

Book of Mormon Witnesses, Part 1: Motives

The testimony of the Book of Mormon witnesses has been a thorn in the side of the critics for more than a century and a half. Many critics have tried to ignore their testimonies, while others have simply glossed over their significance. Those who have attempted to tackle the issue generally have relied on ad hominem arguments—attacking the credibility, honesty, or motives of the Three Witnesses.

It is important to keep in mind that these three men *never* denied their testimonies. Throughout their entire lives they claimed that an angel of God had shown them the Book of Mormon plates. Each of these men separated themselves from the LDS Church at some point in their lives for one reason or another (Cowdery and Harris eventually returned). If the Book of Mormon was true, then why did they leave the Church? Did not Judas—an Apostle chosen by Christ—betray Jesus? Did not Peter—the chief Apostle—deny Christ *three times*? Are we to conclude therefore that Christianity is a fraud?

Despite their loss of membership, however, they *continued to affirm* their testimonies of the Book of Mormon. Think of the significance. Despite excommunication, embarrassment, and ill feelings, these men *knew* they had seen an angel; they *knew* they had heard a voice from heaven declaring the book's authenticity; and they *knew* that the Book of Mormon was the word of God.

What possible motives might have driven the Three Witnesses to proclaim (and maintain) their testimonies? There are five possibilities that need exploration.

Wealth—They might have hoped to get rich from the sales of the book. Perhaps they even thought they would start an organization by which they could con thousands of people out of their money. Several critics have claimed that Joseph was simply trying to get rich off of a con.

If wealth was the motive, there must have been some indication from the beginning that they could make money from such a venture. Nobody makes a blind investment with so much at stake unless there is some hope of a reward. Was there hope? One of the characteristics of a successful con-man is his ability to give the people what they want, to entice them with something attractive, and to demonstrate a talent for understanding human nature. So what did Joseph Smith have to offer? He presented a lengthy book claiming to be the record of the former inhabitants of the Americas. Enticing as a novel, but what if he were to claim that such a book was sacred scripture and authentic ancient history? How would it be received? Could he get away with such an arduous venture?

It must be remembered that Joseph's townfolk ridiculed his claims of a "golden bible" *before* he even received the plates—let alone translated and printed the record.¹ Once Joseph acquired the plates, the persecution for having a "golden bible" increased. As Hugh Nibley points out, "there are ten thousand safer and easier ways of fooling people than by

undertaking a work of infinite toil and danger which, as he could see from the first, only made him immensely unpopular."² Nibley notes:

Joseph Smith wanted only one thing of the Book of Mormon—that people should believe it. The story never sold well and only made trouble for the "author." Those who believed he was a prophet would have believed him just as much without the Book of Mormon. His enemies would have had far less against him—the Book of Mormon might even be called his undoing. From the day he received the plates it gave him only trouble and pain.³

If there were any expectations of getting rich, such hopes were quickly dashed. On June 26, 1829, nearly a year before the Book of Mormon came off the presses (and at about the same time the Three Witnesses had received their experience⁴), the *Wayne Sentinel* ran an article about the "Golden Bible." As noted by this Palmyra paper, the Book of Mormon had been "generally known" as the "Golden Bible" for a while, and had "for some time past" been speculated upon—most people thinking it was a "gross imposition, and a grosser superstition."⁵

What kind of con artist would try to become wealthy by publishing a book that was ridiculed *prior* to being printed? Cons are designed to make money an easier way, not a more difficult way. All signs pointed *away* from the possibility of becoming wealthy by publishing the Book of Mormon. And why then would his comrades—the Three Witnesses—expect to get rich when Joseph Smith most certainly did not? They were just as cognizant as Joseph was to the unpopularity of the Book of Mormon before it was published. It is incredulous to believe that these four men would attempt to become rich from such a plan.

Fame—They might have hoped that people would have been impressed by their testimonies and shown them the adulation reserved for royalty. Based on our discussion on "wealth," what kind of "fame" could they have expected to receive for taking any part in the Book of Mormon story? They already knew that it was unpopular with the general public. What they did receive, by attaching their testimonies to the book was *notoriety*. They were scorned, ridiculed, and even threatened with their lives because of their testimonies. On the other hand, if they would have exposed the wicked Joseph Smith as a fraud and claimed that he was so clever that they had been duped, they would have been famous the world over for exposing the clever deceiver. This claim, like the first, just doesn't fit the facts.

Power—They might have falsely testified in hopes of gaining power of other people. Perhaps they felt that they could achieve some sort of leadership status with power over follower. The problem with this scenario is that very little "power" or authority was given to the witnesses in the early Church and what authority they did receive was stripped away

upon excommunication. To strip this “power” from an accomplice in any scam would assuredly move a conspirator to unmask the truth about the angel and the plates. When Oliver Cowdery returned to the Church after several years of separation, he returned to the bottom of the ranks, like any other new convert. Surely, if Cowdery had been in on a scheme for power he would have asked for, and received, a position of authority for his part in the scam. The argument for “power” is as spurious as the previous two charges.

Duped—They might have been duped by Joseph Smith or their own fantasies. Perhaps Joseph Smith was such a brilliant con artist that he was able to prey upon their own desires and lunatic fantasies that he helped them *think* they had seen an angel and the plates.

Perhaps the Three Witnesses and all the succeeding Mormons simply have been entranced by Joseph’s charisma and “magnetic appeal.” This is the claim made by some critics. This theory, however, has several flaws. First, there were many people who *hated* Joseph, *simply for what he taught*, and no amount of appeal could win them over. Second, even members of the Church, such as the Three Witnesses who left the faith, and had *bitter feelings* toward Joseph, *never* denied their testimonies. Thirdly, as Nibley points out, “the church [in subsequent years] derived its numbers and its strength largely from

European converts who had never set eyes on Joseph Smith.”⁶

Some critics suggest that the witnesses’ encounter with the angel and the plates took place solely in their minds. They claim that witnesses saw the angel in a “vision” and equate “vision” with imagination. To bolster this claim they generally cite two supposed quotes from Martin Harris (this is discussed in Part 3 of this series).

David Whitmer—like the other witnesses—had been charged with being deluded into *thinking* he had seen an angel and the plates. One observer remembers when David was such accused, and said:

“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!*’”⁷

Could the Three Witnesses have been so caught up in the excitement that they imagined they saw an angel, or lied about seeing an angel to heighten the stimulation? An affirmative answer may suffice for testifying in the “heat of the moment,” but this explanation is not satisfactory when we look at the testimony that they continued to proclaim *throughout* their lives—through persecution, financial ruin, excommunication, embarrassment, and bitter-feelings. A testimony born in the excitement of the moment would die quickly under such adverse conditions.

Truth—Lastly, there are millions of people who believe that the witnesses told the truth. The witnesses believed that they were telling the truth. Joseph Smith had no other motive for his claims other than that he wished to be believed. He wanted to share his spiritual experience and his translation of an ancient scripture that testified of the Living God and offered another testament of the Savior Jesus Christ to the world. If the testimony of the Three Witnesses is true— and all evidence suggests that it is— then the Book of Mormon would demand the careful consideration of anyone who seeks to better understand their place in the eternities.



For more details on this topic see
<http://www.mormonfortress.com/witness1.html>

Written by Michael R. Ash for the Foundation for
Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR),
Copyright © 2003. www.fairlds.org

¹ Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother, Lucy Mack Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1901), 97.

² Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company and FARMS, 1989), 59.

³ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴ See Elden Watson, <http://www.inconnect.com/~ewatson/BoM.htm>

⁵ Quoted in Francis W. Kirkham (1960), *A New Witness for Christ in America* (Salt Lake City: BYU and Utah Printing, 1960), 2:28.

⁶ Hugh Nibley, *No Ma’am, That’s Not History* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946), 43.

⁷ Richard L. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1981), 88.