

## Tangible Restoration: The Witnesses and What They Experienced

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Joseph Smith's claims regarding the Book of Mormon seem, at least on the surface, to be very detailed and utterly tangible. They are not mystical claims, but, at least in principle, can be tested in the real world of everyday, physical objects.

And critics have not been reluctant to meet the claim head on. "As for the golden plates," wrote the evangelical Protestant polemicist G.H. Fraser, "we will say simply that there were not any."

But the historical evidence suggests—no, it shouts—the contrary.

A representative statement is that given by David Whitmer during an 1878 interview with Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith:

It was in June, 1829, the latter part of the month . . . Martin Harris was not with us at this time; he obtained a view of [the plates] afterwards (the same day). Joseph, Oliver, and myself were together when I saw them. We not only saw the plates of the Book of Mormon, but also the brass plates [a set of records mentioned early in the Book of Mormon as having been carried by Lehi from Jerusalem to the New World], the plates of the book of Ether, the plates containing the record of the wickedness and secret combinations of the people of the world down to the time of their being engraved, and many other plates. The fact is, it was just as though Joseph, Oliver and I were sitting just here on a log, when we were overshadowed by a light. It was not like the light of the sun nor like that of a fire, but more glorious and

beautiful. It extended away round us, I cannot tell how far, but in the midst of this light about as far off as he sits (pointing to John C. Whitmer, sitting a few feet from him), there appeared, as it were, a table with many records or plates upon it, besides the plates of the Book of Mormon, also the sword of Laban, the directors [i.e. the ball with spindles which Lehi had, and the interpreters].

Lucy Mack Smith, who had seen the chosen witnesses leave for their encounter with the angel and the plates, recalled, many years later, the scene that ensued at their return:

When they returned to the house, it was between three and four o'clock P. M. Mrs. Whitmer, Mr. Smith, and myself, were sitting in a bedroom at the time. On coming in, Joseph threw himself down beside me, and exclaimed, "Father, mother, you do not know how happy I am: the Lord has now caused the plates to be shown to three more besides myself. They have seen an angel, who has testified to them, and they will have to bear witness to the truth of what I have said, for now they now for themselves, that I do not go about to deceive the people, and I feel as if I was relieved of a burden which was almost too heavy for me to bear, and it rejoices my soul, that I am not any longer to be entirely alone in the world." Upon this, Martin Harris came in: he seemed almost overcome with joy, and testified boldly to what he had both seen and heard. And so did David and Oliver, adding, that no tongue could express the joy of their hearts, and the greatness of the things which they had both seen and heard.

Ultimately, each of the Three Witnesses—Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer—signed his name to a statement that has appeared in every edition of the Book of Mormon from the beginning.

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, than 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.

According to David Whitmer, the quite distinct experience of the Eight Witnesses to the Book of Mormon occurred one or two days after the experience of the Three.

Soon thereafter, all of the Eight signed their names to a statement that has accompanied the testimony of the Three in every printed version of the Book of Mormon.

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.

It is worth examining the contrasting character of the experiences reported by the Three Witnesses and the Eight, since, I believe, their very difference reinforces them. First of all, the experience of the Three, as they report it, was suffused with the glory and power of God. In a brilliant light, an angel came down and showed them the plates. They heard the voice of God testifying that the translation had been accomplished “by the gift and power of God.” Their written testimony is characterized by a marked religious or spiritual tone. It might be termed a supernatural or miraculous testimony.

By contrast, the experience of the Eight involves no glory, nothing miraculous. It is as mundane as anything can be. No angel shows the plates to them; Joseph Smith does. There is no miraculous light. Unlike the Three, who seem simply to have observed the plates in the hands of the angel, the Eight handled the plates and turned their pages. They “hefted” them. The language of their official account is cool and even formal or legalistic to the point of emotional distance (“the said Smith”). God figures in their testimony only as witness to their concluding oath. His voice does not testify to the correctness of the

translation. The Eight Witnesses are manifestly in full possession of their senses and mental faculties. Theirs might be labeled an ordinary or natural testimony.

Why the differences? In order, I think, for the task of skeptics to be rendered more difficult. One might be tempted to dismiss the testimony of the Three, with its spectacular divine accompaniments, as hallucinatory (however untenable that dismissal would be) or mere superstition. By contrast, there is absolutely nothing in the testimony of the Eight that points to superstition or hallucination. It is the most matter-of-fact kind of experience—nine men in the woods in the early afternoon—except for the object at the center of it. On the other hand, if one were to approach the Witnesses first by way of the Eight and one were inclined to skepticism, one might be tempted to write their experience off as deception by Joseph Smith or by some other conspirator or group of conspirators. There must really have been plates—fabricated to deceive. But this doesn't account for the testimony of the Three, which goes beyond fabrication and involves a number of additional objects. In other words, a single explanation seems unable to account for the two very different kinds of experience. This means that skeptics who wish to explain the two testimonies away must resort to some unlikely combination of sincere hallucination, already unlikely in and of itself, and deliberate, insincere fabrication. Or, as we shall see, they must attempt to collapse the difference between the two.

Let us examine a case that critics often cite as a parallel to Joseph Smith and his Witnesses:

Forgery is the virtually certain explanation for the two sets of inscribed metal plates that James Jesse Strang said he had found in Wisconsin and Michigan (between 1845 and 1849) and translated. Strang, who claimed to have a letter of appointment from Joseph

Smith, announced himself as Joseph Smith's successor and was clearly seeking to imitate the Prophet. That his plates really existed is beyond serious dispute. The first set, the three "Voree" or "Rajah Manchou" plates, were dug up by four "witnesses" whom Strang had brought to the appropriate site. Inscribed on both sides with illustrations and "writing," the Rajah Manchou plates were roughly 1.5 by 2.75 inches in size—small enough to fit in the palm of a hand or to carry in a pocket. Among the many who saw them was Stephen Post, who reported that they were brass and, indeed, that they resembled the French brass used in familiar kitchen kettles. "With all the faith & confidence that I could exercise," he wrote, "all that I could realize was that Strang made the plates himself, or at least that it was possible that he made them." One not altogether reliable source reports that most of the four witnesses to the Rajah Manchou plates ultimately repudiated their testimonies. The eighteen "Plates of Laban," likewise of brass and each about 7 3/8 by 9 inches, were first mentioned in 1849 and, in 1851, were seen by seven witnesses. Their testimony appeared at the front of *The Book of the Law of the Lord*, which Strang said he translated from the "Plates of Laban." (Work on the translation seems to have begun at least as early as April 1849. An 84-page version appeared in 1851; by 1856, it had reached 350 pages.) The statement of Strang's witnesses speaks of seeing the plates, but mentions nothing of any miraculous character. Nor did Strang supply any second set of corroborating testimony comparable to that of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon. One of the witnesses to the "Plates of Laban," Samuel P. Bacon, eventually denied the inspiration of Strang's movement and denounced it as mere "human invention." Another, Samuel Graham, later claimed that he had assisted Strang in the fabrication of the "Plates of Laban." The well-read Strang had

been an editor and lawyer before his brief affiliation with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and his subsequent career as a schismatic leader.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Strang's plates were much less numerous than those associated with Joseph Smith, his witnesses saw nothing supernatural, his translation required the better part of a decade rather than a little more than two months, and, unlike the Witnesses to the Book of Mormon, Strang's witnesses did not remain faithful to their testimonies. Milo Quaiife, in his early, standard biography of Strang, reflected that "It is quite conceivable that Strang's angelic visitations may have had only a subjective existence in the brain of the man who reported them. But the metallic plates possessed a very material objective reality." If we are unwilling to accept *The Book of the Law of the Lord* as authentically divine, he says, "we can hardly escape the conclusion . . . that Strang knowingly fabricated and 'planted' them for the purpose of duping his credulous followers" and, accordingly, that "Strang's prophetic career was a false and impudent imposture."<sup>2</sup> Roger Van Noord, Strang's most recent biographer, concludes that, "Based on the evidence, it is probable that Strang—or someone under his direction—manufactured the letter of appointment and the brass plates to support his claim to be a prophet and to sell land at Voree. If this scenario is correct, Strang's advocacy of himself as a prophet was more than suspect, but no psychological delusion."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Roger Van Noord, *King of Beaver Island: The Life and Assassination of James Jesse Strang* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 33-35, 97, 102, 163, 219; Doyle C. Fitzpatrick, *The King Strang Story: A Vindication of James J. Strang, the Beaver Island Mormon [sic] King* (Lansing, MI: National Heritage, 1970), 34-38; Milo M. Quaiife, *The Kingdom of Saint James: A Narrative of the Mormons [sic]* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930), 2-8, 16-19, 92-93, 185-189.

<sup>2</sup> Quaiife, *The Kingdom of Saint James*, 17-18.

<sup>3</sup> Van Noord, *King of Beaver Island*, 274.

It seems that virtually every reputable writer on the subject now grants the sincerity and honesty of all or most of the Book of Mormon Witnesses. A few critics argue that the printed testimonies don't really represent what the Witnesses said. "I want Non-LDS to know," wrote one recent poster on an internet message board,

that regardless of the three witnesses of the Book of Mormon and the eight witnesses of the Book of Mormon—not a single witness ever touched the plates with their own hands and never saw the plates with their own eyes. When Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdrey supposedly had visions of the Book of Mormon for their testimony – only Joseph Smith wrote their testimony down in the Book of Mormon.

But the testimonies of have been published with the Book of Mormon ever since that first edition in 1830, which, since it was prepared under the careful supervision of Oliver Cowdrey (one of the Three) and Hyrum Smith (one of the Eight), seems to imply their endorsement of those statements. Consistent with this, a correspondent for the *Salem [Massachusetts] Advertiser and Argus* reported in 1843 having heard Hyrum "declare, in this city in public, that what is recorded about the plates, &c. &c. is God's solemn truth."<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, there are far too many recorded testimonies from the other Witnesses for this to be a plausible escape. For example, E. C. Brand visited John Whitmer, one of the Eight, in 1875, and recorded that Whitmer "declared that his testimony, as found in the 'Testimony of Eight Witnesses,' in the Book of Mormon, is strictly true."<sup>5</sup> In 1876, Whitmer told Mark Forscutt, "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

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<sup>4</sup> Anderson article.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson article.

first edition of the Book of Mormon.”<sup>6</sup> And, later that same year, referring to the published testimony, he told Heman C. Smith, “That testimony was, is, and will be true, henceforth and forever.”<sup>7</sup> And, finally, in 1877, the year prior to his death, he wrote “concerning my testimony as recorded in the Book of Mormon” that “It is the Same as it was from the beginning, and it is true.”<sup>8</sup>

Today’s attack on the Witnesses focuses, instead, on the alleged non-literalness of their experience. Dan Vogel is the principal source for this newly popular way of dismissing their testimony. For example, in his 2002 essay on "The Validity of the Witnesses' Testimonies," he attempts to discredit the witnesses by portraying them as alienated from empirical reality and as having merely imagined the plates of the Book of Mormon, or seen them in a subjective hallucination.

I’ve commented elsewhere on how bizarre it is to me that

the witnesses, a group of early nineteenth-century farmers who spent their lives rising at sunrise, pulling up stumps, clearing rocks, plowing fields, sowing seeds, carefully nurturing crops, raising livestock, milking cows, digging wells, building cabins, raising barns, harvesting their own food, bartering (in an often cashless economy) for what they could not produce themselves, wearing clothes made from plant fibers and skins, anxiously watching the seasons, and walking or riding animals out under the weather until they retired to their beds shortly after sunset in "a world lit only by fire," are being portrayed as

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<sup>6</sup> Anderson article.

<sup>7</sup> Anderson article.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson article.

estranged from everyday empirical reality by people whose lives, like mine, consist to a large extent of staring at computer and television screens in artificially air-conditioned and artificially lit homes and offices, clothed in synthetic fibers, commuting between the two in enclosed and air-conditioned mechanical vehicles while they listen to the radio, chat on their cell phones, and fiddle with their iPods—all of whose inner workings are largely mysterious to them—who buy their prepackaged food (with little or no regard for the time or the season) by means of plastic cards and electronic financial transfers from artificially illuminated and air-conditioned supermarkets enmeshed in international distribution networks of which they know virtually nothing, the rhythms of whose daily lives are largely unaffected by the rising and setting of the sun.

Yet Dan Vogel's view of the Witnesses has recently been given wider currency in an article published by the non-Mormon biblical scholar Lester Grabbe, who commendably seeks to show that Joseph Smith's story can illuminate ancient Hebrew prophecy. Unfortunately, Professor Grabbe's discussion is totally dependent upon Vogel and wholly uninformed by any exposure to the work of the leading authority on the Witnesses, Richard Lloyd Anderson. Grabbe readily grants the sincerity of Martin Harris and David Whitmer, but also declares that "it seems that no one saw the plates uncovered

except Smith himself.”<sup>9</sup> “Both Martin Harris and David Whitmer of the Three Witnesses,” he writes,

while continuing to affirm their belief in the Book of Mormon, also stated that they had seen the plates “in spirit” or with “spiritual eyes” or in vision. As far as they were concerned, this was no less real than seeing them with ordinary eyes, but to non-Mormons this distinction is likely to be important.<sup>10</sup>

Professor Grabbe cites the Rev. John A. Clark’s recollection of an unnamed attorney’s alleged recollection of an alleged statement from Martin Harris:

A gentleman in Palmyra, bred to the law, a professor of religion, and of undoubted veracity told me that on one occasion, he appealed to Harris and asked him directly,--“Did you *see* those plates?” Harris replied, he did. “Did you see the plates, and the engraving on them with your bodily eyes?” Harris replied, “Yes, I saw them with my eyes,--they were shown unto me by the power of God and not of man.” “But did you see them with your natural,--your bodily eyes, just as you see this pencil-case in my hand? Now say *no* or *yes* to this.” Harris replied,--“Why I did not see them as I do that pencil-case, yet I saw them with the eye of faith; I saw them just as distinctly as I see any thing around me,--though at the time they were covered over with a cloth.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, “Prophecy: Joseph Smith and the Gestalt of the Israelite Prophet,” in *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in Its Social Context*, edited by Philip F. Esler (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 117, 122.

<sup>10</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, “Prophecy: Joseph Smith and the Gestalt of the Israelite Prophet,” in *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in Its Social Context*, edited by Philip F. Esler (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 119-120.

<sup>11</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, “Prophecy: Joseph Smith and the Gestalt of the Israelite Prophet,” in *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in Its Social Context*, edited by Philip F. Esler (Minneapolis: Fortress Press,

And yet, Professor Grabbe acknowledges,

The situation with the Eight Witnesses is more complex, and some continue to assert that these members of the Whitmer family and others saw and handled the plates in a purely physical context. Some of the testimony certainly gives this impression, but we have a few later interviews with most of the Eight Witnesses. There is some evidence that their experience was also “spiritual” or “visionary” or whatever one might wish to call it.<sup>12</sup>

How did the Witnesses come to “see” the plates? Thomas Ford, the former governor of Illinois, “who,” Grabbe assures us, actually “knew many Mormons,” explains it all by means an account of the experience of the Eight Witnesses. “Unfortunately,” as Grabbe concedes “he does not give his sources and he has some of the names slightly wrong.”<sup>13</sup>

He [Joseph Smith] set them to continual prayer, and other spiritual exercises, to acquire this lively faith by means of which the hidden things of God could be spiritually discerned; and, at last, when he could delay them no longer, he assembled them in a room [Lucy Mack Smith says it was a grove near their house], and produced a box, which he said contained the precious treasure. The lid was opened; the witnesses peeped into it, but making no discovery, for the box was empty, they said, “Brother Joseph, we do not see the plates.” The prophet answered them, “O ye of little faith! how long will God bear

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2006), 120, citing Martin Harris interviews with John A. Clark, 1827 & 1828 (Vogel 1998: 2:270; also 2:291, 325.

<sup>12</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, “Prophecy: Joseph Smith and the Gestalt of the Israelite Prophet,” in *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in Its Social Context*, edited by Philip F. Esler (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 120.

<sup>13</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, “Prophecy: Joseph Smith and the Gestalt of the Israelite Prophet,” in *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in Its Social Context*, edited by Philip F. Esler (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 121.

with this wicked and perverse generation? down on your knees, brethren, every one of you, and pray God for the forgiveness of your sins, and for a holy and living faith which cometh down from heaven.” The disciples dropped to their knees, and began to pray in the fervency of their spirit, supplicating God for more than two hours with fanatical earnestness, at the end of which time, looking again into the box, they were now persuaded that they saw the plates. I leave it to philosophers to determine whether the fumes of an enthusiastic and fanatical imagination are thus capable of blinding the mind and deceiving the senses by so absurd a delusion.<sup>14</sup>

An even more entertaining version of this theory appeared on an ex-Mormon message board just a few days ago:

I used to tease my kids.....  
I would take my coat or a towel or a blanket and gather it up in the crook of my arm. Then I would stick my face down into it and make a whimpering sound like a puppy. Then I would make a petting motion. My little kids would see what was going on and GUESS what? they wanted to see the puppy! Of course I refused to let them see the puppy because there was not one. Then I would walk into another room and the kids would follow demanding to see the puppy. I would run into another room, the kids would follow, but by then the puppy was gone! I would claim to have hidden the puppy.  
The kids would go crazy trying to find the puppy. it was great fun, but as my kids got a little older they finally caught on. The trick no longer worked. When I tried it on their younger cousins my kids would scoff

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<sup>14</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, “Prophecy: Joseph Smith and the Gestalt of the Israelite Prophet,” in *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in Its Social Context*, edited by Philip F. Esler (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 121, citing Vogel 2000: 3:333..

and give away the secret right off..... to any youngster who would listen!

Why was it a puppy? because A.I said so B. Because I could make the sound of a puppy, C.Kids like puppies. D. A puppy would fit under the cover.

I never claimed to have a rabid grizzly bear or adult crocodile under the wrap for the inverse of all the reasons stated above. ....How convenient that THE Gold plates were "Gold" instead of wood or zinc or stone. How convenient that they were a certain size and that they dissappeared and that only Joe could read them! How convenient for the blood sucking scum that currently runs the Mormon corporation today that so many TBM adults are dumb as preschoolers about certian things . . .

Professor Grabbe cites a passage from Vogel that cites an account of an encounter between Theodore Turley and John Whitmer:

Whitmer asked, “do you hint at me?” [Turley replied], “if the caps fits you, wear it.” all I know, 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 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.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, “Prophecy: Joseph Smith and the Gestalt of the Israelite Prophet,” in *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in Its Social Context*, edited by Philip F. Esler (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 120, citing John Whitmer testimony, 1839 (Vogel 2003: 5:241).

Then he cites Vogel's introduction to that account, which declares that "it seem [sic] to imply that while Whitmer's handling of the plaes [sic] (perhaps in a box or through a covering) was physical, his seeing the plates was visionary."<sup>16</sup>

But I am a loss to understand how Whitmer's alleged statement that the plates were "shown to [him] by a supernatural power" (which, incidentally, is difficult to reconcile with the numerous other accounts from John Whitmer), even if taken at face value, can be translated so easily into the idea that "his seeing of the plates was visionary."

Grabbe also cites the notorious testimony of the disaffected nineteenth century Mormon Stephen Burnett, which makes an even bigger leap:

I have reflected long and deliberately upon the history of this church & weighed the evidence for & against it—loth to give it up—but when I came to hear Martin Harris state in a public [sic] 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.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, "Prophecy: Joseph Smith and the Gestalt of the Israelite Prophet," in *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in Its Social Context*, edited by Philip F. Esler (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 327 note 39, citing Vogel 2003: 5:241.

<sup>17</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, "Prophecy: Joseph Smith and the Gestalt of the Israelite Prophet," in *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in Its Social Context*, edited by Philip F. Esler (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 121, citing Stephen Burnett, letter to Lyman E. Johnson, 15 April 1838 (Vogel 1998: 2:290-291).

Professor Grabbe swallows Dan Vogel's line without no reservation whatever. "In the end," he says, "it appears that the only one who saw the plates directly was Joseph Smith himself. Even this situation could be doubted."<sup>18</sup>

My wife fears that I have nothing original to say today, and she's probably right. Richard Lloyd Anderson, the foremost authority on this subject and the author of, among other things, the classic *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, has addressed this topic in an important recent article in the *FARMS Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* entitled, straightforwardly enough, "Attempts to Redefine the Experience of the Eight Witnesses." But, frankly, originality doesn't much matter to me on this matter. I wish, at the least, to register a vigorous protest against what seems to me to have become unquestioned but baseless orthodoxy, in certain quarters, about the Witnesses.

They are often portrayed, now, by critics, as gullible fools, unable to distinguish reality from fantasy, easily duped. And Martin Harris is their parade example.

But this falsifies and misrepresents the facts.

True to his reputation as a careful, prudent man, Martin Harris initially approached the claims of Joseph Smith with hope but also with cautious skepticism. It was Harris who took a transcript of characters from the plates to New York City, for the evaluation of Professor Charles Anthon of Columbia University, and others. And, while he was serving as Joseph's first scribe for the translation, he once surreptitiously substituted a similar-looking stone for the seerstone that the Prophet was using, in order to see if it made any difference. (It did.) At one point, he lifted the box in which the plates were

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<sup>18</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, "Prophecy: Joseph Smith and the Gestalt of the Israelite Prophet," in *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in Its Social Context*, edited by Philip F. Esler (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 121.

allegedly concealed, to see what he could determine. “I knew from the heft,” he recalled, “that they were lead or gold, and I knew that Joseph had not credit enough to buy so much lead.” He cross-examined “Joseph, his wife, brothers, sisters, his father and mother. I talked with them separately, that I might get the truth of the matter.” One day, he arrived when Joseph was away from home. “I was glad he was absent,” Harris reminisced, “for that gave me an opportunity of talking with his wife and the family about the plates. I talked with them separately, to see if their stories agreed, and I found they did agree.”

Did Martin Harris think his experience as a Witness was real?

The twenty-five-year old Edward Moroni Thurman ran into Martin Harris at a blacksmith shop, and asked him whether the Book of Mormon was true. Harris responded by asking whether the young man could see an apple tree nearby. His vision of the angel, the plates, and the other objects, he told Thurman, had been as real and factual as the sight of the apple tree. When a group of teenagers posed the same question to him, he pointed to a chopping block and asked if they could see it. “Well, just as plain as you see that chopping block, I saw the plates; and sooner than I would deny it I would lay my head upon that chopping block and let you chop it off.”

To William Pilkington, he said,

Just as sure as You see the Sunshining. Just as sure am I that I stood in The presence of an Angel of God, with Joseph Smith and saw him hold the Gold Plates in his Hands. I also saw the Urim and Thummin [sic], The Breastplate and the Sword of Laban I saw the Angel descend from Heaven. The Heavens were then opened and I heard the voice of God declare, that every thing the Angel had told us was True, and that the Book of Mormon was Translated correct. I was

commanded by God's Voice to testify to the whole world what I had seen and heard.

Joseph Homer Snow recalled the time that Martin Harris came to have dinner with his family:

Mother asked him these questions: "Did you actually see an angel and hear him speak?"

He said, "Just as much so as I see you and hear you speak."

"Will you describe how he stood?" Mother asked.

He said, "He stood at least twenty inches off the ground, and he had records in his hand—The Book of Mormon. He turned the leaves and declared that it was the work of the Lord and that it was true. He commanded us to bear that testimony to the world."

Stephen Burnett plainly misrepresented Martin Harris's testimony about his own experience: Harris would never have gone along with Burnett's "only in vision," let alone with the notion that his experience was merely "imaginary." So why should we trust Burnett's account of Harris's alleged account of the experience of the other Witnesses? After all, Harris's supposed claim that the other Witnesses were reluctant to endorse their published testimony is, on the basis of evidence to which we've already alluded, extremely suspect.

In a notarized statement dated 29 October 1921, George Godfrey, who prepared Martin Harris's grave in Clarkston, Utah, summarized his lengthy acquaintance with the Witness. Then he offered this interesting statement:

Prior to his death and in his last sickness I sat up nights with him upon many an occasion, in connection with my Brothers, John E. Godfrey and Thomas Godfrey, both of whom now reside at Clarkston,

aforesaid, and who can make affidavit to the things I am herein stating: that many times I have heard the said Martin Harris bear witness to the truthfulness and genuineness of the Book of Mormon, at times when he was enjoying good health and spirits and when he was on his deathbed; that his testimony never varied; that I have seen others and that I myself have tried to entrap him relative to the testimony which he bore, by cros [sic] questioning him relative to the scenes and events which are Church History in connection with the bringing forth of the Book of Mormon; that upon all of these questions his mind was clear as it is possible for the human mind to be, and that his testimonies have left no tract [sic] in my mind that he actually converse with an angel who bore testimony to him of the truthfulness of the records contained in the Book of Mormon; that he saw and handled the gold plates from which the said records were taken; that a few hours before his death, and when he was so weak and enfeebled that he was unable to recognize me or anyone, and knew not to whom he was speaking, I asked him if he did not feel that there was an element, at least, of fraudulence and deception in the things that were written and told of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and he replied as he had always done, and many, many times in my hearing, and with the same spirit that he always manifested when enjoying health and vigor: “The Book of Mormon is no fake. I know what I know. I have seen what I have seen, and I have heard what I have heard. I have seen and handled the gold plates from which the Book of Mormon is written. An angel appeared to me and others and testified to the truthfulness of the record, and had I been willing to have perjured myself and sworn falsely to the testimony I now bear, I could have been a rich man, but I could not have testified other than I have done and am now doing, for these things are true.”

Martin Harris was buried with a copy of the Book of Mormon in his right hand, and a copy of the Doctrine and Covenants in his left. In a patriarchal blessing given to him by Joseph Smith, Sr., Harris was promised that

thy testimony shall yet convince its thousands and its tens of thousands; yea it shall shine like the sun, and though the wicked seek to overthrow it, it shall be in vain, for the Lord God shall bear it off victorious.

In 1848, the year before he died, Oliver Cowdery received rebaptism into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at Kanesville, Iowa. Before an audience of approximately two thousand, including non-members of the Church, Cowdery bore witness of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, the restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods, and the divine calling of Joseph Smith. “I beheld with my eye and handled with my hands the gold plates from which it was translated. I also beheld the Interpreters. That book is true.”

Cowdery was bedridden for most of 1849, probably as a result of chronic pulmonary tuberculosis, and died at Richmond, Missouri, on 3 March 1850. A few months before his death, Cowdery was visited by Jacob Gates, a Latter-day Saint traveling eastward on a mission to England who had been a friend since before Cowdery’s 1838 excommunication. In the course of conversation, Gates asked him about his experience as one of the Witnesses to the Book of Mormon. Had it been a dream? Was it imagination, or illusion, or mere mythology? Cowdery rose from the place where he was resting, retrieved a first edition copy of the Book of Mormon, and read aloud the Testimony of the Three Witnesses. Then, turning to face Gates, he said,

Jacob, I want you to remember what I say to you. I am a dying man, and what would it profit me to tell you a lie? I know . . . that this Book

of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God. My eyes saw, my ears heard, and my understanding was touched, and I know that whereof I testified is true. It was no dream, no vain imagination of the mind—it was real.

David Whitmer lived until 1888, the last of the Witnesses to the Book of Mormon. Consequently, he was the most interviewed of all of them.

“Each witness of the Book of Mormon,” Richard Lloyd Anderson justly observes, was an individualist. In David Whitmer, this quality verged on the stubborn. Whether in Mormon society or not, he stood like a rock for his principles. This outspoken and utterly honest personality would have been the first to detect fraud and expose it.

Whitmer was excommunicated from the Church on 13 April 1838 after a period of doctrinal disagreement, financial stress, persecution, and upheaval. Yet when, in 1886, the *Omaha Herald* asked him whether he “still believed that Joseph Smith was a divinely inspired prophet,” David Whitmer replied, “I know he was, it is not a matter of belief.”

The young James Henry Moyle, who had just received his law degree from the University of Michigan and was returning home to Utah, took a detour to Richmond, Missouri, for the sole purpose of interviewing David Whitmer. When he saw the Witness, he implored him to tell the truth. He told Whitmer of the sacrifices that his family had made for the gospel’s sake, driven from state to state and finally pulling a handcart all the way to the arid desert of the Great Basin.

I said to him: “I was born and reared in the Church and I do pray of you to let me know if there is any possibility of your having been deceived. I am just commencing life as you are preparing to lay it down, and I beg of you to tell me if there is anything connected with the testimony which you have borne to the world that could possibly

have been deceptive or misunderstood.” I further said, in an earnest youthful appeal, that I didn’t want to go through life believing in a falsehood, that it was in his power to make known the truth to me. His answer was unequivocal. There was no question about its truthfulness. The angel had stood in a little clear place in the woods with nothing between them but a fallen log—the angel on one side and the witnesses on the other. It had all occurred in broad, clear daylight. He saw the plates and heard the angel with unmistakable clearness.

“He was the first witness I ever attempted to cross examine,” Moyle wrote many years later, “and I did so with all the intensity of my impelling desire to know the truth. The interview lasted two and one-half hours.” The young lawyer, who subsequently served as assistant secretary of the treasury in two federal administrations, came away utterly convinced of David Whitmer’s sincerity.

Throughout his life, Whitmer insisted that the experience was literal, and physical, not merely imaginary or “spiritual.” Joseph Smith III, for example, recalled an 1884 exchange between the Witness and a non-Mormon identified as Colonel Giles:

Rather suggestively he asked if it might not have been possible that he, Mr. Whitmer, had been mistaken and had simply been moved upon by some mental disturbance, or hallucination, which had deceived them into *thinking* he saw the Personage, the Angel, the plates, the Urim and Thummim, and the sword of Laban. How well and distinctly I remember the manner in which Elder Whitmer arose and drew himself up to his full height -- a little over six feet -- and said, in solemn and impressive tones: “No, sir! I was not under any hallucination, nor was I deceived! I saw with these eyes and I heard with these ears! *I know whereof I speak!*”

In a letter to Anthony Metcalf dated 2 April 1887, Whitmer again insisted on the literal reality of what he had seen: “Of course we were in the spirit when we had the view, for no man can behold the face of an angel, except in a spiritual view, but we were in the body also, and everything was as natural to us, as it is at any time.” To Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith, nearly a decade earlier, he testified:

I saw [the plates, the Sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim, and other 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."

“I saw them as plain as I see you now,” he told a reporter from the *Kansas City Journal* in 1881. He frequently emphasized that the angel and the table on which the plates and other objects rested was very close to him and the other Witnesses, within about three to six feet. “Mr. Whitmer describes every detail of the ‘vision’ with great precision,” reported the *Omaha Herald* in 1886, “and much fervency.”

P. Wilhelm Poulson interviewed David Whitmer in 1878. When Poulson asked him if the Eight Witnesses did not “handle the plates,” Whitmer replied, “We did not, but they did.”<sup>19</sup>

The 26 January 1888 issue of the *Richmond Conservator* reported on the last days of David Whitmer in memorable detail:

On Sunday evening before his death he called the family and his attending physician, Dr. George W. Buchanan, to his bedside, and said “Doctor do you consider that I am in my right mind?” to which the Doctor replied, “Yes, you are in your right mind, I have just had a conversation with you.” He then addressed himself to all present and

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<sup>19</sup> Anderson article.

said: “I want to give my dying testimony. You must be faithful in Christ. I want to say to you all that the Bible and the record of the Nephites, (The Book of Mormon) are true, so you can say that you have heard me bear my testimony on my death bed. All be faithful in Christ and your reward will be according to your works. God bless you all. My trust is in Christ forever, worlds without end. Amen.

“I have been visited by thousands of people,” David Whitmer told James H. Hart in 1883,

believers and unbelievers, men and ladies of all degrees, sometimes as many as 15 in one day, and have never failed in my testimony. And they will know some day that my testimony is true.

As Richard Anderson points out, ten of the forty-two surviving testimonies from the Eight Witnesses mention handling the plates. Lucy Mack Smith, who knew the Witnesses well and was there that day, says that they “looked upon the plates and handled them.”<sup>20</sup> William Smith, son and brother to several of the Eight, said that all of them testified “that they not only Saw with their eyes but handled with their hands the said record.”<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps already responding to suggestions that the experience of the Eight Witnesses was merely “spiritual” and visionary, Hyrum Smith insisted during an 1838 speech that it was entirely real. “He said that he had but two hands and two eyes,” Sally Parker remembered in a letter written in August of that year. “He said he had seen the plates with his eyes and handled them with his hands.” The year previously, Hyrum

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<sup>20</sup> Anderson article.

<sup>21</sup> Anderson article.

married Mary Fielding. Shortly thereafter, her brother, Joseph Fielding, wrote, “My sister bears testimony that her husband has seen and handled the plates.”<sup>22</sup> And Hyrum himself wrote, in December 1839, of his sufferings in Missouri, where he had been arrested in the fall of 1838 and then imprisoned in the ironically named Liberty Jail from the beginning of December to the beginning of April:

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, wherever my lot had been cast. 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.

Samuel Smith, Hyrum’s brother and another of the Eight Witnesses, bore his testimony in the presence of fifteen-year-old Daniel Tyler, who summarized it as simply “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.”<sup>23</sup>

In an 1836 editorial in the Church newspaper, John Whitmer bore strong testimony of his experience as one of the Witnesses:

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, and know of a surety that Joseph Smith, Jr., has translated the Book of Mormon by the gift and power of God. . . Therefore, know ye, O ye inhabitants of the earth, wherever this address may come, that I have

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<sup>22</sup> Anderson article.

<sup>23</sup> Anderson article.

in this thing freed my garments of your blood, whether you believe or disbelieve.

But John Whitmer was excommunicated on 10 March 1838, one month before his brother David, and never returned to the Church.

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 economic and other issues raised by the Church's 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. Of all the Witnesses, he comes the closest, in a sense, to denying his testimony. During the 1839 exchange with Theodore Turley that we've already mentioned, Whitmer confessed to doubts about whether the Book of Mormon was true. Speaking of the original text on the plates, he said, "I cannot read it, and I do not know whether it is true or not." Nonetheless, he insisted, "I handled those plates; there were fine engravings on both sides. I handled them."

This is highly impressive. Unlike the Three Witnesses, who heard a divine voice testify to the truth of the translation of the plates, the Eight Witnesses simply saw the plates under quite matter-of-fact conditions. Yet, 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, John Whitmer could not deny that he had "lifted and handled a metal object of substantial weight."

Moreover, the bitterness, or at least the skepticism, was short-lived. After 1856, John Whitmer was the last survivor of the Eight Witnesses. In 1861, Jacob Gates spoke

with him for more than four hours. Gates then wrote of John Whitmer in his journal:

“[H]e still testified that the Book of Mormon is true and that Joseph Smith was a Prophet of the Lord.”

Myron Bond reported in 1878 that

old Father John Whitmer told me last winter, with tears in his eyes, that he knew as well as he knew he had an existence that Joseph translated the ancient writing which 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.

P. Wilhelm Poulson interviewed him that same year:

I said: I am aware that your name is affixed to the testimony in the Book of Mormon, that you saw the plates? He—It is so, and that testimony is true. I—Did you handle the plates with your hands? He—I did so! I—Then they were a material substance? He—Yes, as material as anything can be. I—They were heavy to lift? He—Yes, and you know gold is a heavy metal, they were very heavy. I—How big were the leaves? He—So far as I recollect, 8 by 6 or 7 inches. I—Were the leaves thick? He—Yes, just so thick, that characters could be engraven on both sides. I—How were the leaves joined together? He—In three rings, each one in the shape of a D with the straight line towards the centre. . . . I—Did you see them covered with a cloth? He—No. He handed them uncovered into our hands, and we turned the leaves sufficient to satisfy us.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, six months before his death, John Whitmer spoke at a public Sunday service. His remarks were reported in the *Kingston Sentinel*, as follows:

Mr. Whitmer is considered a truthful, honest and law abiding citizen by this community, and consequently, his appointment drew out a large audience. Mr. Whitmer stated that he had often handled the identical golden plates which Mr. Smith received from the hand of the angel. He said it was of pure gold; part of the book was sealed up solid, the other part was open, and it was this part which was translated.”

Were there real plates? Yes, there were. If anything in early Mormon history is well established, surely the existence of the plates is. Let’s consider the testimonies of several unofficial witnesses.

The sixteen-year-old William Smith always remembered the night when his older brother, Joseph, outran pursues and brought the plates into the Smith home. William lifted the plates that night, and estimated their weight at about sixty pounds.<sup>25</sup> Joseph Smith’s sister Katharine hefted the covered plates on several different occasions. She too recalled his arrival home with the plates and remembered that they were “wrapped . . . up in his frock”:

When he got to the door he said:

“Father, I have been followed; look and see if you can see any one.”

He then threw himself on the bed and fainted, and when he came to he told us the circumstances; he had his thumb put out of place and his arm was very lame.

Her grandson, Herbert Salisbury, remembered Katharine relating that “When [Joseph] came in the house . . . he was completely out of breath. She took the plates from him and laid them on the table temporarily, and helped revive him until he got

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<sup>24</sup> Anderson article.

<sup>25</sup> Anderson article.

breathing properly, and also examined his hand, and treated it for the bruises on his knuckles.”

She said he entered the house running and threw himself on a couch, panting from his extraordinary exertion. She told me Joseph allowed her to “heft” the package but not to see the gold plates, as the angel had forbidden him to show them at that period. She said they were very heavy.

Martin Harris says that he and his family lifted the plates in a box when they were first looking into Joseph’s claims, and that he held the plates on his knee for a time while he and Joseph were preparing to hide them in the woods. He said that “he had hefted the plates repeatedly.”<sup>26</sup> Harris put their weight at between forty and fifty, or forty and sixty, pounds.<sup>27</sup> Like his fellow Witness David Whitmer, Harris gave the dimensions of the plates as seven by eight inches.<sup>28</sup>

William could feel the shape of the plates through the cloth that covered them. “They were not quite as large as this Bible,” he said. “Could tell whether they were round or square. Could raise the leaves this way (raising a few leaves of the Bible before him). One could easily tell that they were not stone, hewn out to deceive, or even a block of wood. Being a mixture of gold and copper, they were much heavier than stone, and very much heavier than wood.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Anderson article.

<sup>27</sup> Anderson article.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Smith recalled them as being six by eight inches; Orson Pratt, who had spoken with all of the principal figures, agreed with Harris and Whitmer that they were seven by eight inches. See Henrichsen, JBMS, 18.

<sup>29</sup> Anderson article.

“I could tell,” said William Smith, “they were plates of some kind and that they were fastened together by rings running through the back.”<sup>30</sup> The rings are a striking feature. We’ve already heard John Whitmer’s testimony that there were three of them, shaped like a capital D. Based on his interviews with two of the Three Witnesses and especially with Hyrum Smith, William McClellin also knew of connecting “rings in the shape of the letter D, which,” he says, “facilitated the opening and shutting of the book” (in the manner of modern three-ring binders).<sup>31</sup> David Whitmer also described the three D-shaped rings. It’s difficult to imagine this degree of consensus regarding such an unusual detail if the plates were only imaginary or never uncovered. A brief article by Warren Aston, forthcoming in the FARMS *Insights* newsletter, will examine the significance of these rings and (this is still under discussion) may point out a striking ancient parallel to them.

Emma Smith, two months before her death, told her eldest son that

The plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen table cloth, which I had given him to fold them in. I once felt of the plates as they thus lay on the table, tracing their outline and shape. They seemed to be pliable like thick paper, and would rustle with a metallic sound when the edges were moved by the thumb, as one sometimes thumb the edges of a book. [I] moved them from place to place on the table as it was necessary on doing my housework.”

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<sup>30</sup> Anderson article.

<sup>31</sup> Anderson article.

One striking and often unnoticed aspect of the experience of the Three Witnesses is the fact that they did not see only the golden plates. The vision was considerably more complex than that, making deception (via the fabrication of fake ancient artifacts) an even more remote possibility. According to repeated testimony, besides the plates of the Book of Mormon and the angel, both the sealed and the unsealed portion, they saw the Urim and Thummim and the accompanying breastplate, the “Ball” or “Director” (called the “Liahona” in the Book of Mormon), the Sword of Laban, the brass plates, and “many other plates.”

“The Urim and Thummim were two white stones,” David Whitmer told P. Wilhelm Poulson in 1878, “each of them cased in as spectacles are, in a kind of silver casing, but the bow between the stones was more heavy, and longer apart between the stones, than we usually find it in spectacles.”

Lucy Mack Smith “examined” the Urim and Thummim and “found that it consisted of two smooth three-cornered diamonds set in glass, and the glasses were set in silver bows, which were connected with each other in much the same way as old fashioned spectacles.”

#### Lucy Mack Smith on the breastplate

It was wrapped in a thin muslin handkerchief, so thin that I could see the glistening metal, and ascertain its proportions without any difficulty.

It was concave on one side and convex on the other, and extended from the neck downwards, as far as the centre of the stomach

of a man of extraordinary size. It had four straps of the same material, for the purpose of fastening it to the breast, two of which ran back to go over the shoulders, and the other two were designed to fasten to the hips. They were just the width of two of my fingers, (for I measured them,) and they had holes in the ends of them, to be convenient in fastening.

David Whitmer, saw the receptacle in which the plates had lain in the Hill Cumorah. “It was a stone box,” he told P. Wilhelm Poulson in 1878, “and the stones looked to me as if they were cemented together. That was on the side of the hill, and a little down from the top.” According to a reporter for the *Chicago Times*, who interviewed Whitmer in August 1875, “Three times has he been at the hill Cumorah and seen the casket that contained the tablets, and the seer-stone. Eventually the casket had been washed down to the foot of the hill, but it was to be seen when he last visited the historic place.” Both the *Chicago Tribune* in December 1885 and the *Chicago Times* in January 1888 reported his testimony that he and Oliver Cowdery had been guided to the Hill Cumorah by Joseph Smith on one occasion, during which they had seen the receptacle together.

Accordingly, in order to save his unbelief, Vogel must invent elaborate metallurgical fraud as well as invoke complex collective hallucination. He suddenly suggests, without even a trace of supporting evidence, that Joseph Smith might perhaps, conceivably, have faked a set of tin plates in order to deceive his friends. This

unevidenced and rather implausible pseudofact is, however, a topic for another occasion, when we will also need to consider how the poor farmboy Joseph Smith also managed, it seems, to create a forged sword of Laban, a bogus Liahona, a fake breastplate, and a stage-prop Urim and Thummim, and then somehow lost them without a trace.

“Secular historians are . . . more inclined than Mormons to suppress source material from Joseph’s closest associates,” remarks the distinguished Columbia University historian Richard L. Bushman. Since, he says, quoting extensively from the reminiscences of those closest to the events would tend to suffuse a modern narrative with their own faith, and would turn readers’ attention to Joseph’s transparently sincere desire to obey God, “believing historians are more inclined to be true to the basic sources than unbelieving ones.”<sup>32</sup>

Watch this lecture on our Youtube site at:

- Pt. 1- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5acjjXygMJg>
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- Pt. 4- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6HwbyGcwE>
- Pt. 5- [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G1YfhW\\_NTc8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G1YfhW_NTc8)

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<sup>32</sup> Bushman, “The Recovery of the Book of Mormon,” 24, 26.

