

Book of Mormon Witnesses, Part 4: David Whitmer

David Whitmer always maintained a strong testimony about the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon and the encounter he experienced with the angel who showed him the plates.

In 1833 when Missouri vigilantes were harassing the Mormons, a mob of about five hundred men put David's testimony to the test. The mob drove David and several others to the public square, stripped, tarred, and feathered them, aimed their guns then threatened these men to deny the Book of Mormon and confess it to be a fraud, or die instantly. David Whitmer raised his hands and bore witness to these angry men that the Book of Mormon was the Word of God. The mob trembled with fear and let them go. Afterwards, an unbelieving doctor told David that his fearless testimony and the fear that gripped the mob had made him a believer in the Book of Mormon.¹

In an effort to impugn the veracity of the Book of Mormon detractors often resort to attacking the character credibility of the Three Witnesses in an attempt to demonstrate that they were unreliable or unstable. One of the common anti-Mormon "evidences" against David Whitmer's unreliability stems from a statement he wrote in his *Address to All Believers in Christ*:

If you believe my testimony to the Book of Mormon; if you believe that God spake to us three witnesses by his own voice, then I tell you that in June, 1838, God spake to me again by his own voice from the heavens, and told me to 'separate myself from among the Latter-day Saints, for as they sought to do unto me, so should it be done unto them.' In the spring of 1838, the heads of the church and many of the members had gone deep into error and blindness. I had been striving with them for a long time to show them the errors into which they were drifting, and for my labors I received only persecutions.²

Did David Whitmer ever deny his testimony of the Book of Mormon? Is his Book of Mormon testimony suspect because he later claimed that God told him to separate himself from the Mormons?

Shortly after David and other notable Mormons had been excommunicated Sidney Rigdon preached his "Salt Sermon" (which was later criticized by the Brethren) warning dissenters to leave town. Other radical Mormons, such as Sampson Avard, enforced expulsion of those who did not leave on their own. Joseph Smith and the Twelve criticized Rigdon's aggressive speeches as well as the secret and unsanctioned actions of Avard.³ As Anderson noted, "David Whitmer could have received true spiritual comfort because of the unjust methods that his former associates were using against him...."⁴ Whitmer claims that God told him to separate himself from the Latter-day Saints. This could easily have been inspired direction. Confrontation with some of the more radical characters within the Church (such as Sampson) might

have caused Whitmer serious harm (physical, emotional, or spiritual). However Whitmer understood this direction from God, it did not conflict with his testimony of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon.

David Whitmer left the Church in 1838 but continued to proclaim and assert his testimony and the truthfulness of what he had seen and heard. Although Whitmer never returned to Mormonism, in the fifty years he lived outside of the Church he insisted that he knew the Book of Mormon was divinely revealed. Anyone seriously interested in Whitmer's testimony should read Lyndon W. Cook's, *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness*.⁵ Cook documents seventy-two interviews with Whitmer concerning his experience with the angel and plates – the experience upon which his Book of Mormon testimony is based. All seventy-two interviews took place *after* David had left the Church. If he had lost his testimony following his excommunication, he would have had ample opportunity to deny his earlier proclamation. Instead, however, we find that Whitmer continued to assert its truthfulness.

Throughout Richmond, Missouri, the non-Mormons knew David Whitmer as an honest and trustworthy citizen. When one anti-Mormon lectured in David's hometown, branding David as disreputable, the local (non-Mormon) paper responded with "a spirited front-page editorial unsympathetic with Mormonism but insistent on 'the forty six years of private citizenship on the part of David Whitmer, in Richmond, without stain or blemish.'"⁶

...The following year the editor penned a tribute on the eightieth birthday of David Whitmer, who "with no regrets for the past" still "reiterates that he saw the glory of the angel."

This is the critical issue of the life of David Whitmer. During fifty years in non-Mormon society, he insisted with the fervor of his youth that he knew that the Book of Mormon was divinely revealed. Relatively few people in Richmond could wholly accept such testimony, but none doubted his intelligence or complete honesty.⁷

When another anti-Mormon published an article claiming that David had denied his testimony, David printed a "proclamation" testifying to the truth of the Book of Mormon and reiterating the fact that *he had never denied that testimony*. He wrote:

It is recorded in the American Cyclopedias and the Encyclopedia Britannica, that I, David Whitmer, have denied my testimony as one of the Three Witnesses to the divinity of the Book of Mormon; and that the two other witnesses, Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris, denied their testimony to that book.

I will say once more to all mankind, that I have never at any time denied that testimony or any part thereof. I also testify to the world, that neither Oliver Cowdery nor Martin Harris ever at any time denied their testimony. They both died affirming the truth of the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon.⁸

Attached to Whitmer's proclamation was an accompanying statement signed by twenty-two of Richmond's political, business, and professional leaders who certified that they had been "long and intimately acquainted" with Whitmer and knew him to be "a man of the highest integrity and of undoubted truth and veracity."⁹

A few days before he died an article in the *Chicago Tribune* read:

David Whitmer, the last one of the three witnesses to the truth of the Book of Mormon, is now in a dying condition at his home in Richmond. Last evening he called the family and friends to his bedside, and bore his testimony to the truth of the Book of Mormon and the Bible.¹⁰

Following his death the *Richmond Conservator* wrote:

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 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....

On Monday morning he again called those present to his bedside, and told them that he had seen another vision which reconfirmed the divinity of the "Book of Mormon," and said that he had seen Christ in the fullness of his glory and majesty, sitting upon his great white throne in heaven waiting to receive his children.¹¹

The *Richmond Democrat* also added this comment:

"Skeptics may laugh and scoff if they will, but no man can listen to Mr. Whitmer as he talks of his interview with the Angel of the Lord, without being most forcibly convinced that he has heard an honest man tell what he honestly believes to be true."¹²

Like Oliver Cowdery, and Martin Harris, David Whitmer bore the testimony to the truthfulness of reality of his encounter with the angel and the authenticity of the Book of Mormon until the day he died. Book of Mormon critics have not been able to impugn their testimonies but have instead

resorted to character assassination. As history demonstrates, however, the honesty, integrity and reliability of these witnesses confound the critics every bit as much as the testimony of the three witnesses confounds those who refuse to accept the revealed word of God.



For more details on this topic see
<http://www.mormonfortress.com/whitmer1.html>

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¹ Richard L. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1981), 83–84.

² David Whitmer, *An Address To All Believers in Christ: By A Witness to the Divine Authenticity of The Book of Mormon* (Richmond, Missouri, 1887), 27.

³ Anderson, 163–164.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Lyndon W. Cook ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Grandin Book Company, 1993).

⁶ Anderson, 74.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Whitmer, 8; italics added.

⁹ Ibid., 9–10.

¹⁰ *Chicago Tribune* Correspondent 23 January 1888, quoted in Cook, 220.)

¹¹ *Richmond Conservator* Report, 26 January 1888, quoted in Cook, 226.)

¹² *Richmond Democrat*, Vol. 16, No. 6 (February 2, 1888), quoted in Eldin Ricks, *The Case of the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1971), 16.