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Facts On The Book of Mormon Witnesses

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This paper examines the culture, credibility and relevance of the testimony of the eleven men the LDS Church presents as witnesses to the Book of Mormon. It draws extensively from early sources, both Mormon and non-Mormon, in an attempt to provide an honest and balanced portrayal of the Witness phenomenon. A careful analysis of the historical evidence reveals serious problems.

"The Three Witnesses ... all initially describe their experience with the angel and the plates as subjective and visionary rather than objective and concrete."

The Three Witnesses, Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris and David Whitmer, all initially describe their experience with the angel and the plates as subjective and visionary rather than objective and concrete. Their elaborations on the encounter, their departure from the LDS Church, as well as other events in their lives, raise questions about their level of discernment and their credibility as witnesses.

The testimony of the Eight Witnesses is more objective but is plagued by its own set of problems. All eight had close personal ties to Joseph Smith's family — four were David Whitmer's brothers, a fifth was married to a Whitmer sister, and Joseph's father and two brothers made up the remaining three. These close ties to Joseph Smith, coupled with discrepancies between the witnesses' published Book of Mormon statement and later personal statements, as well as the question of coercion on the part of Joseph Smith, all raise questions of their credibility as well.

The Witnesses & the Historical Record

For some people, the fact that eleven men would sign their names to a written statement and never denounce the Book of Mormon is sufficient evidence for believing the Book of Mormon is of divine origin. But is the testimony of these eleven men a solid foundation for faith in the authenticity of the Book of Mormon? A careful investigation reveals there are a number of historical details which raise questions about the objectivity and credibility of these witnesses. To gain an objective perspective on the reliability of the witnesses and the strength of their testimony, three criteria will be used to evaluate the historical facts:

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- Were they discerning men of sound judgment not easily swayed by tales of the fantastic or supernatural?
- Were they without conflict of interest, and were their characters and reputations unquestioned?
- Did their later statements regarding the plates ever vary, deviate or detract from their original statements?

What Makes a Credible Witness?

In every period of history there are those individuals who tend to be credulous and suggestible. Such people desire to be a part of the fantastic or supernatural, and their very desire leaves them vulnerable to deception or manipulation. Research done on the period of American history from the late 1700s to early 1800s shows this time period to be no exception. Like today, a certain segment of the population desired and pursued subjective and mystical experiences in a quest for spiritual significance. Tales of spirit apparitions, buried treasure and the ability to see things with “spiritual eyes” that cannot be confirmed with the physical senses, were “reality” for those who lived through them. Experiences perceived with “second sight” were taken seriously and held as undeniable fact. But should testimony of this nature be presented as undeniable empirical evidence?

In an article published in the *American Quarterly*, Alan Taylor cites many incidents where 18th and 19th century treasure seekers claimed to have seen spirits and handled treasure that sank from their grasp. Alan Taylor in his article “The Early Republic’s Supernatural Economy: Treasure Seeking in the American Northeast, 1780-1830” comments:

These supernatural encounters were very “real” to those who experienced them. Childhood exposure to treasure tales and their careful performance of elaborate ceremonies at the digging site created a nervous expectation to see the extraordinary. (Taylor 1986, 14)

Magic circles, incantations, and a strict code of silence once the digging commenced were all part of the ceremony. Any spoken word would break the spell and the whole night’s efforts be lost. Taylor gives several examples including the following:

In 1814 a party of Rochester, New York treasure seekers barely escaped with their lives when the conductor exclaimed, ‘Damn me, I’ve found it!’ With that, a local newspaper recorded, ‘the charm was broken! — the scream of demons — the chattering of spirits — and hissing of serpents rent the air, and the treasure moved.’ (Ibid, p. 12)

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While many of the fantastic descriptions are viewed as folklore and tall tales, Taylor cites evidence that does not fit a simple explanation of fraud. Treasure seekers often impressed contemporary audiences with their sincerity and “utter conviction that their supernatural encounters had been real. Waitsfield, Vermont’s nineteenth-century chronicler wrote of a local treasure seeker, ‘The most ridiculous part of this matter, is the fact well attested, that Mr. Savage believed all this, as long as he lived, and was never ridiculed out of it.’” (Taylor 1986, p. 13)

In the years immediately preceding any mention of the gold plates and the Book of Mormon, both Joseph Smith, Jr., and his father, Joseph Sr., were money diggers like those described above. They openly shared their supernatural abilities to see treasure and other things not visible to the natural eye. William Stafford, a neighbor and fellow treasure seeker gave the following account:

Joseph, Jr., could see, by placing a stone of singular appearance in his hat, in such a manner as to exclude all light; at which time they pretended he could see all things within and under the earth, — that he could see within the above mentioned caves, large gold bars and silver plates — that he could also discover the spirits in whose charge these treasures were, clothed in ancient dress.”

It is evident the Smith’s believed what Joseph saw in his stone for they made attempts to retrieve this treasure. In the same affidavit Stafford recalled one time the made a circle on the ground and put hazel sticks around the circle to keep off evil spirits. A steel rod was added to the center of the circle, a trench dug and then “the older Smith consulted his son who had been ‘looking in his stone and watching the motions of the evil spirit.’” However, they had made a mistake in how they started the whole operation, otherwise they would have gotten the money (*Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reexamined*, Rodger I. Anderson, SLC, Signature Books, 1990, pp. 143-145).

As noted earlier, money digging and treasure seeking were generally accompanied by anticipation of the supernatural. Participants were emotionally excited and desired that something extraordinary would happen. We find this same pattern of anticipatory desire preceding the experience of the Three Witnesses.

While Joseph Smith was dictating the Book of Mormon to Oliver Cowdery, he read off a section that declared there would be three special witnesses who would be allowed to see the plates and then “bear witness” to the Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith’s *History of the Church* states:

Almost immediately after we had made this discovery, it occurred to Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and the aforementioned Martin Harris (who had come

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to inquire after our progress in the work) that they would have me inquire of the Lord to know if they might not obtain of him the privilege to be these three special witnesses; and finally they became so very solicitous, and urged me so much to inquire that at length I complied (*History of the Church*, Vol. 1, pp. 52-53).

Joseph then produced a revelation for Oliver, David and Martin which stated that if they relied upon God's word and did so with a full purpose of heart they would "have a view of the plates, and also the breastplate, the sword of Laban, the Urim & Thummim ... and the miraculous directors which were given to Lehi" (Ibid, p. 53). It would only be by their faith that they would be able to obtain a view of them.

This is very convenient. Joseph dictates the part of the Book of Mormon that mentions three special witnesses while all three are there with him. These men beg Joseph to ask God if maybe they aren't the ones. When he finally gives in, Joseph immediately gets a revelation that says, if they have faith, rely on God's word and have full purpose of heart, they will see not only the plates but numerous other wonderful things.

So they go to the woods and first spend a prolonged time in prayer. Nothing happens. They pray more. Nothing happens. Martin Harris volunteers to leave the group because he senses the others think he was the reason nothing was happening. As soon as Harris leaves, the others claim to see the angel and plates, though there is no mention of any of the other items that had been promised. According to Joseph Smith's history, Joseph then goes to find Harris, and while praying together, Harris cries out, "Tis enough, tis enough; mine eyes have beheld; mine eyes have beheld;" (Ibid, p. 55). It becomes clear that all three of these men desired this prestigious position of being the special chosen witnesses. They were emotionally primed by what Joseph claimed to translate and then by the revelation Joseph gave that emphasized their need for faith. The vision only came to Oliver and David after a prolonged time in prayer and the departure of Martin Harris.

It would appear from this account and Doctrine & Covenants 17, that the idea of three witnesses to the Book of Mormon is a new discovery made by Joseph and Oliver in June of 1829 while producing the Book of Mormon. Yet, three months earlier in March of 1829, Joseph received a revelation for Martin Harris which stated that Joseph had the gift to translate the Book of Mormon but that God would grant him no other gift, and that God would call and ordain three special witnesses to whom God would give supernatural power to "behold and view these things as they are." The revelation went on to say that no one else but the three would have the power to receive this same testimony. It is possible that Joseph did not refer back to this March 1829 revelation regarding the witnesses because by June he already had in mind to add eight additional witnesses besides Cowdery, Whitmer and Harris. Adding additional witnesses would go against

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the earlier revelation that there would be three and only three witnesses and that Joseph should not show the gold plates to anyone else (D&C 5:3, 12-14).

There is another conflict with the story as recorded by Joseph in his official history. Supposedly all three men saw the angel and gold plates the same day. But, Harris provided this information in an interview with Anthony Metcalf:

I never saw the golden plates, only in a visionary or entranced state. I wrote a great deal of the Book of Mormon myself, as Joseph Smith translated or spelled the words out in English. Sometimes the plates would be on a table in the room in which Smith did the translating, covered over with a cloth. I was told by Smith that God would strike him dead if he attempted to look at them, and I believed it. When the time came for the three witnesses to see the plates, Joseph Smith, myself, David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery, went into the woods to pray. When they had engaged in prayer, they failed at the time to see the plates or the angel who should have been on hand to exhibit them. They all believed it was because I was not good enough, or in other words, not sufficiently sanctified. I withdrew. As soon as I had gone away, the three others saw the angel and the plates. In about three days I went into the woods to pray that I might see the plates. While praying I passed into a state of entrancement, and in that state I saw the angel and the plates. (Anthony Metcalf, *Ten Years Before the Mast*, n.d., microfilm copy, p. 70-71.)

Visionary Reality

Like Martin Harris, each of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon willingly accepted visionary or second sight experiences as objective, unquestionable reality. The testimony of these witnesses contain qualifications which indicate there was a spiritual, visionary dimension to the encounter with the plates and the angel. It should be understood that this was not unusual for those who were actively seeking such experiences. However, this visionary aspect of the experience is seldom explained to investigators of Mormonism. In Mormon “faith-promoting” literature, references to the witnesses “handling” the plates are prominently featured, but they are not put into a context of a visionary handling of the plates. Martin Harris himself claimed to have sat with the plates, and “held them on his knee for an hour and a half ...” (“Testimony of Martin Harris” in the *Latter Day Saints Millennial Star*, 34:21, August 20, 1859, p. 545; also in George Reynolds, “Myth of the Manuscript Found,” in *Juvenile Instructor*, 1883, as cited in *Case Against Mormonism*, Vol. 2, p. 40, Jerald and Sandra Tanner, SLC, 1968). Did he truly sit with plates said to weigh 45-60 pounds on his lap, or did this occur in the realm of vision and imagination? We may not know for sure, but it is interesting that when Mormon apologist Richard Anderson quoted this testimony of Harris from the *Millennial*

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Star he chose to omit with an ellipsis, Harris' claim to have held the plates on his lap. It is possible Anderson himself recognized this detracted from Harris' credibility. Regardless of how one interprets this event, There is ample historical evidence the witnesses shared a subjective, visionary mindset.

Martin Harris

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Of the Three Witnesses, Martin Harris was probably the most affected by this mystical and magical outlook. Contemporaries of Harris had some of the following to say about him:

"a visionary fanatic" - said Rev. Jesse Townsend,

"Marvelousness" was his "predominating phrenological development," - Pomeroy Tucker (a man who appeared to like and respect M. Harris) who also said he was given to a "belief in dreams, ghosts, hobgoblins, 'special providences,' terrestrial visits of angels, [and] the interposition of 'devils' to afflict sinful men"

"There can't anybody say a word against Martin Harris. Martin was a good citizen ...a man that would do just as he agreed with you. But, he was a great man for seeing spooks." - Lorenzo Sauders, one who claimed to know the Harris family well. (Ronald W. Walker, "Martin Harris: Mormonism's Early Convert," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, vol. 19 (Winter 1986, 34-35).

Another example comes from John H. Gilbert, one who participated in the printing of the Book of Mormon. He provides this information:

Martin was something of a prophet: — He frequently said that "Jackson would be the last president that we would have; and that all persons who did not embrace Mormonism in two years would be stricken off the face of the earth.: He said that Palmyra was to be the New Jerusalem, and that her streets were to be paved with gold. Martin was in the office when I finished setting up the testimony of the three witnesses, — (Harris — Cowdery and Whitmer) I said to him, — "Martin, did you see those plates with your naked eyes?" Martin looked down for an instant, raise his eyes up, and said, 'No, I saw them with a spiritual eye.' (Wilford C. Wood, *Joseph Smith Begins His Work*, Vol. 1, 1958, introduction. This is a photomechanical reprint of the first edition [1830] of the Book of Mormon. It also contains biographical and historical information relating to the Book of Mormon.)

Martin Harris shows signs of being an unstable person in terms of his religious convictions. G.W. Stodard, in an affidavit dated Nov. 28, 1833 states:

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I have been acquainted with Martin Harris, about thirty years... Although he possessed wealth, his moral and religious character was such, as not to entitle him to respect among his neighbors....He was first an orthodox Quaker, then a Universalist, next a Restorationer, then a Baptist, next a Presbyterian, and then a Mormon. By his willingness to become all things unto all men, he has attained a high standing among his Mormon brethren. (Howe 1834, 260-261)

This religious instability continued even after Harris joined the Mormon Church. The Mormons admitted as much in 1846:

One day he [Martin Harris] would be one thing, and another day another. He soon became deranged or shattered, as many believed, flying from one thing to another, as if reason and common sense were thrown off their balance. In one of his fits of monomania, he went and joined the 'Shakers' or followers of Anne Lee. He tarried with them a year or two, or perhaps longer ... but since Strang has made his entry into the apostate ranks, and hoisted his standard for the rebellious to flock too, Martin leaves the 'Shakers,' whom he knows to be right, and has known it for many years, as he said, and joins Strang in gathering out the tares of the field. (*Millennial Star*, vol. 8, November 15, 1846, p. 124.)

The same article goes on to state:

... if the Saints wish to know what the Lord hath said of him, they may turn to the 178th page of the Book of Doctrine and Covenants, and the person there called a 'wicked man' is no other than Martin Harris ... (Ibid)

Mormon writers have admitted Harris' instability. E. Cecil McGavin states, "Martin Harris was an unaggressive, vacillating, easily influenced person," (Tanner 1968, 33) and Mormon apologist Richard Anderson though questioning "five religious changes before Mormonism," does make several references to his "religious instability." (Anderson 1981, 111, 167-ff)

While Mormon missionaries and popular literature of the LDS Church both point out Martin Harris' eventual return to the Mormon Church as a baptized member in full fellowship, and attribute this information as coming from David Whitmer (Videocassette 1 - The Three Witnesses, produced by Brigham Young University,) there is evidence he was neither mentally stable nor in full fellowship. Rather, he was said to be "feeble both in body and mind" and "was persuaded by persistent importuning to join his destinies with the Utah Mormons." The report in the *Des Moines Daily News* of October 16, 1886 went on to say that "Whitmer entertains no doubt whatever that this singular action upon the part of Harris was wholly chargeable to the enfeebled condition of his mind..."

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(Tanner 1968, 31) Phineas H. Young, writing to Brigham Young from Kirtland, Ohio records, “Martin Harris is a firm believer in Shakerism, says his testimony is greater than it was of the Book of Mormon.” (Gunnell 1955, 52) W.C. Gunnell in his dissertation on Martin Harris also notes regarding M. Harris’ eventual rejoining of the church that “Martin’s motives in being baptized at that time are not known, but the data of later events would indicate a lack of sincerity.” (Gunnell 1955, 52) The previously cited interview conducted by A. Metcalf further substantiates this, and states:

Harris never believed that the Brighamite branch of the Mormon church, nor the Josephite church, was right, because in his opinion, God had rejected them; but he did believe that Mormonism was the pure gospel of Christ when it was first revealed, I believe he died in that faith. (Metcalf, 73)

When Metcalf asked Harris why he had rejoined the church and taken the Mormon Temple endowments he answered that “his only motive was to see what was going on in there.” (Ibid, 72)

Martin Harris as a witness appears to be neither completely competent nor reliable. He was greatly influenced by a magical mindset and able to blend the mystical and material to the point where both were equally real. There is considerable evidence as to his religious instability, as he jumped from one group or person to the next. Mormon scripture refers to him as “a wicked man” and Mormons referred to his “monomania” or “mad fits,” as his wife called them. Mormon historians likewise have had to admit he was an “vacillating, easily influenced person.”

Much emphasis is placed on the assertion that the BOM Witnesses like Harris, never denounced the Book of Mormon or denied their testimony of seeing an angel. But given what we know of Harris, is his lack of denial of great significance? He does not appear to be a man of sound judgment or discernment and was easily swayed by tales of the supernatural, especially in a religious context. There is no evidence he ever denied his testimony of Shakerism or his experiences with that group. His experience with the angel was visionary and was seen with “a spiritual eye” so it is unverifiable and quite likely was real to him. He had little reason to renounce the Book of Mormon for its message was consistent with the restorationist mindset of many people in the nineteenth century. As the primary financial investor in the Book of Mormon he had a vested interest in supporting its authenticity. These factors would be more likely to lead to continued affirmation of his testimony rather than a denial of it. Throughout his life and especially toward the end, his role as a BOM witness attracted considerable attention as numerous people came to ask him questions and hear him speak. His testimony later in life appears to be less visionary and contain few if any qualifications about its subjective nature. A deathbed account of Martin Harris in the LDS periodical *The Instructor*, speaks of his

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reaffirmation of seeing an angel with gold plates. After speaking of the gold plates Harris went on to describe a money digging incident that took place after Joseph found the plates. Harris is quoted as saying:

Three of us took some tools to go to the hill and hunt for more boxes of gold or something, and indeed we found a stone box. We got quite excited about it and dug carefully around it, and by some unseen power it slipped back into the hill. We stood there and looked at it and one of us took a crow-bar and tried to drive it through the lid and hold it, but the bar glanced off and broke off one of the corners of the box. Sometime that box will be found and you will see the corner broken off, and then you will know I have told you the truth ("The Last Testimony of Martin Harris," by E. Cecil McGavin in *The Instructor*, October, 1930, Vol. 65, No. 10, pp. 587-589).

It is evident Martin Harris was something of a celebrity toward the close of his life. He seemed to enjoy speaking of the encounter with an angel, and the more the story was repeated, the more concrete it became while the subjective aspects of the incident seemed to diminish. This does not prove nor disprove the authenticity of the events recounted by Harris. It does, however, confirm that with the passage of time these events became more real and more concrete for Harris so that his later testimony is understood in light of earlier qualifications. This evidence creates some serious problems for the manner in which the LDS church presents the person and life of Martin Harris. He does not appear to be a man of discernment or sound judgment and was easily swayed by tales of the fantastic and supernatural. He had a vested interest in the success of the Book of Mormon and his reputation was questioned by the Latter-day Saints themselves. Harris added elements to his story of the angel and his connection with Joseph Smith as he told it through the years, allowing it to become less visionary and subjective and more concrete. For example, Martin Harris, claimed in an interview that before his experience as one of the three witnesses he told Joseph Smith, "Joseph, I know all about it. The Lord has showed me ten times more about it than you know." (Interview with Martin Harris in *Tiffany's Monthly*, 1859, p. 166). While quite likely a sincere man, he would appear to be neither reliable nor credible as a witness.

Oliver Cowdery

Oliver Cowdery and Joseph Smith were third cousins (*Oliver Cowdery: The Elusive Second Elder of the Restoration*, Phillip R. Legg, p. 17), and Cowdery also shared what must be considered a magical, mystical mindset. D. Michael Quinn in his book, *Early Mormonism & the Magic World View*, states, "Cowdery's use of a divining rod, however, does suggest that before 1829, he may have also had at least some knowledge of and experience with

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astrology and ceremonial folk magic” (p. 35). Quinn’s and other extensive research has turned up some interesting facts. William Cowdery, Oliver’s father was closely associated with, if not a member of Vermont’s Wood Scrape, and participated in folk magic. Quinn has linked him closely with Nathanael Wood’s “Fraternity of Rodsmen.” (Quinn 1987, 84-86)

Alan Taylor also discovered this connection in his research on the previously cited “Treasure Seeking In the American Northeast,” and states:

In 1799 a seer named Wingate arrived in Middletown as a guest of the Woods and of William Cowdery [sic] in adjoining Wells, Vermont. The Woods began to feature divining rods in their rituals, insisting that the rods’ jerks in answer to their questions represented divine messages. (Taylor 1986, 24)

Oliver Cowdery followed his father’s lead in folk magic practices with his own occultic use of a divining rod. This has been documented by RLDS Church Historian Richard P. Howard.

For example, the ‘divining rod’ was used effectively by one Nathanael Wood in Rutland County, Vermont, in 1801. Wood, Winchell, William Cowdery, Jr., and his son Oliver Cowdery, all had some knowledge of and associations with the various uses, both secular and sacred, of the forked witch hazel rod. Winchell and others used such a rod in seeking buried treasure;...when Joseph Smith met Oliver Cowdery in April 1829, he found a man peculiarly adept in the use of the forked rod ... (Howard 1969, 211-214)

This is further supported by research done by Marvin S. Hill of the Mormon Church’s Brigham Young University who, along with confirming Cowdery’s use of a rod also stated, “Some of the rodsman or money diggers who moved in Mormonism were Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, Orrin P. Rockwell, Joseph and Newel Knight, and Josiah Stowell.” (Hill 1972, 78)

Jerald and Sandra Tanner point out an interesting and important change Joseph Smith made in one of his revelations as he attempted to cover up Cowdery’s ability to work with a divining rod. Here is a comparison of the original revelation as found in the Book of Commandments with the altered version as it now appears in the Doctrine and Covenants.

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Book of Commandments

Now this is not all, for you have another gift, which is the gift of working with the rod: behold it has told you things: behold there is no other power save God, that can cause this rod of nature, to work in your hands... (7:3)

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Now this is not all thy gift, for you have another gift, which is the gift of Aaron; behold, it has told you many things; Behold, there is no other power, save the power of God, that can cause this gift of Aaron to be with you. (8:6-7)

LDS historians have attempted to justify the extensive involvement of the founders of the Mormon church in occultic and folk magic practices by claiming this was simply part of the culture of the time. This may be true to some extent, but laws in both New York and Vermont made divining illegal and the better educated ridiculed it in books and newspapers of the day. Furthermore, it does not change the fact that God has clearly condemned such practices as well as those who are involved in them (Deuteronomy 18:10-11).

True prophets of God in biblical times, rather than going along with their cultures (which often were engaging in these things) stood against the common culture and condemned such activities. We do not find Joseph Smith taking any such stand against occultic practices, as would be expected of a true prophet of God.

Cowdery, in conjunction with his magical involvement, appears to have shared a visionary mindset similar to other Mormons. Brigham Young, second president of the Mormon church, at a special conference on Sunday, June 17, 1877 told of an incident from the life of Oliver Cowdery. On more than one occasion they were able to enter into the hill Cumorah and see many wonderful things. Young explained:

When Joseph got the plates, the angel instructed him to carry them back to the hill Cumorah, which he did. Oliver says that when Joseph and Oliver went there, the hill opened, and they walked into a cave, in which there was a large and spacious room ... They laid the plates on a table; it was a large table that stood in the room. Under this table there was a pile of plates as much as two feet high, and there were altogether in this room more plates than probably many wagon loads; they were piled up in the corners and along the walls. The first time they went there the sword of Laban hung upon the wall; but when they went in again it had been taken down and laid upon the table across the gold plates; it was unsheathed and on it was written these words: "This sword will never be sheathed again until the

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kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our God and his Christ.” I tell you this as coming not only from Oliver Cowdery, but others who were familiar with it... Carlos Smith was a young man of as much veracity as any young man we had, and he was a witness to these things. Samuel Smith saw some things, Hyrum saw a good many things, but Joseph was the leader. (*Journal of Discourses* 1878, 19:38)

This is another example of having second sight, and was claimed not only by Joseph and Oliver but others of their friends and neighbors as well. Some of those who did not claim to have this ability did believe that other people possessed such gifts. According to Lucy Smith, this was the reason Josiah Stowell hired Joseph for treasure hunting on his property. He firmly believed Joseph “could discern things invisible to the natural eye. (Smith 1958, 92).

For this reason the witnesses could make statements like those of Oliver and Joseph where, through the power of second sight, or with the eyes of understanding, they claim to enter a mountain and handle plates, putting them back on a table. None of this, however, is subject to objective or empirical scrutiny, so, statements like Cowdery’s oft quoted “I beheld with my eyes and handled with my hands the gold plates from which it was translated,” (*Millennial Star* 1859, 544) should at least be considered in this context of visionary second sight.

A statement made by Brigham Young furthers this type of understanding.

Some of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon, who handled the plates and conversed with the angels of God, were afterwards left to doubt and to disbelieve that they had ever seen an angel. One of the Quorum of the Twelve — a young man full of faith and good works, prayed and the vision of his mind was opened, and the angel of God came and laid the plates before him, and he saw and handled them, and saw the angel. (*Journal of Discourses* 1860, 7:164)

First we have the “vision of his mind opened,” and then a handling of the plates with the aid of an angel. The question to ask is, would he, when retelling the story of the angel and plates, always qualify his statement “I handled the plates” with the disclaimer that this was in a vision? Not likely, which would provide us with many of his friends and family that could testify that Bro. So and so — of the Quorum handled the plates. I believe that in a similar manner, many of the friends and relatives of the Book of Mormon witnesses could make statements to the effect that “so and so told me that they handled the plates,” without mentioning that it was a visionary experience.

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This quote by Brigham Young is also significant for it provides evidence that some of the witnesses had doubts. Young may or may not be referring to some of those who signed their name to the Book of Mormon, but this is of secondary importance. The point is, some who had an experience with an angel and gold plates later had reason to doubt the veracity of the experience, and this detracts from the reliability of those who founded their faith and testimony on the visionary and subjective.

Adding further confusion to what actually happened with the Three Witnesses is testimony by Joseph Smith that Oliver Cowdery actually saw the gold plates in a vision before the Three Witnesses event. In a history of his own life and work Joseph Smith writes:

... [the] Lord appeared unto a young man by the name of Oliver Cowdery and shewed unto him the plates in a vision and also the truth of the work and what the Lord was about to do through me ... (Jessee 1984, 8)

It would appear then that David Whitmer was the only witness to see the gold plates for the first time on the day mentioned by the Three Witnesses statement. Oliver Cowdery had already seen them once before, and Martin Harris, according to his own statements, did not see them until three days later. Most Mormons do not know this, and it is quite unlikely to be incorporated into the material presented by the Mormon missionaries.

Cowdery & Conflict of Interest

The close association of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery during the production of the Book of Mormon raises the question of whether or not Cowdery was free of any conflict of interest as a witness to the Book of Mormon. Did he have anything to gain by endorsing the supernatural origins of the book? Is there any indication he was a willing participant in a deliberate deception? Recently published historical evidence reveals problems with the common LDS view that the Aaronic Priesthood was given to Oliver and Joseph by John the Baptist and the Melchizedek Priesthood was conferred upon Joseph and Oliver by the biblical apostles Peter, James and John in 1829. Cowdery and Smith both testified repeatedly that they were together when an angel (later identified as John the Baptist) appeared to them, as did Peter, James and John at a later date. Both of these ordinations are mentioned in Doctrine & Covenants 27:6-13. D. Michael Quinn, a researcher and writer on the area of LDS history, discovered that:

A closer look at contemporary records indicates that men were first ordained to the higher priesthood [in June of 1831] over a year after the church's founding [on April 6, 1830]. No mention of angelic ordinations can be found in original documents until 1834-35. Thereafter accounts of the visit of Peter, James, and John

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by Cowdery and Smith remained vague and contradictory. (*The Mormon Hierarchy - Origins of Power*, D. Michael Quinn, Signature Books, 1994, p. 15.)

Here is a chronology of key events that can be historically documented: Book of Mormon published in March of 1830; Church of Christ organized in April 1830; June 1831 conference Joseph Smith announces there was a “high priesthood.”

Up until this time, according to Quinn’s research, apart from Joseph being the “first elder” and Oliver being the “second elder” there were different priesthood offices in the church, i.e. priest, elder, teacher, but no discernable difference in status or level of authority (*The Mormon Hierarchy*, p. 28). The announcement of a “high priesthood” now implied that all previous authority was of a lower status. At this June 1831 conference Joseph conferred this “high priesthood” on Lyman Wight. Wight then “ordained” Joseph Smith to the “high priesthood.” At this time there is no indication Joseph mentioned any kind of angelic source for this new development in church authority, nor is the new priesthood named either Aaronic or Melchizedek.

This continued to be the case for the next few years. Quinn makes the important observation that:

Until Cowdery’s 1834 history and retroactive changes in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, there was nothing in Mormonism to attract converts who expected a literal restoration of apostolic authority. Charisma [spiritual sign gifts like healing and prophecy] and the voice of God [coming through Joseph Smith] were the only bases of authority that early Mormon converts knew until the publication of Cowdery’s history in 1834 (*Mormon Hierarchy*, p. 32).

An interesting picture begins to emerge. Historical data indicates that starting in 1834, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery together began introducing the idea that they had been given divine authority by God via an angel. Quinn found that the first public discussion of an angelic restoration came from Oliver Cowdery in 1834. Cowdery’s history of Mormonism, written with the assistance of Joseph Smith, speaks of an angel from heaven, (but later identified as John the Baptist), restoring “the Holy Priesthood.” Cowdery claimed that he and Joseph were pondering who had authority and were waiting for a command to be baptized when an angel appeared and said:

Upon you my fellow servants, in the name of Messiah I confer this priesthood and this authority, which shall remain upon earth, that the sons of Levi may yet offer an offering unto the Lord in righteousness! (*Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1, No. 1, October 1834).

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Though no prior mention of such an event can be found, starting in 1834, both Joseph and Oliver claimed the angel appeared to them in 1829, and gave them “the holy priesthood.” Mormon people today understand “the holy priesthood” to refer to the higher or Melchizedek priesthood, and it is very possible that this was Cowdery’s intent in his 1834 history, since Smith, in 1831, only announced one “high priesthood.” This has generally been linked to what was later called the Melchizedek priesthood. But when Cowdery first mentions this “holy priesthood” in October of 1834, he links it to Levi, who, in the Old Testament, was an Aaronic priest. Later material provided by Cowdery and Smith changes both the identity of the messenger and the priesthood that he confers. For example, Oliver Cowdery originally spoke of an unnamed angel, but later the angel becomes John the Baptist according to the testimony of Joseph and Oliver. What is conferred upon them is no longer “the holy priesthood” associated with Melchizedek, but the Aaronic priesthood. Quinn notes that Cowdery’s history speaks of only one angelic visit and the conferring of only one priesthood (*Mormon Hierarchy*, pp. 15-16).

Prior to the publication of the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph had not claimed to receive any revelations that mentioned priesthood authority. Yet, when the 1835 D&C was published, not only was there new material on divine priesthood authority, some of the earlier revelations published in 1833 had been altered. A careful comparison of what is now section 27 of the Doctrine & Covenants with how it was originally published in 1832 in *The Evening and the Morning Star* and then in the 1833 Book of Commandments (Section XXIII, p. 60), reveals the original revelation was considerably shorter. This revelation, as first given by Joseph Smith in 1830, only had 7 verses prohibiting the purchase of wine or strong drink from the Saint’s enemies. When published in the 1835 D&C, it unexplainably had 9 additional verses. These spoke of Moroni, John the son of Zacharias, the Aaronic priesthood as the “first” priesthood, and an additional ordination of Joseph and Oliver by Peter James and John, who gave them “keys of your ministry” and “keys of the kingdom.” Quinn notes, without providing an explanation, that “the added text cannot be found in any document before 1835, nor can any similar wording or concept be found prior to 1834.” (Ibid, p. 16).

Historical evidence suggests one logical explanation for these changes. Cowdery and Smith, who were in charge of the edits to the 1835 D&C, together developed the idea of an angelic source for their authority sometime after 1833. Cowdery, writing his history in 1834 with Joseph’s assistance, added the story of the appearance of the angel. Then, together they added extra material to a revelation Smith had already given in 1830, to make it look like the appearance of both John the Baptist and Peter James and John had been known since 1830 and not 1834 as was truly the case. Their attempts at altering history and adding a supernatural element did not go unnoticed. David Whitmer, one of the three Witnesses along with Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris, broke off his

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association with Cowdery, Smith and the church, because they had dared to alter what was said to be a revelation from God (*Address to All Believers in Christ*, pp. 56ff).

There is little attempt to explain where Cowdery or Smith derived the sudden appearance of Peter, James & John in D&C section 27, and how they become the source for the both the high priesthood and the concept of “keys” that today play such an important part in Mormon theology. There appears to be nothing in the earlier writing of Smith or Cowdery that associates keys with these three New Testament apostles. Quinn noted that no similar wording or concept can be found prior to 1834. However, correspondence between Oliver Cowdery and W. W. Phelps, published in the *Messenger and Advocate* from October 1834 to July 1835 provides both a link to Cowdery and Smith and a source for these new theological developments. Cowdery first writes of an angelic ordination in October of 1834 (*Messenger and Advocate*, pp. 15-16). In the April 1835 *Messenger and Advocate* Cowdery writes to Phelps regarding Moses’ awareness of blessings for the Gentiles, drawing Phelps’ attention to Moses’ prayer in Deuteronomy 32:43 (“Rejoice O ye nations, with his people!”, p. 111.) In the July 1835 issue of *Messenger and Advocate*, Phelps responds to Cowdery and suggests and develops the idea of Moses conferring special keys to Peter James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration (pp. 145). In the same letter Phelps also gives a detailed exposition of the importance of “blessing” and connects this with the conferring of keys to Peter, James and John. Is it merely coincidence that later this same year Cowdery and Smith introduce the ideas of *priesthood blessings* that bring about the “keys” of authority through the Melchizedek priesthood? Cowdery and Smith would later claim they received these from Peter, James and John. Some of these appear as part of “unannounced changes and expansions of revelations” in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants which was accepted at a special conference in August of 1835 (Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, p. 623).

Quinn observed that by late 1835 Cowdery was writing about two angelic ministrations and also a blessing given him by Smith which spoke of Smith and Cowdery being ordained “by the hand of the angel in the bush, unto the lesser priesthood and after received the holy priesthood under the hands of they who had been held in reserve for a long season, even those who received it under the hand of the Messiah” (Ibid, p. 17). These historical discoveries about the development of priesthood authority and the altering of previously given revelations suggest that Cowdery and Smith were working together to introduce a divine element into the story of Mormon origins. Cowdery’s close collaboration with Smith in these areas raises serious questions regarding whether or not there truly were any divine angelic visitations, and also casts doubt on Cowdery’s status as an unbiased, reliable witness to the divine origin of the Book of Mormon.

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Cowdery's Departure

For reasons that are not completely clear, Smith and Cowdery's relationship soured. Cowdery's elevated status as "second elder" and witness to the Book of Mormon was eventually lost amid accusations of adultery and theft. He was excommunicated from the Church in 1838 and forced to leave the area. "Faith-promoting" material about the Book of Mormon witnesses like Cowdery claims they enjoyed spotless character and reputations, yet, as with Harris, some of the worst accusations against Cowdery come from LDS leaders of that time period. George Q. Cannon, a member of the First Presidency stated:

[Cowdery] transgressed the law of God; he committed adultery; the Spirit of God withdrew from him, and he, the second elder in the Church, was excommunicated from the Church. (*Juvenile Instructor*, 1885, p. 360)

Joseph Smith himself said, "Such characters as McLellin, John Whitmer, David Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, and Martin Harris, are too mean to mention; and we had liked to have forgotten them" (Smith 1902, 3:232).

These men, and others, were later driven away, after receiving a very threatening letter which included some of the following:

To Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, John Whitmer...there is but one decree for you, which is depart, depart, or a more fatal calamity shall befall you. "After Oliver Cowdery had been taken by a state warrant for stealing, and the stolen property found in the house of William W. Phelps; in which nefarious transaction John Whitmer had also participated. Oliver Cowdery stole the property ... (*Senate Document* 189 1841, 6-9)

In this same letter Cowdery is accused of misusing his position of justice of the peace, of being "united with a gang of counterfeiters, thieves, liars, and blacklegs of the deepest dye, to deceive, cheat and defraud," and of participating with David Whitmer in a "bogus money business." (It would appear the crime of counterfeiting had been associated with the Cowdery name from the time Oliver's father took into their home the escaped counterfeiter Paine Wingate and became involved in the Rodman affairs with him.)

LDS leaders made further accusations in this statement in *Times and Seasons*, Vol. 3, p. 868, August 1, 1842:

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... in Kirtland, when persecution raged, Oliver Cowdery [among others] ... had been engaged in extensive frauds in the Bank, and were the principle cause of its not being able to meet its liabilities;

None of this, of course, does anything to help support LDS claims regarding Cowdery's "spotless reputation," or his "unchallenged honesty." However, in all fairness to Cowdery and the other witnesses, it appears that most, if not all the malignings were character assassination intending to discredit these former LDS leaders, like Cowdery, as apostates in the eyes of other Mormons, and thus discourage the Saints from following them in their apostasy. Regardless, we are confronted with inaccuracies in the Mormon Church's portrayal of its witnesses.

There is also evidence that some early LDS Church members believed Cowdery at some point denied his testimony of the Book of Mormon. This is found in *Times and Seasons*, Vol. 2, p. 482. In this Mormon publication one stanza of a poem reads:

Or prove that Christ was not the Lord
Because that Peter cursed and swore?
Or Book of Mormon not his word
Because denied, by Oliver?

The reason for this belief is likely linked to Cowdery's later association with the Methodist church. After breaking with the Mormon church, there is considerable evidence indicating Cowdery later joined the "Methodist Protestant Church of Tiffin, Seneca County, Ohio." The following is quoted from an affidavit given by G.J. Keen in 1885.

Mr. Cowdery opened a law office in Tiffin, and soon effected a partnership with Joel W. Wilson. In a few years Mr. Cowdery expressed a desire to associate himself with a Methodist Protestant Church of this city.

Rev. John Souder and myself were appointed a committee to wait on Mr. Cowdery and confer with him respecting his connection with Mormonism and the Book of Mormon. We accordingly waited on Mr. Cowdery at his residence in Tiffin, and there learned his connection, from him, with that order, and his full and final renunciation thereof. (Shook 1914, 58-59)

The affidavit recounts Cowdery's reluctance to provide a public recantation but willingness to authorize one and have the church publish it if it were required by the church. They did not demand it and upon submitting his name, Oliver Cowdery was accepted unanimously. Keen continues:

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At that time he arose and addressed the audience present, admitted his error and implored forgiveness, and said he was sorry and ashamed of his connection with Mormonism. He continued his membership while he resided in Tiffin, and became Superintendent of the Sabbath-School, and led an exemplary life while he resided with us. (Ibid)

Cowdery went on to act as a clerk for this church, was elected Secretary of a church meeting, and recognized as a charter member. Minutes of a church meeting in his handwriting and signed by him are still extant at the Methodist Church in Tiffin, Ohio (Gunn 1942, 124). While this in itself is not absolute proof that Cowdery denied or retracted his testimony, it is highly improbable that he could have become a member of this church, let alone achieve such respected standing, without disavowing his connection with the Book of Mormon and the Latter-day Saints.

Cowdery's Credulity

Various sources indicate that Cowdery was also a credulous witness. One of the eight witnesses, Hiram Page, found his own seer stone and began getting revelations from it. Ivan J. Barrett, former professor at Brigham Young University, and writer for the LDS Church contributes the following statements from "More Remarkable Stories of How We Got the Revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants,"

[Hiram Page] obtained a stone through which he received some spurious revelations. ... So Hiram Page decided to settle the question as to where Zion was to be built through his magical stone Oliver Cowdery and the Whitmer family were deceived by the false declarations of Hiram Page. (Tanner 1968, 6)

Joseph Smith claimed that Page's revelations were false and admitted that others were being deceived by them.

Brother Hiram Page had in his possession a certain stone, by which he had obtained certain 'revelations' concerning the upbuilding of Zion, the order of the Church, etc., all of which were entirely at variance with the order of God's house The Whitmer family and Oliver Cowdery, were believing much in the things set forth by this stone ... (Smith 1902, 1:109-110)

So, according to Joseph Smith, when Oliver Cowdery and the Whitmer family believed Joseph's claim to receive revelations from his seer stone they were people full of faith, but when they believed revelations from Hiram Page's stone they are credulous and deceived.

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A Faith-Promoting Story

One of the favorite stories used to defend Cowdery during his years away from the Church is cited by LDS historian B.H. Roberts. He recounts an incident in Michigan where Cowdery, as a prosecuting attorney, is challenged by the defense as to his role in the Book of Mormon. Cowdery's lengthy response includes a solid affirmation of his testimony in the Book of Mormon and the visitation of the angel. A similar story is related by Brigham Young in *Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 2, p. 258.

Stanley Gunn in his B.Y.U. Master's thesis (1942) could find no record of Cowdery practicing law in Michigan, and stated "The testimony is given here merely as 'possible or probable testimony,' but its authenticity lacks official confirmation." (Gunn 1942, 139) Yet, given the questionable nature of the story, LDS apologist Preston Nibley in his book *Witnesses of the Book of Mormon*, published in 1953, uses the story and prefaces his quote of the Michigan account with, "The following interesting event... gives conclusive proof that Oliver Cowdery was faithful to his testimony of the divinity of the Book of Mormon, and that he fearlessly proclaimed that testimony during the years that he was out of the Church, from 1838 to 1848." (Nibley 1958, 42) Whether this was purposefully deceitful cannot be known for sure, but one wonders about the wisdom of not consulting a Master's thesis entitled *Oliver Cowdery - Second Elder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, when writing a book on the Book of Mormon Witnesses.

By 1962, when Gunn published his book *Oliver Cowdery - Second Elder and Scribe*, he still had found no evidence of Cowdery's practicing law in Michigan, or his attaining the office of Prosecuting Attorney. Richard Anderson (*Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 1981) admits the third hand-nature of this account, but still uses it as evidence, attributing its most accurate telling to George Q. Cannon. While this was a late recollection on Cannon's part, Anderson justifies using it by stating that Cannon "had a remarkable intellect and a great capacity for accurate detail in his personal writing." However, Cannon's own reliability is questionable since he, "in his biography of Joseph Smith in 1888, admitted the 'paltry things' were left out of his account of 'men of God... pure and holy.'" (Russell 1983, 132) Selective historiography has tended to be sanctioned and at times encouraged by the Mormon Church as long as it is faith-promoting in nature.

Oliver Cowdery did return to the Mormon church, but there are questions as to his motivation, how long he remained a member after rejoining, and the truthfulness of the commonly held belief that he died in full fellowship as a Mormon.

It appears that certain persons of the Council of the Twelve wrote to Oliver, encouraging him to return to the Church. One of his responses to Phineas Young, who had also called on Oliver personally, states: "I am poor, very poor, and I did hope to have health and

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means sufficient last spring to go West and get some gold, that I might so situate my family, that I could be engaged in the cause of God;" (Gunn 1942, 144).

Oliver was rebaptized in October of 1848, but some of the Mormons were apparently against his return to the Church. A March 1911 *Improvement Era*, published by the LDS church, records that "Some thought that he could not possibly be sufficiently repentant to entitle him to return; but Orson Hyde stood up for him — declared...that he should be restored to full fellowship. This view prevailed, and he was so received, by re-baptism." (Tanner 1968, 28)

There is interesting evidence that indicates Cowdery was never completely reconciled to the Mormon Church. *The Gospel Herald*, November 1, 1849, contained the following comments:

You will observe also that they make no mention of Oliver Cowdery filling up their organization. The truth is, he is not the sort of man for them. It was a singular mania by which he was led off after them, and seems to have lasted him but a few weeks they would not trust power in his hands a single moment. (Ibid)

Oliver Cowdery died, not in Utah, but at the home of fellow witness David Whitmer on March 3, 1850. Whitmer makes it very clear that Cowdery "died believing as I do today," which included a belief that Joseph was a fallen prophet, and that the Doctrine and Covenants contained false revelations. He states, "I have proof to verify my statement. If anyone chooses to doubt my word, let them come to my home in Richmond and be satisfied." He goes on to say:

Now, in 1849, the Lord saw fit to manifest unto John Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery and myself nearly all the remaining error in doctrine into which we had been led by the heads of the old church. We were shown that the Book of Doctrine and Covenants contained many doctrines of error, and that it must be laid aside; (Whitmer 1887a, 1-2).

In summary, we encounter many problems with Oliver Cowdery's reliability as a witness. Besides succumbing to the common culture of the day and possessing a "rod," which was at first sanctioned by Joseph Smith, and then later covered up by changing the revelation currently found in Doctrine and Covenants 8:6-7, he also was quite credulous. This is indicated by the visionary account of entering the hill Cumorah and seeing a supposed Jewish sword that was engraved in English, as well as being led astray by Hiram's "peep stone." He raised questions regarding Joseph Smith's adultery, and subsequently was himself accused of adultery. He later joined the Methodist Church and is thought to have denied his testimony at least for a time, due to both his status in the

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Methodist Church and a poem published by the Mormons stating the Book of Mormon was “denied by Oliver.” He was included with those called “liars, counterfeiters, thieves and blacklegs,” and referred to by Joseph Smith as one “too mean to mention.” Whitmer claimed Cowdery died believing Joseph was a fallen prophet, something supported by a writer for the *Saints Advocate*, who recorded Whitmer saying that the reason Oliver was rebaptized at Council Bluffs, Iowa in 1847 was:

in order to reach his relatives and others among the Brighamites, and redeem them from the errors and evils of polygamy, etc Besides this, a sister of O. Cowdery, now living, says that O. Cowdery, when at Council Bluffs, previous to his death, expressed, in her presence his regret and sorrow over the base doctrines and corrupt practices of the Brighamite leaders. (Tanner 1968, 28)

Given the preceding evidence, it is difficult to accept Oliver Cowdery as a reliable, credible and unbiased witness to the divinity of the Book of Mormon.

David Whitmer

David Whitmer’s testimony varied as to the objective versus the subjective nature of the experience, but he also spoke of the angel and gold plates in visionary terms. In 1885 he was interviewed by Zenas Gurley. Gurley asked if Whitmer knew that the plates were real metal. Whitmer said that he did not touch or handle them. He was then asked if the table they were on was literal wood or if the whole thing was a like a vision. Whitmer replied that the table had the appearance of literal wood as shown in the vision, in the glory of God (Zenas H. Gurley, Jr., Interview with David Whitmer on January 14, 1885.).

As mentioned earlier, David Whitmer left the Mormon Church, was also accused of being unreliable and morally deficient by LDS leaders. He came to the conclusion that Joseph Smith was a fallen prophet and that LDS scriptures contained false revelations.

So, according to their own testimonies, all three witnesses describe a mystical, visionary, almost dream-like experience in which they claim they saw an angel with the gold plates. And, contrary to the LDS church’s portrayal, David Whitmer is the only one who saw the plates for the first time that day in the woods, since Oliver and Martin had apparently already seen them in a vision before that day. According to his own testimony, Martin Harris didn’t see the angel with plates until he was alone in the woods three days later. This does not appear to be the factual, unquestionably objective event the Mormon church often portrays it to be.

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Testimony of the Eight Witnesses

The testimony of the eight other witnesses who claimed they handled actual plates, also has problems in several areas. The Mormon church always pictures all eight of them standing together in the woods, with Joseph showing them the plates. But according to the testimony of John Whitmer who was one of the eight witnesses, Joseph showed them to four people at one time in his house, and then later to four other people (*Deseret Evening News*, 6 August 1878, Letter to the editor from P. Wilhelm Poulson, M.D., typed transcript, p. 2). It is notable that these eight men fall naturally into two groups of four. The first group is comprised of four brothers of David Whitmer, who himself was one of the three witnesses: Christian, Jacob, Peter jun., and John Whitmer. The second four are Joseph Smith's father, Joseph's two brothers (Hyrum and Samuel) and Hiram Page, who was married to the Whitmer's sister, Catherine. Another sister, Elizabeth, married Oliver Cowdery. So, all the witnesses, except Martin Harris, were closely related to one another.

Another significant historical point regarding the eight witnesses comes from a letter dated April 15, 1838. It was written by a former Mormon leader named Stephen Burnett. In that letter, Burnett states:

I have reflected long and deliberately upon the history of this church & weighed the evidence for & against it loth (sic) to give it up—but 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 [Cowdery] nor David [Whitmer] & 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 foundation was sapped & the entire superstructure fell in heap of ruins. (Stephen Burnett letter to Lyman E. Johnson dated April 15, 1838. Typed transcript from Joseph Smith Papers, Letter book, April 20, 1837—February 9, 1843, microfilm reel 2, pp. 64-66, LDS archives.)

Stephen Burnett goes on to say in his letter that after hearing that testimony he publicly renounced the Book of Mormon, and further states:

I was followed by W Parrish, Luke Johnson & John Boynton [Boyington] all of who concurred with me, after we were done speaking M Harris arose & said he was sorry for any man who rejected the Book of Mormon for he knew it was true, he said 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. And said that he never should have told that the testimony of the eight was false, if it had not been picked out of [him/me?] but should have let it passed as it was... (Ibid.)

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While some LDS scholars and apologists have tried to brush aside this testimony as “hearsay,” it is corroborated by a letter cited in Wayne C. Gunnell’s 1955 BYU dissertation. This letter, written by George A. Smith to Josiah Fleming and dated March 30, 1838 (a couple of weeks earlier than the Burnett letter), describes a similar scene with Martin Harris, Boynton, Parish, and Johnson, all of whom are mentioned in the Burnett letter.

The question of what exactly happened with the Eight witnesses is further complicated by some puzzling statements made by the witnesses themselves. It appears that only three of the eight witnesses made separate statements that they had handled the plates. They were Joseph’s two brothers, Hyrum and Samuel, and John Whitmer. Hyrum and Samuel’s statements are further qualified by their brother William who, in an interview, also claimed to have handled the plates. He said:

I did not see them uncovered, but I handled them and hefted them while wrapped in a tow frock and judged them to have weighed about sixty pounds. ... Father and my brother Samuel saw them as I did while in the frock. So did Hyrum and others of the family.

When the interviewer asked if he didn’t want to remove the cloth and see the bare plates, William replied:

No, for father had just asked if he might not be permitted to do so, and Joseph, putting his hand on them said; ‘No, I am instructed not to show them to any one. If I do, I will transgress and lose them again.’ Besides, we did not care to have him break the commandment and suffer as he did before. (*Zion’s Ensign*, p. 6, January 13, 1894, cited in Church of Christ broadside.)

John Whitmer’s statements were the most detailed — both the 1878 statement mentioned earlier and his 1839 statement to Theodore Turley where he said, “I now say, I handled those plates; there were fine engravings on both sides. ... they were shown to me by a supernatural power” (*History of the Church*, Vol. 3, p. 307). He appears to be the only witness giving independent testimony that he handled the plates uncovered. Yet, even his testimony is qualified by the statement “they were shown to me by a supernatural power.” Now if these were physical plates, presented to the eight witnesses while Joseph Smith held them on his knee, why did Whitmer qualify his statement by saying it happened by means of a supernatural power? One can only wonder why there was a need for a supernatural presentation of physical plates. Unless, of course, the Whitmer family was also shown the plates under a cloth, and was encouraged to see them with their eyes of faith. This, however, conflicts with John Whitmer’s 1878 interview where he states that his group of four were handed the plates “uncovered into our hands, and we

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turned the leaves sufficient to satisfy us.” (Poulson letter to *Deseret Evening News*, previously cited, p. 2).

Just as puzzling is Hiram Page’s testimony regarding his part as one of the eight witnesses. While he makes a veiled reference to “what I saw” he never mentions seeing or handling the plates, but instead emphasizes that Joseph had to have supernatural power to write such a book. He also says:

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 a hymn in their own pure language; yes, it would be treating the God of heaven with contempt, to deny these testimonies. (*Ensign of Liberty*, 1848, cited in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Vol 7:4, Winter 1972, p. 84.)

Statements like these raise serious questions about the witnesses, and what exactly happened with Joseph Smith. It is significant that Joseph Smith himself called into question the moral integrity of at least four of the eleven witnesses. In *History of the Church*, vol. 3:232 he wrote: Such characters as McLellin, John Whitmer, David Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris, are too mean to mention; and we had liked to have forgotten them.” Because they had dared leave the Latter-day Saint church, these men and others were later driven away after being accused of being “united with a gang of counterfeiters, thieves, liars and blacklegs of the deepest dye, to deceive cheat and defraud” (*Senate Document 189*, 1841, p. 9). In all fairness to the witnesses, this appears to be character assassination with the intent of discrediting these men in the eyes of other Mormons. That way other people would think twice about leaving the Mormon church or listening to any further testimony from these witnesses.

According to historical evidence, the Mormon church’s customary portrayal of the witnesses as eleven men of rational and critical mindsets, unquestioned honesty and integrity and unwavering commitment to the Mormon church and the Book of Mormon is far from true. Joseph Smith himself questioned their integrity, and many of them left the church and did not return.

There are also some questions left unanswered, such as, were there really gold plates, or did Joseph produce a prop which he kept covered in a cloth and allowed only certain relatives to see and lift? He had four years between when he announced he discovered the gold plates, and when he actually claimed to get them out of the ground. When did Joseph, Harris, Whitmer & Cowdery first find out there would be three special witnesses? The D&C records two different times when Joseph claimed to receive a revelation regarding BOM witnesses. The first came at the request of Martin Harris in March of 1829

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(D&C 5). It warned Joseph not to show the plates except to those whom God commanded (vs. 3). This revelation went on to say that three witnesses would be given special power to see the plates, but “to none else will I grant this power” (D&C 5:13-14). According to this revelation, there would only be three witnesses.

Yet, in Joseph Smith's *History of the Church*, Vol. 1, pp. 52-53 previously cited, Joseph and Oliver did not discover there would be three witnesses until they were translating the Book of Mormon in late June of 1829 - at least three months later. A little while after this (no date is given) Joseph took it upon himself to show what he claimed were the BOM plates to the eight witnesses who were all related to one another. Joseph had them sign a testimonial. Apparently, showing the plates to his father and brothers did not require the power of God, but supernatural power was needed for showing them to John Whitmer. There was also no revelation giving him permission to show the plates, just a private meeting. At least one source indicates that Joseph showed the plates to two groups of four on separate occasions in his house, while other accounts say that all eight were together out in a grove.

One of the problems with relying on the Witnesses for the authenticity of Mormonism is the testimony of David Whitmer given later in life. In his *Address to All Believers in Christ*, page 27, Whitmer declares:

If you believe my testimony to the Book of Mormon; if you believe that God spake to us three witnesses by his own voice, then I tell you that in June, 1838, God spake to me again by his own voice from the heavens, and told me to ‘separate myself from among the Latter-day Saints, for as they sought to do unto me, so should it be done unto them.’ In the spring of 1838, the heads of the church and many of the members had gone deep into error and blindness. I had been striving with them for a long time to show them the errors into which they were drifting, and for my labors I received only persecutions.”

This quote creates a quandary. If we accept Whitmer's testimony regarding his experience with the angel and the gold plates, then we must also accept his testimony that God also declared the current Mormon church is in a fallen state. To disavow the revelation he received stating that the Mormon church since 1838 has “gone deep into error and blindness” means we must hold as suspect his testimony to the Book of Mormon. Whitmer inseparably links the two events.

Even if the majority of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon did not deny their testimony of the book itself, this does little to support Mormonism today. Current Mormon doctrine on the nature of God, the priesthood, use of temples, baptism for the dead, and men becoming gods, is nowhere contained in the Book of Mormon. By 1847 not a single one

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of the surviving eleven witnesses was part of the Mormon church. Five of these witnesses joined The Church of Christ started by William McLellin, and Oliver Cowdery indicated he was supportive of this group, though he never joined. (D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*, Signature Books, 1994, p. 188). If these men were alive today, they would be considered apostates who had turned their back on the Spirit of God. They would be cut off from the LDS church and condemned to outer darkness, regardless of whether or not they still believed in the Book of Mormon.

What are the facts? Joseph Smith produced two written documents containing the signatures of eleven men. According to those signed statements, eleven men claimed to witness the existence of plates they believed were the source for the Book of Mormon. Three of these men admitted the experience was subjective and visionary. Each of the first three witnesses saw the plates in a vision for the first time in a different place and time. The other eight witnesses were closely related to Joseph Smith either by blood or marriage. Apart from the testimony document only three of them claimed to see and handle that which had the appearance of being plates of gold, and could testify Joseph did have something that resembled plates with etchings after signing their name to the testimony document. Many of these witnesses left Joseph Smith and the organization that he started, believing at best that he was a fallen and false prophet. Joseph Smith himself, called into question the general character and reliability of several of these men. This, in spite of the fact that they were close friends and family of Joseph Smith.

These historical facts highlight another thread of Mormon history that has been misrepresented by LDS Church leaders. The witnesses' testimonies as a whole are presented as objective, solid, and irrefutable, but upon close examination are seen to be subjective, ambiguous and, at times, contradictory. The traditional portrayal of a tightly woven story of Mormon origins is slowly being unraveled by the historical evidence, much of which is now being compiled and published within the Mormon community itself.

Addendum

Another thread of the traditional Mormon story that is seriously misrepresented by the LDS church has to do with the discovery and translation of the supposed gold plates of the Book of Mormon. The testimony of those who were closest to Joseph Smith state unequivocally that [Joseph never used the plates](#) while doing the translation, he used his seer stone in his hat to both discover and translate the Book of Mormon. (Richard Van Wagoner & Steve Walker, "Joseph Smith: 'The Gift of Seeing,'" in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Vol. 15:2, Summer 1982, p. 53) If the plates were never used in the translation process, why the need for witnesses? Does this prove the plates were a true

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historical artifact versus a prop Joseph put together. No. The witnesses could only testify as to appearance, and Joseph Smith himself was later duped by forged plates in the Kinderhook incident.

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