

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MORMONISM



Edited by
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of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

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orities for retranslation, and producing new editions more in conformity with the English format.

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HUGH G. STOCKS

BOOK OF MORMON WITNESSES

Beginning with the first edition of 1830, the Book of Mormon has generally contained two sets of testimonies—the “Testimony of Three Witnesses” and the “Testimony of Eight Witnesses.” When Joseph SMITH first obtained the GOLD PLATES, he was told to show them to no one. As translation progressed, he and those assisting him learned, both in the pages of the Book and by additional revelation, that three special witnesses would know, by the power of God, “that these things are true” and that several besides himself would see the plates and testify to their existence (Ether 5:2–4; 2 Ne. 27:12–13; D&C 5:11–13). The testimonies of the witnesses affirm that these things occurred.

The witnesses were men known for truthfulness and sobriety. Though each of the Three Witnesses was eventually excommunicated from the Church (two returned), none ever denied or retracted his published testimony. Each reaffirmed at every opportunity the veracity of his testimony and the reality of what he had seen and experienced.

A June 1829 revelation confirmed that Oliver COWDERY, David WHITMER, and Martin HARRIS would be the Three Witnesses (D&C 17). Soon thereafter, they, with Joseph Smith, retired to the woods near FAYETTE, NEW YORK, and prayed for the promised divine manifestation. The “Testimony of Three Witnesses” summarizes the supernatural event that followed, when an angel appeared and showed them the plates and engravings and they heard the Lord declare that the Book of Mormon was “translated by the gift and power of God.” They said that the same divine voice “commanded us that we should bear record of it.”

Joseph Smith’s mother later recounted Joseph’s great relief at no longer being the sole witness of the divine experiences of the restoration

(see LAW OF WITNESSES). That others had also seen an angel and “will have to testify to the truth of what I have said for now they know for themselves” relieved him of a great burden (Lucy Smith Preliminary Manuscript, Church Archives).

Soon afterward, at the Smith farm in New York, eight others were allowed to view and handle the plates: Christian Whitmer, Jacob Whitmer, Peter Whitmer, Jr., John Whitmer, Hiram Page, Joseph Smith, Sr., Hyrum Smith, and Samuel H. Smith. Their signed “Testimony of Eight Witnesses” reports that Joseph Smith showed these eight men the metal plates, which they “hefted” while turning the individual “leaves” and examining the engravings of “curious workmanship.” In 1829 the word *curious* carried the meaning of the Latin word for “careful,” suggesting that the plates were wrought “with care and art.” Five of these Eight Witnesses remained solidly with the Church; John Whitmer was excommunicated in 1838, and his brother Jacob Whitmer and brother-in-law Hiram Page then became inactive.

Most of these eleven witnesses were members of the large Smith and Whitmer families—families who had assisted in guarding and in translating the ancient record. Not surprisingly, other family members reported indirect contact with the plates and the translation. Young William Smith once helped his brother Joseph carry the plates wrapped in a work frock. Joseph’s wife Emma SMITH felt the pliable plates as she dusted around the cloth-covered record on her husband’s translating table. Burdened with daily chores and caring for her family and visitors working on the translation, Mother Whitmer (Peter Whitmer, Sr.’s, wife) was shown the plates by a heavenly messenger to assure her that the work was of God.

Martin Harris, a prosperous farmer of Palmyra, New York, who had long sought a religion fulfilling biblical prophecy, assisted with the translation previous to his experience as a witness. In 1828 he spent two months transcribing as Joseph Smith dictated the first major segment of Book of Mormon translation—116 handwritten pages. After Martin lost these pages, he wrote no more for the Prophet, but he later financed the publication of the book.

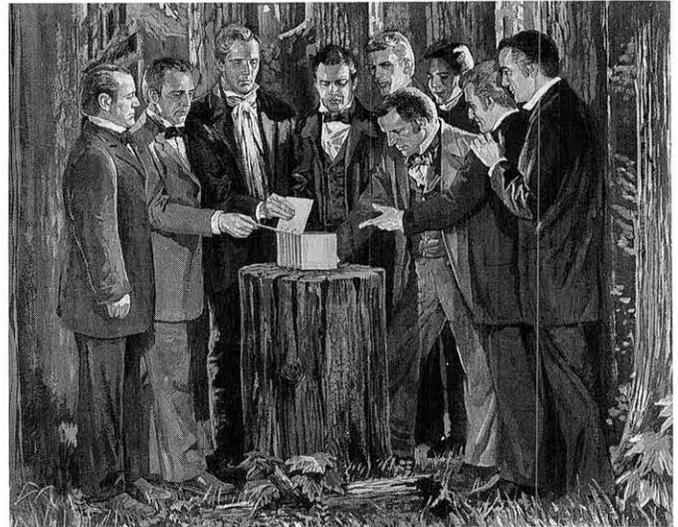
Oliver Cowdery was the main scribe for the Book of Mormon. A schoolteacher, he learned of the gold plates and the translation while boarding with Joseph Smith’s parents near Palmyra, New York. In early April 1829, Oliver walked from the

Smith home to HARMONY, PENNSYLVANIA, where Joseph Smith was translating. On the way Oliver visited his friend David Whitmer, who also developed an intense interest in the new scripture. When persecution increased in Harmony, David came as requested and moved Joseph and Oliver to his family farm near Fayette (more than 100 miles away), about June 1.

Joseph Smith later recalled the insistent pleading of Harris, Whitmer, and Cowdery after they learned that three would be permitted to see the plates. The June 1829 revelation confirmed that they would be the Three Witnesses—and that they would then testify both from firsthand knowledge and “by the power of God” to the end “that my servant Joseph Smith, Jr., may not be destroyed” (D&C 17:3–4). Of the perhaps 200 recorded interviews with the Three Witnesses, a significant percentage stress the spiritual intensity of the witnesses as they described the angel and the plates. By themselves, the Prophet’s reputation and claims were vulnerable, but the testimony of additional reputable, solemn witnesses who shared a divine experience added credibility.

Lucy Smith’s autobiography records the overwhelming gratitude of the Three Witnesses as they returned to the Whitmer house after sharing this experience. Joseph Smith’s own history gives the fullest details of the event: repeated prayers followed by a vision given simultaneously to the Prophet, Cowdery, and Whitmer, and soon after a nearly identical vision experienced by the Prophet with Harris. According to Joseph, the intense glory of God enveloped the natural surroundings, and in this divine light the angel appeared, carefully displayed the plates, specifically counseled David Whitmer—the only one of the three who did not eventually return to the Church—to endure to the end, and the voice of God declared the book divine (HC 1:54–56).

By early 1838, disagreements on Church policies brought disaffection and excommunication for each of the Three Witnesses, and they separated; Cowdery died in 1850, Harris in 1875, and Whitmer in 1888. Throughout their lives, each witness freely answered questions about his firsthand experience with the angel and the plates. Obviously not relying on Joseph Smith’s account, which was not written until the months following their excommunication, each spoke spontaneously and independently; yet the details harmonized with each other and with Joseph Smith’s history.



Joseph Smith and the Eight Witnesses, by Harold T. (Dale) Kilbourn (1984), illustrates Joseph Smith allowing the eight witnesses to touch the gold plates from which the Book of Mormon was 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.”

The alienation of the witnesses from the Church stemmed largely from conflicts regarding authority. After receiving revelation, the Three Witnesses felt they shared equally with Joseph Smith in foundational experiences, and their certainty about a past vision contributed to their inflexibility concerning future revelations. They sided with the Prophet’s critics who reacted negatively to the failure of the Kirtland Safety Society (see KIRTLAND ECONOMY), and they opposed Joseph Smith’s vigorous doctrinal and administrative leadership. After their excommunication, each felt deep rejection, resulting, predictably, in their harsh criticisms of Church leadership. Even in these circumstances, each of the Three Witnesses continued to maintain vigorously the authenticity of their published testimony. None expressed any doubt as to what they had testified. Both Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris returned to the Church at the end of their lives; David Whitmer retained religious independence but to the end aggressively defended the Book of Mormon.

Skeptics have discounted the “Testimony of Three Witnesses” on the ground of collusion or deception. Yet each of the three was a respected and independent member of non-Mormon society,

active in his community. Their lives, fully documented, clearly demonstrate their honesty and intelligence. David Whitmer repeatedly reacted against charges of possible “delusion.” To one skeptic, he responded: “Of course we were in the spirit when we had the view . . . but we were in the body also, and everything was as natural to us, as it is at any time” (Anderson, p. 87). Perhaps their later alienation makes them even more credible as witnesses, for no collusion could have withstood their years of separation from the Church and from each other.

The testimonies of the Three and Eight Witnesses balance the supernatural and the natural, the one stressing the angel and heavenly voice, the other the existence of a tangible record on gold plates. To the end of their lives, each of the Three said he had seen the plates, and each of the Eight insisted that he had handled them. Most of the Eight and all of the Three Witnesses reiterated their Book of Mormon testimonies just before death. Together with Joseph Smith they fulfill Nephi’s prophecy: “They shall testify to the truth of the book and the things therein” (2 Ne. 27:12).

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RICHARD LLOYD ANDERSON

BOOK OF MOSES

The book of Moses is an extract of several chapters from Genesis in the JOSEPH SMITH TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE (JST) and constitutes one of the texts in the PEARL OF GREAT PRICE. The Prophet Joseph

SMITH began an inspired revision of the Old Testament in June 1830 to restore and clarify vital points of history and doctrine missing from the Bible.

As for other ancient books, the original title of the first chapter of Moses may have been its opening line, “The words of God” (Moses 1:1). The account deals with Moses’ revelation, and beginning with chapter 2 largely parallels Genesis 1:1–6:13. The revelation came to Moses after his call to deliver the Israelites from bondage in Egypt (Moses 1:26). Much of it concerns God’s dealings with Adam and Eve and their immediate posterity following their expulsion from the GARDEN OF EDEN, a topic on which the current text of Genesis is silent. Structurally, a series of orienting visions (chap. 1) is followed by a revelation of the Creation and its aftermath (2:1–8:1). Embedded within this revelation is an extended account of ENOCH (6:25–51; 7:1–8:1), which itself quotes from a record of Adam (6:51–68). A narrative concerning Enoch’s descendants, chiefly Noah, appears next (8:2–30).

An outline of the book of Moses follows:

Chapter 1. God reveals himself and his creations to Moses; Satan tries to deceive Moses; God’s work and glory are characterized.

Chapter 2. God reveals to Moses—and commands him to write—the creation of the HEAVENS and the EARTH; man has dominion over other living things.

Chapter 3. All things were created in a spirit state before being created naturally on the earth; man and woman are created in God’s image.

Chapter 4. Satan, who had rebelled in the pre-earthly council, tempts Eve; Adam and Eve transgress and are expelled from the Garden, becoming subject to death (see DEVIL).

Chapter 5. Children are born to Adam and Eve; Adam offers animal sacrifice as a type and shadow of the anticipated Savior’s atoning sacrifice; the gospel of the future Jesus Christ is preached; Cain rebels, and wickedness spreads.

Chapter 6. Adam and his faithful posterity have a “pure and undefiled” language, both written and spoken, and keep records (see ADAMIC LANGUAGE); Enoch preaches the word of God and proclaims that the plan of salvation was revealed to Adam; faith, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost are taught.

Chapter 7. God reveals himself to Enoch, who preaches and establishes the city of ZION; Enoch foresees the coming of Christ, his atonement and his resurrection; Enoch foresees the