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Direct External Evidences - The Three Witnesses - Subsequent Life and Testimonies - David Whitmer

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CHAPTER XVII.

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

Continued.

DAVID WHITMER.

David Whitmer continued to repeat his testimony to the truth of the Book of Mormon up to and including the very day of his death. Living for many years at Richmond, Missouri—from 1838 to 1888, half a century—he was frequently visited by all sorts of people, and in the latter years of his life by newspaper representatives especially, who came to inquire concerning the testimony he had given to the world to the truth of the Book of Mormon. For all these parties he had but one answer: “My testimony written in the Book of Mormon is true.” It was sometimes elaborated by the addition of a description of the circumstances under which the great revelation was given, but there was never any deviation from the main facts published in his testimony which accompanies the Book of Mormon. He was not always fairly treated by those whose questions he answered; his statements were sometimes misrepresented, much to his annoyance; and having been taught the necessity for it by sad experience, in the later years of his life, he always took the precaution to have one or more of his personal friends present at interviews he granted to strangers.

Referring to these acts of misrepresentation concerning his testimony, in his pamphlet, “Address to all Believers in Christ,” he makes the following refutation of the charges of denial:

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 nor 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 death bed of Oliver Cowdery, and his last words were, "Brother David, be true to your testimony to the Book of Mormon." He died here in Richmond, Missouri, on March 3rd, 1850. Many witnesses yet live in Richmond, who will testify to the truth of these facts, as well as to the good character of Oliver Cowdery. The very powers of darkness have combined against the Book of Mormon, to prove that it is not the word of God, and this should go to prove to men of spiritual understanding, that the Book is true. To show the reader what I have had to contend with, I give you below a copy of a leaflet which I had printed and distributed in March, 1881:

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, Missouri, 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 never have 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 re-

gard to the same, I do again affirm the truth of all 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. * * * I do not indorse any of the teachings of the so-called Mormons, or Latter-day Saints, which are in conflict with the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, as taught in the Bible and Book of Mormon; for the same gospel is plainly taught in both these books as I understand the word of God.

And if any man doubt, should he not carefully and honestly read and understand the same, before presuming to sit in judgment and condemn the light, which shineth in darkness, and showeth the way of eternal life as pointed out by the unerring hand of God?

In the Spirit of Christ who hath said: “Follow thou me, for I am the life, the light and the way,” I submit this statement to the world. God in whom I trust, being my judge as to the sincerity of my motives and the faith and hope that is in me of eternal life.

My sincere desire is that the world may be benefited by this plain and simple statement of the truth.

And all the honor be to the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, which is one God. Amen. (Signed)

DAVID WHITMER.

Richmond, Missouri, March 19, 1881.

We the undersigned citizens of Richmond, Ray county, Missouri, where David Whitmer has resided since the year A. D. 1838, certify that we have been long and intimately acquainted with him and know him to be a man of the highest integrity, and of undoubted truth and veracity.

Given at Richmond, Missouri, this March 19, A. D. 1881:

Gen. Alexander W. Doniphan.

Hon. George W. Dunn, Judge of the Fifth Judicial Circuit.

Thomas D. Woodson, President of Ray Co. Savings Bank.

J. T. Child, editor of “Conservator.”

H. C. Garner, Cashier of Ray Co. Savings Bank.

W. A. Holman, County Treasurer

J. S. Hughes, Banker, Richmond:
 James Hughes, Banker, Richmond.
 D. P. Whitmer, Attorney-at-Law.
 Hon. Jas. W. Black, Attorney-at-Law.
 L. C. Cantwell, Postmaster, Richmond.
 George I. Wasson, Mayor.
 Jas. A. Davis, County Collector.
 C. J. Hughes, Probate Judge and Presiding Justice of Ray
 County Court.
 Geo. W. Trigg, County Clerk.
 W. W. Mosby, M. D.
 Thos. McGinnis, ex-Sheriff Ray County.
 J. P. Quesenberry, Merchant.
 W. R. Holman, Furniture Merchant.
 Lewis Slaughter, Recorder of Deeds.
 Geo. W. Buchanan, M. D.
 A. K. Reyburn.

At the same time the "Richmond Conservator" of March 24, 1881, said, editorially:

An Explanation.

Elsewhere we publish a letter from David Whitmer, an old and well known citizen of Ray, [county] as well as an indorsement of his standing as a man signed by a number of the leading citizens of this community, in reply to some unwarranted aspersions made upon him. There is no doubt that Mr. Whitmer, who was one of the Three Witnesses of the authenticity of the gold plates, from which he asserts that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon (a fac simile of the characters he now has in his possession with the original records), is firmly convinced of its divine origin, and while he makes no effort to obtrude his views or beliefs, he simply wants the world to know that so far as he is concerned there is no "variableness or shadow of turning." Having resided here for near a half a century, it is with no little pride that he points to his past record with the consciousness that he has done nothing derogatory to his character as a citizen and a believer in the Son of Mary, to warrant such an attack on him,

come from what source it may, and now with the lillies of seventy-five winters crowning him like an aureole, and his pilgrimage on earth well nigh ended, he reiterates his former statements, and will leave futurity to solve the problem that he was but a passing witness to its fulfilment.

David Whitmer died at his home in Richmond, on the 25th of January, 1888, in the eighty-fourth year of his life. His final testimony was given under the following circumstances:

On the evening of Sunday, January 22nd, at half past five o'clock, Mr. Whitmer called his family and a number of his friends to his bedside, and to them delivered his dying testimony. Addressing his attendant physician he said: "Dr. Buchanan, I want you to say whether or not I am in my right mind before I give my last testimony?" The doctor answered: "Yes, you are in your right mind, for I have just had a conversation with you." He then directed his words to all who surrounded him, saying:

Now, you must all be faithful in Christ. I want to say to you all that the Bible and the record of the Nephites (Book of Mormon), are true, so you can say that you have heard me bear my testimony on my death bed. All be faithful in Christ and your reward will be according to your works. God bless you all. My trust is in Christ for ever, worlds without end. Amen.

* * * *

On Monday last (Jan. 23rd), at 10 o'clock a. m., after awaking from a short slumber he said he had seen beyond the veil and had seen Christ on the other side. His friends who were constantly at his bedside claim that he had many manifestations of the truths of the great beyond, which confirmed their faith beyond all shadow of doubt. He bore his long illness with great patience and fortitude, his faith, never for a moment wavering, and when the summons came, he sank peacefully to rest with a smile on his countenance, just as if he was being lulled to sleep by secret music. Just before his breath left his body, he opened his eyes, which glistened with the brightness of early manhood. He then turned them toward heaven, and a wonderful light

came over his countenance, which remained several moments, when the eyes gradually closed and David Whitmer had gone to his rest.^c

In the same issue of the paper from which this account of his death is taken, occurs the following description of Whitmer's connection with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and his being a Witness of its truth. Some inaccuracies as to details must be allowed for here, such as the omission of Martin Harris' name as one of the Three Witnesses, and the time of day that Oliver Cowdery and Joseph Smith called upon him in the field to go with them to become a witness to the Book of Mormon. Other accounts state that they came to him in the morning instead of the afternoon.^d And it should be remembered that what follows is not given in language of David Whitmer:

When he was twenty-four years of age and worked on his father's farm near Palmyra, New York, all that section of the country was more or less excited over the reported discovery by Joseph Smith of the gold plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated. Oliver Cowdery, the village school teacher, mentioned the matter to him and announced his determination to visit Smith and investigate the matter for himself, promising Mr. Whitmer, at the latter's request, to advise him of the result. A few days later he [Whitmer] received a letter from Cowdery, urging him to join him, which he did, being received by the "Prophet" with open arms. After remaining long enough to satisfy himself of the divine inspiration of

^cThis account of David Whitmer's death is from the Richmond Democrat, of the 26th of January, 1888, a paper published in the town where his death occurred. It is copied into the Deseret News of the 8th of February, 1888; and in the Millennial Star, Vol. 50, p. 139.

^dSee statement of David Whitmer to William H. Kelley, G. A. Blakeslee, Sept. 15, 1882. Braden & Kelley Debate, p. 187.

Smith, the three returned to Whitmer's home, where it was agreed that the work of translation should be prosecuted.

Shortly after his return, and while he was plowing in the field one afternoon, he was visited by Smith and Cowdery, who requested that he should accompany them into the woods on the hill across the road for the purpose of witnessing a manifestation that should qualify him and Cowdery to bear witness to the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Smith explaining that such procedure was in accordance with explicit instructions he had received from an angel of the Lord.

Repairing to the woods they engaged in prayer for a short time, when suddenly a great light shone around about them, far brighter and more dazzling than the brilliancy of the noon day sun, seemingly enveloping the wood for a considerable distance. A spirit of elevation seized him as of joy indescribable and a strange influence stole over him, which so entranced him, that he felt that he was chained to the spot. A moment later and a divine personage, clothed in white raiment, appeared unto them, and immediately in front of the personage stood a table on which lay a number of gold plates, some brass plates, the "Urim and Thummim" and the "sword of Laban." All of these they were directed to examine carefully, and after their examination they were told that the Lord would demand that they bear witness thereof to all the world. * * *

While describing this vision to us, all traces of a severe cold from which he was suffering disappeared for the time being, his form straightened, his countenance assumed almost a beautiful expression and his tones became strangely eloquent. Although evidently no studied effort, the description was a magnificent piece of word painting, and he carried his hearers with him to that lonely hill by the old farm, and they stood there with him awed in the divine presence. Skeptics may laugh and scoff if they will, but no man could listen to Mr. Whitmer as he talks of his interview with the angel of the Lord, without being most forcibly convinced that he has heard an honest man tell what he honestly believes to be true.*

David Whitmer, like Oliver Cowdery, was excommuni-

*"Richmond Democrat," issue of Jan. 26th, 1888.

cated from the Church, and at about the same time.^f But unlike Oliver Cowdery, he never returned, but remained estranged from the Church to the last day of his life. Still he always manifested a friendly disposition towards all believers in the Book of Mormon, however mistaken he may have considered them to be in the matter of Church affiliation. But while out of the Church as when in it, and certainly having no worldly purpose to serve by continuing in such a course, he steadfastly, as we have seen, adhered to his testimony to the truth of the Book of Mormon.

^fFor the same reasons that were given in the foot note explaining the case of Oliver Cowdery, I here give the charges brought against David Whitmer and sustained before the High Council: 1st. Not observing the Word of Wisdom, (See Doc. and Cov., Sec. 89.) 2nd. Unchristianlike conduct in neglecting to attend meetings and uniting with and possessing the same spirit as the dissenters. 3rd. Writing letters to the dissenters in Kirtland, unfavorable to the cause and character of Joseph Smith, Jr. 4th. Neglecting the duties of his calling, and separating himself from the Church. 5th. Signing himself president of the Church of Christ in an insulting letter to the High Council, after he had been cut off from the presidency. The presidency of the Church alluded to was a local presidency over the Church in Missouri, in which position the Saints, some time before his arraignment before the High Council, refused to sustain him. (See Mill. Star, Vol. XVI., pp. 133, 134, also Missouri Persecutions, pp. 180-1.)