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## Witnesses Concerns

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## Chapter 11

### Witnesses Concerns

56) *The Book of Mormon Witnesses all had a magical world view that preceded their “visions.”*

Answer: A lot of people in Joseph Smith’s day/vicinity believed in what some today call “magic.” That’s like saying a lot of people today believe in God. So what? Scholars typically avoid terms like “magic” because of the negative connotation. It’s used far too frequently (at least in the discussion of religion) as a pejorative—what I do is religion, what you do is magic. As a rule of thumb it appears that God speaks through revelation to the mind—with a “still small voice.” Someone who believes that such things are possible is probably going to be more receptive than someone who would brush things off as hallucinations, etc.

57) *In 1826 Joseph was brought to court in Bainbridge, New York, for trial on charges of fraud. He was arrested on the complaint of Josiah Stowell’s nephew who accused Joseph of being a “disorderly person and an imposter.”*

Answer: Stowell hired Joseph to do some digging for buried treasure. It was believed that Joseph could see the location of lost articles by way of a seer stone (this was, it should be remembered, before Joseph Smith acquired the Book of Mormon plates). Stowell’s sons weren’t too happy that their dad was giving money to search for lost treasure and therefore had Joseph brought to court on charges of fraud.

While Joseph Smith never had any luck finding buried treasure, some of the townspeople believed that he did, indeed, have the gift of a “seer” and recounted tales of how he had once found a lost tooth pin in a pile of straw, and how he was able to describe houses and trees hundreds of miles away (all which were verified by people who had actually seen the places being described).

Whether or not Joseph Smith could see such things is irrelevant to the fact that both he and those who hired him *believed* that he could see such things. Someone can believe something and be wrong, but sincerely believing in something wrong doesn’t make that person a con artist or fraud (and we can’t necessarily rule out the possibility that he did indeed *see* lost objects in his seer stone despite the fact that such things run contrary to modern scientific sensibilities).

It’s easy to sit in an ivory tower and poke fun at the gullible 19<sup>th</sup> century bumpkins who believed in dowsing and seer stones, but the truth is that many people today still believe in supernatural things that can only be taken on faith. According to various polls, for instance, nearly half of Americans believe that the body can be healed by psychic, spiritual, or mind powers.<sup>25</sup> Nearly half believe in ESP.<sup>26</sup> Nearly 6 out of 10 believe in ghosts,<sup>27</sup> and nearly 1 in 5 Americans claim they’ve seen a ghost.<sup>28</sup> Nearly 1 in 3 believe they have felt in touch with someone who has died,<sup>29</sup> and an equal number believe that a power exists to see into the past or the future.<sup>30</sup> Ironically, despite fewer Americans laying claim to organized religion, belief in the supernatural seems to be rising.<sup>31</sup>

While some might brush this off as the delusions of an uneducated public, I also find it interesting that 1 out of 3 atheists and agnostics believe in some sort of afterlife and that 6% of this group believes in a bodily resurrection.<sup>32</sup>

Now this is certainly not the place to discuss the existence or “proof” of God, the supernatural, and so forth. It is, however, important to point out that even in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, with all of our scientific advances, declining Church attendance, and adulation of big name atheists like Richard Dawkins, the fact remains that a large percentage of Americans still believes in some things that can only be described as supernatural (or “magic” if you want to tweak someone’s religious nose). In Joseph Smith’s day, the percentage of sincere believers in the supernatural was, I’m certain, much higher. Believing in the supernatural doesn’t make one a fraud.

While critics like to claim that Joseph Smith and his followers were easily fooled because they were gullible, another interpretation might be that they were open to receive divine revelation because they were receptive to such communications. While we know that at least in some instances God can smack non-believers on the head with a club of spiritual manifestation (see Alma the Younger, Paul, and surprisingly more than a few former modern-day critics), it only seems reasonable that those with hearts open to spiritual experiences are more likely to receive manifestations than those whose hearts are hardened to spiritual promptings. As the Apostle Paul said,

But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned....

But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty (1 Corinthians 2:14, 1:27).

*58) D&C 8:6 says that Oliver Cowdery had the “gift of Aaron.” Now we find out that this meant he had the gift of using a dowsing rod.*

Answer: It was not uncommon—among the educated as well as the religious—to believe in divining and “magic” in Joseph Smith’s day and vicinity. A number of people today (even intelligent Americans) believe in water dowsing, astrology, etc. The people of biblical times also believed in non-scientific practices and worldviews. The Lord speaks to us in our language so we can understand and grasp what he wants us to know and do. The belief in the supernatural probably made Joseph and Oliver more receptive to revelation and the translation of ancient documents through the use of supernatural tools.

*59) The Witnesses believed in Second Sight or the ability to see things “in their minds.”*

Answer: Although our eyes collect data and light, vision takes place in the brain. How does

one explain a “vision” of a supernatural experience? The witnesses consistently testified that what they saw and experienced was real (as real as seeing your own hand) but they were at a loss as how to explain something that ultimately came from another world or dimension.

60) *The Witnesses were unreliable, unstable, and gullible.*

Answer: The fact is, the Witnesses never denied their testimonies of the Book of Mormon. Never. They could have, and life would have been much easier. All of the Three Witnesses were, at one time, on the outs with Joseph Smith and the Church. David Whitmer never came back. Many of the Eight Witnesses were eventually at odds with Joseph Smith and the Church; some never came back. It would have been easy to say, “I was conned! Joseph Smith is a brilliant and manipulative devil [some of the Witnesses did say very nasty things about Joseph Smith]. I should have known better, but he got me. My bad.”

People would have been forgiving and would have seen these former Mormons as victims. The hard feelings that the non-Mormons might have once had for the Witnesses’ participation in the (supposed) cons, would have been swallowed up in exuberance for turning state’s evidence on the man they really detested—Joseph Smith. Any witness who had come forward to expose the con and deny his testimony would have been hailed as a hero (heck, in today’s ex-Mormon crowd those who were once former Church leaders—such as bishops, etc.—are hailed as heroes when they leave the church and claim that they were conned by their former faith). Instead, however, the Witnesses endured abuse and humiliation because they refused to deny what they had seen—even when they no longer supported the Church.

The Book of Mormon plates are the fly in the critics’ potato salad. You can’t just eat around it, you have to get rid of it in a way that still makes the salad palatable to the dinner guests. If there were no golden plates, then Joseph Smith simply made up the whole story of the Lehites and the Jaredites. It all came from his imagination—call it lies, call it delusional.

Those pesky plates, however, make things a bit more complicated. If there really were plates then they have to be explained away. Obviously, claim the critics (in an ironic twist of confirmation bias), the plates couldn’t have been real ancient engraved plates with the appearance of gold. *Something—ANYTHING!*—must have been going on here that doesn’t buy into Joseph Smith’s story.

If Joseph Smith were the only one who had claimed to see/heft the plates, then the critics could return to their default position—“it all came from his imagination—call it lies, call it delusional.” Unfortunately for the critics, a number of witnesses claimed to have seen and touched the plates, and three even claimed that they were shown the plates by an angel of God.

While the testimony of the Three Witnesses is powerful, if they had been the only witnesses to the existence of the Book of Mormon plates, then critics could claim (and they attempt to make this very argument) that the entire thing was a product of mass hallucination, clever conjuring, or hypnosis.

If the only witnesses to the Book of Mormon had been the Eight Witnesses, then we would have evidentiary support that Joseph Smith had old-looking metal plates but it wouldn't necessarily tell us that the plates contained the word of God. Having both sets of witnesses covers all the bases. Like it or not, accept it or not, believe it or not, the testimony of the Three and the Eight provides evidence that the Book of Mormon is exactly what Joseph Smith claimed it was. That clever Joseph Smith and his witnesses. It's almost like he had divine guidance in supplying the right kind of evidence.....

So back to our fly in the potato salad. Critics will tell you it's not a fly, it's just a raisin. What looks like wings is really sun sparkles glistening on raisin moisture. What looked like a fly moving are actually pieces of the potato salad settling and shifting as the mayonnaise liquefies in the summer sun. No matter how much it looks like a fly (or even tastes like a fly—yuck!) you can rest assured that it's a raisin and not a fly. How can we be so sure? Because there are no such things as flies that get stuck in potato salads—ergo, this must be a raisin.

*61) Martin Harris was gullible.*

Answer: Martin Harris is frequently the target for charges of gullibility. It's interesting, however, that Martin was, at times, apparently skeptical of the entire venture and needed some confirmation. He didn't part with a penny for printing the Book of Mormon, for example, until after he showed a copy of Book of Mormon characters to a respected scholar at the local university (in what became known as the Anthon episode). At one point Martin switched Joseph Smith's seer stone in an attempt to see if Joseph Smith could really translate, or was just making things up. His non-Mormon neighbors called Martin honest and industrious. The attempt to malign Martin's character is a desperate *ad hominem* which attempts to brush aside the evidentiary strength of his witness testimony.

*62) Harris believed in the Shaker book as much as the Book of Mormon.*

Answer: The newly restored church was like a baby learning to walk. There were stumbles and difficulties in the first few steps. Joseph Smith didn't know everything about Christ's church all at once—and probably didn't know everything by the time he was assassinated. Revelations seem to come to people like grainy images.

One of my serious passions is photography—it used to be film photography but now it's digital photography. The first digital camera was made by Kodak in 1975 and produced a 100x100 pixels image (or .01 Mega Pixels). To render a high resolution image from this sensor you couldn't print anything larger than the size of a postage stamp. A couple of decades later, cameras were capable of producing images measuring 640x480 pixels (or about .3 MP). Then, by the late 1990s, cameras began to appear with 1.3MP resolution or better. Today, your average cell phone has 16MP.

Imagine if someone gave you a print of a house produced from that first .01MP camera and told you to replicate the structure based on the photo. It would be really hard to get all the details right. Years later, as you are still working on the construction, the building contractor gives you a

print made by the 1.3MP camera. Now you are able to fill in some of the details you couldn't see before. You also realize that some of the "windows" you saw in the original image weren't really windows but were simply the way that light and shadows illuminated the house's siding. Each time you got a better photo—taken at a higher resolution—you were able to get more details right and fix more of the errors that you didn't see, or thought you saw in earlier photos.

This is kind of how revelation works with the gospel. Resolution line upon resolution line, here a little pixel and there a little pixel (see what I did there?). The image gets sharper, the fuzzy things get redefined or deleted, and the house is improved. It's still the same house, but with refinements it becomes a superior structure and a more comfortable home than the one which was erected from the first image. Joseph Smith explained this principle to his follower:

It is not wisdom that we should have all knowledge at once presented before us; but that we should have a little at a time; then we can comprehend it.<sup>33</sup>

When you climb up a ladder, you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top; and so it is with the principles of the gospel—you must begin with the first, and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation. But it will be a great while after you have passed through the veil before you will have learned them. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave.<sup>34</sup>

During the grainy pixel season of the Restored Church (and, believe it or not, we still look forward to an ever-sharpening picture), a lot of people were trying to figure out the details of the image. This caused some to stumble and some to go different directions. Martin Harris was one of those who, in time, formed disagreements with Joseph Smith.

Martin had a different image in his head based on the first grainy photo of the 1830 church. His disagreements led him to seek like-minded people who shared *his image* of what he saw in Christ's church. With the exception of a brief episode with the Shakers, all of Martin's wanderings were linked to off-shoots of Mormonism. And even when he joined the Shakers and went out on a mission for his new church, he spent most of the time proselytizing for the Book of Mormon—so much so that the Shakers finally pulled him back from his mission.

A third-hand source accuses Harris of claiming to have as much faith in the Shakers' book as he did in the Book of Mormon. It's hard to judge the reliability of this claim, however. We have no first-hand sources from Harris himself making this claim, and the only source which makes this claim comes from an evangelical preacher who made the accusation during a debate nine years after Harris had died (which means Harris wasn't alive to correct the claim if it was wrong). We don't know the minister's source for the claim, but it's hard to reconcile his claim against the many more testimonies we have wherein Harris reaffirmed his belief in the authenticity of the Book of Mormon and what he had witnessed.

63) *Whitmer said the angel had no appearance or shape.*

Answer: Bunk. Someone else made this claim about Whitmer's description and when

Whitmer found out, he went ballistic and published a rebuttal denying the charge. Although Whitmer never returned to Mormonism, he never denied his testimony, and the people of his town (non-Mormons) frequently defended (even in print) David's honor as an honest, upstanding member of their community.

64) *Oliver Cowdery was Joseph's cousin and therefore not an objective witness.*

Answer: Oliver Cowdery left the Church for many years and was no friend of Joseph's in the interim. During his absence, Oliver didn't know that he would eventually return; it would have been easy for him to claim that Joseph tricked him or that he was naïve in his youth, but he never did. He stood by his testimony even in the face of criticism while he was out of the Church.

65) *Martin Harris saw the plates with his spiritual eyes or in an entranced or imaginary state.*

Answer: These claims about how Harris described his encounter with the angel and plates were published years after Harris had died and was therefore unable to correct the record. Harris left plenty of first-hand testimonies that contradict these late second-hand accounts.

66) *Martin Harris claimed that he had not seen the plates uncovered.*

Answer: Poppycock. Martin Harris saw and hefted the plates while they were covered and saw them again uncovered in the vision with the angel. There are enough examples of his testimony to clarify that he spoke of two different events.

67) *James Strang was Joseph Smith 2.0 and had equally fascinating claims.*

Answer: James Strang was a copy-cat wannabe who hoped to become Joseph's successor after the prophet was martyred. To help gain a following, he imitated Joseph and created some metal plates. The CES Letter lists 5 "fascinating" parallels that attempt to show that his religious efforts were every bit as ingenious as Joseph Smith's. It's easy to see, however, that the supposed parallels are selected to fit into a circle obviously drawn according to the term of the "sharp shooter's fallacy" (see #9 above).

Let's note some of the remarkable *differences* between the Strang organization and the Restored Church. None of Strang's "witnesses" saw the plates in an angelic setting (as we find with the testimony of the Three Book of Mormon Witnesses). Several of the Strang witnesses later recanted their testimonies (none of the Book of Mormon witnesses ever did), and some admitted to helping create the Strang plates (something we never hear from *any* Book of Mormon follower).

Granted, some of the Book of Mormon witnesses temporarily followed Strang but that may have been more because of their disagreement with Brigham Young than their agreements with Strang. There was a succession crisis. Joseph didn't really leave clear instructions as to who would lead the Church if both he and Hyrum (who *would* have taken charge) both died. Several men stepped forward. The majority followed Brigham Young, but others tried to take leadership claim

by virtue of family ties, supposed secret ordinations, or in the case of Strang, an initial ability to show (by deception) that he, too, had prophetic powers to translate ancient plates.

*68) We have no original copy of the Witnesses' testimonies that were included in the Book of Mormon.*

Answer: So what? Let me get this straight... If the original to something is missing, then the original didn't exist? Here are a few other things that are missing... the Wright Brothers' airplane patent—ergo, planes don't really exist; the original nuclear bombing maps for targets in Japan, ergo, Hiroshima never got bombed. How about the library at Alexandria? This was probably the world's most complete library of the time and was said to house, at its peak, up to nearly half a million scrolls. Where are those scrolls now? Gone forever when the library burned down more than a thousand years ago. No original scrolls? Surely this must mean that the Library at Alexandria never existed.

*69) All of the witnesses except Martin Harris were related to either Joseph Smith or David Whitmer, therefore they could not have been objective.*

Answer: This argument means nothing. Some of the witnesses did not get along with each other in later life. There is no reason to impugn their testimonies because of their relationship—especially when they never denied their affidavits despite differences that stood between them and the Church as well as between the other witnesses. Besides, nobody is “objective”—but that is a topic for another time.

*70) The mistake that is made by 21<sup>st</sup> century Mormons is that they're seeing the Book of Mormon Witnesses as empirical, rational, nineteenth-century men instead of the nineteenth-century magical thinking, superstitious, and treasure-digging men they were.*

Answer: It's easy to look back on past generations and call their beliefs superstitious—future generations may do the same with some of our beliefs. Believing in spirits, an afterlife, and a divine being is already viewed as “superstitious” by some people today despite the fact that most Americans believe in such things. The Book of Mormon Witnesses believed in revelation and angels and *that* opened their hearts and minds to receive the things from God.