



Type: Book Chapter

---

## Direct External Evidences - Reflections Upon The Testimonies of the Three Witnesses

Author(s): B.H. Roberts

Source: *New Witnesses for God: Volume II - The Book of Mormon*

Published: Salt Lake City; Deseret News, 1909

Pages: 269-278

---

---

## CHAPTER XIX.

### DIRECT EXTERNAL EVIDENCES—REFLECTIONS UPON THE TESTIMONIES OF THE THREE WITNESSES.

The direct evidence of the truth of the Book of Mormon found in the testimony of the Three Witnesses, is now before the reader. The trying circumstances under which the Witnesses persisted in maintaining the truth of that testimony is also known. Neither separation from Joseph Smith as a companion and associate, nor excommunication from the body religious, brought into existence as a sequence, one may say, of the coming forth of the Nephite Record, affected them as Witnesses. In the Church and while out of it they steadfastly maintained what they first published to the world respecting the Book of Mormon. The plates existed, they saw them, and the engravings upon them. An angel of God appeared before them, and laid the records before their eyes. The record was translated by the gift and power of God; for his voice had declared it unto them, hence they knew it. No evidence exists that they ever denied that testimony. They never attempted to resolve the appearance of the angel, the exhibition of the plates, or hearing the voice of God into hallucination of the mind; nor did they ever attempt to refer this really great event to some jugglery on the part of Joseph Smith. They never allowed even the possibility of their being mistaken in the matter. They saw; they heard; the splendor of God shone about them; they felt his presence. Joseph Smith could never have produced such a scene as that which they beheld. They were not deluded. The several incidents making up this great rev-

elation were too palpable to the strongest senses of the mind to admit of any doubt as to their reality. The great revelation was not given in a dream or vision of the night. There was no mysticism about it. Nothing unseemly or occult. It was a simple, straightforward fact that had taken place before their eyes. The visitation of the angel was in the broad light of day. Moreover it occurred after such religious exercises as were worthy to attend upon such an event, viz.: after morning devotional exercises common to all really Christian families of that period—the reading of a scripture lesson, singing a hymn, and prayer; and after arriving at the scene of the revelation, devout prayer again by the Prophet and each of the then-to-be Witnesses. The revelation then followed under the circumstances already detailed, which circumstances were of such a nature that the Witnesses could not be mistaken. There exists no possibility of resolving their testimony into delusion or mistake. Either they spoke the truth in their published Testimony to the world, or they were wilful, conscious liars; bent upon a wicked scheme of deception relative to a subject—religion—which, as it is the most sacred, so should it also be the furthest removed from the practice of deceptions.

Since, then, the possibility of mistake or delusion, is eliminated from the revelation to the Three Witnesses, let us consider the likelihood of conscious, intentional fraud; a deliberately planned deception, through the collusion of Joseph Smith and the Three Witnesses, by which the Book of Mormon was to be palmed off upon mankind as a volume of ancient scripture, and a new Church organization brought into existence.

*First.* It must occur to every unbiased reflector upon the subject that every circumstance is against the likelihood of collusion. The very youthfulness of the men, the Prophet

and the Three Witnesses, is against such a hypothesis. Joseph Smith, at the time of the publication of the Book of Mormon, was about twenty-five years old; Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer were also of that age, all having been born in the year 1805-6. Martin Harris was older, it is true, having been born in the year 1783; but he, as an exception to the youthfulness of the group, will not affect the argument based on this score of youthfulness, as his influence with the rest held no proportion to the difference of age between himself with the other members of the group. Indeed, though the oldest, he was the least influential of the number; and withal so simple-minded in his honesty, that the world, if it knew him, would acquit him of guile, and regard him as a wholly impossible factor in practicing such a monumental delusion upon mankind as foisting the Book of Mormon upon the world as a revelation from God would have been had not the book been true.

I would not argue that young men are incapable of practicing deception, or formulating delusions. My argument is, merely, that they are less likely to be guilty of it than older men. Youth is essentially the period of honesty in men's lives. Youth is not hardened in sin; is not so capable of the grosser wickedness, especially such wickedness as would be involved in the deliberate deception of their fellows. Neither has unholy ambitions fired the soul in youth. The hopes, the aspirations, the ambitions of youth are generally pure and noble. Unholy ambitions as a rule come later. The practice of religious deception is one of the grossest forms of wickedness, and requires the deepest depravity of the human heart to make one capable of it: and since youth is the period of men's lives in which they are least desperately wicked, it follows that the very youthfulness of this group of men we are considering stands against the likelihood of

their combining to deceive mankind in this matter of the revelations of God to them about the Book of Mormon.

*Second.* The persistence of these Witnesses in adhering to their testimony after their connection with Joseph Smith and the Church was severed is strong evidence against the presumption of collusion among these young men to deceive the world. Suppose, for a moment, however, that such a collusion did exist. In that event, if the Three Witnesses fell into transgression—as they evidently did—and violated Church discipline ever so flagrantly, would Joseph Smith dare to break friendship with them by excommunicating them? Would he not, on the contrary, say in his heart: It matters not what these men may do, I dare not raise my hand against them; for if I do they will divulge our secret compact, and I shall be execrated as a vile imposter by the whole world, I shall be repudiated by my own people, and driven out from all society a vagabond. At whatever cost I must cover up their iniquity, lest I myself by them be exposed to shame. Such, doubtless, would have been his course of reasoning; and had he with them conspired to deceive mankind, such, doubtless, is what would have taken place; for I maintain that men who would be base enough to concoct such a deception would also be base enough to expose it and become traitors when they became disaffected towards each other. But nothing of the kind took place. When these men violated the law of God and would not repent and forsake the evil they did, neither Joseph Smith nor the Church would any longer fellowship them, but boldly excommunicated them.

By the act of excommunication, Joseph Smith virtually said to the Three Witnesses: Gentlemen, God has made you witnesses for himself in this age of spiritual darkness and unbelief, but you refuse to keep his laws, therefore we must

withdraw the hand of fellowship from you. This may fill you with anger and malice; you may raise your hand against me and the work of God to destroy it; Satan may put it into your hearts to deny the testimony you have borne; but I know you received that witness from God, I was with you when you received it, I saw the glorious messenger from heaven show you the plates; I, myself heard the voice of God bear record to you that the translation was correct and the work true—now deny that testimony if you dare—this work is of God, and he can sustain it even if you should turn against it; therefore we will not fellowship you in your wickedness—you are cut off from our association—do your worst! That is what, in effect, that action said; but though Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer became the pronounced enemies of Joseph Smith, and sought his overthrow, yet they never denied the testimony they bore to the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. Through all the vicissitudes of life they remained true to that trust committed to them of God. In my opinion they dared not deny that which God had revealed; it drew with it consequences too weighty for them to meet.

Nor should it be matter for wonderment that the Three Witnesses, after receiving such a marvelous revelation from God, and beholding the demonstration of such almighty power, turned away from the Church, and lost their places. Their case does not stand alone. They are not the first servants and witnesses for God that wandered from the path direct, and fell into error and perhaps sin. Seeing a heavenly messenger or hearing the voice of God, by no means places men beyond the power to do evil, nor does it give them immunity from the temptations of the adversary. Noah received revelations from God, and yet after being preserved from the flood, and enjoying other special favors, he so far

forgot himself as to get drunk. David, a man after God's own heart, after enjoying sweet communion with God, and receiving many revelations from him, was at last guilty of the heinous sin of defiling another man's wife, and deliberately planning the injured man's murder! Peter, after going into the mountain and witnessing the glorious ministrations of Moses and Elias to the Messiah, and hearing the voice of God declare that Jesus was his beloved Son, was so weak, under the influence of fear, that he denied having any knowledge of him, and emphasized his denial by cursing and swearing. I do not refer to these incidents in the lives of these characters to weaken the esteem any one may have for them, but to show that neither a revelation from God nor the visitation of angels takes from man the power of doing wrong. It was so in the case of Oliver Cowdery and his fellow witnesses. They transgressed the laws of God, and the Church was in duty bound to withdraw fellowship from them, and did so, confident that God was able to preserve his work though these men should turn traitors, and deny the truth. I repeat that this circumstance—the fact that the Three Witnesses persisted in their testimony though excommunicated from the Church, and their relations with Joseph Smith disrupted, is strong presumptive evidence that there was no collusion among these men to deceive the world by their solemn testimony to the Book of Mormon.

*Third.* The fact that two of the Witnesses, Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris, returned to the Church after long years of separation from it—the former eleven, the latter thirty-three years—is another evidence against the theory of collusion among the witnesses. Surely had they been parties to a wicked scheme of deception in their youth, after separating themselves from it for years, they would not return to it in old age. This suggestion is strengthened when

it is remembered that the religious organization which may be said to have come into existence as a consequence of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon—the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—neither did nor could hold out to them any worldly advantage as a reward for their returning to the body religious. When Oliver Cowdery returned to the Church, in 1848, the great body of the Latter-day Saints were enroute for the west. They were a people scattered and peeled. They were but recently expatriated from their country. They were exiled for conscience sake from a country that boasts of its guarantees of religious freedom. They were wandering in the wilderness, in a solitary way—hungry and thirsty, their souls fainting in them, and they had as yet no certain abiding place. Surely a people thus situated was not a people to come to for worldly advantage. Yet such was the condition of the Church when Oliver Cowdery once more cast his fortune with theirs, humbly confessing all his errors that he might have fellowship with them.

When Martin Harris returned to the Church in 1870, the condition of the Saints had improved somewhat when compared with what the conditions were when Oliver Cowdery returned, but even then the Saints were under the ban of the world's displeasure; as of old, they were the people everywhere spoken against; while throughout the United States, of which the lands the Saints had redeemed from desert wastes was now an integral part, there was arising that storm of vexation which subsequently crystalized into congressional enactments which not only menaced but disturbed the peace of the Saints. To become once more connected with such a people surely promised no worldly advantage; and besides, when Martin Harris returned to the Church the sands of his life had so well nigh run their course—he was then eighty-seven years of age—that worldly considerations



could have but little or no effect upon his actions. Thus the return of these men to the Church, the circumstances considered under which they returned, is certainly strong evidence against the theory of collusion or deception among these Witnesses.

*Fourth.* There is a harmony in things bad as well as in things that are good. As men do not work righteousness that evil may come; so they do not plan evil that good may come. Now, these young men who bear witness to the truth of the Book of Mormon spent the greater part of their lives—especially when actively promulgating the Book of Mormon and the principles it teaches—in bringing to pass righteousness. They were exhorting men to keep the commandments of God; to cease doing evil and to learn to do well. It is admitted on all sides of the controversy that the Book of Mormon is not a bad book in the sense that it approves evil deeds, canonizes the vicious, lauds immorality, or in any way gives countenance or sanction to sin. No; its bitterest enemies are forced to admit that it stands for righteousness absolutely, that everywhere, and in all men it condemns sin. What motive, then prompted these Witnesses to enter into a wicked collusion to deceive mankind in a matter so grave? Did they become villains that they might preach righteousness? Did they wickedly conspire to deceive mankind in order that they might spend their lives in toil, and suffering; and invite the opposition of the world as expressed in ridicule, scorn, vituperation, to say nothing of actual violence through malicious prosecutions before courts, illegal imprisonment, repeated acts of mob violence, ending in house-burning, in drivings, in cruel whippings, in other brutal assaults, and often in outright murder—if not of the Witnesses themselves, then of their dearest friends and neighbors; and, of course, with reference to the Prophet Joseph and his brother

Hyrum (who must have been necessarily members of the conspiracy, if one existed), their persecutions ended in their martyrdom.<sup>k</sup> I refer to the well-known history of these men and to the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for proof that the results just enumerated followed the testimony of the Three Witnesses that they endured all these things in consequence of their testimony. I refer to the whole body of doctrine held by the Church, brought into existence, under God, by Joseph Smith and these Witnesses, to the Book of Mormon in particular; to the periodicals published by the Church, and to the letters and other writings of these men, in proof of the facts that their motives were pure, their purposes honest, their efforts praiseworthy, and having for their sole object the attainment of righteousness by themselves and by their fellowmen. Why, I ask again, should they become rogues and villains only to pursue a course that makes for righteousness, for a more exalted morality, for a higher spiritual life than at the time was known among men? It is incumbent upon those who insist that there was a collusion among these Witnesses to deceive mankind, to prove that the subsequent career of these men was in harmony with that theory; for men do not become rogues that they may establish virtue; nor do wicked men become candidates for martyrdom that righteousness might be established: the harmony existing in things evil, as in things good, forbids us believing such a theory.<sup>l</sup>

It will be no valid answer to this contention to say that if the Three Witnesses cannot be proven to be conscious

---

<sup>k</sup>The argument in this paragraph is suggested by a similar one in Paley's Evidences for Christianity; and indeed it may be said to be for the most part, a paraphrase of it.

<sup>l</sup>For a fuller treatise of the ideas and the force of the argument here presented the reader is referred to Vol. I of New Witnesses, ch. xvii.

frauds and deceivers they may yet be relegated to that very large class known as the mistaken. We have already seen that such was the nature of the revelation vouchsafed to these Witnesses in attestation of the truth of the Book of Mormon that it cannot possibly be resolved into delusion or mistake; and it is not necessary to further discuss that proposition here. There is no middle ground on which one may place these Witnesses; inexcusable liars or true witnesses they must be; they never can be classed among the mistaken.

The possibility of their being mistaken set aside, every circumstance connected with their relationship to the Book of Mormon favors the theory of their being true witnesses, their testimony standing not only unimpeached but unimpeachable; it must follow that they are God's solemn Witnesses of a great truth—the verity of the Book of Mormon.