



Type: Magazine Article

The Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon

Author(s): Preston Nibley

Source: *Relief Society Magazine*, Vol. 31, No. 8 (August 1944), pp. 431–434

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Abstract: A historical account of the vision the Three Witnesses received on the Peter Whitmer farm during the latter part of June 1829. Includes the testimonies of Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris.

The Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon

Preston Nibley

THE vision of the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon took place on the Peter Whitmer farm, three miles south of Waterloo, in western New York, some time during the latter part of June 1829. About one month previous to this event, the young Prophet Joseph, with his wife Emma and his scribe Oliver Cowdery, had arrived at the Whitmer home after a journey from Harmony, Pennsylvania, where a considerable portion of the Sacred Record had been translated. The reason that Joseph, Emma, and Oliver left Harmony, was that they were being constantly harassed and persecuted by their neighbors. Emma's father, Isaac Hale, had practically ordered them away from his premises. It was at this juncture that Oliver Cowdery had written to David Whitmer asking if they might find refuge under his father's roof, and help to complete the translation. In answer to this request, David Whitmer had gone after them with his team and wagon, and had brought them to his father's home.

The Whitmer family, in 1829, consisted of the father, Peter Whitmer, his wife, Mary, and seven children, five sons and two daughters. It was not an easy task for them to take into their log home the three visitors from Harmony, but they were all deeply impressed with the nature and importance of the young

Prophet's mission. They were anxious to do anything possible to assist in the translation of the Sacred Record. With their co-operation the work went rapidly forward, and was completed, as stated above, about the latter part of June.

The vision of the Three Witnesses took place in the daytime. According to the Prophet Joseph Smith, who was an eyewitness to this important event, we have the following:

... we knelt down again and had not been many minutes engaged in prayer, when presently we beheld a light above us in the air, of exceeding brightness; and behold, an angel stood before us. In his hands he held the plates which we had been praying for these to have a view of. He turned over the leaves one by one, so that we could see them, and discern the engravings thereon distinctly. He then addressed himself to David Whitmer, and said, "David, blessed is the Lord, and he that keeps His commandments"; when, immediately afterwards, we heard a voice from out of the bright light above us, saying, "These plates have been revealed by the power of God, and they have been translated by the power of God. The translation of them which you have seen, is correct, and I command you to bear record of what you now see and hear." (D. H. C. Vol. 1, pp. 54-55)

Such were the circumstances of the great vision of the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon. It is not necessary to reproduce their written testimony here, as it has been read and reread, and has appeared

in every copy of the Book of Mormon from 1830 until the present time.

Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris were obscure, unpretentious men when they witnessed the great event related above. Had they not formed the acquaintance of Joseph Smith it is doubtful if any one of them would ever have been known beyond his small community. They were not great men; but what they saw and heard on this June day in the little grove on Father Whitmer's farm was great. There is nothing greater! For here once more was definite, conclusive evidence that there is a God in Heaven, and that He is mindful of His children here upon earth.

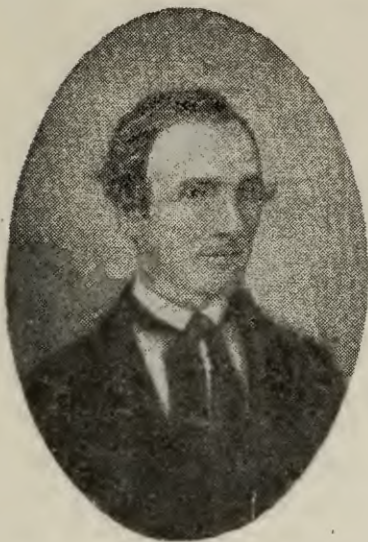
According to the accounts, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris "were overjoyed with the greatness of the things they had seen and heard!" Yet, strange as it may seem, not one of them was able to continue long in the Church under the leadership of the Prophet Joseph Smith. All of them soon began to assume that they were better qualified to lead the Church than was the man whom God had called to found His Kingdom. Shortly after their great vision, Oliver Cowdery wrote Joseph a curt letter commanding him to change a verse in one of the revelations. Martin Harris had already caused the Prophet great trouble by going contrary to his advice with regard to the first 116 pages of the manuscript of the Book of Mormon. Through his disobedience the precious document had been stolen and destroyed. David Whitmer, after locating with the Saints in Kirtland, had actually connived with a group of apostates

to have Joseph deposed as the head of the Church and himself elected to that exalted position. Not one of the Three Witnesses could be true servants to the greatest man of modern times; they could not recognize his greatness; they had not learned the principle of loyalty.

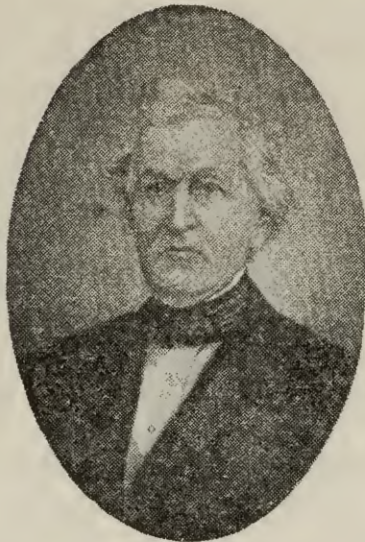
When the time arrived that Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer came out in open rebellion against the Prophet, in Missouri, he permitted the High Council to take action against them, and they were excommunicated from the Church. Martin Harris was not excommunicated, but when the members of the Church moved away from Kirtland, he remained on his farm in that vicinity and became inactive.

After the year 1838, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris went their separate ways. Oliver Cowdery studied law, and practiced to some extent in Ohio, Wisconsin, and Michigan. He kept up a correspondence with some of the leading brethren of the Church, but made no attempt to reunite with them. However, in October 1848, four years after the death of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, with his wife and daughter, arrived at Kaneshville, Iowa, to outfit for the long journey across the plains. Here he met with Apostle Orson Hyde and expressed his desire to again unite with the Mormon people, and join them in their gathering place in Salt Lake Valley. He was accordingly rebaptized and accepted into the Church. In a public meeting at this time he made the following strong statement:

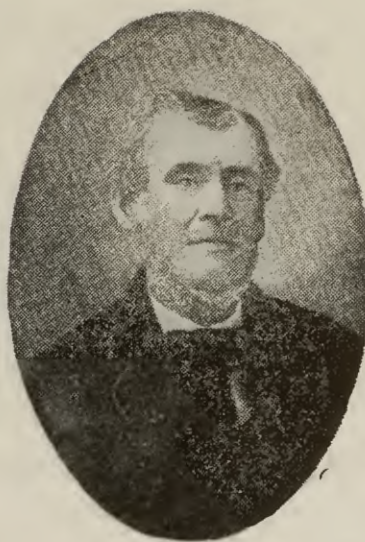
I wrote with my own pen the entire Book of Mormon (save a few pages) as it fell from the lips of the Prophet Joseph



OLIVER COWDERY



DAVID WHITMER



MARTIN HARRIS

THREE WITNESSES OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

Smith, as he translated it by the gift and power of God, by means of the Urim and Thummim, or, as it is called in the book, the "holy interpreters." I beheld with my eyes and handled with my hands the gold plates from which it was translated. I also saw with my eyes and handled with my hands the holy interpreters. That book is true. (Andrew Jenson, *L.D.S. Biographical Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1, p. 349.)

A few months after making this statement, Oliver Cowdery died suddenly, March 3rd, 1850, at the home of his father-in-law, Peter Whitmer, in Richmond, Missouri.

David Whitmer lived until he reached his 84th year. During his long life he never deviated from his original testimony as given in the Book of Mormon. In 1878, when visited by Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith, he said, when describing the vision of the Witnesses:

It was just as though Joseph, Oliver and I were sitting here on a log, when we were overshadowed by a light. It was not like the light of the sun, nor like that of a fire, but more glorious and beautiful. It extended away around us, I cannot tell

how far, but in the midst of this light, about as far off as he sits (pointing to John C. Whitmer, sitting a few feet from him) there appeared, as it were, a table, with many records or plates upon it, besides the plates of the Book of Mormon, also the sword of Laban, and the directors (namely, the ball which Lehi had) and the interpreters. I saw them just as plainly as I see this bed, and I heard the voice of the Lord, as distinctly as I ever heard anything in my life, declaring that the records of the plates of the Book of Mormon, were translated by the gift and power of God. (Andrew Jenson, *L.D.S. Biographical Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1, p. 266.)

David Whitmer did not again unite with the Church after his excommunication in 1838. He lived for fifty years beyond this time, and died at Richmond, Missouri, January 25th, 1888, in his eighty-fourth year. On his death bed he reiterated his testimony of the vision of the Witnesses.

* Martin Harris is the only one of the Witnesses who joined the Saints in Utah. He was in his eighty-eighth year when he arrived in Salt Lake City in August 1870. He

lived five years among the members of the Church in the valleys, and bore testimony of the vision to everyone who was interested in hearing his message. My own father, Charles W. Nibley, was one of those who heard him. Martin Harris died at Clarkston, Utah, on July 10th, 1875. During his last illness, according to his son, Martin Harris, Jr., "he continued to talk and testify to the truth of the Book of Mormon, and he was in his happiest mood

when he could get somebody to listen to his testimony. . . . The last audible words he spoke were something about the witnesses." (*Andrew Jenson, L.D.S. Biographical Encyclopedia, Vol. 1, p. 276.*)

It is to the everlasting honor of Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris that, amidst the changing scenes and vicissitudes of life, they remained true to their testimony of the divine origin of the Book of Mormon.

FRUITION

Leone G. Layton

Dedicated to Lydia Purnell

Gaunt as a wind-stripped poplar, she
 Holds up her arms to eternity.
 Life's storms have swirled about her trunk;
 Deep from the earth her roots have drunk.
 No careful nurture in sheltered field
 But wind-swept wastes have been made to yield.
 Her strength was drawn from earth and sky;
 The calm of the heavens deepened her eye,
 And peace born of faith in One above
 Who watched o'er her with a Father's love.
 No dread of the passing in her mien,
 No senseless whine of what might-have-been.
 Though weakened her roots, waiting leave of earth
 Stalwart she stands, welcoming rebirth.