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## Personal Writings of the Book of Mormon Witnesses

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## CHAPTER 3

# PERSONAL WRITINGS OF THE BOOK OF MORMON WITNESSES

*Richard L. Anderson*

Eleven men signed two formal statements, the first recording that a brilliant angel displayed the Nephite plates to three men, followed by the verifying voice of God, and the second telling how eight men lifted and examined the ancient record leaf by leaf. These documents fulfill prophecies in the ancient record and are appropriately printed in each Book of Mormon authorized by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Early in his epic, Nephi wrote that the future translator would show the engraved original to others: "Three witnesses shall behold it, by the power of God, besides him to whom the book shall be delivered; and they shall testify to the truth of the book and the things therein" (2 Nephi 27:12). In addition to these three, others would see the plates themselves: "And there is none other which shall view it, save it be a few according to the will of God, to bear testimony of his word unto the children of men"

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(2 Nephi 27:13). Seven of the eleven witnesses survived Joseph Smith, including the three who testified that the angel appeared with the plates. Though the eleven witnesses went their separate ways, not one recanted his written testimony.

The lives of the eleven witnesses are well documented; each was questioned closely about his natural and supernatural experiences. The documents on their lives and testimonies are so numerous that they could fill volumes:<sup>1</sup> my files include reports from about 200 individuals who heard one or more Book of Mormon witnesses, some of which virtually reproduce their words. Strong and clear support of their 1830 statements is found in all responsible reports from the eleven witnesses, though there are minor discrepancies on details. The gold nuggets in these extensive sources are those the witnesses personally wrote or dictated. This article will quote direct confirmations from every witness who left such personal writing. The total conviction in these personal validations is moving. Those who interviewed the Three Witnesses note the light in their eyes and the forthright expressions that signaled the reality of their angelic experience. President Joseph F. Smith never forgot David Whitmer's testimony: "Nothing could be more earnest, more sincere, than that aged man's solemn affirmation that he saw the angel and heard his voice declaring that the characters upon those plates had been divinely translated."<sup>2</sup>

Although Joseph Smith's name does not appear on the formal testimonies in the Book of Mormon, he is nevertheless a Book of Mormon witness because he was present each time official witnesses saw the plates. He left two important personal statements, one describing what the Three Witnesses saw and heard, and the other giving an exact description of the plates the Eight Witnesses saw and handled. In the concise letter informing editor John Wentworth how the

Church was founded and what it believed, Joseph said of the plates:

These records were engraven on plates which had the appearance of gold. Each plate was six inches wide and eight inches long and not quite so thick as common tin. They were filled with engravings in Egyptian characters and bound together in a volume, as the leaves of a book with three rings running through the whole. The volume was something near six inches in thickness, a part of which was sealed. The characters on the unsealed part were small, and beautifully engraved. The whole book exhibited many marks of antiquity in its construction and much skill in the art of engraving.<sup>3</sup>

In 1838 the Prophet began writing the official Church history—he started with the First Vision, and later narrated the Three Witnesses' prayer in the grove. Following is his description of what he saw and heard with Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer:

We beheld a light above us in the air, of exceeding brightness, and behold, an angel stood before us. In his hands he held the plates, which we had been praying for those to have a view of. He turned over the plates one by one so that we could see them, and discern the engravings thereon distinctly. He addressed himself to David Whitmer and said: "David, blessed is the Lord and he that keeps his commandments." When immediately afterwards we heard a voice from out of the bright light above us, saying: "These plates have been revealed by the power of God, and they have been translated by the power of God—the translation of them which you have seen is correct, and I command you to bear record of what you now see and hear."<sup>4</sup>

Other accounts of these experiences exist for each of the eleven official Book of Mormon witnesses, in the form of

reported conversations or public talks. In addition, some of the witnesses have left handwritten or published statements. Such individual writings about the plates have not yet been found for the Prophet's father or his brother Samuel, who, although they served in Church positions, did not contribute to the public press or take time for much correspondence. They died in 1840 and 1844 respectively, without leaving known signed recollections of seeing the plates. Similarly, neither Christian Whitmer nor Peter Whitmer Jr., who died in full fellowship in 1835 and 1836, respectively, left signed statements of their experiences with the plates. Another of the Eight Witnesses, Jacob Whitmer, did not record his experience, and he became inactive when his brothers David and John were excommunicated. A shoemaker-farmer in Richmond, Missouri, he wrote little and died in 1856 without penning any addendum to the Testimony of Eight Witnesses. However, each of the Three Witnesses and three of the Eight Witnesses reaffirmed their Book of Mormon testimonies by writing their own accounts of viewing the plates. The firsthand statements of the Three Witnesses will be presented first, followed by statements of three of the Eight Witnesses. Within these groupings, material from each person appears in the sequence of his date of death.

### **Oliver Cowdery**

Oliver Cowdery was the most visible of the eleven witnesses during his years in the Church: he was a scribe for the Book of Mormon translation, the foremost spokesman for the Church after its organization, the leader of the first major mission, the editor of Church publications, a counselor to Joseph Smith, a prominent recorder of Church records, and a member of the Kirtland High Council. In Church minute books and in one letter while he was out of

the Church, Oliver wrote about being with the Prophet when receiving the Aaronic priesthood from John the Baptist and the Melchizedek priesthood from Peter, James, and John. His testimonies thus regularly include his additional role as a witness of priesthood restoration. Because he had a significant part in editing the Doctrine and Covenants in Kirtland, the first published account of the coming of the ancient apostles with the keys of the priesthood is really the joint testimony of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery (see D&C 27:12–13). Oliver published the fullest narrative of the coming of John the Baptist, an account that supplements the Prophet's official history (see Joseph Smith—History 1:68–72 and note). In the following account, the phrase *my mission from the holy messenger* may refer to one of the priesthood restorations or to the angel that commissioned Oliver as a Book of Mormon witness. The following extract is part of Oliver's 1837 editorial farewell in the Kirtland Church newspaper:

It is only requisite for me to add that the doctrines which I commenced to preach some seven years since are as firmly believed by me as ever; and though persecutions have attended, and the rage and malice of men been heaped upon me, I feel equally as firm in the great and glorious cause as when first I received my mission from the holy messenger.<sup>5</sup>

Oliver left the Church in 1838 with his brothers-in-law, David and John Whitmer, because of his inability to accept the strong leadership of the Prophet. Unlike David and John, however, Oliver could not remain outside the Church in good conscience. He practiced law for a decade but returned and was rebaptized in 1848 in Kaneshville, Iowa. It was too late in the season for him to emigrate west that year, and without the resources to winter in the small Iowa settlements, Oliver and his wife and daughter traveled some two hundred miles

to stay with the Whitmers in Richmond, Missouri, where Oliver died the next year.<sup>6</sup> Their journey to Missouri was interrupted by a snowstorm, forcing the Cowderys to stop at a farmhouse and ask for shelter. By coincidence, their host was devout Mormon Samuel W. Richards, who visited with Oliver for days and at the end asked for Oliver's personal statement of the divine events of the restoration. Though the location of the original is not known, Richards sent the text to the *Deseret News* in 1884, and it was no doubt an accurate copy. Richards emphasized that Oliver "penned, with his own hand and in my presence, the testimony and statement herewith." The statement is dated 13 January 1849, is addressed "To Elder Samuel W. Richards," and ends with Oliver's signature:

While darkness covered the earth and gross darkness the people, long after the authority to administer in holy things had been taken away, the Lord opened the heavens and sent forth his word for the salvation of Israel. In fulfilment of the sacred scripture, the everlasting gospel was proclaimed by the mighty angel (Moroni), who, clothed with the authority of his mission, gave glory to God in the highest. This gospel is the "stone taken from the mountain without hands." John the Baptist, holding the keys of the Aaronic Priesthood; Peter, James and John, holding the keys of the Melchizedek Priesthood, have also ministered for those who shall be heirs of salvation, and with these ministrations ordained men to the same priest-hoods. These priest-hoods, with their authority, are now, and must continue to be, in the body of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Blessed is the elder who has received the same, and thrice blessed and holy is he who shall endure to the end. Accept assurances, dear brother, of the unfeigned prayer of him who, in connection with Joseph the Seer, was blessed with the above ministrations and who earnestly and devoutly hopes to meet you in the celestial glory.<sup>7</sup>

## Martin Harris

Martin Harris sacrificed his prosperity and first marriage in order to finance the first edition of the Book of Mormon. His rewards were mainly of conscience and respect, for he never held a high office in the Church. Though a member of the Ohio high council, he sympathized with the financial critics of Joseph Smith after the failure of the Kirtland bank in 1837. By the end of that year, Martin was excommunicated with a number of prominent Mormons who opposed the Prophet's religious leadership as a whole.<sup>8</sup> For a time this group tried to maintain a reformed Mormonism without the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's visions, but Martin dissented from the dissenters, standing up for the Book of Mormon in a meeting of former leaders: "Martin Harris then bore testimony of its truth and said all would be damned that rejected it."<sup>9</sup> For a third of a century, the Book of Mormon financier stayed in Kirtland, sustaining himself on a small farm, and was known as an intense believer in the Book of Mormon who did not commit continuously to any Mormon group. In 1870 William H. Homer and Edward Stevenson persuaded him to go to Utah. He arrived at the end of August and was rebaptized. After speaking and visiting in Salt Lake City until after the October conference, he moved to Cache Valley to reside with his son, Martin Harris Jr., and the family later moved from Smithfield to Clarkston, where Martin spent the last year of his life. Many times he restated his testimony to visitors as he lingered bedridden before death in 1875.<sup>10</sup>

Not long after settling in Smithfield, Martin answered two letters from Hannah Emerson, reiterating his testimony of the Book of Mormon and his faith in Joseph Smith as a prophet. Hannah was baptized into the Reorganized Church about two months after Martin Harris sent the



second response.<sup>11</sup> The text of the following letter is from the early Reorganized Church newspaper, since the originals have disappeared. This letter is addressed to “Mr. Emerson, Sir,” evidently taking her initials as masculine, is dated “Smithfield, Utah, Nov. 23d, 1870,” and is signed “Martin Harris.” The entire text of the letter is included for insight into the man and his testimony:

I received your favor. In reply I will say concerning the plates, I do say that the angel did show to me the plates containing the Book of Mormon. Further, the translation that I carried to Prof. Anthon was copied from these same plates; also, that the professor did testify to it being a correct translation. I do firmly believe and do know that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God, for without I know, he could not [have] had that gift, neither could he have translated the same. I can give, if you require it, one hundred witnesses to the proof of the Book of Mormon. I defy any man to show to me any passage of scripture that I am not posted on or familiar with. I will answer any questions you feel like asking to the best of my knowledge, if you can rely on my testimony of the same. In conclusion, I can say that I arrived at Utah safe, in good health and spirits, considering the long journey. I am quite well at present and have been, generally speaking, since I arrived. With many respects, I remain your humble friend.<sup>12</sup>

## **David Whitmer**

David Whitmer was first convinced of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon through letters Oliver Cowdery sent him during the translation. David moved the translators to the Whitmer farm, where the manuscript was completed and where the Three Witnesses saw the angel and the plates. Since David had a strong personality and was a vigorous leader, he headed the Mormon defense before the Jackson County

expulsion in 1833. The next year he was assigned to preside over the Saints in Missouri. In 1838 he supported his counselors, John Whitmer and W. W. Phelps, when Church members would not sustain them in their purchasing land with Church funds and selling it in lots at Far West, where the Church began to gather. David also joined his brother-in-law Oliver Cowdery in opposing Church cooperative economics, and both were excommunicated that spring. He spent the last half century of his life outside the Church, operating a successful livery stable in Richmond, Missouri, and earning the respect of a community that had earlier supported the Latter-day Saint expulsion in 1838–39. During the last two decades of his life, interviewers of every religious persuasion visited David to hear his uncompromising testimony of the Book of Mormon.<sup>13</sup>

David Whitmer's most used direct statement was his answer to critic John Murphy in 1881. Murphy, a local farmer who had been a Protestant missionary, visited David Whitmer in the summer of 1880, and the following January published a reconstructed conversation that claimed David had essentially agreed that his angelic vision was an inner feeling. Murphy closed with this public appeal: "He had an honest, simple look, and my impression, which I think to be as good as his or his angel, is that he ought to reconsider and contradict his former testimony to a delusion, or perhaps a cunning scheme, being a fact which has resulted in so much woe to many; and as he seems to be nearly 80 years old, he ought not to delay."<sup>14</sup> Two months later, David published a denial that his experience was subjective, insisting that his printed testimony accurately reported the glorious messenger who turned the leaves of the plates. He added statements affirming his personal integrity from two dozen community leaders in Richmond, the county seat. He then asked newspapers to publish this information in Hamilton, where

Murphy's appeal first appeared, and in Richmond, where David resided. The witness then "printed and distributed" the material as a leaflet, reprinting it six years later, in 1887, in his widely distributed *An Address to All Believers in Christ*. In these publications David had two goals: to leave an unmistakable record of his Book of Mormon testimony and to distance himself from polygamy and the Church in Utah. The short 1881 statement was signed by David Whitmer and was dated, "Richmond, Mo., March 19, 1881." The document's first half follows:

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, Mo., 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 have never 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 regard to the same, I do again affirm the truth of all of 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.<sup>15</sup>

One of the more articulate witnesses, David Whitmer dictated and signed many letters, some answering inquiries regarding his experience of seeing the plates. A selection of these letters has recently been published. The following letter is included here because it is not well-known and is the

earliest known signed testimony from David Whitmer.<sup>16</sup> Beneath David's signature is the note, "Handwriting of Geo. W. Schweich, grandson," reflecting David's practice of dictation after losing his right thumb in an 1838 accident. The statement is dated, "Richmond, Missouri, March 2d, 1875," and the letter is addressed to "Mr. Mark H. Forscutt," who was then a Reorganized Church missionary assigned to the Iowa-Missouri area.<sup>17</sup>

Dear Sir: My testimony to the world is written concerning the Book of Mormon. And it is the same that I gave at first, and it is the same as shall stand to my latest hour in life, linger with me in death and shine as gospel truth beyond the limits of life, among the tribunals of heaven. And the nations of the earth will have known to[o] late the divine truth written on the pages of that book is the only sorrow of this servant of the Almighty Father.<sup>18</sup>

A dozen years later, in the last year of his life, David Whitmer published a seventy-five-page booklet of his religious views to explain why he did not affiliate with the Latter-day Saints in Utah or with the Reorganized Church. He essentially opposed polygamy and the later revelations of Joseph Smith that he felt complicated his view of the simple organization of the ancient church of the Book of Mormon. In the opening portion of the booklet, David addressed those not familiar with the Book of Mormon, and in the last section of the booklet, he argued for a less structured church. He reprinted the Testimony of Three Witnesses and the Testimony of Eight Witnesses, found in the front matter of the Book of Mormon, along with the 1881 Murphy refutation and the certificate affirming David's character from the leading Richmond citizens. David updated these earlier statements by correcting the misrepresentations of contemporary reference works:

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 or 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 deathbed 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 3d, 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.<sup>19</sup>

## **Hyrum Smith**

Hyrum Smith, Joseph Smith's older brother, was the most prominent of the Eight Witnesses. He was a respected school board member and Mason in his community when he added his name to the testimony of the eight that they "did handle" and "heft" the plates and "saw the engravings thereon, all of which has the appearance of ancient work, and of curious workmanship." Hyrum was essentially a counselor to Joseph Smith from the time the Church was organized, but he officially served in the First Presidency from 1837 until the 1844 double murder in Carthage Jail. Other than the Prophet Joseph, no one knew better the origins of Mormonism, and no Latter-day Saint was more trusted than Hyrum Smith.<sup>20</sup>

Hyrum was arrested after Far West was surrounded by the Missouri militia in the fall of 1838. He was jailed and chained with Joseph and other leaders in Richmond while

they awaited their preliminary hearing on charges of treason and other crimes stemming from the Mormons' armed resistance to their impending exile from northern Missouri. While they awaited a grand jury hearing, the Smiths and others were imprisoned in Liberty Jail from the beginning of December to the beginning of April. Distrusting the legal process, they and other leaders escaped to Illinois in early April. There Hyrum published an account of the abuse and why he endured it, and in the preface he explained why he reaffirmed his 1830 statement that he saw the gold plates: "Having given my testimony to the world of the truth of the Book of Mormon, the renewal of the everlasting covenant, and the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven in these last days; and having been brought into great afflictions and distresses for the same, I thought that it might be strengthening to my beloved brethren to give them a short account of my sufferings for the truth's sake and the state of my mind and feelings while under circumstances of the most trying and afflicting nature."<sup>21</sup> Near the end of this narrative, Hyrum validated the declaration of the Eight Witnesses and stated that he had regularly confirmed that statement wherever he had been:

Thus I have endeavored to give you a short account of my sufferings while in the state of Missouri. . . . 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>22</sup>

## Hiram Page

Hiram Page married Catherine Whitmer, a sister of David and John Whitmer, and was baptized a few days after the Church was organized. After moving to Jackson County with the Whitmer clan, Hiram was whipped and threatened with death when the Mormons were expelled from that county in 1833. When David and John were excommunicated in the spring of 1838, Hiram became inactive and remained on his farm near Excelsior Springs, Missouri, after the Saints left the state the following winter.<sup>23</sup> Before his death in 1852, he showed considerable interest in maintaining David Whitmer's form of Mormonism. In his final years, he wrote a dozen letters on behalf of their small group that reverted to a few priesthood offices and Book of Mormon doctrines that existed before the Church was organized. Many of Hiram's communications arose in response to William E. McLellin's attempt to establish a faction of the Church by enlisting the aid and prestige of the surviving Book of Mormon witnesses. McLellin, a former apostle, traveled to Missouri and ordained David Whitmer president of this organization, with John Whitmer as a counselor and Hiram as a high priest. However, these men were almost immediately disenchanted with McLellin's inspiration.<sup>24</sup>

Before getting involved with McLellin, Hiram Page answered a McLellin letter advocating a reconstituted church. Page commended McLellin for stressing the name of Christ but was cautious on the question of whether McLellin had the authority to reorganize. William had queried Hiram about his written testimony as one of the Eight Witnesses, and Hiram asserted that his printed 1830 Book of Mormon statement was still true and was according to "what I saw." His full comments about the Book of Mormon follow, including his conviction that Joseph Smith did not have the

education to write the Book of Mormon. Hiram also told of several personal spiritual experiences that were printed as part of his statement about seeing and handling the plates:

In the next place you want to know my faith relative to the Book of Mormon and the winding up of wickedness. 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 language. Yea, it would be treating the God of heaven with contempt to deny these testimonies, with too many others to mention here.<sup>25</sup>

## **John Whitmer**

The last survivor of the Eight Witnesses was John Whitmer, who died in 1878. The Prophet relates the following about the conclusion of Book of Mormon translation after he and Oliver Cowdery had moved to the Whitmer farm in June 1829: "John Whitmer, in particular, assisted us very much in writing during the remainder of the work."<sup>26</sup> Thus John apparently had some contact with the ancient plates even before they were displayed to the Eight Witnesses. He was a trusted associate and scribe for the Prophet during the first years of the Church and was appointed Church historian in 1831 (see D&C 47). After settling with the Whitmers



in Missouri, John was forced out of Jackson County. He then became a counselor to his brother David in the Missouri presidency. However, the Saints began to distrust John as they gathered to Caldwell County in 1837 and learned that John Whitmer and W. W. Phelps were benefiting financially by selling lots obtained with Church funds. Both men were excommunicated in early 1838, and John never returned to the Church. He spent the remainder of his life on a large farm that included land on which the Mormon city of Far West was located.<sup>27</sup>

Between 1835 and 1836, John Whitmer resided in Ohio and was the editor of the Church newspaper for eleven months. When the Kirtland Temple was dedicated, he and other Missouri leaders were free to return to their homes, and in his final editorial, John shared his strong spiritual and physical knowledge of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon:

It may not be amiss in this place, to give a statement to the world concerning the work of the Lord, as I have been a member of this Church of Latter Day Saints from its beginning. 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. 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. And in this thing the wisdom of the wise most assuredly has perished. Therefore, know ye, O ye inhabitants of the earth, wherever this address may come, that I have in this thing freed my garments of your blood, whether you believe or disbelieve the statements of your unworthy friend and well-wisher.<sup>28</sup>

Persecution and hardship took its toll on the eleven Book of Mormon witnesses, most of whom died by 1856. Only three lived beyond that year—Martin Harris died in 1875, John Whitmer in 1878, and David Whitmer in 1888. Because of increasing public curiosity, these survivors were personally interviewed many times and sometimes queried in correspondence. John Whitmer responded to inquiries several times in writing. The following, his longest surviving letter, is written entirely in his own handwriting. It begins, “Dear Sir,” and the complementary close of “Yours respectfully” is followed by John Whitmer’s signature. John penned it at his residence at Far West, Missouri, addressing it to “Mark H. Forest, Esq.,” who is more accurately Mark H. Forscutt, an able member of the Reorganized Church who seems to have asked Whitmer whether he or other witnesses had modified their written testimonies.<sup>29</sup> Two years before his death, dating the letter 5 March 1876, John wrote:

Yours came duly to hand 4. inst. and the contents considered. I hasten to answer according to best of my information at hand. Mrs. Cowdery resides some place in Colorado. The address is mislaid or I would give it. However, I think I am able to answer your enquiries to your satisfaction.

Oliver Cowdery lived in Richmond, Mo., some 40 miles from here, at the time of his death. I went to see him and was with him for some days previous to his demise. I have never heard him deny the truth of his testimony of the Book of Mormon under any circumstances whatever. I have no knowledge that there was any effort made to force him to deny the Book of Mormon. Neither do I believe that he would have denied, at the peril of his life; so firm was he that he could not be made to deny what he has affirmed to be a divine revelation from God.

I desire to good when it is in my power. I have never heard that any one of the three or eight witnesses ever

denied the testimony that they have borne to the Book as published in the first edition of the Book of Mormon. There are only two of the witnesses to that book now living, to wit., David Whitmer, one of the three, and John Wh[itmer], one of the eight. Our names have gone forth to all nations, tongues and people as a divine revelation from God. And it will bring to pass the designs of God according to the declaration therein contained, &c.<sup>30</sup>

While still active in the Church, John Whitmer fulfilled his calling by making a survey history of nearly one hundred manuscript pages. In the Forscutt letter, he gave a historical evaluation of the testimonies of the eleven Book of Mormon witnesses, an act significant in part because he knew the views of the Eight Witnesses, particularly his brothers and brother-in-law who died in Missouri before they could provide their own detailed documentation of their experience with the plates. The intense tone of John Whitmer's 1876 reaffirmation matches that of the statement he joined in forty years earlier. In fact, all the Three Witnesses and three of the Eight Witnesses left personal restatements of their 1830 printed certificates. All say not only that they saw the plates, but also that their testimonies have binding significance for the modern world. They insist that their God-given witness must not be dismissed lightly, that all who read and hear it will be accountable for their acceptance or rejection of the ancient record of prophets who testify of the American ministry of Christ and his restored gospel in the latter days.

According to President Ezra Taft Benson, learning about the Book of Mormon witnesses is a step toward achieving the necessary spiritual knowledge that comes through scripture reading and prayer: "God has built in his own proof system of the Book of Mormon as found in Moroni, chapter 10, and in the testimonies of the Three and the Eight Wit-

nesses and in various sections of the Doctrine and Covenants.”<sup>31</sup> From the surviving personal writings, readers of this article have seen the direct words of six witnesses as they reported their experiences with the angel and the plates. Their words display a remarkable harmony with each other and with the Prophet’s own history. Whether near Joseph Smith or separated by time and distance, they sustain his description of the sacred gold plates and the divine revelations contained in them. The message of those written comments is captured by the final sentence of the Testimony of Eight Witnesses: “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.”<sup>32</sup>

## Notes

1. A complete collection of documents about the Book of Mormon witnesses is now being compiled. The books were initiated by my respected coeditor Scott H. Faulring and with the research support of FARMS. The first volumes concern Oliver Cowdery and are in the final stages of editing.

2. Joseph F. Smith, “My Missions,” *Deseret News*, 21 December 1901; also cited in James R. Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1970), 4:22. The phrase *his voice* illustrates how clarity of expression can fade as conversations are retold long after they occurred. While Smith’s account seems to indicate that the angel spoke, David Whitmer said in an early report of the event, “I heard the voice of the Lord as distinctly as I ever heard anything in my life, declaring that the records of the plates of the Book of Mormon were translated by the gift and power of God” (Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith, letter to President John Taylor, 17 September 1878, *Deseret News*, 16 November 1878; also in Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* [Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991], 40). Quotations from historical sources in this article are verbatim

but include conservative modernization in punctuation and spelling.

3. Joseph Smith, "Church History," *Times and Seasons* 3 (1 March 1842): 707; republished in Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B.H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1946): 4:537. Orson Pratt boarded at the Prophet's home in the early 1830s and in 1840 he first published the description of the plates along with an account of Joseph Smith's early visions. The Prophet obviously felt he was quoted accurately about the plates, because he used Pratt's sketch as his own, with some corrections. For Pratt's original account, see Dean C. Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:399–400.

4. This is the earliest surviving draft (1839) of the Prophet's manuscript history ("Church History," 236–7); it is minimally edited in Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:54–5.

5. "Valedictory," dated February 1837, *Messenger and Advocate* 3 (August 1837): 548.

6. For an outline biography of Oliver Cowdery, see Lyndon W. Cook, *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 14.

7. "Oliver Cowdery's Last Letter," *Deseret News*, 22 March 1884. Richards prefaces the "letter" by describing the circumstances in which he obtained it.

8. Some say Martin Harris was not excommunicated, but a 1 January 1838 letter written by John Smith, then the First Presidency member presiding over the Kirtland High Council, stated that Martin had been excommunicated the week before. See Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 119 n. 13.

9. George A. Smith, letter to Josiah Fleming, 30 March 1838, Kirtland, Ohio, in LDS Church Archives.

10. For an outline biography of Martin Harris, see Cook, *Revelations*, 9.

11. Data on Hannah is from RLDS records in Susan Easton Black, *Early Members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1993), 2:670.

12. *The True Latter Day Saints' Herald* 22 (1875): 630.

13. For an outline biography of David Whitmer, see Cook, *Revelations*, 24–5.

14. “Murphy on Mormonism,” *The Hamiltonian*, 21 January 1881. David Whitmer turned seventy-six on 7 January 1881.

15. David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, Mo.: David Whitmer, 1887), 8–9. This is David’s final re-printing of his proclamation; the text matches the 1881 original. David explains the publication of his earlier leaflet on pages 8–9 of the *Address*.

16. For other letters from David Whitmer, see Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 234–47.

17. For a brief biography of Forscutt, see F. Henry Edwards, *The History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Independence, Mo.: Herald House, 1970) 6:78–9.

18. Printed courtesy of the RLDS Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri. For a reproduction of the handwritten manuscript from the RLDS Archives, see Inez Smith Davis, *The Story of the Church*, 10th ed. (Independence, Mo.: Herald House, 1981), 75.

19. *Address to All Believers in Christ*, 8. The booklet closes with David’s name and the dateline, “RICHMOND, MO., April 1st, 1887.”

20. For an outline biography of Hyrum Smith, see Cook, *Revelations*, 19–20.

21. Hyrum Smith, “To the Saints Scattered Abroad,” *Times and Seasons* 1 (December 1839): 20.

22. *Ibid.*, 23.

23. For an outline biography of Hiram Page, see Cook, *Revelations*, 40.

24. McLellin’s 1847 reorganization is surveyed by Larry C. Porter, “The Odyssey of William Earl McLellin: Man of Diversity, 1806–83,” in *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831-1836*, ed. Jan Shippo and John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1994), 341–46.

25. Hiram Page, letter to William E. McLellin, 30 May 1847, *Ensign of Liberty* 1 (January 1848): 63.

26. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church* 1:49.

27. For an outline biography of John Whitmer, see Cook, *Revelations*, 25–6.

28. *Messenger and Advocate* 2 (March 1836): 286–7. Because it contains the temple dedication minutes of that day, the issue must have been published after March 27.

29. For information on Forscutt, see Edwards, *The History of the Reorganized Church*, 6:78–9.

30. Printed courtesy of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri. Author's transcription of the holograph letter, found in the RLDS archives.

31. Ezra Taft Benson, *A Witness and a Warning* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 31.

32. Book of Mormon, introductory statements.