



Type: Conference Proceedings

---

## Explaining Away the Book of Mormon Witnesses

Author(s): Richard Lloyd Anderson  
Presented at: 2004 FAIR Conference  
Published by: FairMormon



# EXPLAINING AWAY THE BOOK OF MORMON WITNESSES

RICHARD LLOYD ANDERSON

I'll unload my briefcase before I unload on you. I visited with Matt Brown and heard that he did an incredible PowerPoint presentation and I simply pray for the Spirit of the Lord so I'll have the power behind the PowerPoint.

You can tell I'm a faithful Latter-day Saint because I'm going to start with an apology. I did hear early but prepared late so I've got an outline and I wish I had decided to speak on "explaining the witnesses" instead of "explaining away the witnesses" so my topic is what other people are doing "explaining away" and I'm trying to get behind that and try to understand about where they're coming from and what needs to be said.

The problem as I see it... I had a law school professor that said "I'll win any argument if you'll let me define the problem."

I have in my files, over the years, about fifty so-called interviews with Oliver Cowdery. "Interview" is a contact, basically, where they said something about *The Book of Mormon*, it might be detailed; it might be a speech; it might be something he wrote, and so on. And, in the case of David Whitmer, a long interview.

So, here are the statistics about... did I say fifty? Thirty for Oliver Cowdery; a minimum of seventy for David Whitmer; about fifty for Martin Harris; and a minimum of forty—probably one and a half times that much.

So I've got about two hundred times when one of the witnesses said, "I did sign the statement." "The statement means what it says." "I saw the angel." "I saw the plates." Or in the case of the eight witnesses, "I handled the plates." So two hundred very positive and specific statements in many cases and I'm dealing today with about eight or ten documents, in other words, five percent. And the question is: "Do you believe the 95 percent or do you believe the five?"

There's a paradox of this and that is the people that are attacking the witnesses and have in the past are basically saying, "well, they just dreamed it up; it's a matter of their exerting too much faith." And that's the paradox because I never would've set out this morning if I hadn't believed the Special Events Center was here, hadn't had faith that there was a crowd to speak to, et cetera.

Columbus started on faith, Edison started on faith, and it's that faith that is called a hypothesis in this scientific method. You have to conceive of something in terms of imagination and logical extension, extrapolation, before you ever really verify something beyond your little reality and so we're really dealing with that basic issue below.

## **APOLOGETICS AND THE "REASONS BELOW"**

I was talking with Scott Gordon this morning and I was explaining that Socrates got up and defended himself before they asked him to take the hemlock and two disciples, Xenophon and also Plato, wrote their approximation reconstruction of what he said and they're both called—in Greek—*apologia* and I said to Scott "not only does *apologia* really mean to answer or defend (transitioning to a verb) but it... in the case of Socrates he tried to distinguish between the charges that were the verbal attacks upon him and the real reasons below.

And if I wanted to work with that, I would just make an analogy which could be quick: That I spent about forty years talking about the New Testament, collecting books on the New Testament, I'm doing total Church History right now, I have faith that I'll make the circle and come back and use many of those books but I can't tell you how many books I have bought in terms of the reality of the resurrection. You know, is there really an intellectual argument or is there empirical proof that would establish the resurrection?

Well if I go into a courtroom and watch testimony and see a jury believe or not believe the various witnesses, I don't really distinguish between the evidence for the resurrection or the evidence for the witnesses.

But basically the field of New Testament studies is in the throes of this self-reappraising agony "Can we really believe?" and so many people write books about the resurrection ignoring the miracles of Jesus' life. Scores of them ignoring the personal testimonies of the gospel writers—two of those who had seen and felt Jesus in the resurrection—ignoring the speeches in the Book of Acts of Peter and John who had been there in the resurrection and Paul who had seen Jesus in a vision afterward.

And so, what is driving this is really not evidence at all. What's driving it is skepticism and the playing out of that skepticism by picking pieces of evidence, for instance, very quickly, one verse in Matthew said that Jesus appeared on the mount and... but some doubted. And you pick that out and think well, you know, there's a resurrection appearance so they weren't really sure of it

but then you read the next verse and then it says literally (in Greek) “And Jesus walked toward them.” Well if that was their initial fright, which other resurrection accounts describe and document, but the verification of the reality of Jesus physically is afterward but that one little thing, that one little tail wags a big dog.

And so, I apologize for the topic in a way, because you can really read the 95% and that is such consistent and powerful evidence and I just want to go on record saying that I think it isn’t the evidence that I’m really talking about, there’s a motivation of lack of faith underneath or lack of open-mindedness.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF THE WITNESSES**

All right, if you go back to the first reaction to the witnesses of the Book of Mormon in *The Palmyra Reflector*, ridicule is pretty standard; character assassination; you can’t take these people seriously and their claim to be liars or really stupid; easy to convince people and superstitious.

And if you’ve read anti-Mormon approaches to the witnesses in the last five years, many of them are saying—they’re not really many and I’m not... I’ll be glad in questions to name people and so on but I’m really trying to work with issues—but the issue here is that people work with this idea that my approach in the little red book or the big blue book before that, the first edition, *Investigating The Book of Mormon Witnesses*, that approach says honesty and credibility was the hallmark of these people in their community.

Now I have to back off and say in the case of Martin Harris that people said that he was terribly gullible because he believed the Bible and took literally the prophecies. So, credibility had a religious exception: he was credible in business but he wasn’t credible in his religious attitudes.

And, so, anyway I’m told that credibility and character and honesty are all irrelevant, if you’re going to be deceived you can be an honest person and be deceived so we don’t even talk about that.

Well, if Mark Hofmann somehow got out and offered us a new set of documents, credibility might be an issue. If somebody is a known liar, you’re not even going to get to first base in taking it seriously and so I say that these are really big issues and if you’ve crossed that huge chasm of having believable people who are saying “we saw the plates,” “we saw the angel,” or “we handled the plates,” then you’ve really come a long way.

Oliver Cowdery's law partner said that he had never met anybody that was so well informed and this man went on to have a career in politics, a successful career in law. He did a really fine county history that's not a bunch of blurbs but real history and wrote two paragraphs on early pioneer lawyers in his county. His name is William Lang, he apprenticed in Oliver Cowdery's law office, and he said he had never met a person that was so well informed on so many different subjects. He sincerely admired the man's mind and his capabilities.

Well if I tell you that I've seen the northern lights in Utah that's a fairly improbable statement but it might be true sometime. You might say, "well does Anderson know the difference between the appearance of northern lights and the appearance of Salt Lake City in the distance?" And intelligence, perception is a great issue too. And these are really defined as, out of the way, that's irrelevant. It's certainly not irrelevant. We have substantial people bearing substantial testimonies.

A variation of this, their bad character, is quoting Joseph Smith on their bad character. And Joseph Smith has, I have to smile at it because we've all been in this mood and some of us have acted on it and others have had better judgment but anyway Joseph Smith says basically judgment for judgment, I mean he puts this at the beginning of this editorial in the *Elder's Journal* in 1838 and he's just had it with people that want to leave the Church and give him a bad time and all Missourians conspiring to throw the Mormons out and he is in a defensive mood and mode for sure. But he calls David Whitmer a dumb ass but he's talking about Balaam's ass in the Old Testament speaking the truth in spite of himself and he has an epithet for Martin Harris. I don't really recall that he says anything about Oliver Cowdery except he does feel betrayed.

And so Joseph Smith did label the witnesses with those labels and so if you quote Joseph Smith it looks pretty impressive: "These people weren't to be believed, and Joseph Smith said so, so don't believe their testimony of the Book of Mormon." Well that's a neat reversal of reality, just based on circumstances, but that plays into the whole issue.

I'm told in some books that they are impostors; they are part of a conspiracy. Well Joseph Smith went out of his way to alienate them as they left the Church. The Church in Far West went out of their way to alienate John Whitmer, Lyman Johnson as an ex-apostle was along for the ride out, and David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery and they were told you're not welcome in town-

get out! (It happens in many frontier communities, and Latter-day Saints are not insulated from emotions trying to explain instead of justify.)

If you're run out of town and told that the people that you were with don't want you around anymore and some rather extreme charges are made about your honesty on the way out, you would have a pretty strong reaction and so you get into this set and subset of somebody accusing, counter-accusing and escalating a whole argument and these emotions actually went on.

The witnesses are victimized by this and Oliver Cowdery stayed out of the Church partly because he waited for an apology which never came. But in spite of that, he said "I know." So quoting Joseph Smith negatively is only to highlight the conflict that these witnesses bridged themselves and said for sure they had seen the plates in spite of all that.

## **CULTURAL DISMISSAL OF THE WITNESSES**

Basically they're saying these people couldn't help themselves, they were culturally impaired. In other words, everybody around them believed in ghosts, apparitions and the whole communities were out money digging.

Alan Greenspan wouldn't have had a very good projection if all that were true. Somebody had to keep the economy going and that's such an exaggeration to say, as one author does, lumping all the witnesses together. I wish I had somebody that had a basic college logic course to diagram this but you can see the holes in the argument: Some people in the community did money-digging, some people in the community saw ghosts and apparitions, therefore all the witnesses who came from that community are tainted. I mean there's the jump, with that apparition and money-digging tag, and therefore you couldn't believe them because they were all superstitious.

It's a huge jump and a really stupid approach. I mean you've got to look at the people individually and all I can say is that every one of these witnesses—Matt Brown may have done something of this this morning—but every one of these witnesses responded to that.

In my red book is a documentation of David Whitmer being present because he wouldn't let the manuscript of the Book of Mormon go out of his hands when the RLDS committee came and was trying to do an edition of the Book of Mormon corrected by what they thought was the original manuscript—it was the printer's.

## DECEIVING THE WITNESSES

A man who was pretty secular and skeptical said to David Whitmer to his face, “well, you might believe that you saw the plates and the angel, but you were probably deceived.” And Joseph III said David Whitmer stood up to his full height which was nearly six feet and said, “No sir. I was not deceived. I saw, I heard.” And he said it with such force that the man was uncomfortable and left the room and Joseph III left the room with him and said “Mr. Smith, this is preposterous that somebody could believe that, but one thing is sure and that is that David Whitmer is certain that he saw and he heard.”

Every one of those men had that experience. David H. Cannon, brother to George Q. and president of the St. George Temple in his later years, told in his recollections of his life of visiting Martin Harris in Kirtland about 1860. He said “I asked him is there any possibility that you were deceived?”

For David Whitmer the best interview for you to go to is James H. Moyle, many of us know Henry D.; he was the father of Henry D. Moyle our First Councilor in the First Presidency to President McKay, and James H. Moyle was just out of law school in Michigan and he said that he just really worked David Whitmer over to try to see anything that would beat holes in the story. And he was candid; he wrote in his journal, I expected him to be more physical.

That’s the nub of what we’re talking about. David always said he did not handle the plates and for Oliver and for Martin you can get statements where they said they did handle the plates. Those two were translators; that’s interesting, I can’t go beyond that statement. But David simply said the angel was there, he described the various kinds of plates on the table, he described the Urim and Thummim, sword of Laban, etc. And he did so very specifically in interview after interview, very freely responding to people’s questions and often writing the newspaper or making a comment in a letter afterwards saying they got most of it straight but these are the things that were wrong.

He had a very settled and detailed picture of what he saw and described and said “no, he was not deceived.” Well, you might say that’s simplistic; the man, if he’s going to be deceived isn’t going to know it. I don’t think that’s true.

I have a brother-in-law that I’ve talked to over the years until he’s tired of the conversation, as am I. But he says anybody that is hypnotized—he’s in clinical psych—certainly knows that he was

in and out of that experience. I've been deceived in business plenty of times, sheriff of Soda Springs, Idaho, sent \$20 back to two stupid missionaries that believed a guy's hard luck story and he was really a con man.

But in terms of perceptions when you really think about things, if you're careful, analytical—these people were—they knew whether they were deceived or not. So what we're doing now is really working with this concept of how current literature on Mormonism is trying to transfer the experience of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon into a subjective experience; they call it a “visionary experience.”

David Whitmer would've agreed. That's what he told James H. Moyle, that it was a visionary experience. He had a vision. And then the dichotomy is set up, you know in terms of definitions right at the outset, do you have a vision or do you see a real experience? Well, you've answered the question right there. If you want to set up that dichotomy you don't need to discuss anything further; you've already defined yourself out of a real experience.

So somebody really has to believe that there is a hereafter, that there is a possibility of that hereafter speaking to us, there is indeed a possibility of a world beyond this world which isn't really very hard for me to imagine when I know so many worlds and sub-worlds of biology, astronomy, bacteriology and so on that are not apparent to me. There are worlds beyond mine. And these people come to tell us something about that, but the explanation is that they just talked themselves into the experience. So, let's deal with that.

## **MARTIN HARRIS AND THE “EYE OF FAITH”**

Martin Harris is probably the first person to start with. He talked about his experience in terms of “the eye of faith.” I have to believe that people remembered that accurately, but John H. Gilbert is the person that says most about this and I'd like to deal with Gilbert just a bit.

He was the compositor of the Book of Mormon and he said he asked Martin Harris, “did you really see the plates with your natural eyes as you're talking to me?” He said Martin Harris looked down at the floor—Joseph Smith looked down at the floor very often in contemplation I don't know that that means that he was ashamed—but he thought about his answers to the point and then he said “I saw this with the eye of faith.”



Martin Harris had to have faith in the experience; he separated himself from the other two. That was his Achilles' heel—that he didn't have enough faith and maybe he was trying to explain to Gilbert how it happened and Gilbert took that in more simplistic terms.

All I can say is that when I deal with Martin Harris and his own statement, I want to make a comment on that in a moment, this is what he actually wrote to a person who inquired: "I received your favor. In reply I will say concerning the plates, I do say that the angel did show to me the plates containing the Book of Mormon."<sup>1</sup> He saw the angel, he saw the plates; so whether you talk about "eye of faith" or not, if you take what Martin Harris actually said and then start to measure all these other things by that and see how consistent they are; sometimes witnesses are getting misquoted, sometimes they're quoted accurately but not with a realization of their whole experience and I feel that this fits within that dimension.

## **PHYSICAL EVIDENCE AND THE WITNESSES**

I just want to say something about the witnesses of *the Book of Mormon* in terms of evidence. When Lyndon Cook came out with his book on the David Whitmer interviews I was sad because I didn't do it—I'll have to admit that, you know it was in my files for twenty-five years and I was going to do it next year—so Lyndon at least really got something out, 80% maybe of the interviews, but then the other problem that I had was that what are people going to do with these interviews? Now they'll see David Whitmer saying "I handled the plates" in some interviews and "I didn't handle the plates" in other interviews. That's not David Whitmer's problem because he wrote letters making that absolutely clear where he stood.

But there is a problem of transmission of information and then, you know, just simple matters of copying. He wrote a letter to the *Kansas City Journal* in 1881 after they published an interview saying, "no, I did not say..." (Oh, what is it? He's talking about the seer stone and they goofed on something.) He said "what I really said was 'sunstone.'" Well, they got it wrong twice and so all I can say is that you need to control every interview with one of the witnesses by firsthand personal statements if you've got them and then the correlation of the body of evidence in secondhand statements. If you get something that is really atypical, it doesn't blend with what other evidence is coming from the witness, be skeptical of that.

We really do need to deal with firsthand evidence as much as possible and we've got many statements where the witnesses actually wrote their experience or commented on it directly.

Here is a man who has just written a book experimenting with how Joseph Smith projected all of these experiences in the Book of Mormon which is a key to his psychology instead of a key to ancient America and so the hypothesis here is on the witnesses. He works with two things: they might have had—and these are his words—“They might have had a hallucination.” And he has some statistic that some psychologist says 90% of the people in the world have had a hallucination. Well, just take that for granted; what did they see? Did they see a deer in the headlights instead of a cat when they were driving and tired at night?

This is a unique type of hallucination. To be in broad daylight and have a conversation with an angel, to hear the voice of God and the whole thing is too complex for that type of explanation. But the man that advances this says of his own theory “It is easier to explain the phenomenon generally than it is to discover principles that are in play in specific cases due to the subtlety of the unconscious coordination of experience.” In other words, “I’m just guessing.” And he says “probably,” “might have,” and so on with hypnotism and that theory too.

## **STEPHEN BURNETT’S LETTER**

Now let’s go to some hard documents here. I’m going to go to a letter that is typically quoted and I say this is one of my 5% documents. The letter is by a man who left the Church, the letter is dated 1838, about May. Dan Vogel has put out a five-volume collection of documents, his commentary often is very good on a document, if you keep him on the facts instead of the interpretation of the facts. It’s very worth looking at his documents and this is a letter from Stephen Burnett and it is in one of his five volumes.

Stephen Burnett is on his way out of the Church, he’s concluded the Book of Mormon isn’t true, he’s writing to Lyman Johnson who is his business partner. They both lost money and he starts to gripe and complain about that to begin with, so you know the motivation is basically hostility. Then he said “I went to the Stone Church,” which is the temple in Kirtland, “but when I came to hear Martin Harris state in a public congregation that he never saw the plates with his natural eyes only in vision or imagination.” Now really that’s the jump there. He only saw the plates in a vision. Well, David Whitmer said he only saw the plates in a vision. Does a vision comprehend the reality of an angel being there in the midst of glory? An angel putting his hands on your head and ordaining you to the Aaronic Priesthood as Joseph and Oliver said? That’s a dimension of reality we don’t know.

Christ coming in a closed room—“vision” doesn’t automatically mean a subjective, non-objective, non-real experience. And so, Martin Harris does stand up and say (I have to believe he said something like this) that he saw the plates in a vision.

But then Burnett said “or imagination,” now that’s 1838 and that’s not a new discovery. There’s a man named Ezra Booth who left the Church in 1831 after he went to Missouri. He has his issues with Joseph Smith, some of them are more serious than this one, but he says that Joseph said Missouri was the promised land and he had a better farm in Ohio than any land he found in Missouri. If you live either in Ohio or Missouri you can laugh at it, but anyway, Ezra Booth says there is such things as witnesses of the Book of Mormon. This is his 1831 letters to his pastor or a pastor, and they’re published in the *Ohio Star* and then they’re picked up in 1834 by E.D. Howe writing his *Mormonism Unveiled*, so that’s the easiest place to get them. He says these witnesses stand up in the midst of large congregations and testify that they saw the plates, but he said “I had the privilege of finding the revelation that told them they could see the plates.”

Oddly enough, that was not published in the *Book of Commandments*, but it was published in the 1835 *Doctrine and Covenants*, and it is also in the *Kirtland Revelation Book*, so we know that the manuscript was there early and for some reason it didn’t get into the *Book of Commandments*. Booth says, “when I looked at this revelation,” this is Section 17, “it tells the witnesses that if they have faith they can see the plates,” and so he says that’s the secret. I’m going to read his words: “They were informed that they should see and hear these things by faith, and then they should testify to the world, as though they had seen and heard.”<sup>2</sup> Okay, if they’re going to see them by faith, then they have to testify as though they had seen. So he switches reality on them and then he said “after all, it amounts simply to this—that by faith or imagination, they saw the plates.”

There you are defining yourself out of pursuing the witnesses further because Booth says, in 1831, faith equals imagination or non-reality, and Burnett says Martin Harris said he saw in a vision, which means imagination. Well so much for that if you don’t want to hear the evidence stop at that point. I’m going to go to another document, I’m going to come back to this document and maybe deal with it a little bit more.

I’m going to switch the subject to the eight witnesses. And the eight witnesses of the Book of Mormon said that they had handled—the word is “hefted.” That’s interesting because in 1828 it probably has the connotation of measuring a weight, in other words, estimating the weight of

something you're lifting. They saw the curious characters—that had a connotation in a generation that knew Latin better than we do—*curae* in Latin is “care,” and curious actually has, as one of its senses in the nineteenth or eighteenth century, of being “carefully made” or “made with care.” So they said “we saw those engravings, we looked at them carefully, saw that they were made with care, lifted the plates, turned over the leaves,” etc.

This is what Burnett says about that experience, and I want you to keep in mind what I said about first and second-hand. He says “Martin Harris said that he saw the plates only with his natural eyes in vision...never saw the plates with his natural eyes, only in vision or imagination, and that the eight witnesses never saw them and hesitated to sign that instrument for that reason, but they were persuaded to do it.”

There's a lot of ways to interpret that. One of them is that they never saw the plates the at all; others that they saw the plates in a vision and didn't really handle them and they were persuaded to make that statement.

I'm not sure that the eight witnesses made that statement. All eight of them never made that statement, I've got something like sixty times when those witnesses say essentially, “yes, what I wrote in the Book of Mormon was true.”

And I'm told by some of the books on this subject now, “oh, well, those statements are just *pro forma* public statements and we have to go find what really happened.” Well you know that's like telling your teenage kid “what part of no do you not understand?” What part of ‘hefted’ and ‘seeing the curious characters’ don't you understand?

And John Whitmer one time when he was asked, Joseph III did this, wrote to him and said “I want you to reiterate your testimony of seeing the plates.” According to the family John Whitmer wrote back and said “I'm not going to reiterate my testimony because I never quit bearing it,” in other words, “go see what I've said before.” Another missionary came to John Whitmer and he wrote this, that “what I have said in my testimony was true, is true and will be true for eternities to come.”

So those men said they stood by their testimony and so the testimony said they saw and handled, and I'm supposed to believe on this secondhand statement of a very hostile and angry man in Kirtland that Martin Harris said the eight witnesses admitted that they didn't see or they only saw in a vision?

This latest book that I mentioned that is doing a subjective job of reducing *the Book of Mormon* to Joseph Smith's personal experience, and so he's translating *the Book of Mormon*, that book says "well, the eight witnesses, while this is hearsay, nevertheless Martin Harris knew the eight witnesses, knew them well."

What an irrelevant statement! I mean, the question is whether you can look at that statement and believe that it came from the eight witnesses and if you said "well, nevertheless Martin Harris knew the eight witnesses well," what does that have to do with it? Can we really believe that anyone of the eight witnesses made this statement? It goes totally contradictory to everything else they said.

All right, so I'm passing by the Peter Burnett letter and I hope I've given it a decent funeral.

## **THEODORE TURLEY'S STATEMENT**

Let me take the other biggie that is used by both Vogel in his analysis and Palmer in his book.

I just want to say something about Palmer, I wasn't going to make this personal. It's still an issue; I'm not. I don't know him; he's probably a fine person, etc. Palmer does about twenty pages and then he has a statement saying "now let's look at the firsthand statement," and he quotes what the eight witnesses said. In the meantime, in those twenty pages, he's given you a script of what they saw, they somehow go into a cave in the Book of Mormon and see the plates. It has nothing to do with their statements, and so this is absolutely developing a counterfeit story and telling you that that is history.

Okay, now back of all this is a statement of John Whitmer and he is talking to Theodore Turley, and Theodore Turley is one of the Church agents left in Far West, Missouri, in 1838. He goes into a home to transact some business and there's several people that are leaders of the old settlers' party. They're ridiculing him and abusing him verbally and John Whitmer comes in and does the same and Turley says, "well, I don't know about this because he said some of you here say that you saw and then you apparently say you didn't see," and John Whitmer picked it up and said, "do you hint at me?"

And then this is what Turley reports—now this is a memoir in Nauvoo that Turley writes down four years after the fact. You're trusting his memory, but this is what he says. He said "I call on you, John Whitmer, you say Corrill is a moral and good man." I want to quote Corrill in a

minute. “Do you believe him when he says the Book of Mormon is true, or when he says it is not true?” And he said Whitmer asked “Do you hint at me?” Turley replied, “If the cap fits you, wear it; all I, know is that you have published to the world that an angel did present those plates to Joseph Smith.”

Well, I open the Book of Mormon, and that it isn’t what it reads. It reads that he saw the characters and hefted the plates. So Turley thinks that John Whitmer has testified to an angel. That’s got to get into the mix here some way.

Whitmer replied, “I now say, I handled those plates; there were fine engravings on both sides. I handled them.” Well that is exactly what Whitmer said in a dozen other very well recorded statements that he saw, handled, and lifted. And then he said, “they were shown me by a supernatural power.” If you want to be a good prooftexter—and these people are—they pull out “supernatural power” and say, “Aha! That’s the subjective experience. They weren’t really handling...that’s the giveaway.” Again, do you believe the 95% or the 5%?

Now Turley, in reporting that, may be reporting John Whitmer’s language because John Whitmer had been a scribe for the Book of Mormon and it’s so interesting to me that in one other interview—it’s by Myron Bond—John Whitmer said as we were translating I felt a supernatural power. When John Whitmer wrote his editorial farewell, in *The Messenger and Advocate*, in 1836 he said “I handled the plates, I want the readers to know I lifted the plates, I handled the plates and I know they’re translated by the power of God.”

He felt the power of God, which was a supernatural power, and that may be John Whitmer’s language and that may be the issue: That he felt such a spiritual force when he was translating the Book of Mormon and when he actually had the privilege of lifting the plates that he would say that. But it’s not an either/or; it’s a both/and. I mean it’s silly to even talk about that in terms of the evidence we have.

But you do have in John Whitmer’s statement the misconception of the interviewer that he’d seen the plates and obviously the tendency of the interviewer to want to make seeing the plates something more. I mean, I didn’t restate that correctly, the interviewer said he had seen an angel and the plates—misconception. And some of that misconception may be creeping into that interview. It’s the only one we’ve got where he says that there was a supernatural power because the interviewer wants there to be more than just handling the plates.

Well, I did a little article, I'm not asking you to read it but I'm just using it as an exhibit called *Personal Writings of the Witnesses of The Book of Mormon* and those personal writings are impressive. Whether it's Hyrum Smith; whether it's John Whitmer; whether it's Martin Harris; whether it's David Whitmer; they say, "We saw. It was not an illusion."

David Whitmer's most famous statement about that is his so-called interview with John Murphy from a nearby town in Missouri called Polo. John Murphy had been a Protestant missionary and he came in with some sophistication to try to take David Whitmer apart on this. And he published his statement saying that David Whitmer said "well, it was like the Methodists." John Murphy asked him a series of questions and got him to say, "yes, it was similar to the experience of the Methodists when they get up in a testimony meeting and say they know that Christ is the Savior." And he said, "so that's all it is."

Of course, that's the trap because something is like something else doesn't mean that it should be reduced to something else. Because something was a vision doesn't mean that it is less than reality; it's a vision of greater reality. And every one of these witnesses of the Book of Mormon whether the three or eight are consistent.

## **SUMMARY**

A lady asked me this morning "Did they really substantiate their testimony?" There is not one reliable record where they denied that testimony, all three of the witnesses bore that testimony on their deathbeds. And in this case of John Murphy, David Whitmer issued his own statement in 1881, published it in the newspaper, issued it as a pamphlet, incorporated it in his 1887 *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, saying "if you didn't understand me then, I hope you'll understand me now—it was no deception, it was real."

So I don't dislike David Whitmer and the other witnesses to respond to those criticisms, they do that very well.

And so I would say these witnesses are capable, they're perceptive, they're intelligent enough to know whether they were the victims of deception; they were motivated to expose if there was a conspiracy. They did not. And I think the whole issue is an issue of speculation versus documentation and if you don't believe that I will just show you the counter-explanations that are laced with 'possibly', and it 'perhaps' happened this way and if somebody isn't any more sure of his ground than that, I'd like to stay with the witnesses that are sure of their ground.

I'd like to come back to Section 17, which Ezra Booth said was the giveaway. They were supposed to have faith to see these objects and the first verse in Section 17 names the objects, five of them: plates, sword of Laban, interpreters, etc.

David Whitmer was cross-examined and examined and even though Joseph Smith, in his record, doesn't say that all those objects appear; you get any one of the witnesses in terms of detail and they go into that detail and they verify the revelation in a remarkable way. And the revelation includes this statement saying, they will testify that "my servant Joseph will not be destroyed."<sup>3</sup> I feel these witnesses are a powerful support to the prophet Joseph.

Not only did Joseph have visions, they had similar verification physically and spiritually and there is nothing that I have found that would make me feel a bit to the contrary intellectually or spiritually. And I guess I should bear that testimony of my whole personality involved in this, and I have looked for whatever contradictions—I made up my mind early if they were there I'd find them—I haven't found them. I say that in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.



## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**Q1:** “Why in their personal statements do the eight witnesses consistently use the formulaic language that they ‘saw’ and ‘hefted’ and ‘handled’ rather than using other language or giving greater detail? Doesn’t this suggest a conspiracy?”

I come back to this issue where John Whitmer said if you doubt what happened... if you want my testimony go read it. I don’t see ‘hefted’ as formulaic. I think that’s, as I said, a very specific term of the period meaning they tried to estimate their weight. And whether it’s William Smith estimating the weight when he got handed the plates in a sack or the tow frock in the house when Joseph brought them home; or Martin Harris estimating the weight as he held the plates in a box, 40 to 60 pounds is basically what anybody who lifted the plates say.

And I’m not aware that anybody ever used ‘hefted’ except in the statement. I don’t see that as formulaic; that’s a quick answer.

**Q2:** “Grant Palmer writes in his book that the witnesses credibility is lessened because of their willingness to follow Strang because of Strang’s similar claim to a witness experience. Would you comment?”

I looked at what Palmer had said, he closes his chapter on the Book of Mormon witnesses with a testimony—I’ve forgotten whether he uses both testimonies—but Strang put out two books. One was the *Chronicles of Voree* and that was the original set of plates and one person who was near Strang claimed that they bored into the ground on a lateral direction so that the earth wouldn’t be disturbed as they dug vertically under the tree and they found the plates under the roots and so they’d been planted from the side instead of the top.

But anyway, I probably have the world’s greatest expert on Strang as my research assistant right now, Rob Jensen. I’ve told him if he ever joins the Strangites that my salvation is doomed. Because of my files he’s been very interested in it and I’ve got all the books that are out of print and he has worked with the Strang newspapers and right now he proposed—and I hardly ever do this with my research assistants because I don’t like to capitalize on somebody’s else effort—and he said I want to write this article with you. And I said, well, you can write it yourself and credit me in the footnote. He said, no I want your judgment too.

But what we have done is create a file on every one of the Strang witnesses and there are eight—I haven't got it straight—there are probably eight and six, I think it adds up to fourteen. There are eight... no it adds up to eleven, actually Strang imitated the eleven witnesses of the Book of Mormon.

But some of them saw the plates of Voree and there are pictures of those plates and we know that they were around, floating around in a Colorado house and when you look at the pictures they don't look like anything that couldn't have been manufactured but Strang claimed to get a translation saying there will be somebody in the latter days that finds these plates, that kind of a thing.

And then he wrote *The Book of the Law of the Lord*, which is a long boring description of how the Church should be organized and run and that supposedly came from plates and there are witnesses to those plates. So they never claimed that they saw an angel. They did claim that they saw plates, we do know that there were plates and for all we know, they could be manufactured. The Book of Mormon plates could be manufactured; Dan Vogel thinks they have to be tin because somebody said that they were about the thickness of tin when they felt them through the cloth. So Vogel's approach is that you've got real plates because so many of the people held them and felt them through the cloth but you don't have 'real' plates. To me that inverts reality because the witnesses said they saw and he said we don't believe that, but we'll believe the people that felt through the cloth.

Anyway, three of the eleven witnesses of Strang left the Church and became very hostile enemies and the most telling thing is that none of these Strang witnesses even comment on it afterward. It seems to be a trivial non-event in their lives.

**Q3:** "Do we the Church have originals for the signed statements of the witnesses both the three and the eight?"

You remember that the original manuscript to *the Book of Mormon* was put in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House and most of it rotted away. People in this audience can give a better statistic than I, but anyway 30% roughly is still here and so, as in Greek manuscripts, gospels that I'm aware of, it's the first pages and the last pages that the insects get and the middle is intact. And that's somewhat true with *the Book of Mormon* but we don't have the testimony of the witnesses which was at the end of *the Book of Mormon* and is at the end of the printer's manuscript. So in

the original we don't have any signed testimony of the witnesses of *the Book of Mormon*, either the three or eight.

But we do have the printer's manuscript where, in Oliver Cowdery's hand, we have the testimony of the three and the eight which gives me a little boost because I love Oliver and he signed his own testimony in copying the testimony of the three witnesses in the printer's manuscript.

**Q4:** "So are we to understand that every claim or assertion that one of the witnesses denied their testimony comes from a secondary or hearsay source?"

I think so. I don't know of an exception. And you can't find anything where any of them wrote that they denied their testimony.

John Whitmer wrote to a man that he called Mark Forest. The man is Mark Forscutt; and John Whitmer wrote to him in about '77. John Whitmer died in '78 or '79 and he said I knew most of the eight witnesses—they're related to him—Hiram Page is his brother-in-law, then his brothers. And he said, "I've outlived them all and they all bore their testimony even to the end as I bear my testimony now." That's John Whitmer's own writing. There is no firsthand statement or responsible interview with anyone—and I'm not just manipulating that word "responsible"—I'm talking about somebody that reports anything accurately.

You've got rumors about them denying their testimony, you do not have anybody saying directly they denied their testimony. The closer you get to the witnesses the less that kind of a comment is ever made. David Whitmer said, "people have known me all my life in this community and they know I have never denied my testimony."

**Q5:** "Can President Hinckley use the seer stone to receive revelation today?"

Where's President Hinckley? (Laughter) Brother Sperry claimed he saw it, he looked in it and he didn't get a revelation. His... which would... you know, might be the bottom line. Is the Spirit really working with you, is the power of God that John Whitmer talked about really there? Is faith overemphasized to the point of ignoring knowledge, reason and logic?

Where's my friend Davis Bitton? He's taught at the University of Utah all of his life, what's your answer to that Davis? Are you here?

DAVIS BITTON: Faith and knowledge—two oars work better than one.

RICHARD LLOYD ANDERSON: Did you all hear that? Two oars work better than one. I just passed an eye examination much to my chagrin because I went in thinking, “well, my aunt and my mother had bad cataracts and I’ll see better and not need glasses.” So I went in thinking good I’m going to get it. And the man told me I didn’t need the cataract operation. I said “why?” He said, “because you can see too well.”

What he doesn’t know is that I am a very intuitive and good guesser because I go down that line and I follow my hunches and I follow my sight both. All I can say is that if you don’t have faith you’re just going to sit in your own room and do nothing. Get up and get with it and see the world and believe something out there and check whether it’s there. And the Book of Mormon witnesses have got their testimonies out there. Read and see.

**Q6:** “Aside from the lost 116 pages, was the Book of Mormon translated with the Urim and Thummim or strictly from peering into a hat and the words appearing from a seer stone? I understand Emma, Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery all say the prophet did not translate directly from the plates.”

Well I don’t know where Oliver Cowdery says that. Samuel Richards interviewed him in 1848 because Oliver serendipitously knocked at his door in a snowstorm and Samuel Richards spent two weeks with him. It’s a very late statement of Samuel Richards, after 1900, but he said that he did work directly with the plates.

I keep looking for this. Ask Matt Brown afterwards because he’s looked carefully at all these accounts. Anyway, there’s no account where Oliver Cowdery denies that Joseph Smith utilized the plates.

And Emma says, in her interview in 1878 with Joseph Smith III, her son, that the plates were covered with a cloth by Joseph as he translated. And I, you know I keep thinking if the plates are in the room and the plates are preserved, why isn’t he using the plates? Well, if he looks at the characters he doesn’t know anymore than he does if he looks in the Urim and Thummim, so apparently that’s the answer and I think as I read...as I hear the tape on Matt that that’s the conclusion that he came to.

Emma says, in her letter to Mrs. Pilgrim, that Joseph had the Urim and Thummim taken away from him after the 116 pages were lost and then he used the seer stone after that. I don't know whether to believe that because Oliver Cowdery said in a court case as reported by A.W. Benton in 1830, one of the two 1830 trials, he said Joseph Smith had two stones and he used those, they looked something like spectacles and he used those in translating the Book of Mormon and even though he's... on the second half of the translation of the Book of Mormon as it were, he's using the language of two stones. So that's a question that I honestly can't answer. I don't think Oliver Cowdery denies that Joseph used the plates.

Emma says they were sitting on the table at the time she translated and that's an interesting thing. She didn't translate very much and she wasn't present at the (inaudible) translation and Martin Harris says that in the Palmyra period, that he sat on a table and there's a screen between the two writers.

If you read Matt Brown's book he shows that that isn't true in the Whitmer translation but it probably was true in the Palmyra translation. So there might be multiple answers to that question and I told you what I know.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Martin Harris to H.B. Emerson, in *The True Latter-day Saints' Herald* 22 (15 October 1875), 630. Smithfield, Utah, November 23, 1870.

<sup>2</sup> Ezra Booth, Letter 3, *Ohio Star* (Ravenna, Ohio), October 27, 1831, quoted in Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 186-187.

<sup>3</sup> Doctrine & Covenants 17:3-4.