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## Empirical Witnesses of the Gold Plates

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**Abstract:** Due to the fact that visiting with angels isn't part of the normal human experience, it makes it hard for historians to prove that it happened through an academic investigation. The best way, as discussed by the author, to determine what really happened is by studying other individual's first-hand accounts about the Gold Plates.

# EMPIRICAL WITNESSES OF THE GOLD PLATES

Larry E. Morris

“The question of the ultimate origin of a purported revelation,” writes Grant Underwood, “is ultimately beyond the scope of academic analysis.”<sup>1</sup> Professor of religious studies James D. Tabor concurs: “We can evaluate what people claimed, what they believed, what they reported, and that all becomes part of the data, but to then say, ‘A miracle happened,’ . . . goes beyond our accessible methods [as historians of religion].”<sup>2</sup>

A prime example of such a report is the Three Witnesses’ account of hearing the voice of God and seeing an angel with plates. Although this is a confirmation of what Joseph Smith had already been saying, the veracity of the claim is a religious, not historical, issue. A historical argument relies on documented experiences empirically accessible, at least in theory, to any competent observer, and because hearing God’s voice and seeing angels are not part of normal human experience, the origin of these purported miracles goes beyond the scope of academic investigation.<sup>3</sup> (Historians should report

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1. Grant Underwood, “The Dictation, Compilation, and Canonization of Joseph Smith’s Revelations,” in *Foundational Texts of Mormonism: Examining Major Sources*, edited by Mark Ashurst-McGee, Robin Scott Jensen, and Sharalyn D. Howcroft (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 107.

2. James D. Tabor, “Do Historians of Religion Exclude the Supernatural?,” *HuffPost*, Sept. 5, 2016, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/do-historians-of-religion-exclude-the-supernatural\\_b\\_57cda5cde4b06c750ddb3815](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/do-historians-of-religion-exclude-the-supernatural_b_57cda5cde4b06c750ddb3815).

3. Lyman E. Johnson and Mary Whitmer also offered “religious” accounts of the plates. Johnson left no firsthand account of his experience, but others heard him discuss it. Benjamin Stokely wrote: “An angel brought the Mormon Bible and laid it before him (the speaker); he therefore *knows* these things to be true” (cited in William Shepard and H. Michael Marquardt, *Lost Apostles: Forgotten Members of Mormonism’s Original Quorum of Twelve* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2014], 43—see *Lost Apostles*, 46

evidence of fraud, collusion, mental illness, and the like, however, for these fall squarely within the realm of scholarly analysis.)

It follows, of course, that accounts of the plates involving normal sensory experience fall within the scope of scholarly inquiry. Seventeen people reportedly saw or handled the plates (or both) under such conditions, and this paper examines the documentary evidence surrounding these empirical events to discover what information they offer about what Terryl Givens calls the “pure physicality of the plates.”<sup>4</sup>

### Witnesses Among Joseph’s Family, Friends, and Acquaintances

#### *Emma Smith*

Joseph Smith III interviewed his mother, seventy-four-year-old Emma Hale Smith Bidamon, in February of 1879, two months before her death. “These questions, and the answers she had given to them, were read to my mother by me, the day before my leaving Nauvoo for home, and were affirmed by her,” wrote Joseph III. An excerpt from that interview follows:

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and 91, for similar examples). In interviews given in 1878, 1887, and 1889, David Whitmer told how he, Joseph Smith, and Oliver Cowdery met a “messenger with the plates,” as they traveled from Pennsylvania to the Whitmer home in Fayette, New York, in June 1829. Variousy described as “an old man,” “one of the three Nephites” and “the angel Moroni,” this personage showed the plates to Whitmer’s mother, Mary Musselman Whitmer, who told her family of the experience but left no first-hand account. (See Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* [Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991], 27, 215–16, 217–18.)

Lucy Harris, Martin’s wife, is also sometimes mentioned as a religious witness of the plates because Lucy Mack Smith’s memoir includes a description of Lucy Harris reporting a dream in which a personage appeared to her and showed her the plates. See Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: S. W. Richard, 1853), 112. In an 1833 affidavit, however, Lucy Harris indicated that she never believed Joseph’s story about the angel and the plates.

4. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4. Accounts from those who claimed to have simply lifted the plates inside a container are not included in this discussion.

Question. Had [Joseph Smith] not a book or manuscript from which he read, or dictated to you?

Answer. He had neither manuscript nor book to read from.

Question. Could he not have had, and you not know it?

Answer. If he had had anything of the kind he could not have concealed it from me.

Question. Are you sure that he had the plates at the time you were writing for him?

Answer. The plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen tablecloth, which I had given him to fold them in. I once felt of the plates, as they thus lay on the table, tracing their outline and shape. They seemed to be pliable like thick paper, and would rustle with a metallic sound when the edges were moved by the thumb, as one does sometimes thumb the edges of a book.<sup>5</sup>

Emma did not specify when she handled the plates.

### *William Smith (younger brother of Joseph)*

In 1884, seventy-three-year-old William said:

When Joseph received [the plates], he came in and said: "Father, I have got the plates." All believed it was true, father, mother, brothers and sisters. You can tell what a child is. Parents know whether their children are truthful or not. The proof of the pudding is not in chewing the string, but in eating the pudding. Father knew his child was telling the truth. When the plates were brought in they were wrapped up in a tow frock. My father put them into a pillow case. Father said, "What, Joseph, can we not see them?" "No. I was forbidden to show them until they are translated, but you can feel them." We handled them and could tell what they were. They were not quite as large as this Bible. Could tell whether they were round or square. Could raise the leaves this way (raising a few leaves of the Bible before him). One could easily tell that they were not a stone, hewn out to deceive, or even a block of wood. Being a mixture of gold and copper, they were much heavier than stone, and very much heavier than wood.<sup>6</sup>

5. "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saints' Herald* 26, no. 19, Oct. 1, 1879, 289–90.

6. "The Old Soldier's Testimony. Sermon preached by Bro. William B. Smith, in the Saints' Chapel, Deloit, Iowa, June 8th, 1884. Reported by C. E. Butterworth," *Saints' Herald* 31, no. 40, Oct. 4, 1884, 643–44.

### *Lucy Mack Smith*

Although Lucy Smith's memoir tells of her handling the spectacles and breastplate of the Urim and Thummim through a covering, it is silent on whether she saw or handled the plates. A secondhand account has survived, however. Sally Bradford Parker and her husband converted to the Church in Maine around 1834. In June of 1837 they migrated to Kirtland, Ohio, where they lived until March of 1838. In August 1838, Sally wrote:

[Lucy Smith] told me the whole story. The plates were in the house and sometimes in the woods for eight months on account of people trying to get them. They had to hide them once. They hid them under the hearth. They took up the brick and put them in and put the brick back. The old lady told me this herself with tears in her eyes and they run down her cheeks too. She put her hand upon her stomach and said she, "O the peace of God that rested upon us all that time." She said it was a heaven below. I asked her if she saw the plates. She said no, it was not for her to see them, but she hefted and handled them.<sup>7</sup>

This is consistent with William Smith's assertion that the Smith family handled the plates but was not allowed to see them.

In 1842, British clergyman Henry Caswall visited Nauvoo and reported Lucy's saying, "I have myself seen and handled the golden plates; they are about eight inches long, and six wide; some of them are sealed together and are not to be opened, and some of them are loose. They are all connected by a ring which passes through a hole at the end of each plate, and are covered with letters beautifully engraved."<sup>8</sup> Because Parker knew Lucy well

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7. Janiece L. Johnson, "'The Scriptures Is a Fulfilling': Sally Parker's Weave," *BYU Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 115–16. The original text reads as follows: "she told me the hole story the plates wass in the house and some times in the woods for eight monts and on acount of peopel trying to git them thay had to hide them wonce thay hide them under the hearth they took up the brick and put them in and put the brick back the old lady told me this hur self wih tears in hur eyes and they run down hur cheeks too she put hur hand upon her stomack and said she o the peace of god that rested upon us all that time she said it wass a heaven below I axter if she saw th pates she said no it wass not for hur to see them but she hefted and handled them."

8. Henry Caswall, *The City of the Mormons: or, Three Days at Nauvoo, in 1842* (London: J. G. F. & J. Rivington, 1842), 26–27.

and asked her specific details about her experience—and because Parker’s account of Lucy’s handling but not seeing the plates is corroborated by other sources and Caswall’s claim that she saw them is not—Parker’s is the more reliable source.<sup>9</sup>

*Katharine Smith (younger sister of Joseph Smith)*

Katharine’s grandson Herbert S. Salisbury related two instances of Katharine’s handling the plates:

She told me [when Joseph first brought the plates home in 1827] Joseph allowed her to “heft” the package [of plates wrapped in a frock or a pillow case] but not to see the gold plates, as the angel had forbidden him to show them at that period. She said they were very heavy.<sup>10</sup>

Catherine Smith Salisbury told me that while dusting up the room where the Prophet had his study she saw a package on the table containing the gold plates. . . . She said she hefted those plates and found them very heavy like gold and also rippled her fingers up the edge of the plates and felt that they were separate metal plates and heard the tinkle of sound that they made.<sup>11</sup>

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9. In his interview with Joel Tiffany, Martin Harris said, “When he [Joseph] arrived at home, he handed the plates in at the window, and they were received from him by his mother” (“MORMONISM—No. 2,” Tiffany’s Monthly, May–July 1859, 167).

10. H. S. Salisbury, “Things the Prophet’s Sister Told me,” Church History Library, MS 4122, folder 2. Salisbury typed this statement in 1945.

11. “The Prophet’s Sister Testifies She Lifted the B. of M Plates,” *The Messenger* (Berkeley, Calif.), Oct. 1954, Church History Library, MS 4134. The narrative that Katharine “rippled her fingers up the edge of the plates” is problematic because the residence Katharine presumably would have been cleaning was the Smith frame home in Manchester. However, it is quite unlikely—given the efforts of hostile neighbors to steal the plates—that Joseph would have left the plates on a table. Also, this account is remarkably similar to one (reprinted above) related by Emma. Both accounts mention dusting the room, feeling the edge of the plates, perceiving separate leaves, and hearing the metallic sound created when the leaves were thumbed. See Joseph Smith III to Mrs. E. Horton, letter, Mar. 7, 1900, in *Early Mormon Documents*, edited by Dan Vogel, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 1:546. Such similarity in detail raises the distinct possibility that Katharine initially told of Emma’s experience but that over the interim of several decades, Herbert Salisbury mistakenly attributed it to his grandmother rather than his great-aunt.

### *Joseph Smith Sr.*

As noted, William Smith said that when Joseph carried the frock-covered plates into the house in 1827, Joseph Sr. put them in a pillowcase, which would have involved handling and lifting them. Although Joseph Sr. testified in 1829 of seeing and handling the plates as one of the Eight Witnesses, he is not known to have offered any details on receiving the plates from Joseph Jr. in 1827.

### *Martin Harris*

William S. Sayre, who apparently talked to Harris in 1829, wrote that Joseph Smith “would not let him [Harris] see the bible but let him *feel* of it when it was covered up.”<sup>12</sup> In 1853, Harris told David B. Dille he had once held the plates on his knee “an hour and a half, whilst in conversation with Joseph, when we went to bury them in the woods. . . . And as many of the plates as Joseph Smith translated, I handled with my hands, plate after plate.”<sup>13</sup> In addition, Tiffany reported Harris’s saying, “I hefted the plates many times, and should think they weighed forty or fifty pounds,” adding that the plates were held together by three silver rings and were about four inches thick, with each plate about as thick as a plate of tin.<sup>14</sup>

### *Oliver Cowdery*

When Cowdery spoke to a group of Saints at Council Bluffs, Iowa, on October 21, 1848, Reuben Miller recorded those remarks: “Friends and brethren my name is Cowdery, oliver Cowdery. . . . I wrote with my own pen the entire book of Mormon (save a few pages) as it fell from the lips of the prophet, As he translated <it> by the gift and power of god, By means of the urim and thummim, or as it is called by that book [‘]holy Interpreters.’ I beheld

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12. William S. Sayre to James T. Cobb, letter, Aug. 31, 1878, Theodore A. Schroeder Papers, Archives, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin, in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* 4:144–45.

13. “Additional Testimony of Martin Harris (One of the Three Witnesses) to the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon,” *Millennial Star* 21, Aug. 20, 1859, 545.

14. “MORMONISM—No. 2,” 166, 165.

with my eyes. And handled with my hands the gold plates from which it was translated.”<sup>15</sup>

### *Josiah Stowell*

Stowell and Joseph Knight were visiting the Smith family in September 1827 when Joseph obtained the plates and were present when he brought them to the Smith home a few days later. Although Stowell left no firsthand account of Joseph’s bringing the plates to the house, two individuals who talked to Stowell produced reports. “If I understood him [Stowell] right,” Martha Campbell wrote to Joseph Smith in 1843, “he was the first person that took the Plates out of your hands, the morning you brought[t] them in & he observed blessed is he that seeeth & believeeth & more blessed is he that believeeth without seeing & says he has seen & believed he seems anxious to get there [Nauvoo] to renew his covenant with the Lord.”<sup>16</sup> If accurate, this means Stowell was the first person other than Joseph to handle the plates.<sup>17</sup>

A Colesville, New York court record sheds further light on Stowell’s experience with the plates. On June 30, 1830, Stowell testified in a case in which Joseph was accused of “a breach of the peace . . . by looking through a certain stone to find hid[den] treasures.” After being sworn before Justice of the Peace Joel K. Noble, Stowell said “that about two years since, witness was at Palmyra, and saw prisoner; that prisoner told witness that the *Lord had told prisoner that a golden Bible* was in a certain hill; that Smith, the prisoner, went in the night, and brought the Bible, (as Smith said;) witness [Stowell] saw a corner of it; it resembled a stone of a greenish caste; should judge it

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15. “Reuben Miller journals, 1848–1849,” Church History Library, MS 1392. David Whitmer stressed that he, Cowdery, and Joseph saw but did not handle the plates. See Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, Utah: Grandin, 1991), 152, 188.

16. “Letter from Martha Campbell, 19 December 1843,” The Joseph Smith Papers, Church History Library.

17. Stowell’s being the first other than Joseph to handle the plates is not consistent with William Smith’s claim that Joseph Sr. received them or with Harris’s claim that Lucy Mack Smith did.



to have been about one foot square and six inches thick; he would not let it be seen by any one; the Lord had commanded him not; it was unknown to Smith, that the witness saw a corner of the Bible, so called by Smith.”<sup>18</sup>

These two statements indicate that when Joseph reached the house, he handed the frock-covered plates to Stowell, who apparently caught a glimpse of them as he set them down, making Stowell the only witness to see the plates “by accident.” As for the color of the plates, Ann Taves writes, “A greenish cast would suggest copper rather than lead or gold and pages could be made out of copper more easily than lead.”<sup>19</sup>

*Alvah Beman (also spelled Beaman or Beeman)*

“As soon as it was noised around that there was a golden Bible found (for that was what it was called at the time),” wrote Alvah’s daughter, Mary Adeline Noble, “the minds of the people became so excited and it arose at such a pitch that a mob collected together to search the house of Father Joseph Smith to find the records[. M]y father was there at the time and assisted in concealing the plates in a box in a secluded place where no one could find them although he did not see them.”<sup>20</sup>

Martin Harris added that “when they [the plates] were taken from there [the cooper’s shop], they were put into an old Ontario glass-box. Old Mr. Beman sawed off the ends, making the box the right length to put them in, and when they went in he said he heard them jink, but he was not permitted to see them. He told me so.”<sup>21</sup>

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18. “Mormonism,” *Morning Star* (Limerick, Maine), Nov. 16, 1832, available at <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/BOMP/id/1369/rec/16>.

19. Ann Taves, “History and the Claims of Revelation: Joseph Smith and the Materialization of the Golden Plates,” *Numen* 61, nos. 1–2 (2014): 192n13. Copper turns green when exposed to the elements, also true of bronze (an alloy of copper and zinc), brass (an alloy of copper and tin), and some types of tumbaga (an unspecified alloy of gold and copper).

20. Mary Adeline Noble reminiscence, circa 1836, in Joseph B. Noble reminiscences, 1836–1866, autograph document, p. 3, Church History Library.

21. “MORMONISM—No. 2,” 167.

*Joseph McKune Sr.*

McKune was a neighbor (and relative through marriage) of Isaac Hale's. Joseph Smith had several interactions with the McKune family, most of them negative. Mehitable Smith Many Doolittle (1802–1894) was a granddaughter of Joseph McKune Sr.<sup>22</sup> and grew up knowing Emma. An 1887 newspaper interview with Mrs. Doolittle reported: "While Joe was upon his farm he had the Mormon Bible. Whether he professed to find it before or after marriage Mrs. Doolittle does not remember. Her grandfather was once privileged to take in his hands a pillow-case in which the supposed saintly treasure was wrapped, and to feel through the cloth that it had leaves. From the size and the weight of the book, Mr. McKune supposed that in dimensions it closely resembled an ordinary Bible in the print of those days."<sup>23</sup> This uncorroborated account makes McKune the only outsider to handle the plates.

"What emerges as alone indisputable," writes Givens, "is the fact that Joseph Smith does possess a set of metal plates. . . . Dream-visions may be in the mind of the beholder, but gold plates are not subject to such facile psychologizing."<sup>24</sup>

### The Eight Witnesses

The testimony of the Eight Witnesses, states the Joseph Smith Papers, "reads like a legal document" and "describes a sensory experience that involved both sight and touch as the witnesses handled and lifted the plates."<sup>25</sup> Given such apparently straightforward facts, one would expect a consensus about

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22. Background information from *Middletown Daily Argus*, Dec. 10, 1894 and from McKune family genealogical records at Ancestry.com.

23. "Early Days of Mormonism," *Chenango Union*, Apr. 12, 1877.

24. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 40, 42.

25. 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*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2013), 387.

the nature of the Eight's experience, but several historians argue that the five members of the Whitmer family<sup>26</sup> and three members of the Smith family saw and handled the plates "in vision," thus disqualifying their testimony as empirical evidence.

The key question is this: What did the Eight themselves say about the event? Certainly, they are the authorities on their own experience and should be allowed to speak for themselves. Their statement reads as follows:

Be it known unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, unto whom this work shall come, that Joseph Smith, Jr. the Author and Proprietor of this work, has shewn unto us the plates of which hath been spoken, which have the appearance of gold; and as many of the leaves as the said Smith has 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, that the said Smith has shewn unto us, for we have seen and hefted, and know of a surety, that the said Smith has got the plates of which we have spoken. And we give our names unto the world, to witness unto the world that which we have seen: and we lie not, God bearing witness of it.

CHRISTIAN WHITMER, JACOB WHITMER, PETER WHITMER, JR., JOHN WHITMER, HIRAM PAGE, JOSEPH SMITH, SEN., HYRUM SMITH, SAMUEL H. SMITH.<sup>27</sup>

"As a historical document, the Testimony of Eight Witnesses is disappointing," writes Vogel. "It fails to give historical details such as time, place, and date. Neither does it describe the historical event or events, but simply states that the eight signatories, collectively, have seen and handled the plates." In addition, "Joseph Smith's History is vague about events behind the Testimony of Eight Witnesses" and fails to "describe the historical setting in which the eight men saw the plates." Finally, "subsequent statements by the eight witnesses shed very little light on the historical event behind their Testimony."<sup>28</sup>

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26. Hiram Page married Catherine Whitmer on November 10, 1825.

27. 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, 590. David Whitmer said each witness "signed his own name" to the testimonies (Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 44).

28. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 3:464. One important question is whether the Eight saw the plates together or in smaller groups. P. Wilhelm Poulson, who inter-

These points are well taken—no one provided the kind of details students and scholars of early Mormon history yearn for. The lack of specifics about the historical setting, however, hardly means the testimony is not empirical. Indeed, the testimony is emphatically empirical because it mentions both sight and touch, identifies Joseph Smith as the one who displayed the plates, and neither claims nor even hints that the occurrence included a miracle.

Moreover, the testimony of the Eight meets three crucial standards of source criticism by being (1) a firsthand document (2) produced near the time of the event in question and (3) signed by multiple witnesses. Except for the nonempirical statement of the Three Witnesses, none of the hundreds of other Book of Mormon documents comes close to having such bona fides. And while Lucy Mack Smith, John Corrill, and Luke Johnson said they heard testimonies from all eight men but recorded no specific details,<sup>29</sup> three of the Eight left firsthand confirmations of the original testimony: John Whitmer, Hyrum Smith, and Hiram Page.

A close look at these recitals shows that although these men clearly felt a divine commission to testify of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon and sometimes spoke of their religious and empirical experience in the same breath, they made no claims of examining the plates in a supernatural setting.

### *John Whitmer*

In his official history of the Church, Whitmer wrote: “And also other witnesses even eight Viz. Christian Whitmer, Jacob Whitmer, John Whitmer, Peter Whitmer Jr. Hiram [Hiram] Page, Joseph Smith [Sr.], Hiram [Hyrum] Smith, and Samuel H. Smith. are *the men to whom Joseph Smith Jr showed the*

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viewed John Whitmer in April 1878, reported in a July 31, 1878 letter that Whitmer said the Eight examined the plates in a room at the Smith home, four at one time and four at another (*Deseret News*, Aug. 14, 1878). This report is uncorroborated, however; nor was it approved by Whitmer before his death on July 11, 1878.

29. See Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 140–41; John Corrill, *Brief History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, (Commonly Called Mormons;) Including an Account of Their Doctrine and Discipline; with the Reasons of the Author for Leaving the Church* (St. Louis: For the Author, 1839), 11–12; and “History of Luke Johnson [By Himself],” *History of Brigham Young, Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 26, no. 53, Dec. 31, 1864, 835.

*plates*, these witnesses [including the three 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>30</sup>

In an 1836 editorial, Whitmer added:

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; and I hope, that my patrons will indulge me in speaking freely on this subject, as I am about leaving the editorial department [of the *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*]—Therefore I desire to testify 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>31</sup>

Whitmer intertwined his role as a witness with his religious testimony while at the same time affirming the sensory nature of his examination of the plates. (His statement that he signed his name as confirmation that the Book of Mormon was a revelation from God was technically incorrect, of course, because his signature simply confirmed the reality of the plates.)

In one of his last letters, Whitmer stated, “I conclude you have read the Book of Mormon, together with the testimonies that are thereto attached; in which testimonies you read my name subscribed as one of the Eight witnesses to said Book. That testimony was, is, and will be true henceforth and forever.”<sup>32</sup>

### *Hyrum Smith*

In August 1838, Sally Parker, then in Sunbury, Ohio, wrote that she had heard Hyrum Smith preach. (He had passed through the area a few months

30. “The Book of John, Whitmer kept by Comma[n]d,” ca. 1838–ca. 1847, handwriting of John Whitmer, ninety-six pages, in *Histories, Volume 2: Assigned Historical Writings, 1831–1847*, edited by Karen Lynn Davidson, Richard L. Jensen, and David J. Whittaker, vol. 2 of the *Histories* series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 37, emphasis added.

31. John Whitmer, “Address,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 6, Mar. 1836, 286–87.

32. John Whitmer to H. C. Smith Esq., letter, Dec. 11, 1876, in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:244.

earlier as he migrated from Kirtland to Far West, Missouri.) “We were talking about the Book of Mormon,” she wrote, “[of] which he is one of the witnesses. 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 and he saw a breast plate and he told how it was made. . . . Why I write this is because they dispute the Book so much.”<sup>33</sup>

In an 1839 letter, Hyrum wrote, “I had been abused and thrust into a dungeon, and confined for months on account of my *faith*, and the ‘testimony of Jesus Christ.’ However 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>34</sup>

### *Hiram Page*

Page, who left the Church in 1838, wrote to William E. McLellin in 1847:

As to the book of Mormon, 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

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33. Johnson, “Sally Parker’s Weave,” 115. The original document reads as follows: “wee wass talking about th Book of mormon which he is ons of the witnesses he said he had but too hands and too eyes he said he had seene the plates with his eyes and handeled them with his hands and he saw a brest plate and he told how it wass maid . . . why I write this is because they dispute the Book so much.”

34. Hyrum Smith “to the Saints scattered abroad,” letter, *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 2, Dec. 1839, 20, 23.

language; yea, it would be treating the God of heaven with contempt, to deny these testimonies, with too many others to mention here.<sup>35</sup>

True, the Eight Witnesses “knew” that Joseph had learned of the plates from an angel and considered themselves honor bound to “bear witness unto the world” of what they knew. They made no distinction between religious and empirical truth and believed their experience with the plates to be tightly bound up with Joseph’s authentic calling and the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. Still, they insisted throughout their lives that they “did handle [the plates] with [their] hands” and that they had “seen and hefted,” with no reference to a miraculous setting.

### Empirical or Religious?

As to why the testimony of the Eight is sometimes claimed to be religious rather than empirical, consider the following:

#### *Thomas Ford’s Speculation*

In *No Man Knows My History*, Fawn Brodie reprints the statement of the Eight Witnesses and adds, “One of the most plausible descriptions of the manner in which Joseph Smith obtained these eight signatures was written by Thomas Ford, Governor of Illinois, who knew intimately several of Joseph’s key men after they became disaffected and left the church”<sup>36</sup>—and follows up with a long paraphrase of Ford’s description.

“I have been informed by men who were once in the confidence of the prophet,” wrote Ford, “that he privately gave a different account of the matter. . . . The prophet had always given out that [the plates] could not be seen by the carnal eye, but must be spiritually discerned; that the power to see them depended upon faith, and was the gift of God, to be obtained by fasting, prayer, mortification of the flesh, and exercises of the spirit.” Therefore, when Joseph saw “the evidences of a strong and lively faith in any of his followers . . . he set them to continual prayer, and other spiritual

35. Hiram Page to “Bro. William” [William E. McLellin], letter, May 30, 1847, *Ensign of Liberty* 1, Jan. 1848, 63.

36. Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 79.

exercises, to acquire this lively faith by means of which the hidden things of God could be spiritually discerned.” Then, “when he could delay them no longer, he assembled them in a room, and produced a box, which he said contained the precious treasure. The lid was opened; the witnesses peeped into it, but making no discovery, for the box was empty, they said, ‘Brother Joseph, we do not see the plates.’” Joseph responded, “O ye of little faith! how long will God bear with this wicked and perverse generation? Down on your knees, brethren, every one of you, and pray God for the forgiveness of your sins, and for a holy and living faith which cometh down from heaven.” Lumping the Three and Eight Witnesses together, Ford claimed they “dropped to their knees, and began to pray in the fervency of their spirit, supplicating God for more than two hours with fanatical earnestness; at the end of which time, looking again into the box, they were now persuaded that they saw the plates.”<sup>37</sup>

We don’t know who Ford’s informants were, whether they were trustworthy, or whether they were really “in the confidence of the prophet.” With no names, dates, or locations given, attempting to corroborate this account is virtually impossible. Nor did any of the witnesses report any experience that resembles the one depicted by Ford. And while nineteenth-century “historians” frequently relied on the kind of hearsay and rumormongering employed by Ford, a modern reader expects more careful source criticism from Brodie, writing in the mid-twentieth century and trained at the University of Chicago.

Because it is a thirdhand, anonymous account not corroborated by any first- or secondhand sources, Ford’s story offers little in the way of evidence—except as proof, perhaps, of the kind of rumors making the rounds twenty years after the fact. Nevertheless, it was also cited by a historian as prominent as Dale L. Morgan. The section of Morgan’s manuscript dealing with the Eight Witnesses, chapter 4, added nothing significant to Brodie’s analysis (although it was still in draft form when Morgan died). Like Brodie, he included a lengthy quote from Ford and used Ford as his sole nineteenth-century source (other than the testimony of the Eight itself).<sup>38</sup>

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37. Thomas Ford, *A History of Illinois, From Its Commencement as a State in 1818 to 1847* (Chicago: S. C. Griggs & Co., 1854), 256–58.

38. John Phillip Walker, ed., *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 304.



The influence of Brodie and Morgan has hardly waned. In the posthumously published *Natural Born Seer* (2016), Richard S. Van Wagoner quotes the testimony of the Eight and then moves immediately to the same excerpt from Ford cited by Morgan.<sup>39</sup>

### *Stephen Burnett's Letter to Lyman E. Johnson*

Burnett began losing his faith as he talked with Luke S. Johnson, John Boynton (original apostles with Lyman Johnson), Martin Harris, and others who had been excommunicated late in 1837 after the collapse of the Kirtland Safety Society Anti-Banking Company triggered widespread disillusionment with Joseph Smith.<sup>40</sup> Burnett wrote: “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 [Cowdery] nor David [Whitmer] & 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 a heap of ruins.”<sup>41</sup>

39. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Natural Born Seer: Joseph Smith, American Prophet, 1805–1830* (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2016), 359–61.

40. John Smith, president of the Kirtland High Council, wrote: “The spiritual condition at this time is gloomy also. I called the High Council together last week and laid Before <them> the case of a compan<y> of Decenters 28 persons[,] where upon mature Discussion [we] proceeded to cut them off from the ch[urch]; the Leaders were Cyrus Smalling Joseph Coe Martin Harris Luke Johnson John Boyton and W[arren] Parrish” (John and Clarissa Smith to George A. Smith, letter, Jan. 1, 1838, cited in Shepard and Marquardt, *Lost Apostles*, 158).

41. If Harris indeed used the phrase “in vision,” what he meant by that is open to debate. Speaking of his experience with Oliver and Joseph, for example, David Whitmer wrote: “Of course we were in the spirit when we had the view, for no man can behold the face of an angel, except in a spiritual view, but we were in the body also, and everything was as natural to us, as it is at any time.” (David Whitmer to Anthony Metcalf, letter, April 1887, in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 247.) Stephen Burnett to Lyman E. Johnson, letter, Apr. 15, 1838, Joseph Smith Papers, Letterbook 2, 65, Church History Library.

Burnett's claim of what Harris said was partially confirmed by a letter from Warren Parrish, formerly a trusted secretary of Joseph but by mid-1837 his most hostile critic: "Martin Harris, one of the subscribing witnesses, 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>42</sup>

This report is a portent of Harris's future oblique references to the Eight. As the only Book of Mormon witness communicating with the dissenters, Harris had become the *de facto* spokesman for the others. The irony, of course, is that of the eleven men in question, Harris is the only one known to have been alone with Joseph when he saw the plates, making him the one least qualified to speak for the others.

Adding one complication to another, Burnett's letter subsequently reports that three weeks after Harris's controversial statement about the witnesses, "Harris arose & said . . . he never should have told that the testimony of the eight was false, it if had not been picked out of air but should have let it passed as it was." Rather than confirming that the Eight saw the plates in vision, Harris's calling their testimony false only muddies the water. Two decades later, Harris further confused the picture when he said, "The plates were kept from the sight of the world, and *no one*, save Oliver Cowdrey, myself, Joseph Smith, jr., and David Whitmer, *ever saw them*."<sup>43</sup>

Amazingly, all of this is preamble to the most important question involving Harris's purported disclosure: Where did he get his information? Neither Burnett's nor Parrish's letter says anything about Harris claiming to have talked to the Eight. It is therefore entirely possible, especially given Harris's temperament and his bent toward "religious enthusiasm," that he made presumptions about the experience of the Eight without ever consulting them.

The deeper we delve into Harris's connection—or lack thereof—with the Eight Witnesses, the more mysterious things get. Between 1829 and 1839, close to fifty individuals recorded accounts of Harris's experience with the

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42. Warren Parrish to E. Holmes, letter, Aug. 11, 1838, *The Evangelist* 6, Oct. 1, 1838, 226, available at <https://user.xmission.com/~research/central/parrishletters.pdf>.

43. "MORMONISM—No. 2," 166, emphasis added.

founding of Mormonism, but of all the folks who heard Harris recall his incredible journey, only one said he specifically mentioned the Eight: Stephen Burnett.<sup>44</sup> And while Harris enthusiastically rejoiced after seeing the angel and the plates with Joseph near the Whitmer farm, there is no indication that Harris was even present at the Smith farm in Manchester a few days later when the Eight saw and hefted the plates. Nor do Harris's biographers note any conversations he had with the Eight about their experience.<sup>45</sup>

Given Martin Harris's standing as a Book of Mormon witness, Burnett, Parrish, and others naturally put a good deal of stock in his comments. We can especially sympathize with Burnett, who was still clinging to his conviction that the plates were real when Harris's declaration that the Eight saw the plates only in vision brought his once-strong faith crashing down into "a heap of ruins." But what Burnett quite understandably failed to realize was that Harris's apparently ironclad pronouncement was fragile and that the 1829 empirical statement of the Eight was still the best evidence of what they claimed to have experienced.

### *Notes Made by Thomas Bullock, circa 1845*

Early in 1839, Church member Theodore Turley was appointed to a committee helping the Saints evacuate from Missouri. On April 4 of that year, Turley and Heber C. Kimball visited Joseph Smith and others in Liberty Jail. The next day, Kimball and Turley were in Far West, at the committee's office, when John Whitmer and seven other men entered the room. A passage in the *History of the Church* describes the encounter that followed, and that passage is based on notes taken by Thomas Bullock in Nauvoo around February 1845 when he interviewed Turley. The complete published account reads as follows:

*Friday, April 5.*—Brothers Kimball and Turley arrived at Far West.

This day a company of about fifty men in Daviess county swore that they would never eat or drink, until they had murdered "Joe Smith."

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44. See Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:253–393.

45. Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter, *Martin Harris: Uncompromising Witness of the Book of Mormon* (Provo: BYU Studies, 2018).

Their captain, William Bowman, swore, in the presence of Theodore Turley, that he would “never eat or drink, after he had seen Joe Smith, until he had murdered him.”

Also eight men—Captain Bogart, who was the county judge, Dr. Lafity, John Whitmer, and five others—came into the committee’s room [i.e., the room or office of the committee on removal] and presented to Theodore Turley the paper containing the revelation of July 8, 1838,<sup>46</sup> to Joseph Smith, directing the Twelve to take their leave of the Saints in Far West on the building site of the Lords House on the 26th of April, to go to the isles of the sea, and then asked him to read it. Turley said, “Gentlemen, I am well acquainted with it.” They said, “Then you, as a rational man, will give up Joseph Smith’s being a prophet and an inspired man? He and the Twelve are now scattered all over creation; let them come here if they dare; if they do, they will be murdered. As that revelation cannot be fulfilled, you will now give up your faith.”

Turley jumped up and said, “In the name of God that revelation will be fulfilled.” They laughed him to scorn. John Whitmer hung down his head. They said, “If they (the Twelve) come, they will get murdered; they dare not come to take their leave here; that is like all the rest of Joe Smith’s d—n prophecies.” They commenced on Turley and said, he had better do as John Corrill had done; “he is going to publish a book called ‘Mormonism Fairly Delineated;’ he is a sensible man, and you had better assist him.”

Turley said, “Gentlemen, I presume there are men here who have heard Corrill say, that ‘Mormonism’ was true, that Joseph Smith was a prophet, and inspired of God. I now call upon you, John Whitmer: you say Corrill is a moral and a good man; do you believe him when he says the Book of Mormon is true, or when he says it is not true? There are many things published that they say are true, and again turn around and say they are false?” Whitmer asked, “Do you hint at me?” Turley replied, “If the cap fits you, wear it; all I know is that you have published to the world that an angel did present those plates to Joseph Smith.” Whitmer replied: “I now say, I handled those plates; there were fine engravings on both sides.

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46. A footnote in the original reads as follows: “See Doctrine and Covenants, sec. cxviii.”

I handled them;” and he described how they were hung, and “they were shown to me by a supernatural power;” he acknowledged all.

Turley asked him, “Why is not the translation now true?” He said, “I could not read it [in the original] and I do not know whether it [i.e., the translation] is true or not.” Whitmer testified all this in the presence of eight men.<sup>47</sup>

The late Grant Palmer covers the Eight Witnesses more extensively than Brodie, Morgan, Van Wagoner, or Taves, relying heavily on Burnett’s letter and on this *History of the Church* excerpt, especially Whitmer’s purported statement that “I handled those plates; there were fine engravings on both sides . . . they were shown to me by a supernatural power.” Palmer and others conclude that “this added detail of how [Whitmer] saw indicates that the eight probably did not observe or feel the actual artifact.”<sup>48</sup>

The “added detail,” of course, concerns the phrase *supernatural power*. The published version, which includes Willard Richards’s edits, is straightforward, but Bullock’s original manuscript is not as clear: “I now say I handled those plates. there was fine engravings on both sides. I handled them.” and he described how they were hung and they were shown to me by a supernatural power. he acknowledged all.”<sup>49</sup> Not only does the narration make an unnatural shift from the second-person *he* to the first-person *me*, the critical phrase *they were shown to me by a supernatural power* is not in quotation marks, leaving doubt as to whether Turley intended to be directly quoting Whitmer.

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47. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 7 vols., 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980 printing), 3:306–08. The original document, entitled “Theodore Turley’s Memorandums,” is in Bullock’s hand, making this a thirdhand source—with the account going from Whitmer to Turley to Bullock. Furthermore, the document offers no information about possible interaction between Turley and Bullock and does not contain Turley’s signature or any other indication that he approved it.

48. Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 206.

49. “Theodore Turley’s Memorandums,” Church History Library, transcription by Larry E. Morris.

Another source, however, tends to support the *History of the Church* version by citing another instance of Whitmer using the same phrase. In August 1878, one month after Whitmer's death, Myron H. Bond wrote of "that record [the Book of Mormon] which old Father John Whitmer told me last winter, with tears in his eyes, that he knew as well as he knew he had an existence that Joseph translated the ancient writing which was upon the plates which he 'saw and handled,' and which, as one of the scribes, he helped to copy, as the words fell from Joseph's lips, by *supernatural or almighty power*."<sup>50</sup> While confirming Whitmer's inclination to use the phrase, Bond's account also demonstrates an instance of Whitmer using it while describing a purely empirical event, namely his acting as scribe in the Whitmer home in June of 1829 while Joseph dictated the text of the Book of Mormon as he was looking at the seer stone in his hat. Despite the *belief* of Whitmer and others that Joseph was inspired as he dictated, the process of translation was neutral in terms of whether a miracle was involved.

Certainly, the Three Witnesses, who reported seeing an angel with the plates, could have said, "The plates were shown to us by a supernatural power." The Eight, however, took pains to avoid such language, stating at the beginning of their testimony that "Joseph Smith Jr. . . . has shewn unto us the plates" and at the end that "the said Smith has shewn unto us" and "the said Smith has got the plates." Whitmer reiterated this point in his official history of the Church: "[the Eight Witnesses] are the men to whom Joseph Smith Jr showed the plates."<sup>51</sup>

At the same time, Whitmer's empirical experience with the plates was irrevocably linked to his religious convictions—he was intent on testifying that the Book of Mormon was a revelation from God and proclaimed to the inhabitants of the earth that he had freed his garments of their blood. Isn't it therefore possible or even probable that when he said the plates had been shown to him by a supernatural power, he was reaffirming his convic-

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50. Myron H. Bond to Editors, letter, Aug. 2, 1878, *Saints' Herald*, Aug. 15, 1878, 253, emphasis added.

51. "The Book of John, Whitmer kept by Comma[n] d," ca. 1838–ca. 1847, handwriting of John Whitmer, ninety-six pages, CCLA, in *Joseph Smith Papers*, H2:37.

tion that God had directed the ancient creation of the plates and Joseph's obtaining them through instructions by an angel?

After all, Turley himself had challenged Whitmer with a statement that (inaccurately) conflated Whitmer's empirical and religious testimonies: "All I know is that you have published to the world that an angel did present those plates to Joseph Smith." (The testimony of the Eight, of course, said nothing of an angel or any other miraculous occurrence.) Then, in the presence of eight witnesses of a different stripe—including the virulent anti-Mormon Samuel Bogart, later to flee Missouri after committing murder<sup>52</sup>—Whitmer responded with a detailed empirical description of the plates followed by his assurance that a supernatural power played a crucial role in the translation of the Book of Mormon.

We can't be certain of Whitmer's meaning, but that uncertainly itself shows that concluding "the eight probably did not observe or feel the actual artifact" goes beyond the evidence. Bullock's thirdhand notes lack the historiographical authority to overrule both the testimonies of the witnesses themselves and the secondhand accounts of those who talked directly to them.

### The Materialization of the Golden Plates

Already well respected in religious studies, UC Santa Barbara professor Ann Taves turned her attention to the Book of Mormon with "History and the Claims of Revelation: Joseph Smith and the Materialization of the Golden Plates" (2014) and *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths* (2016). "For the sake of argument," writes Taves, "I want to assume that there were no plates or at least no ancient golden plates and at the same time take seriously believers' claim that Smith was not a fraud. If we start with these premises, then we have to explain how the plates might have become real for Smith as well as his followers." She subsequently argues that the "materialization" of the plates can be "understood as an interactive

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52. Samuel Bogart biography, available at <https://josephsmithpapers.org/person/samuel-bogart>.

process that involves a person with unusual abilities, intimate others who recognized and called forth those abilities, and objects that facilitated the creation of both the revelator and the revelation.”<sup>53</sup>

Taves successfully opens “new options” by turning to a “letter written by Jesse Smith, Joseph Smith’s staunchly Calvinist uncle, to Joseph’s older brother Hyrum in June 1829” and gets good mileage from Jesse’s stinging rejection of the “gold book,” especially his charge that his nephew Joseph “has eyes to see things that are not, and then has the audacity to say they are.” Building on this point, Taves turns “away from discovery as a literal recovery of ancient golden plates buried in a hill in upstate New York to discovery as skillful seeing.”<sup>54</sup> A close look at her arguments, however, reveals that Taves’s effort to employ “historical critical” tools and build “on a review of the evidence for the materiality of the plates”<sup>55</sup> falls short largely because she fails to deal adequately with the testimony of the Eight Witnesses.

Take these examples: Taves writes that “the Book of Mormon contained the testimony of two sets of witnesses (‘the three’ and ‘the eight’) . . . who claimed they had seen or handled the plates. . . . the three and eight witnesses [claimed] to have seen the plates directly.” This summary is problematic because it obscures crucial differences between the accounts of the Three and the Eight: the Three offered a religious testimony—repeatedly using the words *grace*, *heaven*, and *Christ*—in which they claimed to see, but not handle, the plates in a miraculous setting, and the Eight a matter-of-fact empirical testimony—using none of those words—in which they claimed to see, handle, and heft the plates, with no mention of an angel or the voice of God. Although Taves could have printed both statements in their entirety—which seems mandatory in a major scholarly paper about the plates—she opts instead to cite brief excerpts or paraphrase parts of those testimonies, sometimes conflating the two, leaving these questions unanswered: How can both the Eight and the Three have facilitated Joseph’s “skillful seeing” when

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53. Taves, “History and the Claims of Revelation,” 185, 186–87.

54. *Ibid.*, 185–86.

55. *Ibid.*, 183, 182.



their declarations are so radically different? If Joseph and the Three “only saw the plates through the power of God in faith,” what is the significance of faith not being mentioned in relation to the Eight—or, for that matter, the Eight never being specifically mentioned in either the Book of Mormon or in Joseph’s revelations? Taves, however, shows such little interest in the Eight that she does not even identify any of them by name.<sup>56</sup>

Taves’s claim that “the inner circle that saw and touched the plates generally acknowledged that they had either seen the plates in vision or obscured by a covering”<sup>57</sup> is blatantly inaccurate. As discussed above, the only individuals who both “saw and touched the plates” were Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, Josiah Stowell, and the Eight Witnesses, and of those eleven, only Harris and Cowdery saw them in vision, and only Harris (allegedly) said he saw them through a covering.<sup>58</sup> Taves’s presumption that the Eight saw the plates in vision is apparently based on Burnett’s and Parrish’s reports of Harris’s 1838 statement, but, again, as shown, Harris is not a reliable source on the matter. Taves has thus failed to let the Eight speak for themselves.

Taves’s hypothesis that the materialization of the plates was “a process that unfolded over a period of years beginning with the dream-visions of September 1823 and culminating in the publication of the Book of Mormon [in 1830]” is similarly problematic. For Joseph’s family, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon certainly unfolded over the period mentioned by Taves. It is also true that Joseph’s family “shared Smith’s belief in ancient Nephites, the angel Moroni, and ancient buried plates long before Smith claimed to recover them” and that family members were “deeply invested

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56. *Ibid.*, 190. Taves mentions Joseph Sr. and Hyrum Smith but not in the context of their role as witnesses.

57. *Ibid.*, 189.

58. John A. Clark, an acquaintance of Martin Harris, wrote that a “gentleman in Palmyra” told Clark that in answer to the question of whether Harris saw the plates with his “bodily eyes,” Harris replied that he saw the plates “just as distinctly as I see any thing around me,—though at the time they were covered over with a cloth.” (John A. Clark, *Gleanings by the Way* [Philadelphia: W. J. & J. K. Simon; New York: Robert Carter, 1842], 257.) Of course, this is a weak source because it is third hand and includes an anonymous witness.

in the translation process and strongly disposed to believe.”<sup>59</sup> What Taves fails to explain, however, is how this notion of the plates materializing over several years could possibly apply to the Whitmer family, who had known Joseph for less than a month when John, Jacob, Christian, and Peter Whitmer Jr. and their brother-in-law Hiram Page became the majority of the Eight (and David became one of the Three). The sole evidence offered by Taves that these men participated in the materialization of the plates is their testimony itself—essentially the argument that anyone who believed and assisted Joseph must have played a role in the materialization—but such a contention is clearly tautological and therefore evidence of nothing.

Although Seth Perry argues that the “scholarly heft” Taves brings to her work “makes it important reading” and that “her notion of materialization” is “essential reading for the ever-growing set of scholars interested in material religion,”<sup>60</sup> a painstaking discussion of the testimony of the Eight Witnesses would have added considerable weight to that “heft.”

## Conclusion

What, then, is the upshot of the statements of the seventeen empirical witnesses of the plates? By their very nature, of course, those statements cannot prove that an angel delivered an ancient record to Joseph. What those accounts do demonstrate is, in the words of the Eight, that “the said Smith has got the plates” and that those plates had “engravings thereon, all of which [had] the appearance of ancient work, and of curious workmanship.”<sup>61</sup> In

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59. Ibid., 203, 297, 203.

60. Seth Perry, review of *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths*, by Ann Taves, *Mormon Studies Review* 5 (2018): 99.

61. The forgery of the so-called Kinderhook plates, “discovered” in 1843 and considered ancient by many until 1980, shows that it was possible in the nineteenth century for a group of men, including a blacksmith working in his shop, to use plates of brass and acid to create an artifact having the “appearance of ancient work, and of curious workmanship,” with “engravings thereon.” See Brian M. Hauglid, “Did Joseph Smith Translate the Kinderhook Plates?” in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, edited by Robert L. Millet (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011), 93–103, available at <https://rsc.byu.edu/archived/no-weapon-shall-prosper/did-joseph-smith-translate-kinderhook-plates>.

addition, those accounts are consistent: William Smith, in the autumn of 1827, and the Eight Witnesses, in the summer of 1829, as well as Emma Smith, Martin Harris, and Joseph McKune Sr. sometime in between, all described an object with leaves, or pages. Some of the pages were sealed and some were not. There is no evidence that Joseph used sand or anything else to “represent” the plates.

Individual accounts add that the pages were pliable, about as thick as plates of tin, about four to six inches thick, clearly not fashioned from stone or wood, and connected by rings. The plates were heavy, much heavier than stone, with estimates of their weight ranging from forty to sixty pounds. They measured about six or seven inches by eight inches and had a greenish color.<sup>62</sup> The documentary evidence indicates there was one set and one set only. Dan Vogel aptly describes the inevitable conclusion: “The plates were either ancient or modern.”<sup>63</sup>

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62. Although Josiah Stowell judged the plates to be “about one foot square,” that estimate is suspect because he only claimed to see “a corner” of the plates.

63. Vogel, *Making of a Prophet*, xi.