

Hard Questions in Church History

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Questions to Consider

- If the Book of Mormon is inspired, what about its citations from the Bible?
- Did Joseph plagiarize the Spaulding Manuscript?
- Could Sidney Rigdon have written the Book of Mormon?
- If the Book of Mormon is inspired, why make changes in future editions?

Twelve Witnesses of the Golden Plates

Timeline of Twelve Witnesses, 1829

March	The Lord promises Martin Harris that he may see the plates if he is faithful (D&C 5:23-29).
April 7	Oliver Cowdery starts as scribe for Joseph's translation of the Book of Mosiah in Harmony, Pennsylvania.
June 1	Joseph and Oliver Cowdery leave Harmony and move into the Peter Whitmer Sr. home in Fayette, New York; Emma arrives later.
June 4-29	Book of Mormon translation continues in the Peter Whitmer Sr. home; sons Christian, John, and David Whitmer join Oliver Cowdery as scribes.
Early June	Angel Moroni shows Mary Whitmer the gold plates.
June 20	Translated 2 Nephi 27:12 (thus giving more evidence small plates were translated last).
June 26	Wayne Sentinel newspaper publishes the Book of Mormon title page.
June 27	Saturday, Hyrum and Jerusha's daughter Mary is born in their log home in Palmyra.
June Late	Fayette, NY: Three Witnesses—Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris—see the plates from the hand of angel Moroni.
June 30	Joseph finishes translation for Book of Mormon—"even the part which I have commanded" (D&C 17:6).
July 6	In Palmyra, Joseph shows eight male witnesses the plates—Christian Whitmer, Jacob Whitmer, John Whitmer, Peter Whitmer Jr., Hiram Page, Hyrum Smith, Samuel Smith, and Joseph Smith Sr.

Final Stage of the Book of Mormon Translation in Fayette, New York (May-June 1829)

Between April and May 1829, persecution against Joseph and Emma Smith and the scribe Oliver Cowdery was unleashed in Harmony, Pennsylvania. Oliver wrote to his friend, David Whitmer, about the persecution and its effect on their translation of the Book of Mormon. In his third known letter, Oliver included a revelation that Joseph received for David from the Urim and Thummim. The message instructed David to come to Harmony and transport Oliver and Joseph to Fayette, New York where they were to reside with the Peter Whitmer Sr. family and finish the translation. David spoke to his family about the message. His father encouraged David to pray about the decision and finish preparing his fields for spring planting. What happened next was nothing short of a miracle; it affirmed to the Whitmers that Joseph and Oliver were doing the work of God.

The Whitmer Family

Peter Whitmer Sr. and Mary Elsa Musselman were the parents of eight children: Christian, Jacob, John, David, Catherine, Peter Jr., Nancy, and Elizabeth Ann. In 1809 the Whitmers left Pennsylvania and Presbyterianism and moved to upstate New York and became members of the German Reformed Church. In 1827 they moved to Fayette, New York. Into their home in Fayette, the Whitmers welcomed Joseph and Emma Smith and Oliver Cowdery. On April 6, 1830 at the Whitmer home the Church of Christ was organized.

It was planting season, and David needed to plow twenty acres and enrich the soil with plaster of paris to help their wheat grow. His father said he ought to pray first to learn if it was absolutely necessary to leave now. . . . The next morning, David walked out to the fields and saw rows of dark furrows in the ground that had been unplowed the evening before. Exploring the fields further, he saw that about six acres had been plowed overnight, and the plow was waiting for him in the last furrow, ready for him to finish the job (*Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Volume 1: The Standard of Truth*, 1815-1846 [Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018], 69).

Once the fields were plowed, David was to fertilize the fields with plaster of paris or gypsum—an excellent source of calcium and sulfur. Lucy Mack Smith recorded that other family members saw three men were seen spreading the plaster of paris faster than they had ever seen. When David and the family put the pieces together, they believed it was miraculous. David left immediately for Harmony to transport Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery.

The Whitmers' hospitality proved an answer to prayer. It was during this time of transition to a crowded, shared living space that David Whitmer recalled,

Something went wrong about the house and [Joseph Smith] was put out about it. Something that Emma, his wife, had done. Oliver and I went upstairs, and Joseph came up soon after to continue the translation, but he could not do anything. He could not translate a single syllable. He went downstairs, out into the orchard, and made supplication to the Lord; was gone about an hour—came back to the house, and asked Emma's forgiveness and then came upstairs where we were and the translation went on all right (David Whitmer quote, in William H. Kelley, "Letter from Elder W. H. Kelley, 15 January 1882, Richmond, Missouri," *Saints' Herald* 29, no. 5 [March 1, 1882], 68).

The Whitmer family was an invaluable help in the early days of the church. In addition to providing belief, bed, and board, three Whitmer sons—Christian, John, and David—also acted as scribes for Joseph's translations. Additionally, Mrs. Mary Whitmer and five male members of the family became witnesses of the golden plates and the whole Whitmer family became a great help in establishing the church over the next seven years.

First Witness: Mary Whitmer (Early June 1829)

The first person to see the golden plates and Angel Moroni, after Joseph the seer, was Mary Elsa Musselman Whitmer (August 27, 1778–January 1856). Of the twelve witnesses who handled the plates, she is the only woman. Her story was initially documented as an unofficial witness because, at the time, women, children, slaves, and non-Christians did not have the same legal opportunities to witness (nor could they vote, hold office, make contracts, devise wills, etc.). Her story was preserved through family journals. Multiple accounts of her story are now available; two of them are shared here.

As background, the translating party had relocated to the Whitmer home in Fayette in early June 1829. It appears that most of Mary Whitmer's large family had become interested in the translation thus neglecting their daily labor. The extra work of hostessing soon became a strain on her. David recorded what he heard from his mother:

[She] was going to milk the cows, when she was met out near the yard by the same old man (judging by her description of him) who said to her: “You have been very faithful and diligent in your labors, but you are tired because of the increase of your toil; it is proper therefore that you should receive a witness that your faith may be strengthened” (*Testimonies of Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 772-773).

David Whitmer refers to Moroni as “the same old man,” because David had seen a man of the same description during a hundred-mile wagon journey he made June 1st to 3rd, driving Joseph and Oliver from Harmony to the Whitmer home in Fayette, NY (see Andrew Jenson, ed., *The Historical Record*, vol. 6, May 1887, pp. 207–9).

David’s account sounds as if the Lord simply sent an angel to buoy up Mary Whitmer but there is more to the story. If all who sacrificed for the cause were shown the plates as encouragement, then Joseph’s mother and wife surely may have been on the list to receive angelic visitations. In scripture, heavenly angels usually come when a course correction is needed. Another family account explains that is precisely what happened.

When God Sends Angels Rather than His Spirit

God sends His Spirit to encourage believers. When disciples strive to follow the Lord, they often receive gentle encouragement through peaceful spiritual nudges, spiritual enlightenment, and the gifts of the Spirit like hope, faith, and inspiration.

However, when someone opposes God’s plan, stronger intervention is needed and sometimes God sends to redirect people (e.g., Laman and Lemuel, Saul/Paul, Alma Jr., Balaam’s donkey). We also see angels coming to give unexpected directions that could not be known otherwise (e.g., to Zacharias, Mary, Joseph, Manoah and his wife, and the women at the tomb, etc.). It appears this may have been the case with Mary Whitmer as she was planning on telling Joseph and Oliver to leave her home the night before

Angel Moroni Appeared Twice as a Local Man

“[David Whitmer] had seen the same messenger on the way from Harmony to Fayette. When he brought Joseph and Oliver in his wagon from Harmony, Pennsylvania he appeared walking with a knapsack on his back with straps across his breast. Uncle David asked him to ride with them, to which he replied, ‘No. I am going over to Cumorah,’ and suddenly disappeared in the midst of a plain (“The Thirteenth Witness to the Plates of the Book of Mormon,” *Latter-Day Saints’ Millennial Star* 55, no. 13 [March 27, 1893], 215).

Elvira Pamela Mills (Mary’s granddaughter through marriage), adds an important detail in her recording of the event:

When Oliver’s hand and Joseph’s eyes grew tired they went to the woods for a rest. There they often skated rocks on a pond. Mary Whitmer, with five grown sons and a husband to care for, besides visitors, often grew tired. She thought they might just as well carry her a bucket of water or chop a bit of wood as to skate rocks on a pond. She was about to order them out of her home. One morning, just at daybreak, she came out of her cow stable with two full buckets of milk in her hands, when a short, heavy-set, gray-haired man carrying a package met her and said, “My name is Moroni.

You have become pretty tired with all the extra work you have to do. The Lord has given me permission to show you this record: ‘turning the golden leaves one by one!’” (Cox Bulletin II [1958]; written by Orville Cox Day).

Mary Whitmer was frightened of the angel at first but “He spoke to her in a kind, friendly tone, and began to explain to her the nature of the work which was going on in her house, and she was filled with inexpressible joy and satisfaction” (ibid.).

Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon

Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris

(Late June 1829)

By late June 1829, Joseph had already translated verses in the Book of Mormon that spoke of the need for other witnesses to see the plates containing the text of the Book of Mormon (Ether 5:2-4 and 2 Nephi 11:3, 27; and 2 Nephi 27:12-14). Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris petitioned the Prophet to ask the Lord if they might be the recipients of that blessing. Joseph wrote, “They became so very solicitous, and urged me so much to inquire that at length I complied, and through the Urim and Thummim” received an answer:

I say unto you, that you must rely upon my word, which if you do with full purpose of heart, you shall have a view of the plates, and also of the breastplate, the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim . . . After that you have obtained faith, and have seen them with your eyes, you shall testify of them, by the power of God (D&C 17:1, 3)

The exact date of this revelation is unknown, but it suggests that the translation was nearly finished or recently completed when the Three Witnesses were named (D&C 17:6). If that was indeed the case, Tuesday, June 30th would be the date.

As Joseph finished the translation at the Whitmers’, he sent word to his parents. Father and Mother Smith brought Martin Harris with them the next morning. They arrived before sunset and spent the evening “reading the manuscript.” The next morning, the group held a worship service—namely “reading, singing, and praying.” During these services, Joseph said in a solemn manner,

Martin Harris, you have got to humble yourself before your God this day, that you may obtain a forgiveness of your sins. If you do, it is the will of God that you should look up the plates, in company with Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer. ([Lucy Mack Smith History, 1844-1845](#))

Martin Harris (1783-1875)

- 1824: Hires Joseph Smith Sr. and Hyrum Smith to work on his new house; the Smiths confide in Martin about the angel Moroni and gold plates.
- Fall-December 1827: Gives Joseph Smith \$50 to defray the cost of moving from Palmyra to Harmony, Pennsylvania.
- February 1828: Meets with Luther Bradish, Dr. Charles Anthon, and Dr. Samuel Mitchell in New York.
- 1828: Acts as scribe for Joseph Smith as he translates the Book of Lehi.
- Abt. July 7, 1828: Loses 116 manuscript pages.
- Late June 1829: Becomes one of Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon in Fayette, New York?
- August 25, 1829: Enters mortgage agreement with E. B. Grandin for printing the Book of Mormon.
- April 6, 1830: Attends organizational meeting of the Church at the Peter Whitmer Sr. log home in Fayette, New York; is baptized.
- Late May 1831: Arrives in Kirtland, Ohio.
- June 7, 1831: One of fifty-six men named to attend a Church Conference in Missouri (D&C 52:24).
- August 3, 1831: Gives Edward Partridge \$1,200 toward the purchase of land in Zion.
- June-July 1832: Serves mission with his brother Emer in southern New York and northeastern Pennsylvania.
- February 17, 1843: Accepts call to serve as twelfth member of the Kirtland high council (D&C 102:2-4).
- May-July 1834: Serves as a waggoneer in Zion’s Camp.
- February 14, 1835: Unites with First Presidency in prayer; assists in selecting and ordaining the Twelve Apostles.
- November 1, 1836: Marries Caroline Young, niece of Brigham Young.
- December 1837: Kirtland high council excommunicates him.
- December 16, 1838: Joseph’s letter from Liberty Jail names Martin as “to[o] mean to mention.”
- September 17, 1870: Edward Stevenson baptizes Martin in the Endowment House in Salt Lake City.

As the morning progressed, Joseph and Oliver brought David from the field, where he was plowing, and in company with Martin ventured into a nearby “piece of woods” (See Gale Y. Anderson, “Eleven Witnesses Behold the Plates,” *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 2 [Spring 2012], 150).

In the woods, the four men prayed, but angel Moroni did not come. Their prayers seemed hindered until Martin left them to pray alone a short distance away. Then Joseph, Oliver, and David “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. . . . He turned over the leaves, one by one, so that we could see them, and discern the engravings thereon distinctly” (Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:54).

Afterwards, Joseph found Martin and prayed with him. The witnesses had been told earlier, “it is by your faith that you shall obtain a view of them” (D&C 17:2). Martin obviously still had some spiritual work to do. He and Joseph prayed and once Martin’s heart was humbled, a vision opened to his view. Martin “cried out, apparently in an ecstasy of Joy ‘Tis enough, tis enough; mine eyes have beheld, mine eyes have beheld’ and jumping up he shouted, Hosanna, blessing God.” ([Joseph Smith Papers, History, 1838-1856, volume A-1](#))

Interestingly, it was almost exactly one year earlier that Martin confessed to the loss of the 116 pages.

After all three witnesses saw the plates, Joseph came into the family’s log house and cried out in joy. His mother remembered:

They returned to the house ~~wi~~ it was between [*sic*] 3 & 4 o’clock Mrs. [Mary Musselman] Whitmer & Mr. Smith [Joseph Smith Sr.] and myself were sitting in a bedroom I sat on the bedside when Joseph came in he threw himself <down> beside me Father!— Mother!— said he you do not know how happy I am The Lord has caused the plates to be shown to 3 more besides me who have also seen an angel and will have to testify to the thuth [truth] of what I have said for they know for themselves that I do not go about to deceive the people and I do feel as though I was relieved of a dreadful burden which was almost too much for me to endure, but they will now have to bear a part and it does rejoice my soul that I am not any longer to be entirely alone in the world (["Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845," p. 11, bk. 8](#)).

Joseph also recorded details about the experience: “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” (Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:54-55). It was a joyous Martin Harris who returned to Palmyra with Father and Mother Smith the day after the appearance of the angel. Joseph, Oliver, and certain members of the Whitmer family soon followed.

Eight Witnesses of the Book of Mormon

(Early July 1829)

Sometime between July 2 and 6, Joseph, Emma, Oliver, and the Whitmers traveled from Fayette to Palmyra-Manchester. Joseph hoped to make arrangements for publishing the Book of Mormon. He also received permission to personally show the plates to the male part of his company. The men included three Smiths and five Whitmers (Joseph Sr., his sons Hyrum, and Samuel Smith; Christian,

Jacob, John, and Peter Whitmer Jr., along with Catherine Whitmer's husband Hiram Page). Lucy recorded that they "repaired to a little grove where it was customary for the family to offer up their secret prayers" (*ibid.*, p. [1], bk. 9). Here are two of the Eight Witnesses' records of their experience:

- Hyrum Smith wrote, "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, wherever my lot had been cast" (Hyrum Smith, "To the Saints scattered abroad," *Times and Seasons* 1 [November 1839], 23).
- John Whitmer wrote, "I desire to testify to all that will come to the knowledge of this address, that I have most assuredly seen the plates from whence the book of Mormon is translated, and that I have handled these plates" (John Whitmer, "Address to the patrons of the Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate," *Messenger and Advocate* [March 1836], 286-287).

The eight witnesses left their signed testimony which was published at the end of the 1830 Book of Mormon. (For more see Gale Y. Anderson, *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 2, 154.)

Lucy Mack Smith recorded that later that evening they held a type of testimony meeting: "We commenced holding meetings that night in which we declared those facts that we knew to be true" ([Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845](#)).

Joseph and Oliver Returned the Gold Plates to Moroni

Following the Eight Witnesses handling the golden plates, Joseph returned the plates to angel Moroni for the last time. His mother later recollected that "the Angel again made his appearance to Joseph and received the plates from his hands" (*ibid.*). Four other contemporaries shared additional details in their secondhand accounts of the golden plates being returned to angel Moroni in a cave in Cumorah. Here is Brigham Young's recollection:

Oliver Cowdery went with the Prophet Joseph when he deposited [returned] these plates. . . . When Joseph got the plates the angel instructed him to carry them back to the hill Cumorah, which he did. Oliver says that when Joseph and Oliver went there, the hill opened, and they walked into a cave in which there was a large and spacious room. He says he did not think, at the time, whether they had the light of the sun or artificial light; but that it was just as light as day. They laid the plates on a table; it was a large table that stood in the room. Under this table there was a pile of plates as much as two feet high, and there were altogether in this room more plates than probably many wagon loads; they were piled up in the corners and along the walls. The first time they went there the sword of Laban hung upon the wall; but when they went again it had been taken down and laid upon the table across the gold plates; it was unsheathed, and on it was written these words: "This sword will never be sheathed again until the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our God and his Christ." I tell you this as coming not only from Oliver Cowdery but others who were familiar with it (Brigham Young, *JD* 19:38, June 17, 1877, quoted by Alexander Baugh, "Parting the Veil" *BYU Studies* 38.1).

In addition to those that were present, and those that heard the testimonies of eyewitnesses, the number of witnesses of the Book of Mormon has grown over the past nearly two centuries. Millions of people have received personal witness, through the Holy Spirit, that the book is the word of God.

They know it was translated by God's power in order to proclaim His word and prepare the earth for His Second Coming.

Sources

Lucy Mack Smith's autobiography (<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/105#full-transcript>, p. [2], bk. 9). Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols., 1844 (Reprint, Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1980), ed. introduction and notes by B. H. Roberts). Gale Y. Anderson, "Eleven Witnesses behold the Plates," *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 2 (Spring 2012), 152; John W. Welch, ed., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1830-1844* [Provo, UT: BYU, 2005], 101; "Timing the Translation of the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57 no. 4 [2018]: 10-50. Alexander Baugh, "Parting the Veil" *BYU Studies*, 38.1). Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 19:38. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:54-55. William H. Kelley and G. A. Blakeslee, "Letter from Elder W. H. Kelley, 15 January 1882, Richmond, Missouri," *Saints' Herald* 29, no. 5 (March 1, 1882), 68. NA, *Testimonies of Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2001). "The Thirteenth Witness to the Plates of the Book of Mormon," *Latter-Day Saints' Millennial Star* 55, no. 13 (March 27, 1893).