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Direct External Evidences - The Three Witnesses - Subsequent Life and Testimonies - Martin Harris

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CHAPTER XVIII.

EXTERNAL EVIDENCES—TESTIMONY OF THE THREE WITNESSES—SUBSEQUENT LIFE AND TESTIMONIES.

MARTIN HARRIS.

The experience of Martin Harris, with reference to his relations with the Church was somewhat different from that of Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer. He was never excommunicated from the Church as they were, but when there was a general movement of the Church from Kirtland to Missouri, early in the summer of 1838—at which time the Saints may be said to have abandoned Kirtland—Martin Harris remained behind to live in Ohio, separated from the Church. It is evident, too, that his mind became somewhat darkened; for after the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph, in 1844, when various persons arose claiming the right of leadership in the Church, Martin Harris for a time supported the claims of James J. Strang, and under the auspices of the latter's pseudo-church organization, went to England on a mission, in 1846; but he did not become very active in his missionary efforts, and soon returned to Kirtland, where he resided for many years, up to 1870, in fact. During all these years that he was separated from the Church, years of much spiritual darkness for him respecting many things pertaining to the great work of God, he nevertheless steadfastly held to the truth of his testimony to the Book of Mormon. However vacillating in other matters, in this he was firm and immovable. He did see the angel; he did see the plates, and the attendant sacred things; he was overshadowed by a glorious light, from the midst of which he heard the voice of God saying that the record had been translated by the gift and power of God. This testimony he never denied, but

reaffirmed it over and over again. Finally, like Oliver Cowdery, he joined the Church and died in the faith. The circumstances surrounding this last even of his life, briefly told, are as follows: Elder Edward Stevenson, for many years a prominent traveling Elder of the Church, and who a few years before his death was made a member of the First Council of the Seventy—the third general quorum of the Church—became especially interested in Martin Harris. Elder Stevenson, when a boy in Michigan, in 1833, heard Martin Harris, who was on a mission at that time, testify to the appearance of the angel and his having seen the plates of the Book of Mormon. The testimony had great effect on young Stevenson's mind; and when, in 1869—thirty-six years later—he found Martin Harris living at Kirtland, naturally his interest in the Witness revived. After Elder Stevenson returned to Utah, from his eastern mission, he kept up a correspondence with Martin Harris, and the latter finally expressed a wish to visit Utah and rejoin his former associates. Elder Stevenson raised the means by subscription, went east and brought back with him Mr. Harris, arriving in Salt Lake on the 30th of August, 1870.[§] Mr. Harris, addressed a large gathering of Saints in Salt Lake City on the Sunday following, September the 4th, reaffirming his testimony to the truth of the Book of Mormon, a thing he did repeatedly, both before public assemblies and in private conversation. He was received into the Church on renewing his covenants in baptism and reconfirmation. After spending some time in Salt Lake City, Mr. Harris moved to Smithfield, in Cache county, Utah; and subsequently he moved to Clarkston, where he continued to live at the home of his son, Martin Harris, Jr., until his death, which occurred

[§]See Stevenson's account of Harris' return to the Church, Mill. Star, Vol. XLIV., pp. 78, 86, 87.

on the 10th of July, 1875. In these later years of his life he continued to reaffirm his testimony to the truth of the Book of Mormon. It was the one theme above all others which occupied his mind and of which he loved to speak. A few hours before his death the bishop of Clarkston, Simon Smith, called upon him, and as the bishop drew near his bed the now aged Witness (he was in his ninety-third year), stretched out his hand with the remark: "Bishop, I am going." The Bishop, in answer, said he had something of importance to tell him about the Book of Mormon, viz., that at the request of Indians in Central America the Book of Mormon was about to be published in the Spanish language. "Upon hearing this," says his son, Martin Harris, Jr., in his letter describing the incident to George A. Smith, the Church historian—"Upon hearing this, father brightened up, his pulsation improved, and, although very weak, he began to talk as he formerly had done previous to his sickness. He conversed for about two hours, and it seemed that the mere mention of the Book of Mormon put new life into him."ⁱ

Speaking of his condition a little later—the day before his death, in fact—his son says:

He has continued to talk about and testify to the truth of the Book of Mormon, and was in his happiest mood when he could get somebody to listen to his testimony; if he felt dull and weary at times, and some one would come in and open up a conversation and give him an opportunity of talking, he would immediately revive and feel like a young man, for a little while. We begin to think he has borne his last testimony. The last audible words he has spoken were something about the Witnesses of the Book of Mormon, but we could not understand what it was.^j

The next day, July 10th, 1875, he died.

ⁱDeseret News (Weekly) for July 28, 1875.

^jDeseret News (Weekly) for July 28, 1875.