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The Passing of Martin Harris

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Abstract: Martin Harris, one of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon, was persuaded to move from Kirtland, Ohio, to Utah in 1870. A prominent part of the article is devoted to Harris's tenacious adherence to his testimony of the Book of Mormon.



Mr. and Mrs. William Harrison Homer

THE PASSING OF MARTIN HARRIS

BY WILLIAM HARRISON HOMER

[Brother William Harrison Homer, who has written the following testimony concerning Martin Harris, one of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon, was born in 1845. He filled a mission in Great Britain in 1867-69. He has lived an honorable life of great activity. He and his good wife, who celebrated their golden wedding anniversary several years ago, are still living in fair health on Provo Bench. It was the privilege of Brother Homer to hear the testimony of Martin Harris under the unique conditions here described. "To hear Brother Homer relate the testimony of Martin Harris," says Dr. Widtsoe of the Council of the Twelve, "is a thrilling experience. The witnesses to the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon have passed into the spirit world, and not many remain who have heard their testimony. The unusual experience of Brother Homer is of great historical interest and is faith-promoting. Brother Homer's testimony is of itself convincing for, as he speaks, the fire of full knowledge touches all who listen; and he delights to repeat Martin Harris' testimony, and to bear his own to the truth of the Book of Mormon." *The Improvement Era* takes pleasure in reproducing the testimony herewith.—EDITORS.]

I first saw Martin Harris in Kirtland, Ohio, about the last of December, 1869. On my return from a mission in England I stopped to visit some of my relatives in Pennsylvania. On resuming my journey, one of my cousins, James A. Crockett, who was not a member of the Church, came as far as Kirtland, Ohio, with me. We remained in Kirtland over night and the next morning after breakfast, we asked the landlord who was custodian of the Mormon temple at Kirtland and he informed us that Martin Harris was custodian, and pointed out to us where we would find the old gentleman. Accordingly we went to the door and knocked. In answer to our knock there came to the door of the cottage a poorly clad, emaciated little man,

on whom the winter of life was weighing heavily. It was Martin Harris. In his face might be read the story of his life. There were the marks of spiritual upliftment. There were the marks of keen disappointment. There was the hunger strain for the peace, the contentment, the divine calm that it seemed could come no more into his life. It was a pathetic figure, and yet it was a figure of strength. For with it all there was something about the little man which revealed the fact that he had lived richly, that into his life had entered such noble experiences as come to the lives of but few.

I introduced myself modestly as a brother-in-law of Martin Harris, Jr.—as he had married my eldest sister—and as an Elder of the Church who was returning from a foreign mission. The effect of the introduction was electric. The fact of relationship was overwhelmed by the fact of Utah citizenship. The old man bristled with vindictiveness. “One of those Brighamite ‘Mormons,’ are you?” he snapped. Then he railed impatiently against Utah and the founder of the “Mormon” commonwealth. It was in vain that I tried to turn the old man’s attention to his family. Martin Harris seemed to be obsessed. He would not understand that there stood before him a man who knew his wife and children, who had followed the Church to Utah.

After some time, however, the old man said, “You want to see the Temple, do you?” “Yes, indeed,” I exclaimed, “If we may.” “Well, I’ll get the key.” From that moment, Martin Harris, in spite of occasional outbursts, radiated with interest. He led us through the rooms of the Temple and explained how they were used. He pointed out the place of the School of the Prophets. He showed where the Temple curtain had at one time hung. He related thrilling experiences in connection with the history of the sacred building. In the basement, as elsewhere, there were many signs of dilapidation; the plaster had fallen off the ceilings and the walls; windows were broken; the woodwork was stained and marred. Whether it was the influence of these conditions or not, it is difficult to tell, but here again, Martin Harris was moved to speak against the Utah “Mormons.” An injustice, a gross injustice had been done to him. He should have been chosen President of the Church.

When the old man was somewhat exhausted, I asked, “Is it not true that you were once very prominent in the Church, that you gave liberally of your means, and that you were active in the performance of your duties?” “That is very true,” replied Martin Harris, “Things were alright then. I was honored while the people were here, but now that I am old and poor it is all different.”

“Really,” I replied, “how can that be?” “What about your testimony to the Book of Mormon? Do you still believe that the Book of Mormon is true and that Joseph Smith was a Prophet?” Again the effect was electric. A changed old man stood before me. It

was no longer a man with an imagined grievance. It was a man with a message, a man with a noble conviction in his heart, a man inspired of God and endowed with divine knowledge. Through the broken window of the Temple shone the winter sun, clear and radiant.

"Young man," answered Martin Harris with impressiveness, "Do I believe it! Do you see the sun shining! Just as surely as the sun is shining on us and gives us light, and the sun and stars give us light by night, just as surely as the breath of life sustains us, so surely do I know that Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God, chosen of God to open the last dispensation of the fulness of times; so surely do I know that the Book of Mormon was divinely translated. I saw the plates; I saw the Angel; I heard the voice of God. I know that the Book of Mormon is true and that Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God, I might as well doubt my own existence as to doubt the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon or the divine calling of Joseph Smith." It was a sublime moment. It was a wonderful testimony. We were thrilled to the very roots of our hair. The shabby, emaciated little man before us was transformed as he stood with hand outstretched toward the sun of heaven. A halo seemed to encircle him. A divine fire glowed in his eyes. His voice throbbed with the sincerity and the conviction of his message. It was the real Martin Harris whose burning testimony no power on earth could quench. It was the most thrilling moment of my life.

I asked Martin Harris how he could bear so wonderful a testimony after having left the Church. He said, "Young man, I never did leave the Church, the Church left me."

Martin Harris was now in a softer mood. He turned to me and asked "Who are you?" I explained again our relationship. "So, my son Martin married your sister," repeated the old man, shaking my hand. "You know my family then?" "Yes," I replied, "Wouldn't you like to see your family again?" "I should like to see Caroline and the children," mused Martin, naming over the children, "But I cannot, I am too poor." "That need not stand in the way," I answered. President Young would be only too glad to furnish means to convey you to Utah." "Don't talk Brigham Young," warned Harris; "he would not do anything that was right." "Send him a message by me," I persisted, now deeply concerned in the project. "No," declared Harris emphatically, "yet I should like to see my family." "Then entrust me with the message," I pleaded. Martin Harris paused. "Well," he said slowly, "I believe I will. You call on Brigham Young. Tell him about our visit. Tell him that Martin Harris is an old, old man, living on charity with his relatives. Tell him I should like to visit Utah, my family, my children—I would be glad to accept help from the Church, but I want no personal favor. Wait! Tell him that if he sends money, he must send enough for the round trip. I should not want to remain in Utah." For

25 years he had nursed the old grudge against the leaders of the Church, probably because nobody had had the patience with him that I had shown.

After we had bidden Martin Harris goodbye, and had taken a few steps from the Temple, my cousin placed his hands on my shoulders and said, "Wait a minute." Looking me squarely in the eyes he said, "I can testify that the Book of Mormon is true. There is something within me that tells me that the old man told the truth. I know the Book of Mormon is true."

In due time, I reached my home in the Seventh ward in Salt Lake City, I recounted to my father the experience with Martin Harris, and we two set out immediately to report at the office of President Young. The president received us very graciously. He listened attentively to my recital of my visit with Martin Harris. President Young asked questions now and again, to make clear on certain points. Then, when the story was told, he said, and it seemed to me that he beamed with pleasure, "I want to say this: I was never more gratified over any message in my life. Send for him! Yes, even if it were to take the last dollar of my own. Martin Harris spent his time and money freely when one dollar was worth more than one thousand dollars are worth now. Send for him! Yes indeed I shall send! Rest assured, Martin Harris will be here in time. It was Martin Harris who gave the Prophet Joseph Smith the first money to assist in the translation of the Book of Mormon. Martin Harris was the first scribe to assist in the translation of the Book from the original plates as dictated by the prophet who was led by the Holy Ghost. It was Martin Harris who was called by revelation to assist in the selection and ordination of the first Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, of the newly organized Church. It was Martin Harris who was called upon to accompany the prophet to Missouri to assist in the selection of the land of consecration. Martin Harris also aided in the selection of the First High Council in the Church, and he was a member of said Council. When the new presidency of the Church was chosen Martin Harris felt greatly disappointed, that he was not called to leadership, but Martin Harris never denied the faith, never affiliated with any other sect or denomination, but when the Church came West, Martin Harris remained behind. It is true that Martin Harris did not apostatize; he was never tried for his fellowship; he was never excommunicated."

During the summer of 1870, Elder Edward Stevenson was authorized to collect money by subscription to bring Martin Harris to Utah. About two hundred dollars were raised; and on August 30, 1870, Martin Harris arrived in Salt Lake City, in the company of Elder Stevenson.

When Martin Harris reached Salt Lake City, he visited Brigham Young at his home. They became reconciled, and Martin Harris was

invited to speak in the Tabernacle, and he bore a faithful testimony. He went to Smithfield, and later to Clarkston and made his home with his son, Martin Harris, Jr., and in course of time he returned to full fellowship and communion with the Saints.

Early in July, 1875, five years after he had come to Utah, Martin Harris was stricken with a kind of paralysis. It was the venerable witness' last illness, but through it all he remained true to his faith. At that time I and my small family lived in Clarkston. With other members of the Clarkston ward, I called at the Harris home to relieve them in the care of the old man.

We began to think that he had borne his last testimony. The last audible words he had spoken were something about the Book of Mormon but we could not understand what it was, but these were not the aged witness' last words.

The next day, July 10, 1875, marked the end. It was in the evening. It was milking time, and Martin Harris, Jr., and his wife, Nancy Homer Harris, had gone out to milk and to do the evening's chores. In the house with the stricken man were left my mother, Eliza Williamson Homer, and myself, who had had so interesting a day with Martin Harris at Kirtland. I stood by the bedside holding the patient's right hand and my mother at the foot of the bed. Martin Harris had been unconscious for a number of days. When we first entered the room the old gentleman appeared to be sleeping. He soon woke up and asked for a drink of water. I put my arm under the old gentleman, raised him, and my mother held the glass to his lips. He drank freely, then he looked up at me and recognized me. He said, "I know you. You are my friend." He said, "Yes, I did see the plates on which the Book of Mormon was written; I did see the angel; I did hear the voice of God; and I do know that Joseph Smith is a Prophet of God, holding the keys of the Holy Priesthood." This was the end. Martin Harris, divinely-chosen witness of the work of God, relaxed, gave up my hand. He lay back on his pillow and just as the sun went down behind the Clarkston mountains, the soul of Martin Harris passed on. When Martin Harris, Jr., and his wife returned to the house they found that their father had passed away, but in the passing, Martin Harris, favored of God, repeated an irrefutable testimony of the divine inspiration and the prophetic genius of the great Prophet, Joseph Smith.

(Signed) WILLIAM HARRISON HOMER.

Signed in the presence of Mrs. W. H. Homer, Joseph Homer, Leah Widtsoe, John A. Widtsoe.