

Not many days after the above commandment was given, we four, viz., Martin Harris, David Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery and myself, agreed to retire into the woods, and try to obtain, by fervent and humble prayer, the fulfilment of the promises given in the above revelation—that they should have a view of the plates. We accordingly made choice of a piece of woods convenient to Mr. Whitmer's house, to which we retired, and having knelt down, we began to pray in much faith to Almighty God to bestow upon us a realization of these promises.

According to previous arrangement, I commenced by vocal prayer to our Heavenly Father, and was followed by each of the others in succession. We did not at the first trial, however, obtain any answer or manifestation of divine favor in our behalf. We again observed the same order of prayer, each calling on and praying fervently to God in rotation, but with the same result as before.

Upon this, our second failure, Martin Harris proposed that he should withdraw himself from us, believing, as he expressed himself, that his presence was the cause of our not obtaining what we wished for. He accordingly withdrew from us, and we knelt down again, and had not been many minutes engaged in prayer, when presently we beheld a light above us in the air, of exceeding brightness; and behold, an angel stood before us. In his hands he held the plates which we had been praying for these to have a view of. He turned over the leaves one by one, so that we could see them, and discern the engravings thereon distinctly. He then addressed himself to David Whitmer, and said, "David, blessed is the Lord, and he that keeps His commandments;" when, immediately afterwards, we heard a voice from out of the bright light above us, saying,

Seeking the  
Fulfillment of  
the Promise.

The Order of  
Prayer.

The Visitation  
of the Angel  
—Viewing the  
Plates.

"These plates have been revealed by the power of God, and they have been translated by the power of God. The translation of them which you have seen is correct, and I command you to bear record of what you now see and hear."

I now left David and Oliver, and went in pursuit of Martin Harris, whom I found at a considerable distance, fervently engaged in prayer. He soon told me, however, that he had not yet prevailed with the Lord, and earnestly requested me to join him in prayer, that he also might realize the same blessings which we had just received. We accordingly joined in prayer, and ultimately obtained our desires, for before we had yet finished, the same vision was opened to our view, at least it was again opened to me, and I once more beheld and heard the same things; whilst at the same moment, Martin Harris cried out, apparently in an ecstasy of joy, "'Tis enough; 'tis enough; mine eyes have beheld; mine eyes have beheld;" and jumping up, he shouted, "Hosanna," blessing God, and otherwise rejoiced exceedingly.\*

Martin Harris  
also Views  
the Plates.

\* There are some other details connected with the obtaining of the testimony of the Three Witnesses which ought not to be omitted at this point. The day on which the Three Witnesses received their manifestation the usual morning family service was held at the Whitmer residence, namely, scripture-reading, singing, and prayer. Besides the Whitmer family, the Prophet and his wife and Oliver Cowdery, there were present the Prophet's father and mother and Martin Harris. As soon as Joseph rose from his knees, he approached Martin Harris and said, "with a solemnity that thrills through my veins to this day," says the Prophet's mother, who relates this circumstance: "Martin Harris, you have got to humble yourself before your God this day, that you may obtain a forgiveness of your sins. If you do, it is the will of God that you should look upon the plates in company with Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer." (*History of the Prophet Joseph*, by Lucy Smith, ch. xxxi.) When the former transgression of Martin Harris in the matter of betraying the trust of the Prophet, by which part of the translation of the Book of Mormon had been lost (see p. 21)—when this and the pride and self-will of the man's character are taken into account, there was certainly a necessity for the admonition which the Prophet gave Martin Harris that morning. The circumstance also affords an explanation of Martin's difficulty in obtaining a testimony which, after his withdrawal from them, appears to have been given so readily to Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer.

Another circumstance is related by Lucy Smith which is here *apropos*, namely, the joy of the Prophet in having other witnesses than himself to the truth of the work the Lord was then bringing forth to the world. Speaking of the witnesses returning to the Whitmer home after seeing the plates, she says: "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 the bedroom at the time. On coming in,



*Joseph's Revisions of His Story*

But what of Joseph's careful scrutiny and revision of his history from time to time and the frequent changing of his revelations? Brodie assumes that these too are evidences of deliberate deceit (pp. 21, 141, 289). Joseph Smith did manifest the usual human concern for putting himself and his work in the best possible light, but it seems doubtful that on the whole he sought to misrepresent or bury his past. If so, he went about it in strange ways. He never made any effort to destroy the old versions of his history or his revelations, and he kept far too many records if he had any idea that he would deceive his followers or some day fool his biographer. As has already been pointed out, that history is unusually candid at many critical points. Joseph Smith admitted, for example, that he had been a gold digger, but, quite naturally, played down its significance in his early career since the fact was used by his enemies to discredit him. With respect to the revision of his revelations, it may be that like most Americans and most Mormons, Joseph cared much more for the present than he did for the past, that he was more anxious that the revelation express today's inspiration than that his infallibility as a prophet be maintained. Joseph did have some concern for updating his revelations, keeping those parts that were still relevant, revising them where necessary to meet the current situation. He did this with respect to both organizational and doctrinal matters. But this may only suggest that he did not worship his words, that he was confident of the inspiration flowing into him, that he had an urgency to put down his new insights and get them applied in the Church. He did not seem to be overly bothered by the fact that his revelations needed revision. Unless we assume that Smith was something of a fool, which Brodie seems unwilling to maintain, then it is difficult to believe that he was so short sighted that he would revise his revelations and not try to destroy the old ones. It must be that he had other purposes besides deception in mind.

*The Witnesses to The Book of Mormon*

What of the prophet's story about gold plates, and what about his witnesses? Given Brodie's assumptions, was there not deception here, if not collusion? Brodie maintains that the Prophet exercised some mysterious influence upon the witnesses which caused them to see the plates, thus making Joseph Smith once more the perpetrator of a religious fraud. The evidence is extremely contradictory in this area, but there is a possibility that the three witnesses saw the plates in vision only, for Stephen Burnett in a letter written in 1838, a few weeks after the event, described Martin Harris' testimony to this effect:

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 . . . the last pedestal gave way, in my view our foundations.

Burnett reported Harris saying that he had "hefted the plates repeatedly in a box with only a tablecloth or handkerchief over them, but he never saw them only as he saw a city through a mountain." Nonetheless, Harris said he believed the Book of Mormon to be true. In the revelation given the three witnesses before they viewed the plates they were told, "it is by your faith



that you shall view them" and "ye shall testify that you have seen them, even as my servant Joseph Smith Jr. has seen them, for it is by my power that he has seen them." There is testimony from several independent interviewers, all non-Mormon, that Martin Harris and David Whitmer said they saw the plates with their "spiritual eyes" only. Among others, A. Metcalf and John Gilbert, as well as Reuben P. Harmon and Jesse Townsend, gave testimonies to this effect. This is contradicted, however, by statements like that of David Whitmer in the *Saints Herald* in 1882, "these hands handled the plates, these eyes saw the angel." But Z. H. Gurley elicited from Whitmer a not so positive response to the question, "did you touch them?" His answer was, "We did not touch nor handle the plates." Asked about the table on which the plates rested, Whitmer replied, "the table had the appearance of literal wood as shown in the visions of the glory of God." It does not seem likely from all of this that Joseph Smith had to put undue pressure on the three witnesses. More likely their vision grew out of their own emotional and psychological needs. Men like Cowdery and David Whitmer were too tough minded to be easily pressured by Smith.

So far as the eight witnesses go, William Smith said his father never saw the plates except under a frock. And Stephen Burnett quotes Martin Harris that "the eight witnesses never saw them & hesitated to sign that instrument [their testimony published in the Book of Mormon] for that reason, but were persuaded to do it." Yet John Whitmer told Wilhelm Poulson of Ovid, Idaho, in 1878 that he saw the plates when they were not covered, and he turned the leaves. Hiram Page, another of the eight witnesses, left his peculiar testimony in a letter in the *Ensign of Liberty* in 1848:

As to the Book of Mormon, it 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 have forgotten what I saw, to say that a man of Joseph's ability, who at that time did not know how to pronounce the word Nephi, could write a book of six hundred pages, as correct as the Book of Mormon without supernatural power. And to say that those holy Angels who came and showed themselves to me as I was walking through the field, to confirm me in the work of the Lord of the last days — three of whom came to me afterwards and sang an hymn in their own pure language; yes, it would be treating the God of heaven with contempt, to deny these testimonies.

With only a veiled reference to "what I saw," Page does not say he saw the plates but that angels confirmed him in his faith. Neither does he say that any coercion was placed upon him to secure his testimony. Despite Page's inconsistencies, it is difficult to know what to make of Harris' affirmation that the eight saw no plates in the face of John Whitmer's testimony. The original testimony of these eight men in the Book of Mormon reads somewhat ambiguously, not making clear whether they handled the plates or the "leaves" of the translated manuscript. Thus there are some puzzling aspects to the testimonies of the witnesses. If Burnett's statement is given credence it would appear that Joseph Smith extorted a deceptive testimony from the eight witnesses. But why should John Whitmer and Hiram Page adhere to Mormonism and the Book of Mormon so long if they only gave their testimony reluctantly? It may be that like the three witnesses they expressed a genuine



**Gold Plates display at the LDS Church History Museum across from Temple Square.**

**Why did they not make them all out of metal?**

