

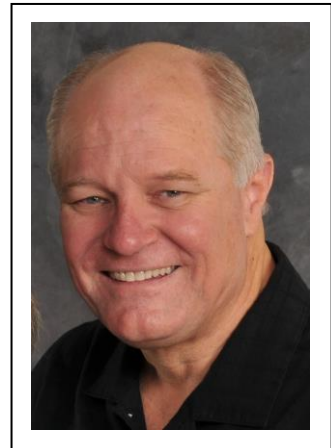
# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Did the Eleven Witnesses Actually See the Gold Plates?

BILL MCKEEVER

1

Joseph Smith claimed that in 1823 he was visited by an angel named Moroni and that this angel told him that “there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence they sprang” (Joseph Smith History 1:34). The gold plates were said to be buried in a stone box not far from the Smith family home. Smith had to wait another four years before he was allowed to retrieve the record. Once he received the plates, he was commanded not to allow just anybody to view them. He carefully chose eleven men who believed in his divine calling to become “eyewitnesses” to this grand event. Their “testimonies” are found in the front of every modern edition of the Book of Mormon and are broken down into two categories:



- ☞ **The Three Witnesses:** Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, David Whitmer
- ☞ **The Eight Witnesses:** Christian Whitmer, Jacob Whitmer, Peter Whitmer, Jr., John Whitmer, Hiram Page, Joseph Smith, Sr., Hyrum Smith, and Samuel Smith

Of the eleven men, three were directly related to Smith (his father and two brothers). Oliver Cowdery was a distant cousin to Joseph Smith. The four Whitmers were brothers to David Whitmer.

Mormons generally believe that these eleven men actually saw the plates in question, and given what they said in their testimonies, it is easy to see why they draw that conclusion. The three witnesses stated that they “beheld and saw the plates and the engravings thereon.” The eight witnesses, in a similar fashion, stated they “saw the engravings,” and that they had also “seen and hefted, and know of a surety that the said Smith has got the plates of which we have spoken.”

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Despite the rather lucid description given by these men, it appears that their familiarity with the plates is not as it first appears. Did the witnesses actually see physical plates with their naked eyes? Or was this some sort of mystical experience that involved “seeing” an object that was not really there?

## The Three Witnesses

2

According to the *History of the Church* (1:52), Smith stated,

“In the course of the work of translation, we ascertained that three special witnesses were to be provided by the Lord, to whom He would grant that they should see the plates from which this work (the Book of Mormon) should be translated; and that these witnesses should bear record of the same, as will be found recorded, Book of Mormon, page 581 [Book of Ether, chapter 5, verses 2, 3 and 4, p. 487, edition 1920], also page 86 [2 Nephi, chapter 11, verse 3, p. 73, edition 1920].”

As a result, he obtained a revelation from the Lord that can be found in *The Doctrine and Covenants* 17. It reads:

1 Behold, I say unto you, that you must rely upon my word, which if you do with full purpose of heart, you shall have a view of the plates, and also of the breastplate, the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim, which were given to the brother of Jared upon the mount, when he talked with the Lord face to face, and the miraculous directors which were given to Lehi while in the wilderness, on the borders of the Red Sea.

2 And it is by your faith that you shall obtain a view of them, even by that faith which was had by the prophets of old.

3 And after that you have obtained faith, and have seen them with your eyes, you shall testify of them, by the power of God;

4 And this you shall do that my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., may not be destroyed, that I may bring about my righteous purposes unto the children of men in this work.

5 And ye shall testify that you have seen them, even as my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., has seen them; for it is by my power that he has seen them, and it is because he had faith.

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Reading these passages, one can't help but notice that the only way the three men would see the plates at all is if they had faith. While it seems clear that faith was a prerequisite to be *allowed* to see the plates, can we not also conclude that "seeing" the plates also took an act of faith? On page 54 of *History of the Church*, volume one, Smith continues his narrative:

"Not many days after the above commandment was given, we four, viz., Martin Harris, David Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery and myself, agreed to retire into the woods, and try to obtain, by fervent and humble prayer, the fulfilment of the promises given in the above revelation—that they should have a view of the plates. We accordingly made choice of a piece of woods convenient to Mr. Whitmer's house, to which we retired, and having knelt down, we began to pray in much faith to Almighty God to bestow upon us a realization of these promises.

"According to previous arrangement, I commenced prayer to our Heavenly Father, and was followed by each of the others in succession. We did not at the first trial, however, obtain any answer or manifestation of divine favor in our behalf. We again observed the same order of prayer, each calling on and praying fervently to God in rotation, but with the same result as before.

"Upon this, our second failure, Martin Harris proposed that he should withdraw himself from us, believing, as he expressed himself, that his presence was the cause of our not obtaining what we wished for. He accordingly withdrew from us, and we knelt down again, and had not been many minutes engaged in prayer, when presently 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 these to have a view of. He turned over the leaves one by one, so that we could see them, and discern the engravings thereon distinctly."

Praying to see the gold plates out in the woods seems rather odd. After all, Smith had already commenced translating the plates. Why not just allow the three men to see the gold record at that location? Why was prayer necessary to see the plates if they were in fact, tangible? Harris' behavior also seems strange if the plates actually existed. How would his doubt be a detriment to seeing a physical object?

Author Dan Vogel offers an interesting point when he writes, "If the printed testimony were all that was available, one would assume that the three witnesses saw the angel and the plates together in a single vision" (*American Apocrypha*, "The Validity of the Witnesses Testimony," p.82). Delving deeper into Martin Harris' reluctance to hinder the others from seeing the plates due to his doubts, Vogel notes that Smith, Whitmer, and Cowdery saw both an angel and the plates *after* Harris withdrew from the group. *The History of the*

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*Church* 1:55 recounts how Smith “left David and Oliver and went in pursuit of Martin Harris, whom I found at a considerable distance fervently engaged in prayer.” Both men joined in prayer, and according to Smith, “**the same vision** was opened to our view.” It is important to note that Smith never claimed to have carried the plates to either the woods where he, Cowdery, and Whitmer prayed, nor does he say he carried them the “considerable distance” to where Harris was praying, yet he and Harris were still able to “see” them, but only via a vision.

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Mormon historian Marvin S. Hill discusses the controversies surrounding the witness’s testimonies in his review of Fawn McKay Brodie’s classic book titled *No Man Knows My History*. In his article “Brodie Revisited: A Reappraisal,” published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Hill states;

“What of the prophet’s story about gold plates, and what about his witnesses? Given Brodie’s assumptions, was there not deception here, if not collusion? Brodie maintains that the Prophet exercised some mysterious influence upon the witnesses which caused them to see the plates, thus making Joseph Smith once more the perpetrator of a religious fraud. **The evidence is extremely contradictory in this area, but there is a possibility that the three witnesses saw the plates in vision only**, for Stephen Burnett in a letter written in 1838, a few weeks after the event, described Martin Harris’ testimony to this effect: ‘When I came to hear Martin Harris state in public that he **never saw the plates with his natural eyes only in vision** or imagination, neither Oliver nor David . . . the last pedestal gave way, in my view our foundations.’”

Hill goes on to note:

“Burnett reported Harris saying that he had ‘hefted the plates repeatedly in a box with only a tablecloth or handkerchief over them, but he never saw them only as he saw a city through a mountain.’ Nonetheless, Harris said he believed the Book of Mormon to be true. In the revelation given the three witnesses before they viewed the plates they were told, ‘it is by your faith that you shall view them’ and ‘ye shall testify that you have seen them, even as my servant Joseph Smith Jr. has seen them, for it is by my power that he has seen them.’ There is testimony from several independent interviewers, all non-Mormon, that Martin Harris and David Whitmer said they saw the plates with their ‘spiritual eyes’ only. Among others, A. Metcalf and John Gilbert, as well as Reuben P. Harmon and Jesse Townsend, gave testimonies to this effect. This is contradicted, however, by statements like that of David Whitmer in the *Saints Herald* in 1882, ‘these hands handled the plates, these eyes saw the angel.’ But Z. H. Gurley elicited from Whitmer a not so

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positive response to the question, 'did you touch them?' His answer was, 'We did not touch nor handle the plates.'" (*Dialogue*, Vol.7, No.4, pp. 83-84).

Mormon apologists like Milton Backman point to Whitmer's steadfast insistence in his printed testimony and somehow sees this as a validation for actual, physical plates:

"Although there is no reliable evidence that David Whitmer repudiated his testimony as published in the Book of Mormon, a few interviewers assumed that he was contradicting his published declaration when he told them that he saw the plates with his spiritual rather than his natural eyes. Explaining what he meant by this statement, David Whitmer wrote in 1887:

"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. Martin Harris . . . called it 'being in vision'. . . .A bright light enveloped us where we were . . . and there in a vision, or in the spirit, we saw and heard just as it is stated in my testimony in the Book of Mormon" (Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration*, pp. 138-139. Ellipses his).

All this really proves is that Whitmer equated a "spiritual view" as being as natural to him "as it is at any time." Language that equates things that are "natural" with things seen in a vision should caution any thoughtful person to pause before assuming that any of the witnesses saw physical plates.

## What About the Eight Witnesses?

Later comments that could clarify the language used in the testimony of the eight witnesses are scarce, but several historians and researchers recount a statement made by John Whitmer that makes their experience sound similar to the three witnesses. Whitmer was excommunicated from the LDS Church on March 10, 1838 along with W.W. Phelps. Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer would also be excommunicated a month later. On April 5, 1839 Theodore Turley challenged John Whitmer to either affirm or deny his testimony regarding the gold plates. Whitmer responded by saying the plates 'were shown to me by a supernatural power" (*History of the Church* 3:307). Why would supernatural power be necessary if the plates actually existed?

Robert N. Hullinger, on page 133 of his book *Joseph Smith's Response to Skepticism*, wrote:

The written testimony of the eight witnesses differed from that of the three witnesses. They claimed no revelation. No "voice" declared to them that the "work

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is true.” No “power of God” showed them the plates—just Joseph Smith. No “angel of God” laid the plates before them; no “voice of the Lord” told them to testify of what they saw. For that reason Eduard Meyer concluded that the testimony of the eight was written primarily as further evidence that Smith indeed had the plates rather than as a demonstration of modern-day revelation. However, the eight did claim revelation in their conversations with others. When David Marks stopped at the Whitmers on March 1830, the eight witnesses “affirmed, that an angel had showed them certain plates of metal, having the appearance of gold that were dug out of the ground by one Joseph Smith.” They explained to Marks certain basic points about the Book of Mormon and its contents but claimed to have viewed the plates in vision only.

Hullinger went on to say:

In 1838 John Whitmer left the church and was confronted by Theodore Turley, who reminded Whitmer that he had “published to the world that an angel did present those plates to Joseph Smith.” Although that is not what the testimony of the eight claims, Whitmer nevertheless affirmed that the plates “were shown to me by a supernatural power.” But he could not vouch for the translation because he could not read the engravings on the plates. Martin Harris publicly denied that the eight witnesses ever saw the plates. The eight paused before in their testimony, he said, and signed only after much persuasion.

Marvin Hill commented on a letter written by Hiram Page to the *Ensign of Liberty* in 1848. In it Page defended his belief that the *Book of Mormon* was a work of the Lord. However, Hill conceded that Page did not actually say he saw the plates:

“With only a veiled reference to ‘what I saw,’ Page does not say he saw the plates but that angels confirmed him in his faith. Neither does he say that any coercion was placed upon him to secure his testimony. Despite Page’s inconsistencies, it is difficult to know what to make of Harris’ affirmation that the eight saw no plates in the face of John Whitmer’s testimony. The original testimony of these eight men in the Book of Mormon reads somewhat ambiguously, not making clear whether they handled the plates or the ‘leaves’ of the translated manuscript. Thus there are some puzzling aspects to the testimonies of the witnesses. If Burnett’s statement is given credence it would appear that Joseph Smith extorted a deceptive testimony from the eight witnesses. But why should John Whitmer and Hiram Page adhere to Mormonism and the Book of Mormon so long if they only gave their testimony reluctantly? It may be that like the three witnesses they expressed a genuine religious conviction. The particulars may not have seemed as important as the ultimate truth of the work” (*Dialogue*, Vol.7, No.4, [pp.84-85](#)).

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Richard L. Anderson, in his faith-promoting book titled *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, insists that readers must take the testimony of the eleven witnesses at “face value.” William D. Russell, a member of the Community of Christ and professor of history of the LDS movement at Graceland University, strongly disagrees.

“Perhaps one should not expect that a book about the witnesses to the Book of Mormon published by Deseret Book Company would be anything other than an attempt to strengthen the reader’s faith in the Book of Mormon. This book will be convincing to those already certain that the gold plates actually existed and that the eleven witnesses saw them. And even the detached reader will probably be convinced by Anderson’s research that the witnesses were honest men who sincerely believed their signed testimony and probably stuck by their story as long as they lived. But Anderson is really trying to have us conclude more than this. He would have the reader be convinced that because these men were honest and reaffirmed their testimony when asked, they actually saw and handled plates which contained the records of an ancient people. I believe that Anderson—like the eleven witnesses—is an honest and sincere man when he writes: ‘After years of working with their lives and their words, I am deeply convinced that their printed testimonies must be taken at face value’ (p. xii). But I don’t believe that his research by itself requires this conclusion. As he admits, ‘spiritual truths must be spiritually verified’ (p. 82). Believers must make a ‘leap of faith,’ apprehending with their ‘spiritual eyes’ rather than their ‘natural eyes’ (“Investigating the Investigation,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Vol.16, No.2, pp. 132-133).

It seems foolish to take the testimony of the witnesses at face value if there is further information available that helps us to understand how certain key words were understood and used by the writer/speaker. For example, if a person took the stand in a court room and said he saw the defendant use a gun to steal another person’s wallet, such an account would tend to carry significant weight with the jury. However, if the same person said he saw the defendant “in a vision” using a gun to steal a wallet, the strength of the testimony is incredibly weakened. Why? Because rational people do not equate visionary experiences with tangible, physical objects.

## The Concealed Object

There is no denying that Smith did have in his possession something that resembled what could be plates of some sort. However, whatever it was he had was kept from view, usually covered up with a cloth or placed in a box. Mormon historian Richard L. Bushman speaks of Smith’s father-in-law, Isaac Hale, who said, “I was allowed to feel the

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weight of the box and they gave me to understand, that the plates was then in the box – into which I was not allowed to look” (Joseph Smith – *Rough Stone Rolling*, p.63).

Bushman also notes that during the brief time Martin Harris was Smith’s scribe, a curtain was hung between Joseph and Martin “to prevent Harris from seeing the plates” (*Rough Stone Rolling*, p.66).

Hill records that William Smith said his father “never saw the plates except under a frock” (“Brodie Revisited,” *Dialogue*, Vol.7, No.4, p.84). William said, “In consequence of his vision, and his having the golden plates and refusing to show them, a great persecution arose against the whole family, and he was compelled to remove into Pennsylvania with the plates. He went on to say that his brother translated the plates using the “Urim and Thummim” placed in a hat, the plates were “lying nearby covered up” (*A New Witness for Christ in America* 2:416,417). This concurs with the description given by his sister-in-law Emma Smith.

Writes Bushman,

“Emma said she sat at the same table with Joseph, writing as he dictated, with nothing between them, and the plates wrapped in a linen cloth on the table. When Cowdery took up the job of scribe, he and Joseph translated in the same room where Emma was working. Joseph looked into the seer stone, and the plates lay covered on the table” (*Rough Stone Rolling*, p.71).

Emma said she “felt the plates as they lay on a table” wrapped in a linen tablecloth. She said the plates were pliable like thick paper and that they “would rustle with a metallic sound when the edges were moved by the thumb” (*Rough Stone Rolling*, p.70). If that is true, then it is certain that the plates were not made of gold since soft metal pages made of gold would not make such a sound.

## So What Did the “Eyewitnesses” Witness?

Several LDS sources give the eleven men who bore their testimony to the authenticity of the *Book of Mormon* the special title of *eyewitness*; however, it appears doubtful that any of them actually saw the plates apart from a supernatural and subjective experience. While they all claimed to have handled what they were told were ancient plates, they did so while the plates were covered up and not visible. That being case, how is their experience any different from others who also claimed to handle the plates? Such persons include Joseph Smith’s mother, Lucy Mack Smith. Lucy admitted she never saw the plates, but she claimed to have handled what she was told were plates of “pure gold.” As mentioned earlier, Joseph Smith’s wife Emma also claimed that she handled the plates when she



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moved them to “do her work” in the Smith home, though she insisted that she never uncovered them.

I maintain that if the eleven are called eyewitnesses, why not Lucy and Emma as well? After all, their experiences with what they thought were gold plates are really not much different than that of the eleven. Mormons might find this conclusion troubling since it tends to take away some of the mysterious sensation associated with the accepted folklore, but it is a consistent conclusion when it comes to comparing the experiences of those involved. If Mormons want to insist that a person can't be considered an eyewitness to the authenticity of the gold plates unless they actually saw them, then there were no eyewitnesses to Joseph Smith's gold plates.

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## **Addendum: Lucy Smith's Account**

An account by Joseph's mother (*Joseph Smith, The Prophet And His Progenitors For Many Generations*, by Lucy Smith, 1853, [pp. 138-9](#); available online [here](#)) makes it apparent that Joseph himself did not believe anyone had seen the plates until after the translation was complete:

As soon as the Book of Mormon was translated, Joseph dispatched a messenger to Mr. Smith, bearing intelligence of the completion of the work, and a request that Mr. Smith and myself should come immediately to Waterloo...

Joseph, Martin, Oliver, and David, repaired to a grove, a short distance from the house, where they commenced calling upon the Lord, and continued in earnest supplication, until He permitted an angel to come down from His presence, and declare to them, that all which Joseph had testified of concerning the plates was true.

When they returned to the house, it was between three and four o'clock in the afternoon. Mrs. Whirmer, Mr. Smith, and myself, were sitting in a bedroom at the time. On coming in, Joseph threw himself down beside me, and exclaimed, “Father, mother, you do not know how happy I am; the Lord has now caused the plates to be shown to three more besides myself...”

## **Addendum: The Annotation by B.H. Roberts**

“The difference between the testimony given the Three Witnesses and that given to the Eight is that the former was attended by a splendid display of the glory and power of God and the ministration of an angel, while the latter was attended by no such display, but was a plain, matter-of-fact exhibition of the plates by the Prophet to his friends; and

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they not only saw the plates, but handled them and examined the engravings upon them." Annotation in *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, p. 58 ([link](#))

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