

Attempts to Redefine the Experience of the Eight Witnesses

—Richard Lloyd Anderson—

An angel showed the Book of Mormon plates to the Three Witnesses, who heard God's voice declare the translation correct. But the Eight Witnesses report handling the plates under natural circumstances, describing color, substantial weight, individual leaves with engraved writings, and careful craftsmanship throughout. Critics have reacted variously to such physical language. Some see the Eight Witnesses as participants in a fraud. But their lives do not fit that mold, since all suffered in the severe persecutions of early Mormonism and not one reversed his written testimony. Other critics acknowledge sincerity and suppose Joseph

Smith constructed an imitation. But the Eight Witnesses were tradesmen and farmers who worked with materials and would recognize a clumsy counterfeit. More recent skeptics advance a double theory: (1) that at various times Joseph Smith allowed the eight men to lift but not see a heavy covered object; (2) that these men testified of seeing plates because of a vision induced by enthusiasm or mind control. This theory is showcased by arbitrary interpretation of very few documents. This article discusses sources that have been misused in attempts to reverse the Eight Witnesses' statement about their physical contact with the ancient record.



The official testimonies of the Three and Eight Witnesses¹ are strengthened by a third tier of witnesses, family members who had contact with the plates as Joseph brought them into his New York farm home, as well as scribes who worked around the plates in the translation process. William Smith was 16 when his older brother outran pursuers and breathlessly carried the covered metal record into the house. William recounted lifting the plates that night, saying several times that they weighed about 60 pounds.² In a pulpit speech William told of feeling their outlines through cloth wrappings: “They were not quite as large as this Bible. Could tell whether they were round or square. Could raise the leaves this way (raising a few leaves of the Bible before him).”³ And he added detail in an interview: “I could tell they were plates of some kind and that they were fastened together by rings running through the back.”⁴ As an early secretary for her husband, Emma Smith remembered how the covered plates were on the translating table, and she sometimes moved them and once felt their shape through the linen covering: “They seemed to be pliable like thick paper, and would rustle with a metallic sound when the edges were moved by the thumb.”⁵

These family descriptions closely correlate with the written “Testimony of Eight Witnesses,” showing that the current theory of a visual illusion is out of touch with the realities of the translation period. Since this subjective concept relies heavily on statements of Martin Harris, it is important to clarify two types of experience he had with the plates. Of course, Martin was one of the Three Witnesses, who saw the angel and plates in 1829. This visitation first came to Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer, and David clarified that they saw but did not handle the plates at that time.⁶ About an hour afterward, this visitation came to Martin and Joseph, and Joseph said the first experience was repeated.⁷ Thus Martin Harris saw the bare plates when the angel showed them to the Three Witnesses. By contrast, Martin was also Joseph Smith’s first scribe, and his comments about covered plates

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no doubt come from that early period. He said, “I hefted the plates many times, and should think they weighed forty or fifty pounds.”⁸ Much later he told a newspaper editor that the plates weighed “altogether, from forty to sixty pounds.”⁹ This early assistant said that he and his family lifted the plates in a box when first investigating Joseph’s story, and he held the plates on his knee while hiding them in the forest with Joseph.¹⁰ Judged by other sources, the record was wrapped at that time. Martin regularly said he saw the plates, and sometimes he said he saw the plates covered. This is not contradictory, because these remarks relate to different occasions during the translation.

Attempts to Repackage the Eight Witnesses’ Testimony

In contrast to seeing a covered record, the Eight Witnesses speak of viewing the plates themselves with unobstructed vision, noting they had “the appearance of gold . . . of ancient work . . . of curious workmanship.”¹¹ In their official testimony, they looked closely at the engravings while turning the leaves, seeing and handling at the same time. Thus the published testimony contradicts the current subjective theory, which asserts the eight men saw the plates in a mystic group experience but handled them only on other occasions when they were covered. Dan Vogel and Grant H. Palmer give variations of this basic theory, though predecessors published similar arguments.¹² Both authors are noted for challenging the objective reality of Joseph Smith’s founding visions. Palmer largely avoids statements from the witnesses but concludes “that the eight, like the three, saw and scrutinized the plates in a mind vision.” He downgrades Joseph Smith’s own story by repeating rumors and folklore about how the Prophet found and returned the plates. Thus he paints the Book of Mormon witnesses as simplistic believers who possessed the “shared magical perspective” of their culture. After discovering the inner workings of their minds, he concludes that these witnesses thought “the spiritual was material,” meaning that their official statement “sounded more physical than was intended.” So reinterpreting the “Testimony of Eight Witnesses” is really based on knowing their “mind-set” instead of focusing on what they repeatedly said about their experience.¹³

Vogel's approach to the Eight Witnesses matches Palmer's, though with more detailed speculation. He starts with flat disbelief: "There is simply no reliable proof for the existence of the supernatural."¹⁴ Reading Vogel on the Book of Mormon witnesses, therefore, is tracking a conclusion in search of evidence. In his writing, no witness saw a divine vision or examined an authentic ancient artifact. In explaining the experience of the Eight Witnesses, Vogel uses little material from these men, though he has collected most of their published testimonies. In all his explanations, the Eight Witnesses saw the plates only through imagination, what he calls a "visionary" experience.¹⁵ As for holding the plates, he apparently prefers the possibility of lifting a weighted box, with something like group hypnosis persuading the eight men that they "viewed the plates through the lid of the box."¹⁶

This concept comes with a second possibility of how Joseph Smith might have convinced the Eight Witnesses there were plates: "They saw them in vision but handled them in a box, or while covered, on some previous occasion."¹⁷ However, Lucy

Mack Smith refutes a split experience of seeing on one day and lifting the plates at an earlier time. Of course, she knew her family had picked up the covered metal object that Joseph brought home in 1827, but she describes an additional formal inspection by the Eight Witnesses as the translation was ending. Mother Smith was present when the Three Witnesses returned to the rural Whitmer home and reported their gratitude on seeing the angel and the plates. She then describes surrounding circumstances as the Smiths returned some 30 miles to their residence south of Palmyra village. Her unedited manuscript picks up the story as follows, omitting only her quotation of the written testimony of the Eight Witnesses:

In a few days we were follow by Joseph and Oliver and the whitmers who came to make us a visit and also to make some arrangements about getting the book printed soon after they came They all that is the male part of the company repaired to a little grove where it was customary for the family to offer up their secret prayers.



Joseph Smith Sr. log home, south of Palmyra village, New York. The grove where the Eight Witnesses saw and handled the gold plates was near this home. Photograph by Lee V. Kochenderfer. © 1998 Intellectual Reserve Inc.

as Joseph had been instructed that the plates would be carried there by one of the ancient Nephites. Here it was that those 8 witnesses recorded in the Book of Mormon looked upon the plates and handled them of which they bear witness in the following words. . . . After the witnesses returned to the house the Angel again made his appearance to Joseph and received the plates from his hands. We commenced holding meetings that night in the which we declared those facts that we knew to be true.¹⁸

During these events of late June 1829, Lucy again resided in her original log home, which was then crowded with guests, and she would know when a group of men left to examine the plates and when they “returned to the house.” Mother Smith’s history states that the Eight Witnesses all saw and handled the plates on the same date. She further states that their joint testimony was drawn up to report their experience in the grove on that occasion. She insists that they “looked upon the plates and handled them” near her house on that day, an understanding gained from observation, conversation, and hearing the Eight Witnesses in the evening meeting when all “declared those facts that we knew to be true.”

The Turley Report and John Whitmer’s Other Statements

This and the next section will discuss the evidence offered by the subjective school. Palmer believes that all of the witnesses “seem to have seen the records with their spiritual eyes and inspected them in the context of a vision, apparently never having actually possessed or touched them.”¹⁹ And Vogel broadly equates the experience of the Eight Witnesses with that of the Three Witnesses, who he thinks describe an event of a “subjective nature” that fits “the illusion of a group hallucination.”²⁰ Thus “the experiences of the eight men were apparently visionary in nature, similar to the experiences of the three witnesses.”²¹

Use of one source shows how little real evidence supports the subjective theory regarding the Eight Witnesses. Vogel revives an anecdote of Illinois governor Thomas Ford, who said Joseph Smith admitted isolating a few followers and whipping up faith and guilt until they imagined they saw gold plates

in an empty box. But serious readers want accurate reports from eyewitnesses or those who can responsibly report what eyewitnesses say. In this case, Ford said his information came from “men who were once in the confidence of the prophet.” One immediately thinks of turncoat John C. Bennett and his exaggerations, as well as several ex-Mormons around Ford at the martyrdom who were characterized by John Taylor as “some of the vilest and most unprincipled men in creation.”²² Ford’s story traces to no reliable

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source and appears to be outright folklore. Vogel admits it lacks credibility but trusts it for insight: “The details transmitted by Ford may be inaccurate, but the essence of the account contains an element of truth.”²³ Vogel’s use of the “inaccurate” story is justified because the governor’s “account is similar to the claims that dissident Mormons in Ohio and Missouri were making in 1838.”²⁴ But slander circulating in one location is not proved true by similar slanders developed elsewhere, as the history of political campaigns shows.

Revisionists offer one interview with one of the Eight Witnesses to support a mental mirage. As the Mormons were forced from Missouri in 1839,

Theodore Turley temporarily remained as a church business agent and was visited by several residents, including John Whitmer, who had been excommunicated the year before. The hostile group ridiculed Turley's belief in the Book of Mormon, but he confronted John Whitmer with inconsistency. Turley later reconstructed the rest of the conversation:

Whitmer asked do you hint at me? Turley replied "if the cap fits you wear it. all I know, you have published to the world 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. Turley asked him why the translation is not now true, & he said "I cannot read it, and I do not know whether it is true or not."²⁵

One statement here becomes a pillar for the theory of visionary plates: "they were shown to me by a supernatural power." Vogel insists this "would suggest something other than a normal, physical experience."²⁶ And Palmer echoes: "This added detail of how he saw indicates that the eight probably did not observe or feel the actual artifact."²⁷ But a strange "added detail" is a red flag. David Whitmer often complained of misquotation in his many interviews. Here the concept of miraculous display differs from all other John Whitmer accounts. Vogel prints relevant parts of 15 interviews with John Whitmer.²⁸ My files contain an additional 8 reports of John's own testimony of the Book of Mormon.²⁹ The total is 23 reports from this last survivor of the Eight Witnesses. Many are brief and general, but when details are given, they speak of seeing and/or handling as a normal event, except for Turley's phrase "supernatural power" and Joshua Davis's recollection that John declared: "I, with my own eyes, saw the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated, and I also saw an angel who witnessed to the truth of the Book of Mormon."³⁰

But John Whitmer's own words counter the odd particulars in these two reports. As official church historian, he named the Three Witnesses, "into whose presence the angel of God came and showed them the Plates, the ball, the directors, etc." He then named himself and seven others "to whom Joseph Smith Jr showed the plates."³¹ Since John Whitmer personally states that the angel appeared only to

the Three Witnesses, Davis obviously got that detail wrong in reporting what John told him. And six statements from John Whitmer speak of handling the plates, including the full Turley reference and John's editorial farewell in the church newspaper, stating "that I have most assuredly seen the plates from whence the Book of Mormon is translated, and that I have handled these plates."³² So John Whitmer claimed to handle the plates as Joseph Smith showed them, not to behold them as displayed by an angel. Though interviews may be quite accurate, they are not transcripts. Davis correctly gave John's statement about seeing the plates but confused the testimonies of the Three and the Eight Witnesses concerning seeing an angel.

So the Davis interview shows the fallacy of proof-texting with a single phrase suggesting the marvelous. Turley remembered John Whitmer as saying the plates were shown to him "by a supernatural power." But as just stated, in his church history John noted that Joseph Smith personally showed the plates to the Eight Witnesses, which agrees with their testimony printed in the Book of Mormon. However, Turley erroneously thought the published statement of the Eight Witnesses testified of the miraculous, telling John, "[Y]ou have published to the world that an angel did present those plates to Joseph Smith." When Turley challenged John to be consistent with his written testimony, John reinforced the physical terms in that document: "I now say I handled those plates. there was fine engravings on both sides. I handled them."³³ On the other hand, the phrasing "supernatural power" corresponds with Turley's preconception, not the written testimony that John was supporting. Thus the idea of a supernormal event evidently came from the interviewer, since John only indicates natural circumstances in other statements referring to the Eight Witnesses' group experience with the plates themselves. The rest of Turley's report blends with the witnesses' declaration and with John Whitmer's other five statements that he handled the plates.

Burnett's Hearsay Report and Testimonies of Handling

Besides misusing the Turley report, revisionists mainly rely on an 1838 letter of former missionary Stephen Burnett, which mentions two linked occasions when he heard Martin Harris discuss his

own experience and that of the Eight Witnesses. But Burnett's letter is hostile and accusatory, adding distracting static to the line of information. Warren Parrish also mentions Harris's initial comments and thereby clarifies how disbelievers reinterpreted the witnesses' printed testimonies. Parrish opposed Joseph Smith after the Kirtland bank failed in early 1837. A national depression followed that summer, and a counter party proclaimed Joseph Smith a fallen prophet, resulting in the December excommunication of Parrish and about two dozen associates, which probably included Stephen Burnett.³⁴ Martin Harris first discussed the witnesses' testimonies about mid-March 1838. Then seceders Burnett and Parrish gave their versions of what Harris said, and the following comes from Parrish, though it is unclear whether he personally heard the Book of Mormon witness:

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; see new edition, Book of Covenants, page 170, which agrees with Harris's testimony.³⁵

On scores of documented occasions, Martin Harris insisted he saw the angel and the plates. So if Harris used the word *vision* to describe the Three Witnesses' experience, he would have meant there was a real visit of an angel, mirroring the normal usage of *vision* in the New Testament and other scriptures. But Parrish used a skeptic's definition, referring to what is now Section 17 of the Doctrine and Covenants, to show that faith was required to see the plates, which proved to Parrish that preconditioning produced a religious delusion. The approach was not new. For example, Ezra Booth left the church in 1831 and admitted that the Three Witnesses "frequently" testified that an angel appeared "and presented them the golden plates," yet when he discovered that Doctrine and Covenants 17 promised the Three Witnesses a view of the Nephite artifacts if they had faith, he concluded this meant that the witnesses saw the plates "by faith or imagination." Booth's slanted reasoning was reprinted in Howe's anti-Mormon work of 1834 and sounds like a promptbook for Burnett and Parrish interpreting Harris in 1838.³⁶

As indicated, Stephen Burnett heard Harris's first comments in mid-March, and a week later he renounced the Book of Mormon in the Kirtland Temple, with Harris protesting he was misunderstood. Afterward Burnett reported both occasions in his partisan letter. Following are the relevant portions:

when I came to hear Martin Harris state in public that he never saw the plates with his natural eyes, only in vision or imagination, neither Oliver nor David & 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. . . . I therefore three weeks since in the stone Chapel gave a full history of the church since I became acquainted with it . . . I was followed by W. Parrish, Luke Johnson, and John Boynton, all of who concurred with me. After we were done speaking M Harris arose & said he was sorry for any man who rejected the Book of Mormon for he knew it was true, he said he had hefted the plates repeatedly in a box with only a tablecloth or a handkerchief over them, but he never saw them only as he saw a city through a mountain. And said that he never should have told that the testimony of the eight witnesses was false, if it had not been picked out of him but should have let it passed as it was. . . . I am well satisfied for myself that if the witnesses whose names are attached to the Book of Mormon never saw the plates as Martin admits that there can be nothing brought to prove that any such thing ever existed for it is said on the 171 page of the book of covenants that the three should testify that they had seen the plates even as J.S. Jr. & if they only saw them spiritually or in vision with their eyes shut—JS Jr never saw them in any other way & if so the plates were only visionary.³⁷

The two-stage interaction with Harris is clear in Burnett's letter. He first heard what he considered a shocking admission of Harris, which was obviously repeated as the centerpiece of Burnett's exposure in the later temple meeting. However, Harris's response in this second stage represents his true attitude, since Harris said his earlier words were misused. This shows that caution is required in quoting Burnett's version of any of Harris's words. Burnett's bias is clear in reporting Harris's original remarks,

where the witness supposedly acknowledged he saw the plates “in vision or imagination.” Yet the word *imagination* would not have come from Harris, who later wrote, “no man ever heard me in any way deny . . . the administration of the angel that showed me the plates.”³⁸ Moreover, Burnett ends with an interpretive paraphrase of Harris, for there is no parallel for the witness equating seeing “in vision” with having “their eyes shut.” These pseudo-quotations are conclusions of the liberated Mormons, for whom a “vision” was by definition an illusion produced by blind faith. And in reporting Harris’s first Kirtland remarks on the plates, Burnett went further to claim that Harris said the “eight witnesses never saw them,” meaning that they saw them only as did the Three Witnesses—“in vision or imagination.”

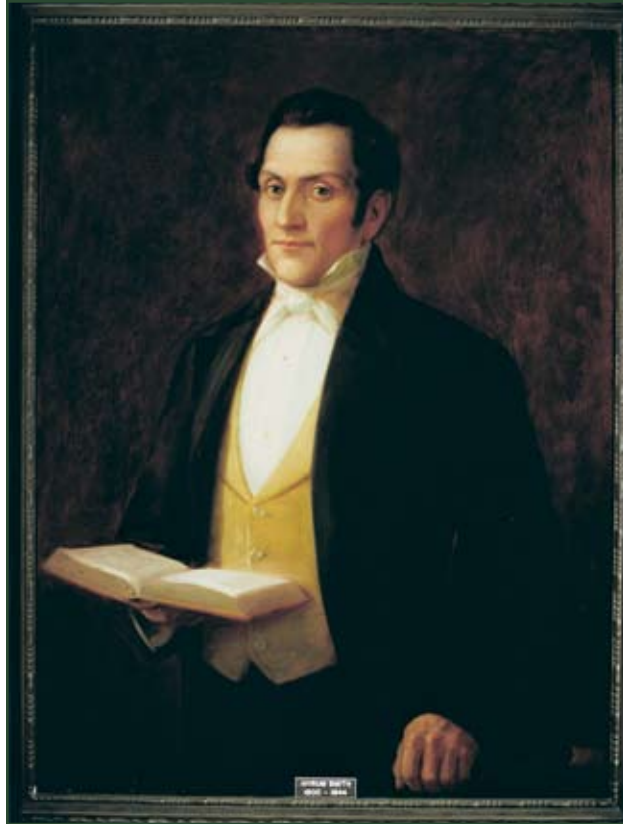
“[W]ee wass talking about the Book of Mormon which he is one of the witnesses he said he had but too hands and too eyes he said he had seen the plates with his eyes and handled them with his hands.”

But the reader comes closer to Harris’s true views when Burnett reports Martin’s later rebuttal.

The second meeting was held in the temple in late March 1838, when Burnett no doubt stressed the central argument of his letter, that “the plates were only visionary.” He was followed by Parrish, whose letter embraced the same theory, and then ex-apostles Boynton and Luke Johnson. Finally, Martin Harris stood and said that “he had hefted the plates repeatedly.” This clearly countered the

dissenters’ visionary theory, which shows that the physical reality of the plates was Harris’s theme in the second meeting. He had actually held them “with only a tablecloth or a handkerchief over them, but he never saw them only as he saw a city through a mountain.” In this context, Harris was not talking of his testimony of seeing the angel and plates, but speaking of other times when he knew the plates were under “a tablecloth or a handkerchief,” probably the experience that he and Emma shared during the 1828 translation, as discussed near the beginning of this paper.³⁹

At the follow-up meeting, Harris modified his initial comments on the Eight Witnesses. As noted, Burnett claimed that Harris first said that group saw the plates only in vision.⁴⁰ Three months before, Hepzibah Richards pictured the Kirtland religious climate: “A large number have dissented from the body of the church, and are very violent in their opposition to the Presiden[cy] and all who uphold them.”⁴¹ Harris fraternized with the reorganizers but drew scorn for believing the Book of Mormon. Burnett’s letter indicates that the witness explained he had given an earlier answer under pressure. This means that Harris’s corrections in the second meeting supersede the earlier, nonphysical language. On reflection Harris said that “he never should have told that the testimony of the eight witnesses was false, if it had not been picked out of him but should have let it passed as it was.” To Vogel, this means that “Harris expressed regret about revealing the true nature of the experience of the eight witnesses,”⁴² but the context is Harris straightening out Burnett by adding his own testimony that there were physical plates. If we compensate for Burnett’s loaded language, Harris’s retraction was essentially this: he never would have agreed that the Eight Witnesses saw the plates through spiritual sight if he had not been confused by leading questions, but would have let their written testimony speak for itself. Vogel thinks the Harris disclosure theory is validated because Harris knew the Eight Witnesses and their experience, but this view widely misses the point.⁴³ The real question is whether Burnett quoted Harris accurately. The answer is that Burnett continued to believe in a visionary experience for the Eight Witnesses even after Harris said he had given the wrong impression on that issue. Since Harris insisted he had “hefted the plates repeatedly in a box,” he disagreed with Burnett’s spiritualizing



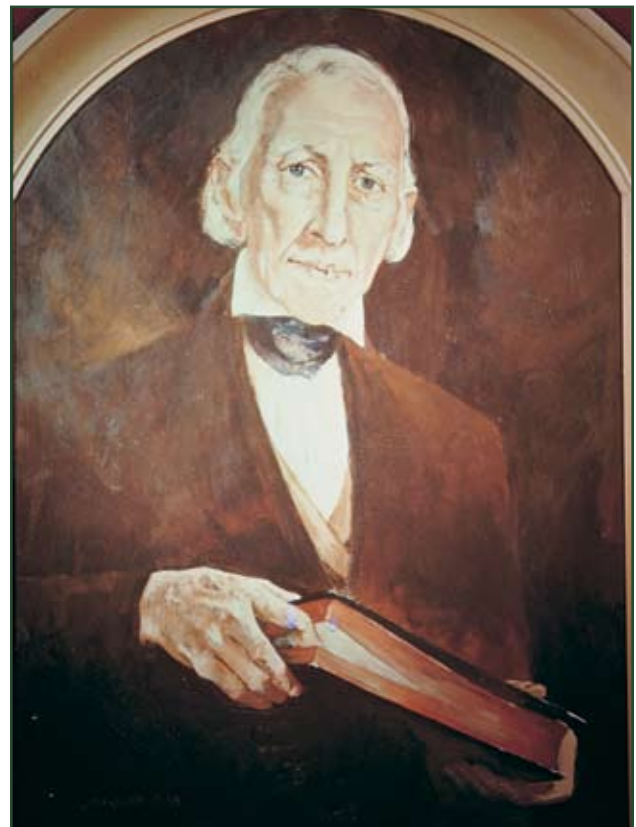
Portrait of Hyrum Smith, by Lewis A. Ramsey

of the Eight Witnesses' experience. Burnett's report of Harris's quoting them is not only compound hearsay, but hearsay rejected by its author.

Six of the Eight Witnesses were still alive by March 1838, but all were either in Missouri or traveling there. Hyrum Smith was the last to leave Kirtland, and his group stopped at the home of Sally Parker in central Ohio. Later she sent a letter to relatives in Maine, knowing they had been exposed to messages from Kirtland dissenters. She mentioned the opposition by Parrish and Boynton and reflected back on the faith-promoting visit of Hyrum Smith, who gave his personal testimony: "[W]ee wass talking about the Book of Mormon which he is one of the witnesses he said he had but too hands and too eyes he said he had seen the plates with his eyes and handled them with his hands."⁴⁴ Two other solid sources report this language from Hyrum in this period. Hyrum married Mary Fielding at the end of 1837, and a little later her brother Joseph wrote: "My sister bears testimony that her husband has

seen and handled the plates, &c."⁴⁵ After his ordeal in Liberty Jail was over, Hyrum, still sensitive to the slanders of the Kirtland dissenters, wrote to his fellow church members, starting his letter with specific reference to giving "my testimony to the world of the truth of the book of Mormon." After narrating persecutions, he returned to his published testimony: "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."⁴⁶ This means that many times, in several states, Hyrum testified to handling the plates. His brother Samuel gave the same oral testimony. Daniel Tyler was 15 and intensely religious when he heard Samuel simply tell his story: "He knew his brother Joseph had the plates, for the prophet had shown them to him, and he had handled them and seen the engravings thereon."⁴⁷

The Eight Witnesses left 10 specific statements of handling the plates: the above 4 from Samuel and Hyrum and 6 among the John Whitmer reports.⁴⁸



Portrait of Joseph Smith Sr., by William Whitaker

Vogel quotes 8 of the 10 handling statements and adds the disturbing comment “As can be seen, except for Poulson’s late interview with John Whitmer, specific declarations by the witnesses about handling the plates are few and vague.”⁴⁹ The basic reliability of Poulson’s interview will be discussed next, but if it is not counted, the remaining 9 references to handling the plates are more than few. Nor is the word *handling* vague. Smith family members, such as William and Emma, describe their limited examination of the covered plates. But in print and in interviews, the Eight Witnesses speak of unlimited direct contact, not a vision of the plates with previous experiences of lifting them when covered. In fact, two observers note the experience was not strung out over time. As discussed earlier, Lucy Smith states she was present as Whitmer family members, along with her husband and two sons, left her log home for forest privacy on the special day when the Eight Witnesses “looked upon the plates and handled them.”⁵⁰ Likewise, David Whitmer was present and/or aware of these circumstances, stating that the eight men became witnesses on a particular date. After recalling that the Three Witnesses saw the plates in late June, David explained that “the eight witnesses saw them, I think, the next day or the day after. Joseph showed them the plates himself, but the angel showed us the plates.”⁵¹ Thus David Whitmer also pictures the experience of Eight Witnesses as an event on a given date, when the plates were shown by Joseph, not by a divine being or supernatural means.

John Whitmer’s Comprehensive Interview

Subjective interpreters seek to disqualify John Whitmer’s most informative interview. P. Wilhelm Poulson visited both John and David Whitmer in upper Missouri in 1878, sending his accounts to the *Deseret News* that summer. Poulson had presided over the Copenhagen district from 1861 to 1863, when he came to the United States and was named secretary for his emigrating company.⁵² He became a homeopathic physician and practiced in Salt Lake City, Council Bluffs, and the San Francisco area. He was doing psychic analysis by late 1873⁵³ and expanded this spiritualistic activity up to later years, when he published spirit messages from notable Mormons and non-Mormons.⁵⁴ He settled in Council Bluffs during the period of his Whitmer interviews, both of which accurately describe

families and activities of David and John Whitmer. Poulson was interested in the Smith family, and Joseph Smith III accepted a guarded friendship with him. Soon after Poulson’s Whitmer interviews, Joseph III said he was “a man of ability and learning, is and has been for some years, a Spiritualist.”⁵⁵ Though Poulson became an eccentric and fictionalized his background, his ability as a reporter is the main issue in evaluating his interviews with David and John Whitmer. He visited them as an educated person and religious eclectic, evidently seeking to preserve the stories of the last surviving Book of Mormon witnesses.

Revisionists consider Poulson’s report as “perhaps suspect since John Whitmer was dead at the time of publication and David Whitmer complained about the accuracy of Poulson’s interview with him.”⁵⁶ The first problem is trivial: Poulson interviewed John in Missouri in April 1878, John died in July, and Poulson sent the interview to the *Deseret News* from Idaho at the end of that month. The delay is reasonable and John’s death unpredictable. Regarding accuracy, after the David Whitmer interview appeared in the *Deseret News*, that witness answered a question about it from L. F. (or T.) Monch (or Mouch), probably capable Ogden educator Louis F. Moench. David said Poulson did not get one of his answers straight: “I surely did not make the Statement which you say he reports me to have made.”⁵⁷ It is unknown which statement is meant, but critics are sloppy in stating that David complained about the whole interview. Instead, he corrected one issue in a report consisting of answers to 20 questions. Similarly, David corrected many details in his 1881 *Kansas City Journal* interview, pronouncing the rest “substantially correct.”⁵⁸ In the Poulson interview, about two-thirds of what David reportedly said is corroborated by what he said in other published interviews (most of the other third being new material that cannot be compared for consistency), so Poulson’s report of his interview with John Whitmer likely reflected a similarly high degree of accuracy.⁵⁹

In questioning John Whitmer, Poulson concentrated on the tangibility of the metal record, and a similar question to David Whitmer shows the interviewer was careful on this topic. Poulson apparently visited David first, and he was obviously interested in the materiality of each brother’s experience. When Poulson asked David if the Eight Witnesses

did not “handle the plates,” David responded: “We did not, but they did.” Here Poulson accurately reports David, since later and careful interviews with David, as those of Zenas H. Gurley and Nathan Tanner Jr., also report that that the Three Witnesses did not handle the plates.⁶⁰ Poulson’s dialogue with John follows here:

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.⁶¹

These seven related answers are impressive on the solid substance of the plates. On the other hand, there are two problematic answers on surrounding circumstances, though they do not invalidate a long interview. Poulson’s account contains minor differences with Lucy Smith’s history regarding place and grouping. Following are the two answers that were omitted from the above line of questions:

I—In what place did you see the plates. He—In Joseph Smith’s house; he had them there. . . . I—Were you all eight witnesses present at the same time? He—No. At that time Joseph showed the plates to us, we were four persons, present in the room, and at another time he showed them to four persons more.

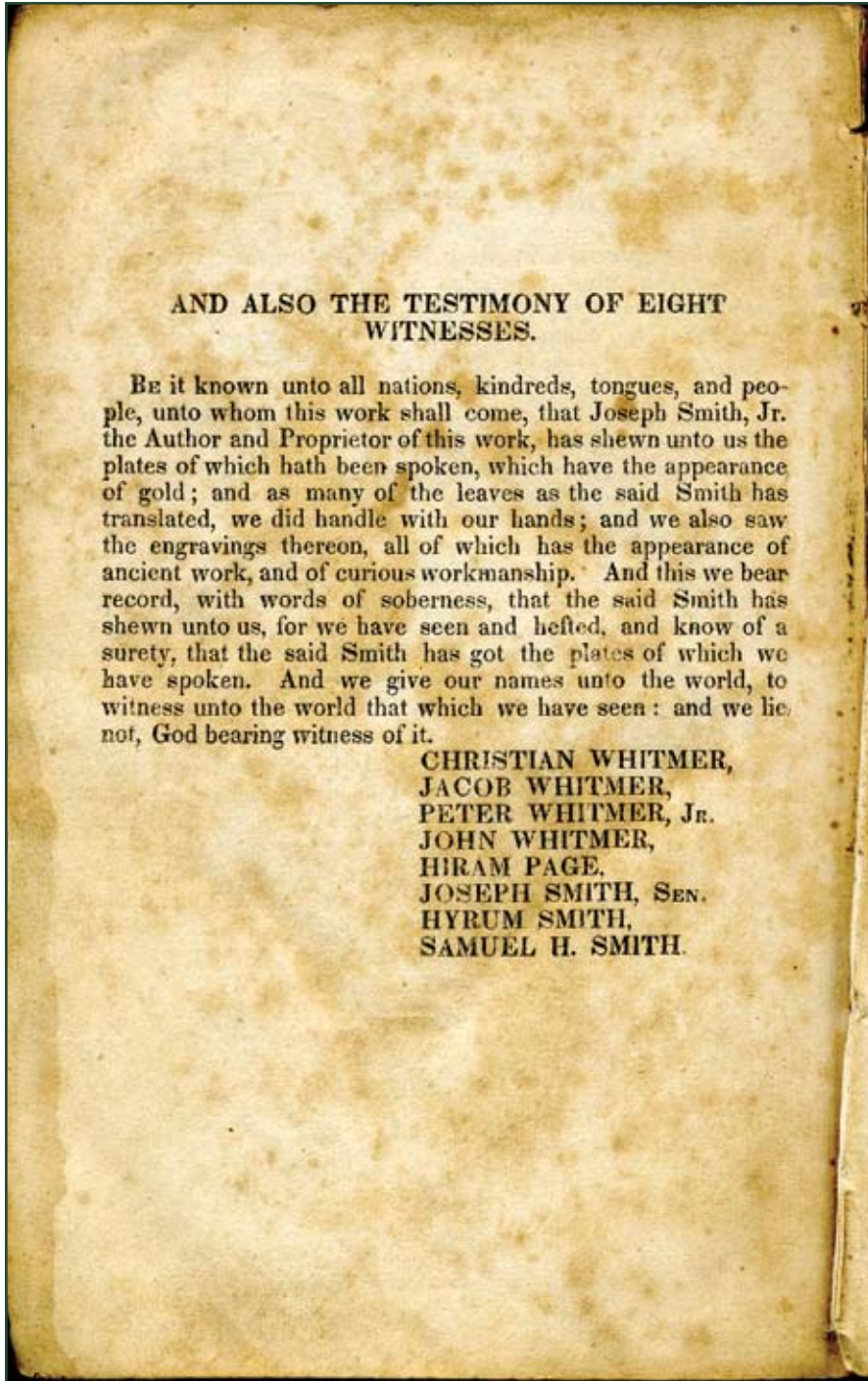
As discussed, Lucy Mack Smith said the Eight Witnesses left her house for a grove, a likely location because that day many Whitmers and Hiram Page were at the small home that the Smith family had recently reoccupied. John Whitmer possibly said something like “at Joseph Smith’s house,” meaning to him that the Eight Witnesses viewed the plates on that property. And Poulson’s report that the plates were

viewed by two groups of four is an odd detail, possibly an error in the interview process. Mother Smith’s history should have priority as being dictated and reviewed.⁶² Nevertheless, Lucy’s history harmonizes with the rest of the answers in the Poulson interview, which clearly state that the men handled uncovered plates in the presence of others.

Miscounted Interviews and the Printed Testimony

More people sought out the Three Witnesses because they had seen a brilliant angel. Even though the Eight Witnesses left fewer interviews, they adequately describe a simple, natural experience. Subjective interpreters seek to replace a material event with a psychic event, and they minimize how much the Eight Witnesses said about examining the plates. Vogel generalizes: “Individual statements by the eight witnesses are rare due largely to their early deaths.”⁶³ This statement prefaces the listing of two group testimonies and 17 times when one of the Eight Witnesses explained or validated his published testimony or when family members said he was always faithful to it. Thus *rare* is inaccurate, especially since this source scholar has added six John Whitmer interviews to the above inventory.⁶⁴ And there are a number of other known contacts beyond this. For instance, Vogel writes “no known testimonies” by the names of Christian and Peter Whitmer Jr.⁶⁵ Yet the latter accompanied Oliver Cowdery on the western mission in 1830–31, when investigator Lyman Wight attended a meeting where “one testified that he had seen angels, and another that he had seen the plates.”⁶⁶ Another omission is Zenas H. Gurley’s recollection of visiting John Whitmer about 1872: “He had seen the plates; and it was his especial pride and joy that he had written sixty pages of the Book of Mormon.”⁶⁷ In addition, Edward Stevenson recalled hearing testimonies from the Prophet’s father and brother Hyrum. And the sons of Jacob Whitmer, John Whitmer, and Hyrum Page heard their fathers’ testimonies at least once in life as well as once before their deaths. We now can document over 40 instances when one of the Eight Witnesses restated his testimony, with the printed declaration of that testimony mentioned or understood in the statement or conversation.

Yet personal statements or reports are only part of the story of the Eight Witnesses. Their relatives



The testimony of the Eight Witnesses, as it appeared in the first edition of the Book of Mormon. Courtesy of Family and Church History Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

AND ALSO THE TESTIMONY OF EIGHT WITNESSES.

BE it known unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, unto whom this work shall come, that Joseph Smith, Jr. the Author and Proprietor of this work, has shewn 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 shewn unto us, for we have seen and hefted, and know of a surety, that the said Smith has got the plates of which we have spoken. And we give our names unto the world, to witness unto the world that which we have seen: and we lie not, God bearing witness of it.

CHRISTIAN WHITMER,
JACOB WHITMER,
PETER WHITMER, JR.
JOHN WHITMER,
HIRAM PAGE,
JOSEPH SMITH, SEN.
HYRUM SMITH,
SAMUEL H. SMITH.

said they affirmed their experience throughout life, showing they were deeply impressed by what they had “seen and hefted.” When word reached Kirtland about the deaths of Christian and Peter Whitmer Jr., brother-in-law Oliver Cowdery wrote that “they proclaimed to their last moments, the certainty of their former testimony.”⁶⁸ Thus these

them then and I believe them yet.”⁷¹ McLellin was a schoolteacher in eastern Illinois who attended Mormon meetings as teams of elders traveled from Ohio to Missouri to participate in dedicating that land for the gathering. He heard David Whitmer’s testimony of seeing an angel and was so impressed that

brothers regularly validated their formal group statement. Sons and nephews of Jacob Whitmer, John Whitmer, and Hiram Page gave similar cumulative accounts. Likewise, Samuel Smith’s obituary noted “his steadfastness as one of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon.”⁶⁹ And William Smith included his father and brothers in saying that all of the Eight Witnesses testified “that they not only Saw with their eyes but handled with their hands the said record . . . nor has either or any one of these witnesses ever to my knowledge Counteracted the testimony as given above Concerning the real existence of these Mormon tablets.”⁷⁰ The above family observations point to hundreds of times when the Eight Witnesses stood by their written declaration.

And thoughtful converts, such as the Pratt brothers, John Corrill, and William E. McLellin, recount how they systematically questioned each Book of Mormon witness at the outset. McLellin later said: “When I first joined the church in 1831, soon I became acquainted with all the Smith family and the Whitmer families, and I heard all their testimonies, wh[ic]h agreed in the main points; and I believed

he rode across two states to western Missouri, just missing the Prophet but spending time with David Whitmer and Martin Harris, and then conversing with Hyrum Smith for four hours, which McLellin described as follows: “I inquired into the particulars of the coming forth of the record, of the rise of the church and of its progress and upon the testimonies given to him &c.”⁷² McLellin was baptized and ordained an elder before returning east as Hyrum’s missionary companion. At Jacksonville, Illinois, both spoke on the validity of the Book of Mormon, with William first giving a picture of the buried book as he learned about it from two of the Three Witnesses, and especially from questioning Hyrum: “a set of thin plates resembling gold, with Arabic characters inscribed on them. The plates were minutely described as being connected with rings in the shape of the letter D, which facilitated the opening and shutting of the book.”⁷³ The description of “D rings” is unusual and confirms the same point in John Whitmer’s interview with Wilhelm Poulson, who wrote down specifics of a direct examination of an uncovered metallic volume.

The printed “Testimony of Eight Witnesses” is the centerpiece for the nature of their experience. Current arguments for a subjective event read like

a study of U.S. constitutional law that rarely mentions the Constitution. Revisionists virtually set aside this definitive source on examining the plates. In quick review, two main documents are used to transform handling the plates into “a vision of the plates.”⁷⁴ Both documents are flawed—the Burnett letter contains irresponsible hearsay about the Eight Witnesses, and the Turley dialogue begins with the interviewer’s misconception that John Whitmer’s written testimony spoke of the supernatural. Judged by the agreement of 40 other interviews of the Eight Witnesses, the historian should conclude that Turley misquoted John Whitmer on a miraculous viewing of the plates. Ironically, the main point of Turley’s interview is that John Whitmer still upheld his written testimony, twice saying he handled the plates.

Although current critics claim a conflict between later sources and the original published testimony, its accuracy is the stated or implied theme of all interviews with the Eight Witnesses. In 1847 McLellin asked Hiram Page about his faith in the Book of Mormon and received this reply: “[I]t would be doing injustice to myself, and to the work of God of the last days, to say that I could know a thing to be true in 1830, and know the same thing to be false in 1847. To say my mind was so treacherous that I had

forgotten what I saw.”⁷⁵ This answer is seen as evidence that Page did not handle the plates,⁷⁶ but the reverse is true. Page here insists he cannot modify the published statement. A correspondent in Salem, Massachusetts, referred to hearing Hyrum Smith “declare, in this city in public, that what is recorded about the plates, &c. &c. is God’s *solemn truth*.”⁷⁷ Here Hyrum refers to his published testimony in the Book of Mormon, as did John Whitmer repeatedly. E. C. Brand visited him in 1875 and wrote that John “declared that his testimony, as found in the ‘Testimony of Eight Witnesses,’ in the Book of Mormon, is strictly true.”⁷⁸



Gold tablet of Darius I, deposited at Persepolis about 516 bc. Paul R. Cheesman Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

Among 42 statements or personal reports from the Eight Witnesses, 39 percent give some detail of the experience, such as seeing, handling, or lifting. And as discussed, 10 of these mention handling the plates.⁷⁹ The above assertions of Hiram Page, Hyrum Smith, and John Whitmer give a different kind of response, a report of the witness expressly affirming the printed testimony. These simple reaffirmations are 33 percent of the total. Since the original testimony refers to a material event, such restatements do the same and therefore qualify as physical descriptions. Thus over two-thirds of the statements or interviews of the Eight Witnesses are in fact physical descriptions. The remaining interviews are generic assurances of continued belief in the Book of Mormon, which are essentially shorthand reaffirmations of their published testimony.

Finally, advocates of a group illusion for the Eight Witnesses admit that the original declaration “seems to describe a literal event,” and its language “implies a natural, physical experience.”⁸⁰ No evidence to the contrary can be shown to come from the witnesses themselves, so *seems* and *implies* should be deleted from these statements. The well-considered published testimony states that Joseph Smith, not an induced apparition, “has shown unto us”⁸¹ not a box or heavy bundle but “the plates,” with observable color and engravings, with leaves that “we did handle with our hands.” Moreover, a group event is pictured for all these actions, not individual contacts with covered plates over a period of time. The essence of the written testimony is Joseph Smith’s showing of the plates, repeated twice for emphasis, each time followed by how the record was physically examined while being observed. These emphatic redundancies first state that the witnesses saw engravings on the goldlike leaves as they turned them, with the simple restatement that the volume was “seen and hefted.”

The documented affirmations of the Eight Witnesses include personal writings from three who in their own phrases verified their official statement published in 1830. Four of these direct statements are discussed above but are summarized here. As

church historian, John Whitmer wrote that the Three Witnesses knew “for a surety” because the angel supernaturally showed them the plates, and John added by contrast that he was one of eight men “to whom Joseph Smith Jr showed the Plates.”⁸² Similarly, in early church newspapers, John Whitmer⁸³ and Hyrum Smith⁸⁴ mentioned their written testimonies, adding they had both seen and handled the plates. By connecting these actions with their written testimony, these witnesses identified sight and touch as part of the 1829 event when Joseph Smith showed the plates to their group. In addition, Hiram Page wrote to William McLellin, stating he could not change his printed testimony.⁸⁵ In addition to these four testimonies penned by three of the Eight Witnesses, near the end of his life John Whitmer reinforced his prior written comments about seeing and handling the plates, sending three personal letters in answer to inquiries of Reorganized Church missionaries. In mid-1876 he told Mark H. 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 first edition of the Book of Mormon.”⁸⁶ And in late 1876 John Whitmer answered Heman C. Smith, referring to the published declaration and concluding, “*That testimony was, is, and will be true, henceforth and forever.*”⁸⁷ Finally, John Whitmer responded to an 1877 letter “concerning my testimony as recorded in the Book of Mormon.” John wrote: “It is the Same as it was from the beginning, and it is true. . . . I have never denied my testimony as to the Book of Mormon, under any circumstances whatever.”⁸⁸ All of these firsthand statements add no adorning spiritual details but establish a standard of comparison for dozens of reports mediated by interviewers. The above seven personal editorial statements or letters combine with the published “Testimony of Eight Witnesses” in direct evidence that Joseph Smith did possess a finely constructed and engraved book, with multiple leaves of deep yellow metal. ■