of the Eight Witnesses left known written accounts of their experience. Hiram Page was whipped in Jackson County, Missouri, in 1833 for his profession

of Mormonism. He left activity in the Church in 1838 and in 1847 wrote to William McLellin. “As to the Book of Mormon,” he affirmed,

it would be doing injustice to myself and to the work of God of the last days, to say that I could know a thing to be true in 1830, and know the same thing to be false in 1847. To say my mind was so treacherous that I had forgotten what I saw. To say that a man of Joseph’s ability, who at that time did not know how to pronounce the word Nephi, could write a book of six hundred pages, as correct as the Book of Mormon, without supernatural power. And to say that those holy angels who came and showed themselves to me as I was walking through the field, to confirm me in the work of the Lord of the last days—three of whom came to me afterwards and sang an hymn in their own pure language. Yea, it would be treating the God of heaven with contempt to deny these testimonies, with too many others to mention here.<sup>20</sup>

After escaping from jail in Liberty, Missouri, Hyrum Smith, another of the Eight Witnesses, wrote in 1839, “Having given my testimony to the world of the truth of the book of Mormon, the renewal of the everlasting covenant, and the establishment of the Kingdom of heaven, in these last days; and having been brought into great afflictions and distresses for the same, I thought that it might be strengthening to my beloved brethren, to give them a short account of my sufferings, for the truth’s sake.” As part of the subsequent narrative, Hyrum summed up what he had suffered and why. “I thank God that I felt a determination to die, rather than deny the things which my eyes had seen, which my hands had handled, and which I had borne testimony to, wherever my lot had been cast; and I can assure my beloved brethren that I was enabled to bear as strong a testimony, when nothing but death presented itself, as ever I did in my life.”<sup>21</sup>

Joseph Smith’s history mentions that John Whitmer, another of the Eight Witnesses, assisted much in scribing the Book of Mormon translation.<sup>22</sup> Writing subsequently as the Church’s historian, John wrote in third person that his brother “David Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, and Martin Harris, were the Three Witnesses, whose names are attached to the book of Mormon according to the prediction of the Book, who knew and saw, for a surety, into whose presence the angel of God came and showed them the plates, the ball, the directors, etc. And also other witnesses even eight viz:

Christian Whitmer, Jacob Whitmer, John Whitmer, and Peter Whitmer Jr., Hiram Page, Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, and Samuel H. Smith, are the men to whom Joseph Smith, Jr., showed the plates, these witnesses names go forth also of the truth of this work in the last days. To the convincing or condemning of this generation in the last days.”<sup>23</sup>

In 1836 John wrote further: “To say that the Book of Mormon is a revelation from God, I have no hesitancy, but with all confidence have signed my name to it as such.” This was John’s last editorial in his role as editor of the Church’s newspaper, and he asked his readers’ indulgence in speaking freely on the subject. “I desire to testify,” he wrote, “to all that will come to the knowledge of this address; that I have most assuredly seen the plates from whence the book of Mormon is translated, and that I have handled these plates, and know of a surety that Joseph Smith, jr. has translated the book of Mormon by the gift and power of God.”<sup>24</sup> Three decades later, John and his brother David were the only two surviving Book of Mormon witnesses. At that point, just two years before his own death, John responded to an inquirer about their testimony. John replied, “I have never heard that any one of the three or eight witnesses ever denied the testimony that they have borne to the Book as published in the first edition of the Book of Mormon.”<sup>25</sup>

These first-person statements by Book of Mormon witnesses are far outnumbered by hearsay statements of persons reporting what they heard about the testimonies. Hearsay is problematic evidence. It is, by nature, unverifiable. Furthermore, the hearsay accounts are inconsistent. What witnesses reportedly said in one account differs from the next. Historians value hearsay for what it reveals about how people and events were interpreted by others, but it is not reliable evidence for interpreting people and events in the first place. The secondary evidence is not reliable for reconstructing the experiences of the witnesses or for establishing what they actually said. Though much of the hearsay evidence unequivocally declares that the witnesses saw and or hefted the plates, some of it obfuscates that point. The hearsay accounts show that one’s faith in the Book of Mormon witnesses or lack thereof is based not simply on hearing the witnesses’ testimonies but on how one chooses to receive and understand their testimonies.

Believers in the Book of Mormon heard the witnesses declare that the plates were real and that the Book of Mormon was true. Sally Bradford Parker wrote of hearing Hyrum Smith: “He said he had but two hands and

two eyes. He said he had seen the plates with his eyes and handled them with his hands.”<sup>26</sup> Theodore Turley wrote of hearing John Whitmer say, “I now say I handled those plates. there was fine engravings on both sides. I handled them.”<sup>27</sup> Joshua Davis heard John declare, “I, with my own eyes, saw the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated.”<sup>28</sup> Daniel Tyler heard Samuel Smith say that “he had handled them and seen the engravings thereon.”<sup>29</sup> One remembered hearing Martin Harris say, “I know that Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God. . . . 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.”<sup>30</sup>

A wide variety of nonbelievers in the Book of Mormon (including newspaper writers, Protestant missionaries, and Latter-day Saints who had lost their faith) claim they heard the witnesses declare something other than that the plates were real and that the Book of Mormon was true. In 1838, dissenting Church members Stephen Burnett and Warren Parrish wrote of hearing Martin Harris deny that he had seen the plates with his natural eyes or that the Eight Witnesses saw them at all or that Joseph ever had them.<sup>31</sup> Parrish wrote that Martin Harris “has come out at last, and says he never saw the plates, from which the book purports to have been translated, except in vision; and he further says that any man who says he has seen them in any other way is a liar, Joseph not excepted.”<sup>32</sup> John Murphy wrote that he had interviewed David Whitmer, who acknowledged that his witness was nothing more than an impression.<sup>33</sup>

Book of Mormon witnesses responded to these hearings with corrections. When he learned how Burnett and Parrish were interpreting his statements, Martin Harris “arose & said he was sorry for any man who rejected the Book of Mormon for he knew it was true.”<sup>34</sup> He maintained his faith and understood what he had said differently than Stephen Burnett and Warren Parrish did, as Burnett acknowledged. “No man ever heard me in any way deny . . . the administration of the angel that showed me the plates,” Harris wrote later.<sup>35</sup> David Whitmer wrote and published a pamphlet in response to Murphy in 1881, in which he affirmed how literally he believed his testimony as stated in the Book of Mormon. That same year Whitmer wrote “A Few Corrections” to the editor of the *Kansas City Journal*, which had misrepresented him.<sup>36</sup>

As an early convert in Ohio, Stephen Burnett felt the Holy Spirit and a desire to take the gospel to his relatives. He led his parents into the church and responded successfully to revealed mission calls (see D&C 75:35; 80). He “was the first one that sounded the glad tidings of the everlasting gospel” in Dalton, New Hampshire.<sup>37</sup> But by 1838 Burnett felt completely disillusioned. He felt he had tried but failed to regain the Holy Spirit. Finally he “proclaimed all revelation lies” and left the church.<sup>38</sup> Burnett wrote candidly to Lyman Johnson, explaining his decisions. “My heart is sickened within me when I reflect upon the manner in which we with many of this Church have been led & the losses which we have sustained all by means of two men in whom we placed implicit confidence,” Burnett wrote, referring to Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon. He felt that Joseph had used his influence for financial gain and had prophesied lies. He continued his compelling story:

I have reflected long and deliberately upon the history of this church & weighed the evidence for & against it—lo[a]th to give it up—but when I came to hear Martin Harris state in a public congregation that he never saw the plates with his natural eyes only in vision or imagination, neither Oliver nor David & also that the eight witnesses never saw them & hesitated to sign that instrument for that reason, but were persuaded to do it, the last pedestal gave way, in my view our foundations was sapped & the entire superstructure fell [in] a heap of ruins, I therefore three week[s] since in the Stone Chapel gave a full history of the church since I became acquainted with it, the false preaching & prophecy of Joseph together with the reasons why I took the course which I was resolved to do, and renounced the Book of Mormon with the whole scene of lying and deception practiced by J. S & S. R in this church, believing as I verily do, that it is all a wicked deception palmed upon us unawares[.] I was followed by W. Par[r]ish Luke Johnson & John Boynton all of who concurred with me, after we were done speaking M. Harris arose & said he was sorry for any man who rejected the Book of Mormon for he knew it was true.<sup>39</sup>

Burnett gave us a rich metaphor by describing his faith as a building whose foundation had been shattered, leaving only a heap of ruins. Those who share his experience know what he means.

One strategy for coping with the devastating loss is to pull what remains from the heap of ruins and try to rebuild something sensible. Burnett and

others since have dug into the pile of statements by and about the Book of Mormon witnesses and fashioned an alternative way to interpret the testimonies of the eleven eyewitnesses. Those with shattered faith in their own spiritual experiences doubt that the witnesses had authentic spiritual experiences either, and therefore seek alternative explanations for their testimonies. Acknowledging that “Harris and others . . . still believe the Book of Mormon,” Burnett wrote, “I am well satisfied for myself that *if* the witnesses whose names are attached to the Book of Mormon never saw the plates as Martin admits that there can be nothing brought to prove that any such thing ever existed for it is said on the 171st page of the book of covenants [D&C 17:5] that the three should testify that they had seen the plates even as J[oseph] S[mith] Jr. & *if* they saw them spiritually or in vision with their eyes shut—J S Jr never saw them any other light way & *if* so the plates were only visionary.”<sup>40</sup>

One is struck by the three instances of *if* in Burnett’s statement. He built his interpretation of the witnesses on hypotheticals: *if* the witnesses never saw the plates as he believed Martin Harris had said, and *if* Joseph never saw them, then they were only visionary. After listening to Burnett expound that rationale, Martin Harris asserted unequivocally, in contrast, that the plates were real.” Harris did not wish to be understood as Burnett understood him.<sup>41</sup>

The hearsay accounts like Burnett’s have been useful to others for building a believable alternative to the straightforward statements of the witnesses. Grant Palmer wrote of his own youthful faith being undermined by later doubts. His chapter on the Book of Mormon witnesses expresses his doubts about the authenticity of accounts by the witnesses in the Book of Mormon and instead draws on the hearsay accounts, where he finds some threads that enable him to conclude that the witnesses thought they had experienced the plates but had not. This explanation is appealing to some because it does not completely dismiss the compelling testimonies of the Book of Mormon witnesses but it categorizes them as unreal.

Those who suspect their own spiritual eyes of playing tricks on them find it hard to believe that the witnesses saw anything with their spiritual eyes. To these souls, promises that the witnesses would see the plates with eyes of faith sound foreign, and are best regarded as artifacts of a bygone era when lots of people thought they could see things that were not real after

all. They cannot trust the Book of Mormon witnesses. They literally find it easier to trust hearsay than direct statements. Grant Palmer and Dan Vogel repeatedly choose to privilege selected hearsay more than the direct statements of the witnesses.<sup>42</sup> Such choices led Palmer to conclude that the witnesses “*seem to have* seen the records with their *spiritual eyes* and inspected them in the context of a vision, *apparently* never having actually possessed or touched them” (emphasis added).<sup>43</sup> In their formal statements, their other direct statements, and in the hearsay accounts, the Book of Mormon witnesses did not speak that way. They did not say they had *apparently* seen or *seem* to have seen. Over and over, they testify that they saw. When their statements were misrepresented, being *interpreted* as visionary and therefore not real, they reasserted the authenticity of their experience. Some of them are on record expressing certainty in the reality of the plates and their divine translation. None of them is on record expressing doubt in those things. The skeptics selectively dismiss the earliest, most straightforward witness statements and favor accounts like Burnett’s hypothetical alternative. They reject direct evidence and selectively accept some of the hearsay. They obfuscate.

The historical record describes a rich mix of what one scholar called the Book of Mormon’s “artifactual reality” beheld with eyes of faith. Indeed, the statements of the Three and Eight Witnesses seem to purposefully mix and merge these ways of knowing and verifying. Regardless of how one decides to understand their words, the witnesses left us no evidence that they doubted the reality of what they experienced supernaturally as well as physically and tangibly. As Terryl L. Givens observed:

One historian has written of Martin Harris’s alleged equivocation about his vision, pointing out that he claimed to have seen the plates with his “spiritual eyes,” rather than his natural ones, and thus that he “repeatedly admitted the internal, subjective nature of his visionary experience.” It is not clear, however, that visionaries in any age have acquiesced to such facile dichotomies. . . . Paul himself referred to one of his own experiences as being “in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell” (2 Cor. 12:3). He obviously considered such a distinction irrelevant to the validity of his experience and the reality of what he saw. It is hard to imagine a precedent more like Harris’s own versions in which he emphatically asserts until the day of his death the actuality of the angel who “came down from heaven” and who “brought and laid [the plates] before our eyes, that we

beheld and saw,” while also reporting, *according to others*, that he “never claimed to have seen them with his natural eyes, only with spiritual vision.”<sup>44</sup>

Givens clearly discerns the quality of direct versus hearsay evidence. Meanwhile, Vogel, who chooses to believe the hearsay more than the direct statements, acknowledges his need for “qualifying verbs and adverbs” because his “analysis is speculative or conjectural.”<sup>45</sup>

When it comes to the Book of Mormon witnesses, the question is which historical documents is one willing to trust? Those whose faith has been deeply shaken sometimes find it easier to trust lesser evidence rather than the best sources or the overwhelming preponderance of the evidence. But that choice is not a foregone conclusion. It is neither inevitable nor irreversible. William McLellin believed the witnesses. He met three of them—David Whitmer, Martin Harris, and Hyrum Smith—when they passed his home in Illinois in August 1831. He walked several miles with them and “talked much” with them and other Saints for several days that summer. Of August 19, William wrote, “I took Hiram the brother of Joseph and we went into the woods and set down and talked together about 4 hours. I inquired into the particulars of the coming forth of the record, of the rise of the church and of its progress and upon the testimonies given to him.” Of the next morning, McLellin wrote, “I rose early and betook myself to earnest prayr to God to direct me into truth; and from all the light that I could gain by examinations searches and researches I was bound as an honest man to acknowledge the truth and Validity of the book of Mormon.” He asked Hyrum Smith to baptize him.

William McLellin later served several missions, some as an Apostle, before becoming deeply disaffected later in the 1830s. He spent half a century frustrated by what he simultaneously loved and hated about Mormonism before receiving a letter from a Salt Lake City anti-Mormon named James Cobb, who wrote assuming he would find an ally. McLellin wrote back: “When I thoroughly examine a subject and settle my mind, then higher evidence must be introduced before I change. I have set to my seal that the Book of Mormon is a true, divine record and it will require more evidence than I have ever seen to ever shake me relative to its purity I have read many ‘Exposes.’ I have seen all their arguments. But my evidences

are above them all!” He explained further, “When a man goes at the Book of M. he touches the apple of my eye. He fights against truth—against purity—against light—against the purist, or one of the truest, purist books on earth. I have more confidence in the Book of Mormon than any book of this wide earth.” McLellin described his own repeated readings of the Book of Mormon before noting his personal experiences with some of the witnesses. “When I first joined the church in 1831,” he wrote, “soon I became acquainted with all the Smith family and the Whitmer family, and I heard all their testimonies, which agreed in the main points; and I believed them then and I believe them yet. But I don’t believe the many stories (contradictory) got up since, for I individually know many of them are false.”<sup>46</sup>

It is hard to imagine someone better positioned to evaluate the testimonies of the Book of Mormon witnesses than William McLellin. He spent much of his life disaffected from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and had no interest in sustaining it. Yet as he wrote of his 1831 experience with the Book and its witnesses, he was bound by the evidence to acknowledge its truth and validity. He not only knew the testimonies of the Book of Mormon witnesses, he knew some of the witnesses personally and interviewed them intimately. He was no fool, no dupe. And he was positioned to know whether the witnesses were fools, dupes, or conspirators. So well informed, McLellin chose to believe the testimonies of the witnesses were truthful.

Why not make the same satisfying choice? Why not opt to believe in the direct statements of the witnesses and their demonstrably lifelong commitments to the Book of Mormon? This choice asks us to have faith in the marvelous, the possibility of angels, spiritual eyes, miraculous translation, and gold plates, but it does not require us to discount the historical record or create hypothetical ways to reconcile the compelling Book of Mormon witnesses with our own skepticism.

## Notes

This is an expanded version of an article published as “Evaluating the Book of Mormon Witnesses,” *Religious Educator* 11, no. 2 (2010): 37–49.

1. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June*

- 1831, vol. 1 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2013), 58–60 (hereafter *JSP*, D1).
2. *JSP*, D1:82–85; Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1834*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman, 314n17 (hereafter *JSP*, H1).
  3. Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–45, book 8, [11].
  4. Joseph's testimony is in his History, 1838–1856, Vol. A-1, Church History Library, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-circa-june-1839-circa-1841-draft-2?p=31&highlight=testimony%20of%20three%20witnesses>.
  5. Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris, Testimony of Three Witnesses, Palmyra, New York, late June 1829, in Book of Mormon Printer's Manuscript, 463–64, handwriting of Oliver Cowdery, Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/testimony-of-three-witnesses-late-june-1829?p=1&highlight=testimony%20of%20three%20witnesses>.
  6. *JSP*, H1:317–21.
  7. Christian Whitmer, Jacob Whitmer, Peter Whitmer Jr., John Whitmer, Hiram Page, Joseph Smith Sr., Hyrum Smith, and Samuel H. Smith, Testimony of Eight Witnesses, Palmyra, New York, late June 1829, in Book of Mormon Printer's Manuscript, page 464, Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/testimony-of-eight-witnesses-late-june-1829?p=1&highlight=testimony%20of%20eight%20witnesses>.
  8. Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–45, book 8, [11]–book 9, [2].
  9. Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–45, book 9, [1].
  10. Dan Vogel, "The Validity of the Witnesses' Testimonies," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 79–80.
  11. See Moses 1:11; Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2000, 2:256 (hereafter *EMD*). Emanuel Swedenborg described seeing visions "not seen with the eyes of my body, but with the eyes of my spirit." *Miscellaneous Theological Works of Emanuel Swedenborg* (New York: American Swedenborg, 1871), 391.
  12. Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise and Progress of Mormonism* (1867), in *EMD*, 3:87–128. Several hearsay accounts declare that Harris testified to seeing the plates with spiritual eyes or eyes of faith. *EMD*, 2:255–56. Dissenters in 1838 cited Harris's declaration that he never saw the plates with his natural eyes. Stephen Burnett to Lyman E. Johnson, Orange Township, Geauga County, Ohio, April 15, 1838, MSS 155, box 2, folder 2, Letterbook 2, pages 64–66, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

13. Burnett to Johnson, April 15, 1838, 64–66.
14. *EMD*, 1:468–72. Grant Palmer follows this argument and reading of the evidence, leading him to the conclusion that “the witnesses seem to have seen the records with their *spiritual eyes* and inspected them in the context of a vision, apparently never having actually possessed or touched them.” Palmer, *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 207; emphasis added.
15. Joseph Smith’s 1839 draft history and 1839 history are in *Papers of Joseph Smith: Autobiographical and Historical Writings*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:235–38, 294–98.
16. Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy’s Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith’s Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 453.
17. Martin Harris to Mr. Emerson, Sir, November 23, 1870, in *True Latter Day Saints’ Herald*, 1875, 630.
18. David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, MO: David Whitmer, 1887), 8–9.
19. Whitmer, *Address to All Believers in Christ*, 8.
20. Hiram Page to William McLellin, May 30, 1847, in *Ensign of Liberty*, January 1848, 63.
21. Hiram Smith, “Communications,” *Times and Seasons*, November 1839, 21.
22. *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:234.
23. Book of John Whitmer, chapter 6, Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri, 25; spelling standardized.
24. *Messenger and Advocate*, March 1836, 286–87.
25. John Whitmer to Mark H. Forest [Forscutt], March 5, 1876, Community of Christ Archives, Independence, Missouri; quoted in Richard Lloyd Anderson, “Attempts to Redefine the Experience of the Eight Witnesses,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 18–31.
26. Sally Bradford Parker to John Kempton, August 26, 1838, Doris Whittier Pierce Collection, Delaware County Historical Society, Delaware, Ohio, in Janiece Johnson, “The Scriptures Is a Fulfilling: Sally Parker’s Weave,” *BYU Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 115; spelling and punctuation standardized.
27. Theodore Turley’s Memorandums, Church History Library.
28. “A Visit to John Whitmer,” *Deseret Evening News*, April 12, 1875.
29. Daniel Tyler, “Incidents of Experience,” *Scraps of Biography: Tenth Book in the Faith-Promoting Series* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1883), 23.
30. William Harrison Homer, “The Passing of Martin Harris,” *Improvement Era*, March 1926, 470.
31. Burnett to Johnson, 64–66.
32. *Evangelist* (Carthage, Ohio), October 1, 1838, 226.
33. “Murphy on Mormonism,” *Hamiltonian*, January 21, 1881.
34. Burnett to Johnson, 64–66.
35. Martin Harris to H. B. Emerson, January 1871, in *Saints’ Herald*, April 1, 1876, 198.

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36. Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews* (Provo, UT: Grandin, 1991), 71–73.
37. Levi B. Wilder to the editor, February 15, 1835, in *Messenger and Advocate*, February 1835, 75.
38. Joseph Smith, editorial, *Elders' Journal*, August 1838, 57.
39. Burnett to Johnson, 64–66.
40. Burnett to Johnson, 64–66; emphasis added.
41. Burnett to Johnson, 64–66.
42. Vogel, “The Validity of the Witnesses’ Testimonies,” 79–121.
43. Palmer, *Insider’s View*, 207, see also 175–76; emphasis added.
44. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 41–42, emphasis added; the two former quotations come from the Testimony of Three Witnesses in the front of the Book of Mormon, and the latter one is the statement of Reuben P. Harmon, made in about 1885, cited in Vogel, *EMD*, 2:255. Note how Givens, unlike Palmer, distinguishes between firsthand and hearsay accounts.
45. Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), xvii.
46. William E. McLellin to James T. Cobb, Independence, Missouri, August 14, 1880, Manuscripts Collection, New York Public Library, in *The William E. McLellin Papers, 1854–1880*, ed. Stan Larson and Samuel J. Passey (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2007), 521–23.

