

Mary Whitmer, 12th witness to the Book of Mormon

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Most Latter-day Saints are aware of the testimonies of the Three Witnesses and the Eight Witnesses to the Book of Mormon. But these 11 men, impressive as they are, were not the only people besides Joseph Smith who had direct encounters with the gold plates. David Whitmer, for example, one of the Three Witnesses, related that his mother, Mary Musselman Whitmer, also saw the plates, quite independently of anybody else and under the most matter-of-fact circumstances.

It was through David, the fourth of nine children, that the entire family of Peter Whitmer Sr. had become acquainted with Joseph Smith in 1828. Eventually, a substantial part of the translation of the Book of Mormon occurred at the Peter Whitmer farm near Fayette, N.Y. (Later, on April 6, 1830, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would be officially organized there.) During that period, the place was a hive of activity; Joseph Smith and his wife, Emma, and Oliver Cowdery were boarding with the Whitmers, and other people (including curiosity-seekers) were constantly coming and going. Much of the burden of coping with them fell upon Peter's wife, Mary.

"My father and mother had a large family of their own," David later explained. "The addition to it therefore of Joseph, his wife, Emma, and Oliver very greatly increased the toil and anxiety of my mother. And although she had never complained, she had sometimes felt that her labor was too much, or at least she was perhaps beginning to feel so."

One day, though, probably in June 1829, when she was going out to milk the cows in the family barn — where, David happened to know, the plates were concealed at the time — she met an "old man," as she described him, who said to her, in David's account of the story, "You have been very faithful and diligent in your labors, but you are tired because of the increase of your toil; it is proper therefore that you should receive a witness that your faith may be strengthened."

“Thereupon,” David said, “he showed her the plates.” And this unexpected encounter “completely removed” her feeling of being overwhelmed, said her son, “and nerved her up for her increased responsibilities.”

Afterwards, Mary was able to describe the plates in detail. John C. Whitmer, her grandson, reported that he himself had heard his grandmother tell of this event several times. He summarized her experience as follows:

“She met a stranger carrying something on his back that looked like a knapsack. At first she was a little afraid of him, but when he spoke to her in a kind, friendly tone and began to explain to her the nature of the work which was going on in her house (that is, the translation of the Book of Mormon), she was filled with unexpressible (sic) joy and satisfaction. He then untied his knapsack and showed her a bundle of plates, which in size and appearance corresponded with the description subsequently given by the witnesses to the Book of Mormon. This strange person turned the leaves of the book of plates over, leaf after leaf, and also showed her the engravings upon them; after which he told her to be patient and faithful in bearing her burden a little longer, promising that if she would do so, she should be blessed; and her reward would be sure, if she proved faithful to the end. The personage then suddenly vanished with the plates, and where he went, she could not tell.”

Five of Mary Whitmer’s sons became official witnesses of the Book of Mormon. Oliver Cowdery, one of the Three Witnesses and the principal scribe during its dictation, baptized her into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Seneca Lake on April 18, 1830, when the church was less than two weeks old, and he married her daughter, Elizabeth Ann, in December 1832. The Whitmers gathered to Missouri with the Latter-day Saints, and there Mary died at 78 years of age in 1856, still a faithful believer in the divine origin of the gold plates and the book that had been translated from them.

According to Jesus, “In the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established” (Matthew 18:16). Plainly, the Lord still follows this pattern, and Mary Whitmer can justly be counted the 12th witness to the Book of Mormon.

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