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“An Angel of God Came Down from Heaven”

THE THREE WITNESSES: LATE JUNE 1829



THE EVER-INTRIGUING MARTIN Harris is such a prominent player in the origin of the Book of Mormon that at times he threatens to overshadow Joseph Smith. And while Harris naturally took center stage in the cases of the learned professor of the East and the disappearance of the 116 pages, it is somewhat surprising—given the strong personalities of both Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer—that Harris garners so much attention in discussions and debates centering on the three witnesses.¹

Harris complicates matters for two reasons, argues Dan Vogel. “First, the three witnesses did not experience the vision together, for Harris’s experience occurred separate from David Whitmer’s and Oliver Cowdery’s. Hence Harris’s testimony should be treated as an independent statement lacking the verification of the simultaneous experience of the other witnesses implied in the Testimony of Three Witnesses.” Second, despite the mention of “our eyes” in the official statement, “Harris seems to have repeatedly admitted the internal, subjective nature of his visionary experience.”² As proof of this, Vogel cites a lengthy list of instances where interrogators of Harris claimed he said he saw the plates with “spiritual eyes” or with “spiritual vision.” But, of course, whether Harris by such expressions meant *internal* or *subjective*—Vogel’s words, not Harris’s—is itself part of the great debate.

It might be argued that interviewers of Harris gave different reports, depending on whether they were believers or skeptics. Stephen Burnett, a convert rapidly losing

his faith, said Harris saw the plates the way one might "see" a city through a mountain; the young believer William Pilkington said Harris saw the angel and the plates just as sure as he saw the sun shining.

A plea can also be offered that just as Harris's experience must be treated independently of Cowdery's and Whitmer's the reverse is also true. Neither of them gave any indication that they considered the event internal or subjective. Whitmer, the most interviewed witness, gave a typical account when he told Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith that he saw the plates and other artifacts just as plainly as he saw a nearby bed, striking it emphatically with his hand.³

But such back-and-forth easily devolves into a dispute where both sides—although they will never agree on the existence of gods or angels—somehow tacitly and mutually assume a similar epistemological hierarchy regarding supernatural events, that is, that seeing plates with "natural eyes" is somehow superior to seeing them with "spiritual eyes." Why?⁴

The ironic thing is, most critics—both nineteenth-century and modern—who interpret Harris's mention of "spiritual eyes" to mean he likely imagined the plates are the same people who do not believe in heavenly visions or visitations in the first place and are unfazed by Whitmer's unequivocal account of seeing the plates with physical eyes.

Martin Harris's apparent difficulty in defining his epiphany ought to point both skeptics and apologists in a different direction—that of acknowledging, in the words of Grant Underwood, that "the question of the ultimate origin of a purported revelation is ultimately beyond the scope of academic analysis;"⁵ that, as James D. Tabor puts it, "we can evaluate what people claimed, what they believed, what they reported, and that all becomes part of the data, but to then say, 'A miracle happened,' . . . goes beyond our accessible methods [as historians of religion]."⁶

Regardless of how Harris "saw" the angel and the plates, his experiencing what he did in a supernatural setting excludes it from historical understanding because seeing angels and hearing the voice of God are not part of normal human life, which is exactly what history deals with. Even if Harris, Whitmer, and Cowdery had seen the plates together and agreed that their joint experience was absolutely objective, it wouldn't make any difference. To qualify as historical, an experience must be empirically accessible, at least theoretically, to any competent witness. But would someone hiding in the woods have experienced the same thing that Joseph, Cowdery, and Whitmer—or Joseph and Harris—did? Considering Martin's reported need to continue in prayer before he could see the vision, even believers would be unlikely to claim the hideaway would have experienced the same event.⁷

“The fact is,” continues Tabor, “we do not exclude religious experience in investigating the past—far from it. We actually embrace it most readily. What people believe or claim to have experienced becomes a vital part of our evidence. . . . Good history is never the enemy of proper faith.”⁸

In terms of the three witnesses of the Book of Mormon, the best historians can do is accurately and fully report what Harris, Whitmer, and Cowdery *claim to have experienced* and provide the historical context and any corroboration for such claims, while carefully documenting any evidence of fraud, collusion, hallucination, and the like. Since the ultimate source of miracles and revelations goes beyond the accessible methodology, historians have no need to proselytize readers to their own personal religious belief or lack thereof.

The question inevitably comes up: Are Harris, Whitmer, and Cowdery eyewitnesses of the angel and the plates? That depends. In the historical sense, no, because angels fall outside the realm of empirical experience. Whether they are eyewitnesses in the religious sense, however, is a different issue. Certainly, their testimony deserves the same kind of scrutiny as that described by Peter—and which also involved three witnesses:

I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to refresh your memory, since I know that my death will come soon, as indeed our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things. For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. (2 Peter 1:13–18, NRSV.)

Joseph Smith’s history may have offered the perfect introduction to a study of the three witnesses when it related his experience with Harris: “I now . . . went in pursuit of Martin Harris, who I found . . . fervently engaged in prayer . . . [and who] requested me, to join him in prayer, that he also might realize the same blessings . . . we accordingly joined in prayer, and ultimately . . . the same vision was opened to our view; *at least it was again to me*” (9.3 Joseph Smith, History Draft, ca. June 1839–ca. 1841, Extract, emphasis added).

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“The Appearance of Ancient Work, and of Curious Workmanship”

THE EIGHT WITNESSES: LATE JUNE 1829



THE STATEMENT OF Cowdery, Whitmer, and Harris, which spoke of the voice of God and an angel coming down from heaven with plates, was on one hand impressive confirmation of what Joseph Smith had been claiming all along, but on the other, a pronouncement propelled beyond the scope of academic analysis by those very “nonempirical” details. The statement of the four Whitmer brothers, Hiram Page, and the three Smiths was quite a different matter—saying nothing about a divine voice or an angelic visitor. “As many of the leaves as the said Smith has translated we did handle with our hands; and we also saw the engravings thereon”—that was the deposition of the eight neatly summed up.

One of the key conundrums of Mormon historiography is the issue of how to handle (no pun intended) the “plates of gold upon which there was engravings which was engraven by Maroni & his fathers.” Whether or not the experience of the eight was empirical—that is, accessible at least in theory to any competent observer—has become a matter of controversy. Given this circumstance, the best we can do is dispassionately account for the relevant statements from (or attributed to) the four Whitmers, one Page, and three Smiths and apply sound source criticism in evaluating those statements.

Such a quest yields a number of intriguing conclusions, including the following:

- The testimony of the eight fails to provide details on the historical context of the event.

- While statements about seeing the plates from the Three Witnesses (and Mary Whitmer) involve miraculous events and are therefore religious (and not empirical), accounts from Emma Smith, William Smith, Martin Harris and others about handling the plates are clearly empirical. The assertions of the eight, however, do not fall cleanly into either category because several of the eight sometimes conflated their experience as a witness with their experience as a devoted believer.
- Because the eight may have examined counterfeit plates, their affirmations must be rigorously critiqued and not prematurely dismissed on the assumption that they must have simply imagined seeing and hefting the plates.
- Crucial questions about the nature of the experience of the eight arise from remarks reportedly made by Martin Harris in 1838 and John Whitmer in 1839.

Answering the question of what kind of event the eight reported is thus considerably nuanced. Nonetheless, persistent and thorough source criticism demonstrates that the weight of evidence supports the argument that the experience was indeed empirical and thus subject to full historical explication.

As for the deficiencies of the original statement, Dan Vogel writes:

“As a historical document, the Testimony of Eight Witnesses is disappointing. It fails to give historical details such as time, place, and date. Neither does it describe the historical event or events, but simply states that the eight signatories, collectively, have seen and handled the plates.” Not only that, but “Joseph Smith’s History is vague about events behind the Testimony of Eight Witnesses” and fails to “describe the historical setting in which the eight men saw the plates.” Finally, “subsequent statements by the eight witnesses shed very little light on the historical event behind their Testimony.”¹

At the same time, the historical value of the eight’s testimony can hardly overstated. Consider the following:

- The testimony meets three of the most important standards of source criticism by being a first-hand document produced close to the time of the event itself and signed by multiple witnesses.
- The statement itself is strictly empirical, “reads like a legal document,” and “describes a sensory experience that involved both sight and touch as the witnesses handled and lifted the plates.”²
- Although a host of crucial Book-of-Mormon events occurred between September 1823 and June 1828, not a single document mentioning the Book of Mormon has survived. Furthermore, the sole extant sources from July 1828

to May 1829 are the Book of Mormon text itself and revelations dictated by Joseph. The testimonies of the three and eight witnesses are thus among the first documents produced by anyone else.

In terms of scholarly analyses of the testimony of the eight, Fawn Brodie set a precedent of sorts. After concluding that the three witnesses were likely “not conspirators but victims of Joseph’s unconscious but positive talent at hypnosis,” she reprints the testimony of the eight. Then, without mentioning any of the subsequent statements of these men (such as those included in this chapter), Brodie suggests—“One of the most plausible descriptions of the manner in which Joseph Smith obtained these eight signatures was written by Thomas Ford, Governor of Illinois, who knew intimately several of Joseph’s key men after they became disaffected and left the church”—and follows up with a long quote from Ford.³

Brodie thus bypasses first-hand accounts from the witnesses themselves, as well as second-hand reports—both pro and con—from known sources, in favor of Ford’s hearsay evidence. As an examination of Ford’s retelling (10.14 Thomas Ford’s Account, 1854) shows, Ford does not identify his informants, much less call them “intimate” acquaintances. These unnamed individuals—whose background, motives, and honesty remain shrouded—reportedly heard Joseph confess that he duped the witnesses, and they passed their second-hand information to Ford, making his third-hand and anonymous, essentially a rumor. Ford next lumps the eight witnesses with the three and prefaces his “plausible description” with the disclaimer that “the most probable account of these certificates is, that the witnesses were in the conspiracy, aiding the imposture.”

Brodie also offers a disclaimer. “Yet,” she writes, after quoting Ford, “it is difficult to reconcile this explanation with the fact that these witnesses, and later Emma and William Smith, emphasized the size, weight, and metallic texture of the plates. Perhaps Joseph built some kind of makeshift deception.”

Between them, Ford and Brodie thus offered a medley of explanations for the testimony of the eight witnesses, including conspiracy, browbeating, and counterfeit plates. Apparently, neither of them had settled on a conclusion. And while relying on hearsay evidence like Ford did was common among historians in the mid-1800s, one would expect more careful source criticism from Brodie, writing in the mid-twentieth century and trained at the University of Chicago.

A contemporary and friend of Brodie’s was Dale L. Morgan, on his way to becoming a legendary researcher—as well as a gifted writer. He assisted Brodie with *No Man Knows My History* and had years to consider her conclusions as he labored on his own book on early Mormon history. “It is a singular tragedy for Mormon historiography,” writes John Phillip Walker, “that Morgan did not finish what would

have been his masterpiece.”⁴ The section of Morgan’s manuscript dealing with the eight witnesses, chapter 4, added nothing significant to Brodie’s analysis (although it was still in draft form when Morgan died). Next, again like Brodie, he included a lengthy quote from Ford and used Ford as his sole nineteenth-century source (other than the testimony of the eight itself).⁵

The influence of Brodie and Morgan has hardly waned. In the posthumously published *Natural Born Seer* (2016), Richard S. Van Wagoner quotes the testimony of the eight and then moves immediately to the same excerpt from Ford used by Morgan, which makes up most of his brief dismissal of the eight.⁶

In recent years, two other sources have been used along with or in place of Ford to explain how the eight came to sign their statement: Stephen Burnett and Theodore Turley. (See 10.11 Stephen Burnett’s Letter to Lyman E. Johnson, April 15, 1838, Extract, and 10.34 Thomas Bullock’s Account, ca. 1845, respectively.)

Burnett had been a faithful member of the church since his baptism in 1830. By early 1838, however, in Kirtland, Ohio, Burnett’s faith faltered as he engaged in discussions with Luke S. Johnson, John Boynton, Warren Parrish, Martin Harris, Cyrus Smalling, and Joseph Coe—all alienated from Joseph Smith.

In his letter, Burnett wrote: “When I came to hear Martin Harris state in a public congregation that he never saw the plates with his natural eyes only in vision or imagination, neither Oliver [Cowdery] nor David [Whitmer] & also that the eight witnesses never saw them & hesitated to sign that instrument for that reason, but were persuaded to do it, the last pedestal gave way, in my view our foundations was sapped & the entire superstructure fell a heap of ruins.”⁷

Burnett’s claim of what Martin Harris said was at least partially confirmed by a letter written by Parrish three months later: “Martin Harris, one of the subscribing witnesses, has come out at last, and says he never saw the plates, from which the book purports to have been translated, except in vision, and he further says that any man who says he has seen them in any other way is a liar, Joseph not excepted.”⁸

In her paper about the “materialization” of the plates, Ann Taves cites both Burnett’s and Parrish’s comments about Martin Harris and adds: “Although Harris’ testimony apparently caused considerable consternation, Parrish noted that it was supported by the revelation Smith received in June 1829 . . . which indicated that the three witnesses would see the plates, ‘as my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., has seen them,’” meaning that “Joseph himself only saw the plates through the power of God in faith.”⁹

Most discussions of the materiality of the plates, continues Taves, whether by insiders or outsiders, “seem to presuppose that we are talking about materiality in the ordinary sense of the term.” It appears, however, that the material presence of the plates “remains under the control of supernatural entities that

have the power to manifest or withdraw [the plates] as they see fit." Indeed, as confirmed in the June 1829 revelation mentioned earlier (9.33 Revelation, June 1829 [D&C 17])—which was directed specifically to Cowdery, Whitmer, and Harris—stressed that the Three Witnesses had to rely on the word of God “with full purpose of heart” in order to see the plates. Given what Taves calls the “magical realism” of the plates, it naturally follows that those who saw them did so “directly in vision.”¹⁰

One can certainly sympathize with the disillusionment of both Parrish, who had served as a scribe for Joseph Smith, and Burnett. Given Martin Harris’s prominent role in the founding of the church—and his status as a Book of Mormon witness—the two dissenters understandably put a good deal of stock in his comments. What must be pointed out, however—and what Taves fails to mention—is that Harris had no business speaking for the eight witnesses, who deserve the right to speak for themselves.

Moreover, in stating that, according to Burnett, “Harris allegedly testified . . . that neither the three nor eight witnesses had seen ‘the plates with his natural eyes only in vision or imagination,’”¹¹ Taves misrepresents what Burnett wrote. His actual words were these: “I came to hear Martin Harris state in a public congregation that he never saw the plates with his natural eyes only in vision or imagination, neither Oliver [Cowdery] nor David [Whitmer] & also that the eight witnesses never saw them.” Rather than clarifying the experience of the eight, this assertion only muddies the water. Did the eight witnesses (according to Harris) see the plates at all—whether in body, vision, or imagination? Apparently following Vogel’s lead, Taves speculates that Harris likely meant to say (or Burnett meant to write) that the eight never saw the plates except in vision.¹² The text itself says differently, however, with words quite consistent with what Martin Harris told Joel Tiffany: “The plates were kept from the sight of the world, and no one, save Oliver Cowdrey, myself, Joseph Smith, jr., and David Whitmer, ever saw them.” (2.13 Joel Tiffany’s Report of an Interview with Martin Harris, 1859.)¹³

Lastly, although Taves acknowledges that “the eight testified that the plates, which ‘we did handle with our hands & we also saw the engraving thereon,’ had ‘the appearance of gold,’” she concludes that they saw the plates in vision without citing any supporting evidence from the eight themselves. Not only that, but she makes no mention whatsoever of the individual accounts of the eight witnesses included in this chapter. Her effort to build “on a review of the evidence for the materiality of the plates”¹⁴ thus falls short.

The late Grant Palmer, who wisely avoids citing Ford and covers the eight more extensively than Brodie, Morgan, Van Wagoner, or Taves, nevertheless relies heavily on Burnett’s third-hand report and on the reported account of Theodore Turley,

especially Turley's claim that John Whitmer said, "I handled those plates; there were fine engravings on both sides . . . they were shown to me by a supernatural power." According to Palmer, "this added detail of how [John Whitmer] saw indicates that the eight probably did not observe or feel the actual artifact."¹⁵

Turley's supposed quote deserves a close look. The account cited by Palmer, as well the one included in this book, is taken from the *History of the Church*, which in turn is based on a handwritten document listed as "Theodore Turley memoranda, circa 1845 February" and held in the Church History Library. This "memoranda" depicts an incident that took place in Far West, Missouri, on April 5, 1839 (by coincidence, ten years to the day after Joseph and Cowdery met for the first time), when church member Turley encountered John Whitmer and seven other men. Whitmer was apparently a bystander as some of the other men began to taunt Turley about how one of Joseph's revelations had failed. When Turley responded he addressed Whitmer specifically. Next, according to the *History of the Church*: "Whitmer asked, 'Do you hint at me?' Turley replied, 'If the cap fits you, wear it; all I know is that you have published to the world that an angel did present those plates to Joseph Smith.' Whitmer replied: 'I now say, I handled those plates; there were 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."¹⁶

While this published version seems straightforward enough, the original memoranda tells a different story. First, the original "memoranda" was not written by Turley but by Thomas Bullock, making this a third-hand document—with the account going from Whitmer to Turley to Bullock. Moreover, the document, labeled "Theodore Turley's Memorandums," in Bullock's hand, includes no date, offers no information about possible interaction between Turley and Bullock; and does not contain Turley's signature. We simply don't know if Bullock copied from an earlier manuscript, if he acted as scribe as Turley dictated, if he created the document by himself after Turley left, or any other possible scenario. What we do know is that Bullock's use of the first-person "I," for Turley was changed by Willard Richards to the second person "he."

As for Whitmer's supposed statement that the plates were shown to him by a supernatural power, a comparison of the two version is instructive.

The published version reads as follows:

"I now say, I handled those plates; there were 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.

The original as follows:

"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.¹⁷

As shown, this is not a careful transcription. First, in the passage *and he described how they were hung and they were shown to me by a supernatural power*, the narration makes an unnatural shift from the second person "he" to the first-person "me." Next, the original includes no quotation marks around the critical phrase *they were shown to me by a supernatural power*. (The quotation marks were added in preparation for publication by Willard Richards.)

Whether Turley intended to be quoting Whitmer directly or paraphrasing Whitmer is not clear. Nor is it clear what Whitmer meant if he indeed said, *they were shown to me by a supernatural power*. He may have been simply confirming his belief in what Turley had just said: "an angel did present those plates to Joseph Smith."

In this regard, it should be noted that, in August of 1878, one month after John Whitmer's death, Myron H. Bond recorded a conversation with Whitmer that occurred the previous winter. Bond wrote that Whitmer mentioned "the ancient writing that was upon the plates, which he 'saw and handled,' and which, as one of the scribes, he helped to copy, as the words fell from Joseph's lips, by *supernatural* or almighty power."¹⁸ This represents an instance of Whitmer using the word *supernatural* to describe a purely empirical event—Joseph looking at the seer stone inside the hat while dictating—that was believed to be inspired, throwing the meaning of Whitmer's possible use of the word during the encounter with Turley further into doubt.

Concluding that Whitmer effectively told Turley the experience of the eight witnesses took place in a miraculous setting (like the experience of the three) thus goes beyond the evidence. Moreover, in any case, John Whitmer cannot be assumed to be speaking for the other seven witnesses. Each of them must speak for himself.

It is also worth reiterating that the three key accounts cited by critics to explain the experience of the eight witnesses—from Thomas Ford, Stephen Burnett, and Thomas Bullock—are all third-hand documents, with no corroboration from first- or second-hand sources. As such, they do not have the historiographical authority to override sources from the witnesses themselves or others who talked directly to the witnesses.

What, then, does the testimony of the eight witnesses tell us about Joseph Smith? The testimony, supplemented by the individual witnesses' lifelong

confirmations—whether explicit or tacit—offer solid support for one thing and one thing only: “that the said Smith has got the plates of which we have spoken.”

“What emerges as alone indisputable is the fact that Joseph Smith does possess a set of metal plates,” writes Terryl Givens. “Dream-visions may be in the mind of the beholder, but gold plates are not subject to such facile psychologizing.”¹⁹

The presence of plates having the appearance of ancient work and of curious workmanship in turn leads to another conclusion: Joseph Smith had either executed an elaborate fraud or he really had been led to an ancient record by an angel of the Lord.

Fraud, of course, would mean counterfeit plates, so the question comes up immediately: Could the eight witnesses have been fooled by fake plates?

“In April 1843, some alleged New World antiquities were presented to Joseph Smith for his opinion,” writes Stanley B. Kimball. “The six small, bell shaped brass plates with strange engravings were reported to have been excavated in Kinderhook, Illinois, about 70 miles south of Nauvoo.” Eventually, all the plates except one disappeared. It is now held by the Chicago Historical Society. “From the plates’ alleged discovery until 1981, many scholarly arguments were made for and against their genuineness. . . . There now appears no reason to accept the Kinderhook plates as anything but an unsuccessful frontier hoax designed to embarrass Joseph Smith.”²⁰

The forgers of the Kinderhook plates proved conclusively that creating a convincing set of “ancient plates” in early nineteenth-century America was not at all out of the question. As Vogel states, “The plates were either ancient or modern.”²¹

“Many modern readers will acknowledge Joseph’s sincerity in his more ordinary revelations,” adds Richard Bushman, but, “with the gold plates, we cross into the realm of deception or psychotic delusion. . . . There is no hiding behind the marvelous workings of the human spirit in explaining the plates. Either something fishy was going on, or Joseph did have a visitor from heaven.”²²

FIRST-HAND CONTEMPORANEOUS DOCUMENT

10.1 Testimony of Christian Whitmer, Jacob Whitmer, Peter Whitmer Jr., John Whitmer, Hiram Page, Joseph Smith Sr., Hyrum Smith, and Samuel H. Smith, circa June 1829

Source Note

And Also the Testimony of Eight Witnesses, 1830 Edition of the Book of Mormon, [590]. Earliest extant version is part of the printer’s copy of the Book of Mormon, in Cowdery’s handwriting, created circa February 1830; original document created between June 1829 and early 1830.