An important episode associated with the translation and coming forth of the Book of Mormon was the experience of two sets of witnesses—eleven total—who, among other things, claimed to have actually seen the gold plates, which were delivered by the angel Moroni to Joseph Smith. Following their respective experiences, the witnesses signed their names to a declaration testifying of the truthfulness of what they had seen and heard. However, skeptics who consider the Prophet’s claims of being visited by divine personages and possessing ancient sacred plates to be a pretentious and deceptive hoax conclude that the experience and testimonies of the Book of Mormon witnesses could not be genuine either. In their attempts to explain away what actually occurred, skeptics and critics have put forward what essentially consists of psychological explanations to demonstrate that what the witnesses actually experienced was nothing more than a form of mental illusion. By so doing, they draw the conclusion that the events surrounding the coming forth of the Book of Mormon were part of a manufactured scheme by Joseph Smith to conjure individuals into believing his claims. But historical evidence does not support these claims, and the testimonies of the witnesses of the plates remain a powerful confirmation of their existence.

While engaged in the translation of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith learned from several passages in the record that witnesses selected to view the plates would testify to their authenticity. For example, a passage in the book of Ether indicated that the translator would be able to show the gold plates and other ancient artifacts to those who would “assist to bring forth this work.” The scriptural text also specified the precise number: “And unto
three shall they be shown by the power of God; wherefore they shall know of a surety that these things are true. And in the mouth of three witnesses shall these things be established; and the testimony of three and this work . . . shall . . . [show] forth the power of God and also his word." Additional passages in the ancient record reiterated a similar injunction: “Wherefore, at that day when the book shall be delivered unto the man of whom I have spoken, the book shall be hid from the eyes of the world, that the eyes of none shall behold it save it be that three witnesses shall behold it, by the power of God, besides him to whom the book shall be delivered; and they shall testify to the truth of the book and the things therein.”

The Three Witnesses

Each of the individuals chosen to be the primary witnesses—Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer—received their designation by revelation. Harris was the first witness appointed. During the initial months of the translation (ca. April 12–June 14, 1828), Harris acted as a scribe to the Prophet before losing 116 pages of the translated manuscript. In March 1829, Harris visited Joseph Smith in Harmony, Pennsylvania, where he requested the privilege of seeing the plates and other ancient relics in the Prophet’s possession. In spite of his previous negligence, Joseph Smith received a revelation informing Harris that if he humbled himself he would be granted “a view of the things which he desires to see.” However, an additional mandate was given. After viewing the relics, he would be under the obligation of bearing testimony of what he experienced: “And then he shall say unto the people of this generation: I have seen the things which the Lord hath shown unto Joseph Smith, Jun., and I know of a surety that they are true, for I have seen them, for they have been shown unto me by the power of God and not of man.”

On April 5, 1829, Oliver Cowdery, who had become acquainted with the Smith family in Manchester, New York, arrived in Harmony in company with Samuel Smith, Joseph Smith’s younger brother, to offer his assistance. Two days later, the Prophet resumed the translation of the plates in earnest, with Oliver as the principal scribe for the second phase of the translation. In the first revelation received by Joseph Smith later that month in behalf of Oliver, two brief phrases possibly allude to his selection as one of the primary witnesses: “In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established” and “by the testimony which shall be given.”

While in Harmony, Oliver communicated with a close acquaintance, David Whitmer, who resided in Fayette, New York, about the work of translation. In May, because of heightened harassment and persecution against him and Joseph, Oliver wrote David to ask if they could finish the translation at the home of Peter Whitmer Sr., David’s father. David agreed, and in
late May or early June he traveled to Harmony and transported the translator and the scribe to Fayette.

It did not take David Whitmer long to recognize Joseph Smith’s intuitive revelatory gift and request that the Prophet pronounce a revelation in his behalf. Like the first revelation given to Oliver, the revelation to David also implied that he would be selected as one of the Book of Mormon witnesses. A portion reads, “If you shall ask the Father in my name, in faith believing, . . . you may stand as a witness of the things of which you shall both hear and see.”

At or near the completion of the translation in late June 1829, Joseph Smith sought to comply with the revelatory directives in the Book of Mormon regarding the requirement that three witnesses be chosen to view the record and at the same time fulfill the promises given to Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer, who had been specifically singled out in the Prophet’s revelations for that privilege. Joseph later recalled that the three men were so eager to see the plates for themselves that they became “very solicitous, and teazed [sic] me so much, that at length I complied and through the Urim and Thummim I obtained [the word] of the Lord for them.”

The revelation not only promised them a view of the plates but also a view of the breastplate and the spectacles (sometimes referred to as the Nephite interpreters), the sword of Laban, and the Liahona—the miraculous directors given to Lehi in the wilderness. However, several stipulations were also given: In order to see the sacred relics, the witnesses would have to rely upon the word of God “with full purpose of heart,” and exercise faith, for they were told, “It is by your faith that you shall obtain a view of them.” But this was not all: “And after . . . you have obtained faith, and have seen them with your eyes, you shall testify of them, by the power of God; and this you shall do that my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., may not be destroyed, that I may bring about my righteous purposes unto the children of men in this work.”

Not long after this directive was given, the promised witness was granted. Joseph, Oliver, David, and Martin secluded themselves in a wooded area a short distance from the Whitmer home. Upon finding an appropriate location, the party knelt down, whereupon Joseph commenced praying in behalf of the group, followed by each of the others in turn. This pattern was repeated a second time, but nothing transpired, at which time Martin “proposed that he should withdraw himself from us, believing . . . that his presence was the cause of our not obtaining the object of our desires at that time.” Shortly after Martin’s departure, an exceedingly bright light appeared and an angel stood before the other men: “In his hands he held the plates we had been praying . . . to have a view of,” the Prophet recorded. “He turned over the plates one by one so that we could see them, and discern
the engravings thereon distinctly.” The voice of Jesus Christ was also heard: “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 & hear.” After the vision closed, Joseph Smith went in search of Martin. “I found [him] at a considerable distance,” Joseph reported, “fervently engaged in prayer [and said] 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.” Moments later “the same vision was again opened,” and Joseph and Martin saw a similar manifestation and heard the same heavenly injunction given previously to the others.10

Lucy Mack Smith, who was present at the Peter Whitmer Sr. home at the time the witnesses returned after experiencing their vision, wrote:

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 know 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.11

In an interview conducted by LDS Apostles Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith with David Whitmer at his home in Richmond, Missouri, in September 1878, Whitmer provided a number of significant details regarding the witnesses’ experience:

D. W. It was in June, 1829—the latter part of the month . . . the angel showed us (the three witnesses) the plates, as I suppose to fulfill the words of the book itself. Martin Harris was not with us at the time, he obtained a view of them 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, the plates of the Book of Ether, the plates containing the records of the wickedness and secret combination 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 . . . but in the midst of this light . . . there appeared as it were, a table with many records of plates upon it, besides the plates of the Book of Mormon, also the Sword of Laban, the directors—i.e., the ball which Lehi had, and the interpreters. I saw them just as plain as I see this bed . . . 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.\textsuperscript{12}

Significantly, Whitmer stated he and the others saw additional plates on a table besides the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated. He also specifically stated that they saw Laban’s sword, the Liahona, and the interpreters—artifacts the witnesses were promised they would be permitted to view,\textsuperscript{13} although no mention was made of the breastplate. Furthermore, he detailed the unusual light that surrounded them during the vision. And finally, he emphatically declared that they each heard an audible voice, even that of the resurrected Jesus Christ, affirming that the translation given by Joseph Smith was correct.

\section*{The Eight Witnesses}

Even though the vision given to Cowdery, Whitmer, and Harris fulfilled the scriptural promise in the Book of Mormon that the record would be shown to three witnesses by the power of God, two passages in the sacred text suggested that additional witnesses might also have a view of the plates. Speaking to the translator, Moroni wrote, “And behold, ye may be privileged that ye may show the plates unto those who shall assist to bring forth this work.”\textsuperscript{14} And Nephi added, “And there is none other which shall view it, save it be a few according to the will of God.”\textsuperscript{15} Given this additional exception, Joseph Smith concluded that after the plates were shown to the Three Witnesses, it would be permissible for him to allow a few others to see the sacred record. He selected his father (Joseph Sr.) and his two adult brothers Hyrum and Samuel. The remaining witnesses came from the Whitmer family—brothers Christian, Jacob, John, Peter Jr., and Hiram Page, a brother-in-law—each of whom had supported and accommodated the Prophet and Oliver Cowdery during the final month of the translation at the Whitmer home.

The viewing of the plates by the Eight Witnesses was considerably less dramatic but exceptionally significant nonetheless. A few days following the Three Witnesses’ manifestation, Joseph, Oliver, and several members of the Whitmer family came to Manchester to look into making arrangements
to have the book printed when, according to Lucy Mack Smith, “all the male part of the company, with my husband, Samuel and Hyrum, retired to a place where the family were in the habit of offering up their secret devotions to God.” She continued, “Here it was, that those eight witnesses, whose names are recorded in the Book of Mormon, looked upon them, and handled them.”

In 1878, P. Wilhelm Poulson interviewed John Whitmer, the last surviving member of the Eight Witnesses, and asked him a series of questions regarding what he recalled about seeing the plates. A portion of the interview reads:

I [Poulson] said: I am aware that your name is affixed to the testimony in the Book of Mormon, that you saw the plates?
He [Whitmer]—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 engraved 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 [Joseph Smith] handed them uncovered into our hands, and we turned the leaves sufficiently to satisfy us.

Following this incident, Joseph Smith returned the plates and other sacred relics to the angel Moroni.

Shortly after seeing the plates, both the Three and the Eight Witnesses prepared formal statements attesting to the truthfulness and reality of what they experienced. Regarding the written declaration made by the Three Witnesses, Joseph Smith’s history states, “Having thus through the mercy of God, obtained these glorious manifestations, it now remained for these three individuals to fulfil the commandment which they had received, viz: to bear record of these things; in order to accomplish which, they drew up and subscribed the following document.” David Whitmer later said that he, Oliver, and Martin “each signed his own name” to the document. The fact
that each of the Three Witnesses personally signed his name to the official declaration suggests that the Eight Witnesses may have done the same and attached their handwritten signatures to their statement. Unfortunately, no document containing the actual signatures of either of two groups of witnesses is known to exist. But evidence suggests that the two statements, along with the personal signatures by each of the witnesses, were likely included at the very end of the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon. However, since most of the original manuscript did not survive, this would explain why the transcription of the original version of the testimonies given by both the Three Witnesses and the Eight Witnesses and their personal signatures no longer exists. Significantly, a word-for-word transcription of both the testimony of the Three Witnesses and that of the Eight Witnesses and their individual names appears at the end of the manuscript of the printer’s copy of the Book of Mormon in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery. Critics have argued that Cowdery actually “signed” their names for them, when in actuality all he was doing was copying the text and their signatures from the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon. The fact that both of the witnesses’ testimonies were added at the end of the original Book of Mormon manuscript as well as the printer’s copy would also explain why they appear on the last two pages of the first edition of the Book of Mormon, published in 1830.20

In their declaration, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris subscribe to the following statements: (1) their experience was a divine manifestation (namely, it was given to them “by the power of God, and not of man”), (2) an angel showed them the Book of Mormon plates and the engravings, and (3) the voice of God (Jesus Christ) was heard declaring that the translation of the sacred record was true and that they must bear testimony of what they had both seen and heard. In their declaration, the Eight Witnesses certify to the following: (1) Joseph Smith showed them the plates (as distinguished from the Three Witnesses, who were shown the plates by an angel), (2) the plates had the appearance of gold and were an “ancient work” of “curious workmanship,” and (3) they saw the engravings, handled the leaves, and lifted the plates.

**Additional Witnesses**

In addition to Joseph Smith and the eleven witnesses seeing the plates, David Whitmer stated on at least three different occasions that in June 1829, soon after the Prophet and Oliver Cowdery arrived at the Peter Whitmer Sr. home in Fayette, New York, to work on the translation, Mary Whitmer, David’s mother, was shown the plates by the angel.21

Several Smith family members acknowledged that Joseph had the plates in his possession, although they were always covered, and the family was never permitted to see them. After retrieving the plates from the
Hill Cumorah, the Prophet’s father, mother, and sister Katherine were each reported to have handled the plates through a linen frock Joseph had concealed them in. Emma said she moved the plates from place to place while doing housework. “The plates often lay on the table . . . wrapped in a small linen table cloth.” She also felt the plates through the fabric and even traced 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.” William Smith, the Prophet’s younger brother, said that although he never saw the plates uncovered, he “handled them and hefted them while wrapped in a tow frock and judged them to have weighed about sixty pounds.”

Secular Explanations

Some secularists, or those who do not believe in the divine, have explained the experience of the Three Witnesses as being some sort of mental delusion, a metaphysical mystical abnormality, a psychological fantasy, or perhaps more simply, religious hypnosis or hallucination. To these types of subjective individuals, spiritual manifestations such as those experienced by Joseph Smith and his associates cannot be considered legitimate because they represent a supernatural manifestation that cannot be proven. These people therefore have concluded that the experience of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon had to have been psychologically induced.

One of the first individuals to propose the notion that Joseph Smith’s spiritual manifestations were psychologically centered was I. Woodbridge Riley, a late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century academic who specialized in philosophy and psychology. Riley wrote and authored The Founder of Mormonism: A Psychological Study of Joseph Smith, which was published in 1903. To secular theorists such as Riley, the Prophet’s visionary experiences were peculiar psychological experiences that resulted from a combination of physical illnesses and abnormalities; psychological elements stemming from his religious, cultural, and social environment and experiences; and possible psychosomatic mental disorders brought about by traumatic experiences from his childhood and youth.

In his assessment of the vision experienced by Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris, Riley categorized it as a “subjective hallucination, induced by hypnotic suggestion.” Joseph Smith, the facilitator, provided “repetition, steady attention, absence of mistrust, self-surrender to the will of the principal,—all the requisites are present.” The result, he concluded, was a “psychic mirage, complete in every detail.” In the case of the Eight Witnesses, Riley contended their vision was “collective hypnotization,” which produced a “hallucination or an illusion . . . of an object where in reality there is nothing, or the false interpretation of some existing external object.”
In 1945, historian Fawn M. Brodie published *No Man Knows My History*, a psychoanalytical biography of Joseph Smith. In much the same manner as Riley's, Brodie's work was underscored with psychological explanations for the Prophet's religious claims and spiritual experiences. Given this context, it should not be surprising that in her analysis of Cowdery, Whittmer, and Harris seeing the angel and the ancient artifacts and hearing the heavenly voice, Brodie asserted that the three men were “victims of Joseph's unconscious but positive talent at hypnosis.”

Perhaps not surprising is the fact that Brodie offered no expanded commentary about what was experienced by the Eight Witnesses, other than that Joseph was “not content with the testimony of the three witnesses,” so a second testimony was drafted.

More recently, Dan Vogel, an ardent critic of Joseph Smith and early Mormonism, took a page—actually many pages—out of Riley’s and Brodie’s books, so his argument was not new, although he attempted to bolster it with more historical sources. Vogel also propounded hypnosis as a possible explanation regarding how Joseph Smith was able to generate artificial spiritual manifestations, including that experienced by the Three Witnesses, but Vogel appeared to lean more to the experience being a hallucination. Vogel also made the case that group hallucination was possible, which he believed explains how Oliver, David, and Martin could each claim to have all seen the same scenes and objects in their so-called “vision.” But Vogel added another interesting twist to the witnesses’ story. Citing statements given later by several of the Eight Witnesses and others who interviewed or interrogated them, Vogel maintained that the collective viewing of the plates by the eight men was also extrasensory, much like that of the Three Witnesses. Vogel also believed that Joseph Smith made a set of fake tin plates, which he allowed the witnesses to lift in a box or handle while covered (either on a previous occasion or on the occasion of their shared witness experience), but the actual viewing of the plates was “visionary.” It was not solely “physical,” as their written testimony maintains.

Grant Palmer, another critic, came to an interesting conclusion about the gold plates and what the witnesses actually saw. Palmer advanced the theory that the gold plates were not even a genuine relic from a previous ancient civilization, but a supernatural treasure that belonged “to another world rather than this one.” Palmer also believed the Eight Witnesses “saw and scrutinized the plates in a mind vision,” but unlike Vogel, who asserted that the eight men experienced a psychic encounter, Palmer considered it to have been an authentic, spiritual one.

Religious opponents who speculate that what the Three or Eight Witnesses saw was merely some sort of hypnotic trance or psychic hallucination tend to support their argument by pointing out that the witnesses (and more precisely the Three Witnesses) sometimes described seeing the plates and other artifacts with their “spiritual eyes.” In other words, they didn’t really
see them in a conscious state. While they did indeed occasionally speak of seeing the plates in a spiritual sense, we learn from scripture that individuals who experience heavenly visions or divine manifestations undergo a spiritual transformation, sometimes referred to as being transfigured or “quickened by the Spirit of God” so they can actually “see” or observe the divine. For example, before receiving the vision of the degrees of glory, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon recorded, “By the power of the Spirit our eyes were opened and our understandings were enlightened, so as to see and understand the things of God.” At the same time, this is not to suggest that the appearance of Moroni and his showing the plates to Oliver, David, and Martin completely excluded any type of physical element. From their personal descriptions and statements, each one clearly acknowledged the spiritual aspects of the manifestation but was also aware of the present surroundings and the physical conditions. It was a spiritual and physical reality. They saw and heard things in a spiritual dimension, but at the same time the angel and the plates and other artifacts were also physically present.

Speaking of those who do not believe in spiritual or divine manifestations, the Apostle Paul taught, “But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” Modern naturalistic thinkers would also discount Moses’s divine encounters with Jehovah; Peter, James, and John’s theophany on the Mount of Transfiguration; Stephen’s heavenly vision of God the Father and the Son; and Paul’s dramatic encounter with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus. When it comes to his own remarkable visionary claims, Joseph Smith is in good company.

**Alternate Explanations are Flawed**

There is no evidence that Joseph Smith ever engaged others in hypnotic activity, conjured up a trance or mental illusion, or possessed such mesmerizing gifts that allowed him to subjugate individuals into coming under some mystic group trance or spell. If the twenty-three-year-old Prophet had engaged in any kind of mind control with the witnesses—each of whom was a rational, sensible individual—any one of them could have recognized what took place; and when questioned about their experience, these men likely would have mentioned that Joseph Smith employed some type of manipulation, especially those who later became disillusioned with Mormonism. But none of the eleven men ever talked about or suggested that anything of the kind ever took place. Such accusations are completely nonexistent in the well-documented record of Joseph Smith’s life because nothing of the sort ever occurred.

Recognizing the notable deficiencies in the psychological arguments put forward by the critics regarding the experience and testimony of the Three Witnesses, noted LDS scholar Richard L. Bushman has observed
that doubters still cannot find any “plausible cause” to explain “the elaborate vision.” The same could be said about the secularist arguments put forward regarding the experience of the Eight Witnesses of seeing and handling the plates. Furthermore, close scrutiny by LDS scholars of the available historical documents and sources associated with the experiences and testimonies provided by the Book of Mormon witnesses shows that many of the explanations made by those critical of Mormonism are incongruent with the firsthand accounts made by the witnesses themselves. This is evident in the fact that one of the fatal flaws skeptical writers have made in their historical interpretations is that they have tended to accept hearsay reports by the witnesses (i.e., reports of what was purportedly said by a witness, some of which obscure firsthand statements) above the actual personal accounts.

**Significance of the Testimonies of the Witnesses**

In late 1837 and early 1838, four of the eleven witnesses to the Book of Mormon—Martin Harris, John Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer—were formally cut off from the Church, while Jacob Whitmer and Hiram Page became disaffected and left on their own. Two of these six eventually returned to the Church: Cowdery in 1848 and Harris in 1875. However, in spite of the personal objections they may have had toward Joseph Smith or the Church following their separation from Mormonism, none of these men ever asserted that Joseph Smith was a religious charlatan or deceiver, nor did they recant or revoke their testimony regarding the Book of Mormon or declare the sacred record to be a sham.

Richard Lloyd Anderson, the leading scholar on the witnesses, has written, “Perhaps their later alienation makes them even more credible witnesses, for no collusion could have withstood their years of separation from the Church and from each other.” He then concludes, “The testimonies of the Three and Eight Witnesses balance the supernatural and the natural, the one stressing the angel and heavenly voice, the other, the existence of the tangible record on gold plates. To the end of their lives, each of the Three said he had seen the plates, and each of the Eight insisted that he had handled them.”

Critics will continue to cry foul and insist that Joseph Smith was a cunning manipulator of the witnesses who were victims of his deception. However, to individuals whose hearts and minds are open and attuned to the divine and who believe in spiritual manifestations and communication from heaven, the collective testimonies of the Three and Eight Witnesses stand as a powerful affirmation of the existence of gold plates and the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon as another testament of Jesus Christ.
Additional Resources


About the Author
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Notes
2. 2 Nephi 27:12; see also 2 Nephi 11:3.
The Testimonies of the Book of Mormon Witnesses


8. D&C 17:1. In addition to seeing the Book of Mormon plates, David Whitmer stated on numerous occasions that the angel also showed them the breastplate, the spectacles, the sword of Laban, the Liahona, and even additional plates. See Lyndon W. Cook, ed., David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness (Orem, UT: Grandin Book, 1991), 11, 15, 20, 26, 34, 40, 86, 108, 127, 181, 184, 186, 198, 213.


13. See Ether 5:2.


17. JSP, H1:320 (“Draft 2”); emphasis added.


21. Riley, Founder of Mormonism, 228.


32. See D&C 68:11–12.

33. D&C 76:12, 19; see also D&C 110:1; Moses 1:11.

34. 1 Corinthians 2:14.
