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## *Learning to Love the Book of Mormon - The Title Page and Testimony of the Three and Eight Witnesses*

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**Abstract:** This work consists of a rather comprehensive commentary on the verses of the Book of Mormon. I believe it may be read and enjoyed by the casual student of the Book of Mormon who might, for example, find use for it as a reference source. The book's intended purpose, however, is to assist the serious student who would like to begin a thorough, intensive, and searching tour through the book.

# Learning to Love the Book of Mormon

Updated August 2013 to February 2014

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## Introduction

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In the Church, our study and understanding of the Book of Mormon has undergone a most interesting evolution since the book's translation in 1829. As late as the early twentieth century our understanding of the book was not far advanced. Almost no serious studies of the book and its contents had been published, and the book was not heavily used in worship service discourse or in gospel instruction. There was even some skepticism about the literal divine origins of the Book within the LDS community, particularly among the more educated. By the mid 1900s, beginning with an acknowledged assumption of the book's divine origins, Sidney B. Sperry, Hugh W. Nibley, John L. Sorenson, and a few others had launched serious scholarly inquiries into the book. In the mid-1970s the rate of publications on Book of Mormon topics began to increase.

The rate of publications on the Book of Mormon particularly soared after President Ezra Taft Benson, soon after his ordination as president and prophet, called the Church to repentance in November of 1985 and at the April General Conference of the Church in 1986. The Church worked the Book of Mormon into the regular cycle of the new correlated curriculum for adults, and church leaders began using the Book of Mormon more frequently and systematically in speeches and instructional situations. Since then, the book's authenticity as an ancient scriptural record has become more firmly and generally established. Those who remain vocal doubters of the book's literal divine origins are no longer identified with the committed LDS community.

In the October General Conference in 1986, President Benson said:

We must make the Book of Mormon a center focus of our study [because] it was written for our day. The Nephites never had the book; neither did the Lamanites of ancient times. It was meant for us. . . . Under the inspiration of God, who sees all things from the beginning, [Mormon] abridged centuries of records, choosing the stories, speeches, and events that would be most helpful to us. . . .

If they [the Book of Mormon writers] saw our day then chose those things which would be of greatest worth to us, is not that how we should study the Book of Mormon? We should constantly ask ourselves, "Why did the Lord inspire Mormon (or Moroni or Alma) to include that in his record? What lesson can I learn from that to help me live in this day and age?" (*Conference Report*, October 1986, 3-7).

President Benson would later write:

It is not just that the Book of Mormon teaches us truth, though it indeed does that. It is not just that the Book of Mormon bears testimony of Christ, though it indeed does that, too. But there is something more. There is a power in the book which will begin to flow into your lives the moment you begin a serious study of the book. You will find greater power to resist temptation. You will find the power to avoid deception. You

will find the power to stay on the strait and narrow path. The scriptures are called the “words of life” (D&C 84:85), and nowhere is that more true than it is of the Book of Mormon. When you begin to hunger and thirst after those words, you will find life in greater and greater abundance (“The Book of Mormon—Keystone of Our Religion,” *Ensign*, November, 1986, 16:7).

Further:

I would like to speak about one of the most significant gifts given to the world in modern times. The gift I am thinking of is more important than any of the inventions that have come out of the industrial and technological revolutions. This is a gift of greater value to mankind than even the many wonderful advances we have seen in modern medicine. It is of greater worth to mankind than the development of flight or space travel. I speak of the gift of the Book of Mormon (*The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft] 1988, 51).

President Benson often reiterated the prophet Joseph Smith’s statement when Joseph referred to the Book of Mormon as “the keystone of our religion” (*TPJS*, 194). A keystone, sometimes called the headstone, is the central stone in an arch. It holds all the other stones in place, and if it is removed, the arch crumbles.

Your author has developed the habit, as I read the Book of Mormon, of reading slowly and actually looking for words or phrases or concepts whose meanings are unclear. I search for ideas that are not completely compatible with the framework of knowledge I already possess. I have been surprised to learn that I seldom have to read more than two or three verses before coming upon some puzzlement, large or small. On each occasion, I am left with an unsettled perplexity, a sort of uncomfortable disequilibrium. “Why are there so many verses in this basic scriptural work,” I have wondered, “that cause me to struggle so?” Disquieting as these feelings are, I have come to recognize them as a first step in learning some valuable new insight.

Once I come upon a phrase or verse I don’t understand, I begin my search for the answer by reading and re-reading the “offending” passage, by checking cross references, by reading supplemental explanatory materials, by sometimes asking help of my learned friends, and often praying about the verse. Mercifully, I have found that my efforts are most always fruitful. I am able to re-establish my equilibrium with the verse, and, at the same time, find myself possessing a greater insight on some particular point. With some satisfaction, I then continue on in my reading, only to find the process beginning again a verse or two later. I heartily recommend this same approach to my readers, and I have attempted in this commentary to spare you some of the pain of finding your answers. I hope I have anticipated many of your perplexities as you study the Book of Mormon, yet I suspect that each of us will encounter and be obliged to overcome our own unique set of questions. There is certainly a magic in enduring in this process, for certainly as we do so, we are “treasur[ing] up . . . the words of life” (D&C 84:85).

Your author prefers to think of this work as an “enrichment commentary.” I believe it may be read and enjoyed by the casual student of the Book of Mormon who might, for example, find use for it as a reference source. The book’s intended purpose, however, is to assist the serious student who would like to begin a thorough, intensive, and searching tour through the book. Though it may be useful to the student who wishes to skip from one verse here to another verse there, it is intended to be read sequentially. Some concepts discussed in earlier verses in the book or even earlier verses in a particular chapter may receive more casual attention when encountered later in the text.

This work consists of a rather comprehensive commentary on the verses of the Book of Mormon. Some may have reservations about the basic concept of this book. I am aware of Peter’s warning: “Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of men: but Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Peter 1:20-21). I have endeavored in this project not to add or detract from the scripture, but only clarify. Some will say that such a comprehensive commentary is not possible without placing a “private interpretation” on some verses. I have earnestly attempted to avoid assigning any purely individual or private interpretations to the scriptural verses. Your author is a student of the Book of Mormon and in no wise an expert. To create this volume I have prayerfully studied and utilized the thoughts and explanations of many authors and scholars whose explanations of the Book of Mormon verses might be generally considered to be “authoritative” and “scholarly.” I have collected materials from general authorities and from individuals with undeniable scholarly credentials who openly profess a spiritual witness of the book. When I have borrowed their ideas only, and have rephrased them for my purposes, no reference will be cited. When I have quoted another author’s wording, acknowledgment is provided. Indeed, I have begun and completed this project as a student who is simply trying to make it possible for myself and for others to understand the book’s sometimes difficult verses. I acknowledge the fact, however, that my private biases have not been completely eliminated.

I am also sensitive to the need to avoid proof-texting in a work such as this. That is, I have tried very hard to let the scriptures speak for themselves. An author guilty of proof-texting presupposes the doctrine and then seeks support from the scriptures. I have attempted to consider each verse in its historical and sequential context.

I have tried to include timely and necessary background information to make the book’s words, phrases, and verses really come alive. I have tried to avoid rhetoric and concentrate on the meat. It is not my purpose to preach about the principles contained in the book, rather my goal is to improve understanding. This work presupposes, in its reader, an “average” understanding of the Book of Mormon. I have tried to eliminate those commentary materials which would likely be redundant and unnecessary for my

so-called average reader. It is my intent to explain, clarify, and enrich your study and understanding of the book.

The work includes a variety of “supplemental articles” to which reference is made appropriately in the text. Among these supplemental articles is a purely historical telling of the Book of Mormon story entitled, *A Narrative Summary of the Book of Mormon*. From this “historical” summary, doctrinal materials have been omitted, but all characters, events, and places are included. It is hope that this historical account may be useful to the student who wishes to quickly “brush up” on the historical narrative.

A few “housekeeping” notes about this work are pertinent. The text of the Book of Mormon is included in bold with a blue color to clearly distinguish it from the commentary. All commentary is colored black. The paragraphs of commentary material are often preceded by a quoted phrase, also of blue color, without any punctuation except for quotation marks. These are phrases taken directly from the verse of text immediately above the commentary paragraph. The commentary then follows these quoted phrases. Sometimes the verse commentary for a group of verses will precede, rather than follow, the actual text rendering of the verses. This is done if it felt that a word of explanation before reading a passage would be helpful. Most block quotes appear in red print and are not double-indented. Finally, in this current updated version of this commentary (2014) page numbers have been eliminated, as they are considered unnecessary.

In reading the Book of Mormon, often we tend to regard some of the materials contained therein as non-essential. We wonder, “Why was the report of this battle or that incident included in the book?” As we study the book, we will assume that there is no “filler” material in the Book of Mormon. Every item in the book was placed there for a reason and purpose. In making his abridgment of the sacred records of the Book of Mormon people, Mormon wrote, “I cannot write the hundredth part of the things of my people” (Words of Mormon 1:5). Hence, we must assume that all items in the book have been included following thoughtful and inspired consideration.

There is a miracle in the scriptures. If a person reads the scriptures regularly, he or she will invariably have his or her life touched by them eventually. “Whosoever believeth on my words,” the Lord said in reference to the Book of Mormon, “them will I visit with the manifestation of my Spirit” (D&C 5:16). Isaiah prophesied that the Book of Mormon would bring a spiritually blind generation to an understanding of the doctrine of Christ (2 Nephi 27:35; Isaiah 29:24). It has been suggested by those experienced in gospel study that no individual who studies the scriptures daily will be remiss in keeping the commandments.

Our scriptures advise us of several other books of scripture yet to come forth. One day, “all things shall be revealed unto the children of men which ever have been . . . and which ever will be” (2 Nephi 27:11). Perhaps, though, we will never be privileged to receive additional scriptures until we learn to appreciate fully those we already have.

Consider the following testimony of The Book of Mormon by President Ezra Taft Benson:

We invite all men everywhere to read the Book of Mormon, another testament of Jesus Christ.

The Bible sits on the pulpit of hundreds of different religious sects. The Book of Mormon, the record of Joseph, verifies and clarifies the Bible. It removes stumbling blocks, it restores many plain and precious things. We testify that when used together, the Bible and the Book of Mormon confound false doctrines, lay down contentions, and establish peace (see 2 Nephi 3:12).

We do not have to prove that the Book of Mormon is true. The Book is its own proof. All we need to do is read it and declare it! The Book of Mormon is not on trial—the people of the world, including the members of the Church, are on trial as to what they will do with this second witness for Christ” (*Conference Report*, October 1984, 7; *Ensign* November 1984, 8).

I am deeply committed to the book as an authentic ancient scripture. The Spirit has born witness to my soul on numerous occasions as I have studied and pondered its verses. I know with all my heart that the book was written by ancient prophets who intended for their writings to come forth to the world and be translated in our day by Joseph Smith, Jr., through the “gift and power of God.”

Michael J. Preece

## The Book of Mormon Another Testament of Jesus Christ

### Subtitle

The official subtitle “Another Testament of Jesus Christ” was given to the Book of Mormon in October conference 1982. During that conference, Elder Boyd K. Packer announced: “You should know also that by recent decision of the brethren, the Book of Mormon will henceforth bear the title ‘The Book of Mormon,’ with the subtitle ‘Another Testament of Jesus Christ’” (*Ensign*, November 1982, 53). This subtitle highlights one of the central purposes of the Book of Mormon: “The convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations” (Title Page; cf. 2 Nephi 26:12). In a world where the biblical account of Christ’s divine status and mission is increasingly under attack in both academic and popular circles, the Book of Mormon’s witness is a cardinal addition to the witness of the Bible.

During the past two centuries, scholars have increasingly employed humanistic methods in biblical study that remove the idea of divine influence as the source of

scripture. These methods have attacked the credibility of the biblical account of Jesus's birth, his miracles, his crucifixion, and his resurrection. Stripping Jesus of his divinity, some scholars have variously depicted him as a cynic philosopher, a peasant revolutionary, a magician, a Galilean rabbi, a Pharisee, or an eschatological prophet—anything but the Son of God. Biblical passages that support Jesus's divinity are understood by those scholars as the incursions of later Christians. The Book of Mormon witness confirms cherished Christian truths taught in the Bible, restores to skeptics the validity of those truths, and stands independent of the shifting sands of secular scholarly opinion.

President Ezra Taft Benson taught: “The word *testament* is the English rendering of a Greek word that can also be translated as *covenant*. Is this what the Lord meant when he called the Book of Mormon the ‘new covenant’? It is indeed another testament or witness of Jesus. This is one of the reasons why we have recently added the words ‘Another Testament of Jesus Christ’ to the title of the Book of Mormon” (*Conference Report*, October 1986, 4; *Ensign*, November 1986, 4).

## Title Page

# THE BOOK OF MORMON

## AN ACCOUNT WRITTEN BY THE HAND OF MORMON UPON PLATES TAKEN FROM THE PLATES OF NEPHI

Wherefore, it is an abridgment of the record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites—Written to the Lamanites, who are a remnant of the house of Israel; and also to Jew and Gentile—Written by way of commandment, and also by the spirit of prophecy and of revelation—Written and sealed up, and hid up unto the Lord, that they might not be destroyed—To come forth by the gift and power of God unto the interpretation thereof—Sealed by the hand of Moroni, and hid up unto the Lord, to come forth in due time by way of the Gentile—The interpretation thereof by the gift of God.

An abridgment taken from the Book of Ether also, which is a record of the people of Jared, who were scattered at the time the Lord confounded the language of the people, when they were building a tower to get to heaven—Which is to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord,

**that they are not cast off forever—And also to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that JESUS is the CHRIST, the ETERNAL GOD, manifesting himself unto all nations—And now, if there are faults they are the mistakes of men; wherefore, condemn not the things of God, that ye may be found spotless at the judgment-seat of Christ.**

**Translated by Joseph Smith, Jun.**

The writings on the title page of the Book of Mormon were most likely written by Moroni directly onto the plates of Mormon. Joseph Smith explained: “I wish to mention here that the title-page of the Book of Mormon is a literal translation, taken from the very last leaf, on the left hand side of the collection or book of plates, which contained the record which has been translated, the language of the whole running the same as all Hebrew writing in general; and that said title page is not by any means a modern composition, either of mine or of any other man who has lived or does live in this generation” (*HC*, 1:71).

Dr. Sidney B. Sperry and others have speculated that Moroni wrote the two paragraphs of the title page at two different times of his life (*A Book of Mormon Treasury*, 123-25). He suggests that Moroni wrote the first paragraph after he had written Mormon 8:12-13 and the second after he had translated the account of the people of Jared. This translation of the Jaredite record was made apparently between the time he wrote the last verse in Mormon (Mormon 9:37) and the first verse in Moroni.

An alternate hypothesis for the authorship of the title page has been advanced by Daniel H. Ludlow. He suggests that Mormon himself may have written the first six lines of the first paragraph and that Moroni wrote the remainder of the title page (*The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, the Doctrinal Foundation*. Religious Studies Center, B.Y.U., Provo, Utah, 28-31). This suggestion is based on the fact that Mormon was qualified and might be expected to have written some sort of preface for his work. Also the construction of the final few lines of the paragraph is awkward and repetitious if we attribute it to one author. For example, compare the consecutive lines which I have here divided into numbered passages:

1. “Written and sealed up, and hid up unto the Lord, that they might not be destroyed, to come forth by the gift and power of God unto the interpretation thereof.”
2. “Sealed by the hand of Moroni, and hid up unto the Lord, to come forth in due time by way of the Gentile, the interpretation thereof by the gift of God.”

This repetitive, almost clumsy, style would be easier to explain if the two phrases were each written by separate authors.

The punctuation and paragraphing of the title page were not done by Joseph Smith. In fact the entire title page was submitted to E.B. Grandin’s Publishing house in one unpunctuated paragraph, and the typesetter, John H. Gilbert, was responsible for punctuation and for the decision to publish it in two basic paragraphs. Those

paragraphs in the original 1830 edition were practically the same as in our current edition except that the phrase “An abridgment taken from the Book of Ether” was placed at the end of the first paragraph in the 1830 edition rather than in its present position at the beginning of the second paragraph.

Some have felt that the current paragraphing is misleading in one sense. The present form suggests that the segment: “Which is to show unto the remnant of the house of Israel what great things the Lord hath done . . . that ye may be found spotless at the judgment seat of Christ,” applies only the abridgment of the Book of Ether and not to the entire Book of Mormon. It would seem that a new paragraph ought to be formed beginning at, “Which is to show unto . . .” This would serve to emphasize the application of this final segment of the title page to the entire book and not just to the Book of Ether.

It is interesting to note that at the bottom of the title page and in the testimony of the eight witnesses of the 1830 edition, Joseph Smith was identified as “Author and proprietor,” and the publisher’s line reads “Printed by E.B. Grandin, for the author.” We know, of course, that Joseph was not the author but rather the translator of the book. In listing himself as author, he was simply complying with the copyright laws of the early nineteenth century (based on research by John W. Welch and Miriam A. Smith reported in “Joseph Smith: Author and Proprietor” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 154-57). To prevent confusion, Joseph changes the word “author” to “translator” in the second edition of the Book of Mormon, printed in 1837. It has appeared that way ever since.

The title page mentions that the Book of Mormon is an abridgment of “the record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites” and the “record of the people of Jared.” An abridgment is an abbreviated, condensed, or shorter version of some larger work or text. In the case of the Book of Mormon, the abridgers also added their own editorial comments. Book of Mormon abridgers were limited in their writing to not even “a hundredth part” of their peoples’ history (Jacob 3:13; Words of Mormon 1:5; Helaman 3:14; 3 Nephi 5:8; 26:6; Ether 15:33). Their inspired abridgments reflect deliberate attention to their intended latter-day audience. The major abridgers of the Book of Mormon were, of course, Mormon (Nephite/Lamanite record) and Moroni (Jaredite record), but also authors of the small plates of Nephi also mention shortening their records (Jacob 3:13) or abridging the records of others (1 Nephi 1:16-17). The Book of Mormon promises to those who accept the abridged Book of Mormon record, future, additional, and perhaps even unabridged, records (3 Nephi 26 9-11; Ether 4:5-7).

**“by way of the Gentile”** Certainly the Book of Mormon came to us “by way of” the prophet Joseph Smith. But certainly he was of the house of Israel and not a Gentile. How then might we explain this phrase? Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote: “Joseph Smith (through whom the Book of Mormon was revealed) was of the tribe of Ephraim. At the same time the prophet was of the Gentiles, meaning that he was a citizen of [the great] Gentile nation [the United States of America] and also that he was not a Jew”

(*Mormon Doctrine*, 311; for discussion of the phrase “great Gentile nation” see the commentary on 1 Nephi 10:14). Generally speaking, in the Book of Mormon, the term *Gentile* refers to a resident of a Gentile nation. Any nation that does not have prophets at its head, revelation as its constitution, and the Messiah as its king, is a Gentile nation.

The title page was officially recorded and published twice before the Book of Mormon itself was printed and made available to the public in March of 1830. When Joseph Smith applied for a copyright of the Book of Mormon on June 11, 1829, R. R. Lansing, the clerk of the Northern District of New York, recorded the title page with the notation, “Joseph Smith Junior of the said District, hath deposited in this Office the title of a Book . . . to wit.” The title page was also printed on June 26, 1829 in the *Wayne Sentinel*, a newspaper published at E. B. Grandin’s press, the same press that printed the first edition of the Book of Mormon. In both of these instances, the title page was written as one paragraph. In the first edition of the Book of Mormon, the title page was published as two paragraphs, a style followed in subsequent English editions but with a change in the point where the two paragraphs divide.

## **The Testimonies of the Witnesses**

### **The Testimony of Three Witnesses**

**Be it known unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, unto whom this work shall come: That we, through the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, have seen the plates which contain this record, which is a record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites, their brethren, and also of the people of Jared, who came from the tower of which hath been spoken. And we also know that they have been translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice hath declared it unto us; wherefore we know of a surety that the work is true. And we also testify that we have seen the engravings which are upon the plates; and they have been shown unto us by the power of God, and not of man. And we declare with words of soberness, that an angel of God came down from heaven, and he brought and laid before our eyes, that we beheld and saw the plates, and the engravings thereon; and we know that it is by the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, that we beheld and bear record that these things are true. And it is marvelous in our eyes. Nevertheless, the voice of the Lord commanded us that we should bear record of it; wherefore, to be obedient unto the commandments of God, we bear testimony of these things. And we know that if we are faithful in Christ, we shall rid our garments of the blood of all men, and be found spotless before the judgment-seat of Christ, and shall dwell with him eternally in the heavens. And the honor be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, which is one God. Amen.**

Oliver Cowdery  
David Whitmer  
Martin Harris

## The Testimony of Eight Witnesses

Be it known unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, unto whom this work shall come: That Joseph Smith, Jun., the translator of this work, has shown unto us the plates of which hath been spoken, which have the appearance of gold; and as many of the leaves as the said Smith has translated we did handle with our hands; and we also saw the engravings thereon, all of which has the appearance of ancient work, and of curious workmanship. And this we bear record with words of soberness, that the said Smith has shown unto us, for we have seen and hefted, and know of a surety that the said Smith has got the plates of which we have spoken. And we give our names unto the world, to witness unto the world that which we have seen. And we lie not, God bearing witness of it.

Christian Whitmer

Hiram Page

Jacob Whitmer

Joseph Smith, Sen.

Peter Whitmer, Jun.

Hyrum Smith

John Whitmer

Samuel H. Smith

**“curious workmanship”** Curious is derived from the Latin *cura*, giving one early English meaning of “made with care or skill.”

When the Book of Mormon came forth in this dispensation, the Lord made it known to Joseph Smith that two sets of witnesses should publicly testify of the book. It is informative, perhaps profoundly so, to note the differences between these two groups. The experience of the first group, the three witnesses, is supernatural or spiritual in its basic character. An “angel” (doubtless Moroni) laid the plates before the witnesses. They were shown the plates “by the power of God, and not of man.” The “voice of the Lord” commanded the witnesses to bear witness of the record. The experience of the eight witnesses, in contrast, was an entirely “natural” event. They were shown the plates by a man, Joseph Smith. They were allowed and encouraged to turn the pages and heft the record. They were simply eight men being shown the plates by Joseph. They described the plates’ color, their weight, their individual leaves with their engraved writings, and their careful craftsmanship.

It has been suggested that the two distinct types of testimonies were intended by the Lord to teach us an important lesson. How should we seek to acquire an abiding testimony of the Book of Mormon—by natural or by spiritual means? With the mind or with the heart? Can we gain a testimony by laboring over the text, by memorizing its passages, by studying scholarly articles about its historicity, its linguistics, its

archeology, its geography, its evidences? Or is a testimony more surely gained by praying for a spiritual confirmation and then spending little time with the book itself? An intellectual testimony is not a durable testimony. A spiritual witness of the book is essential. Yet, there must be something in the mind of which the Spirit might testify.

It would seem that the strongest and most abiding testimony is gained when both mind and intellect, as well as the heart and Spirit, are applied. Reason and revelation must work together. The Lord said, “Seek ye diligently . . . seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). Elder Boyd K. Packer said: “Each of us must accommodate the mixture of reason and revelation in our lives. The gospel not only permits but requires it” (“I Say unto You, Be One,” Brigham Young University 1990-91 Devotionals and Fireside Speeches [Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1991], 89). B. H. Roberts cautioned, let us not have “the heart breathing defiance to the intellect” (Truman G. Madsen, “Philosophy,” in B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life*, ed. John W. Welch [Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1994], lxxii).

And one might equally add, let us also not have the intellect pounding submission into the heart. As we study the Book of Mormon, we must keep both our mind and our spirit alive and functioning. The two must work together, each contributing in its own proper way. Perhaps the Lord intended to teach us the importance of both types of testimony through the experiences of the witnesses. The experience of the eight witnesses is a metaphor for the importance of serious study and pondering the book. The experience of the three witnesses suggests the importance of a spiritual witness.

The many textual evidences that suggest logically the Book of Mormon is true do not eliminate the necessity of the witness of the Spirit, but the “intellectual” evidences are not to be ignored. Your author has discovered time and again that study of the Book of Mormon, the gathering of intellectual evidence, leads to the revelations of God—a confirmatory witness that the book is true. C. S. Lewis wrote, “Though argument does not create conviction, lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows that ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish” (Austin Farrar, “Grete Clerk,” in *Light on C. S. Lewis*, comp. Jocelyn Gibb [New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1965], 26). Perhaps most of all, evidence promotes understanding and enhances meaning. In all our study, we should seek understanding. Just as traveling to the Holy Land richly enhanced my understanding of the world of the Bible, as it has for many people, evidence provides essential building blocks in understanding the Book of Mormon. John W. Welch has “turned a metaphor” in emphasizing the necessity of both faith and reason as we study the Book of Mormon. He said, “I like to think of faith and reason as two arms working together to play a violin. One hand fingers the strings and the other draws the bow. When these two distinct functions are brought together with skill and purpose, they produce expressions that

ontologically [what the book actually *is*] transcend the physics of either part individually. According to this view, for an LDS scholar to proceed on either spirit or intellect alone is like trying to play a violin with only one arm” (*Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch, 26).

Let us get back to the consideration of witnesses. Most members of the Church are aware of the Lord’s Law of Witnesses. Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote:

Whenever the Lord has established a dispensation by revealing his gospel and by conferring priesthood and keys upon men, he has acted in accordance with the law of witnesses which he himself ordained. This law is: “In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established” (2 Corinthians 13:1; Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15; Matthew 18:15-16; John 8:12:29).

Never does one man stand alone in establishing a new dispensation of revealed truth, or in carrying the burden of such a message and warning to the world. In every dispensation, from Adam to the present, two or more witnesses have always joined their testimonies, thus leaving their hearers without excuse in the day of judgment should the testimony be rejected (*Mormon Doctrine*, 436).

President Heber J. Grant stressed the importance of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon:

I do not believe that in any court of justice in the world if a man was being tried for murder and twelve reputable citizens testified of their knowledge of the circumstances leading to the murder, and there was no one who could testify against what they said, there would be a failure to convict the man. We have the testimony of Joseph Smith and the testimony of three witnesses to the effect that God gave them a knowledge regarding the Book of Mormon that an angel of God declared from the heaven that the book had been translated by the gift and power of God. These men were Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and Martin Harris. They left the Church, but to the day of their death they maintained their testimony regarding the declaration of the angel, and that they were commanded to bear witness of the divinity of this book, and they did so. Eight men, some of whom were excommunicated from the Church, maintained their testimony that they had seen and handled the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated, and they remained true to that testimony to the day of their death. The disbelief of all the world does not prove that those men did not tell the truth, because there are no witnesses on the other side (*Conference Report*, April 1929, 128).

### **The Testimony of the Three Witnesses**

On the day following the death of David Whitmer, in 1888, the *Chicago Times* reported an interview with an unnamed “Chicago Man.” This man related a conversation he had engaged in with another individual some years before, a prominent resident of the county in which David Whitmer had lived who had been a lawyer and a sheriff there and who had, the Chicago Man said, known the witness very well. The prominent Clay

County resident had given him a remarkable portrait of David Whitmer's character and later life.

In the opinion of this gentleman, no man in Missouri possessed greater courage or honesty than this heroic old man [David Whitmer]. "His oath," he said, "would send a man to the gallows quicker than that of any man I ever knew." He then went on to say that no person had ever questioned [David Whitmer's] word to his knowledge about any other matter than finding the Book of Mormon. [Whitmer] was always a loser and never a gainer by adhering to the faith of Joseph Smith. Why persons should question his word about the golden plates, when they took it in relation to all other matters, was to him a mystery (Cited in Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews*, 224).

Yet this very David Whitmer persisted, literally to his dying day, despite ridicule and skepticism from those around him and despite his own deep disaffection from the institutional Church led by Joseph Smith and then by Brigham Young and the apostles, in stating that he had been in the presence of an angel, had seen the gold plates and other objects related to the Book of Mormon, and had heard the voice of God declare the book true. In an 1878 interview with Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith, for example, he gave dramatic and emphatic testimony of his experience as a witness:

I saw [the plates and other Lehite artifacts] just as plain as I see this bed (striking his hand upon the bed beside him), 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 (Reported in a letter to President John Taylor and the Quorum of the Twelve dated 17 September 1878. Originally published in the *Deseret News* [16 November 1878] and reprinted in Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews*, 40).

Six years later, Whitmer was interviewed by Joseph Smith III, in the presence of others, not all of whom were disposed to believe his account. Significantly, he listed several items that he had seen, besides the golden plates: the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim, the angel dressed in white, and a dazzling brilliant light that surpassed in brightness even the sun at noonday.

### **The Testimony of the Eight Witnesses**

The testimony of the Eight Witnesses is no less impressive. Though critics of the Book of Mormon have suggested otherwise, these were men who could not be fooled. They were tradesmen and farmers who worked with materials and would recognize a counterfeit.

Hyrum Smith who, besides being the Prophet's loyal elder brother was also one of the Eight Witnesses, wrote in December 1839 of his recent sufferings in Missouri:

I had been abused and thrust into a dungeon, and confined for months on account of my faith, and the testimony of Jesus Christ. However I thank God that I felt a determination to die, rather than deny the things which my eyes had seen, which my

hands had handled, and which I had borne testimony to . . . and I can assure my beloved brethren that I was enabled to bear as strong a testimony, when nothing but death presented itself, as ever I did in my life.

These were not empty words. Four and a half years later, Hyrum Smith sealed his testimony with his blood at Carthage, Illinois, when an armed anti-Mormon mob with painted faces assassinated him and his brother. The historical evidence indicates that Hyrum understood his likely fate, and that he went to it willingly (see, for example, Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977], 402).

Another witness, Joseph's brother Samuel also bore strong and specific testimony of seeing and handling the plates. Daniel Tyler was fifteen years old when he heard Samuel tell his story: "He knew his brother Joseph had the plates, for the prophet had shown them to him, and he had handled them and seen the engravings thereon" (Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon*, 140).

In all, Richard Lloyd Anderson has identified: over 40 [actually 42] instances when one of the Eight Witnesses restated his testimony [10 of these mentioned handling the plates], with the printed declaration of that testimony mentioned or understood in the statement or conversation. Yet personal statements or reports are only part of the story of the Eight Witnesses. Their relatives said they affirmed their experience throughout life, showing they were deeply impressed by what they had "seen and hefted." When word reached Kirtland about the deaths of Christian and Peter Whitmer Jr., brother-in-law Oliver Cowdery wrote that "they proclaimed to their last moments, the certainty of their former testimony" (*Messenger and Advocate* 3 [1836]: 426). Thus these brothers regularly validated their formal group statement. Sons and nephews of Jacob Whitmer, John Whitmer, and Hiram Page gave similar cumulative accounts. Likewise, Samuel Smith's obituary noted "his steadfastness as one of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon" (*Times and Seasons* 5 [1 August 1844]:607, obituary by John Taylor, who had known Samuel for over six years). And William Smith included his father and brothers in saying that all of the Eight Witnesses testified "that they not only saw with their eyes but handled with their hands the said record . . . nor has either or any one of these witnesses ever to my knowledge counteracted the testimony as given above concerning the real existence of these Mormon tablets" ("Notes Written on 'Chambers' Life of Joseph Smith," 15). . . .

And thoughtful converts, such as the Pratt brothers, John Corrill, and William E. McLellin, recount how they systematically questioned each Book of Mormon witness at the outset. McLellin later said: "When I first joined the Church in 1831, soon I became acquainted with all the Smith family and the Whitmer families, and I heard all their testimonies, which agreed in the main points; and I believed them then and I believe them yet" ("William E. McLellan's [sic] Testimony of the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies*

10/4 [Summer 1970]: 486) (*Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, volume 14, number 1, 2005, 28-29).

Another of the Eight Witnesses, John Whitmer, was excommunicated on March 10, 1838, one month before his brother David. Like David, he never returned to the Church. In fact, for a brief period it even appears that John's spiritual confidence in the Book of Mormon had been shaken by his separation from his former associates and by his bitterness over the economic and other issues that had arisen during the Latter-day Saints' brief sojourn in Missouri. He was sorrowful and dejected about his excommunication, but also, for at least a time, quite angry at the Church in general and Joseph Smith in particular (see F. Mark McKiernan and Roger D. Launius, eds., *An Early Latter Day Saint History: The Book of John Whitmer Kept by Commandment* [Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1980], 20). As the Mormons were forced from Missouri in 1839, Theodore Turley temporarily remained as a church business agent and was visited by several residents, including John Whitmer. The hostile group ridiculed Turley's belief in the Book of Mormon, but he confronted John Whitmer with an accusation of inconsistency. Turley later reconstructed the rest of the conversation:

Whitmer asked do you hint at me? Turley replied, "If the cap fits you wear it. All I know, you have published to the world than an angel did present those plates to Joseph Smith." Whitmer replied "I now say I handled those plates. There was fine engravings on both sides. I handled them." And he described how they were hung and they were shown to me by a supernatural power. He acknowledged all. Turley asked him why the translation is not now true, and he said "I cannot read it, and I do not know whether it is true or not" ("Theodore Turley's Memorandums," Church Archives, handwriting of Thomas Bullock, who began clerking in late 1843. Willard Richards made slight changes to this text, which appears with minor modifications in *HC*, 3:307-08).

Thus, even in the depths of his alienation and bitterness, even when he was most inclined to doubt what he could not see for himself, even living, as he did, in the area of the worst anti-Mormon persecutions, when continuing to affirm faith in anything connected with the Latter-day Saint movement could have been personally dangerous, John Whitmer did not deny that he had "lifted and handled a metal object of substantial weight" (The quoted phrase comes from Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 132). There was nothing mystical, visionary, or immaterial about his experience. It was a simple matter of hefting and examining something entirely tangible, something quite literally physical.

It appears, however, that John Whitmer's bitterness, or at least his skepticism, was short-lived. By 1856, he was the last survivor from among the Eight Witnesses. In 1861 Jacob Gates spoke with him for more than four hours, thereafter entering the following summary comment in his journal: "[H]e still testified that the Book of Mormon is true and that Joseph Smith was a Prophet of the Lord" (Journal of Jacob Gates for 18

March 1861, as cited in Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 131). Fifteen years after that interview, in 1876, Whitmer wrote a lengthy letter to Mark Forscutt, which included the following:

Oliver Cowdery lived in Richmond, Mo., some 40 miles from here, at the time of his death. I went to see him and was with him for some days previous to his demise. I have never heard him deny the truth of his testimony of the Book of Mormon under any circumstances whatever. . . . Neither do I believe that he would have denied, at the peril of his life; so firm was he that he could not be made to deny what he has affirmed to be a divine revelation from God. . . .

I have never heard that any one of the three or eight witnesses ever denied the testimony that they have borne to the Book as published in the first edition of the Book of Mormon. There are only two of the witnesses to that book now living, to wit., David Whitmer, of the three, and John Wh[itmer], one of the eight. Our names have gone forth to all nations, tongues and people as a divine revelation from God. And it will bring to pass the designs of God according to the declaration therein contained (Letter of John Whitmer to Mark Forscutt, dated 5 March 1876, cited in Richard L. Anderson, "Personal Writings of the Book of Mormon Witnesses," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds [Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997], 55-56).

In a letter to J. R. Lambert (6 May 1877, Community of Christ Archives number P13, f 311) John Whitmer wrote: "It is the same as it was from the beginning, and it is true. . . . I have never denied my testimony as to the Book of Mormon, under any circumstances whatever."

Martin Harris was, of course, one of the three witnesses, but he was also Joseph's first scribe during the translation of the book of Lehi in 1828, which translation was subsequently lost. During the period of translation, Martin wrote on more than one occasion that he saw the plates, and then sometimes they were covered.

The official testimonies of the three and eight witnesses are strengthened by a third tier of witnesses, family members who had contact with the plates as Joseph brought them into his New York farm home, as well as scribes who worked around the plates in the translation process. William Smith was 16 when his older brother outran pursuers and breathlessly carried the covered metal record into the house. William recounted lifting the plates that night, saying several times that they weighed about 60 pounds (*William Smith on Mormonism* [Lamoni IA: Herald House Steam Book and Job Office, 1883], 12). In a pulpit speech William told of feeling their outlines through cloth wrappings: "They were not quite as large as this Bible. . . . Could raise the leaves this way (raising a few leaves of the Bible before him). ("Sermon in the Saints' Chapel" [Deloit, Iowa, 8 June 1884], *Saints' Herald* 31 (1884): 643-44). And he added detail in an interview: "I could tell they were plates of some kind and that they were fastened

together by rings running through the back” (Interview of William Smith with E. C. Briggs and J. W. Peterson, *Zion’s Ensign*, 13 January 1894, 6).

As an early secretary for her husband, Emma Smith remembered how the covered plates were on the translating table, and she sometimes moved them and once felt their shape through the linen covering: “They seemed to be pliable like thick paper, and would rustle with a metallic sound when the edges were moved by the thumb” (Emma Smith interview between February 4<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, 1879, *Saint’s Herald* 26 [1879]: 290).

Lucy Mack Smith also reported on the experience of the Eight Witnesses:

In a few days we were followed by Joseph and Oliver and the Whitmers who came to make us a visit and also to make some arrangements about getting the book printed soon after they came. They all, that is the male part of the company, repaired to a little grove where it was customary for the family to offer up their secret prayers, as Joseph had been instructed that the plates would be carried there by one of the ancient Nephites. Here it was that those eight witnesses recorded in the Book of Mormon looked upon the plates and handled them of which they bear witness in the following words [Testimony of the Eight Witnesses]. After the witnesses returned to the house the angel again made his appearance to Joseph and received the plates from his hands. We commenced holding meetings that night in the which we declared those facts that we knew to be true (preliminary manuscript in church archives. Later recorded in Lavina Fielding Anderson, *Lucy’s Book* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001] 455-57).

For a further summary of these encounters, see the supplemental article *Those Confusing Book of Mormon Plates*, particularly the section of that article, “The Physical Characteristics of the Plates.”

### **Critics of the Book of Mormon and Their Alternate Theory**

Book of Mormon skeptics have a strong need to believe that the witnesses of the Book of Mormon were involved in some type of fraud and did not have the experiences to which they testified. They have proposed an alternate theory which depends on two different ideas. The first is that the witnesses did not actually see the plates at all but were manipulated into saying that they did by Joseph’s enthusiasm or by his charisma and some type of “mind control.” The second idea is that no one actually saw the uncovered plates at all but rather they only saw and felt a counterfeit, manufactured by Joseph Smith, which was kept constantly covered or in a box. A careful review of the details of the testimonies reported above renders both of these ideas as only desperate attempts to find an alternate explanation for the plates. The current “leaders” in this pitiful effort are Dan Vogel (*Early Mormon Documents*, 3:464-72; and “The Validity of the Witnesses’ Testimonies,” in *American Apocrypha*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalf [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002], 79-121) and Grant H. Palmer

("Witnesses to the Golden Plates," chapter 6 of *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002]). Both of these men largely avoid the Testimony of the Eight Witnesses in their writings. Palmer concludes "that the eight, like the three, saw and scrutinized the plates in a mind vision." He paints the witnesses as simplistic believers who possessed the "shared magical perspective" of their culture. Vogel starts with a premise of flat disbelief: "There is simply no reliable proof for the existence of the supernatural." His writings are then like tracking a conclusion in search of evidence. He claims that the Eight Witnesses saw the plates only through imagination, what he calls a "visionary" experience," "the illusion of a group hallucination," a sort of mental mirage. As for their hefting the plates, he apparently prefers the possibility of their lifting a weighted box, with something like group hypnosis persuading the eight men that they "viewed the plates through the lid of the box."

One may well wonder what source material these anti-Mormons use to justify their claims of fraud against the prophet Joseph. One source is the Illinois governor Thomas Ford who was very much an enemy of the Church at the time of the martyrdom of the Prophet. He was surrounded by several ex-Mormons, including John C. Bennett, who were characterized by John Taylor as "some of the vilest and most unprincipled men in creation" (*HC*, 7:75). Ford's story traces to no reliable source and appears to be outright folklore. He is quoted as saying that Joseph Smith admitted isolating a few followers and whipping up faith and guilt until they imagined they saw gold plates in an empty box. Ford's story and its vague source are reprinted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 3:333.

One statement in the above-mentioned quote of John Whitmer's has become a pillar for the anti-Mormons' alternate theory: "They were shown to me by a supernatural power." Vogel insists this "would suggest something other than a normal, physical experience" (*Early Mormon Documents*, 5:240). And Palmer echoes: "This added detail of how he saw indicates that the eight probably did not observe or feel the actual artifact" (Palmer, *Insider's View*, 205-06). It is interesting that David Whitmer often complained of misquotation in his many interviews. In this particular account the concept of miraculous display differs from all other John Whitmer accounts. Note also the bias of Theodore Turley in his quote above. He said to John Whitmer, "You have published to the world that an angel did present those plates to Joseph Smith." Hence, the idea of a supernatural power later in the quote probably came from the interviewer, Turley himself, rather than from John Whitmer. Richard Lloyd Anderson has reported on twenty-three different reports from this last living survivor of the eight witnesses. Anderson writes:

Many are brief and general, but when details are given, they speak of seeing and/or handling as a normal event, except for Turley's phrase "supernatural power" and Joshua Davis's recollection that John declared: "I, with my own eyes, saw the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated, and I also saw an angel who witnessed

to the truth of the Book of Mormon” (“A visit to John Whitmer,” *Deseret Evening News*, 12 April 1875). But John Whitmer’s own words counter the odd particulars in these two reports. As official church historian, he named the Three Witnesses, “into whose presence the angel of God came and showed them the plates, the ball, the directors, etc.” He then named himself and seven others “to whom Joseph Smith Jr. showed the plates” (Bruce N. Westergren, ed., *From Historian to Dissident: The Book of John Whitmer* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995], 56). Since John Whitmer personally states that the angel appeared only to the Three Witnesses, Davis obviously got that detail wrong in reporting what John told him. And six statements from John Whitmer speak of handling the plates, including the full Turley reference and John’s editorial farewell in the church newspaper, stating “that I have most assuredly seen the plates from whence the Book of Mormon is translated, and that I have handled these plates” (*Latter Day Saint Messenger and Advocate* 2 [March 1836]: 286-87). So John Whitmer claimed to handle the plates as Joseph Smith showed them, not to behold them as displayed by an angel. Though interviews may be quite accurate, they are not transcripts. Davis correctly gave John’s statement about seeing the plates but confused the testimonies of the Three and the Eight Witnesses concerning seeing an angel (*Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, volume 14, number 1, 2005, 23).

One additional source which the anti-Mormons rely upon is the favorite anti-Mormon theme of three apostates from the early Church, Stephen Burnett, Warren Parrish, and Ezra Booth. The idea seems to have originated from Ezra Booth who left the Church in 1831. He admitted that the Three Witnesses “frequently” testified that an angel appeared “and presented them the golden plates,” yet, after his disaffection, he noticed in section 17 of the Doctrine and Covenants, directed to the Three Witnesses, in referring to the plates, the breastplate, the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim, and “the miraculous directors,” verse 2 reads, “And it is by your faith that you shall obtain a view of them, even by that faith which was had by the prophets of old.” Booth’s illogical and warped interpretation of this verse was that the witnesses saw the plates “by faith or imagination.” This statement of Booth’s seems to have functioned as a promptbook for Parrish and Burnett when they wrote anti-Book of Mormon statements in 1838. Both claimed that “the plates were only visionary,” and they even quoted Martin Harris as saying that “he never saw the plates with his natural eyes, only in vision or imagination” (Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:290-93). The simple fact is that Martin Harris never denied seeing the angel and the plates, and his testimony never wavered while he was alive.

Despite the passage of nearly two centuries and countless attempts, no credible counter-explanation has been offered by any critic for the experiences claimed by the Witnesses to the Book of Mormon. Their still-unimpeached testimony clearly demonstrates that the Book of Mormon plates and the other artifacts mentioned in the historical accounts were physical, that they were neither a figment of Joseph Smith’s

imagination nor generated by the credulous fantasies of a band of rustic religious zealots.