

**DAVID WHITMER INTERVIEWS**  
**A Restoration Witness**

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## Introduction

A special significance among Mormons belongs to David Whitmer. He was an eyewitness of the founding of Mormonism, and, naturally, his accounts of its origin provide pertinent information and appropriately carry considerable weight. What is particularly significant is that even though he broke with Joseph Smith within ten years of his first involvement, and became one of the Prophet's detractors, his testimony continues to be respected by the faithful today. His account of seeing the gold plates and of beholding an angel of God is included in every printed copy of the Book of Mormon and is an essential aspect of Mormon history.

A native of Pennsylvania, Whitmer was brought up on the strictest notions of honor and right. His parents were of German stock, hard-working, God-fearing, and rigid disciplinarians. The Whitmer family moved to Fayette, New York, when David was four years old. It was there, in the cradle of Mormonism, that the future witness grew up. He was a man of clear intellect, a little culture, strong will, and an appreciation of all that is noble and self-sacrificing. At maturity he stood five feet ten inches tall, weighed one hundred fifty pounds, and had prominent facial features—a large head and nose, dark eyes, and a full head of hair.

The unmarried David was twenty-four years old when he first met Joseph Smith in Harmony, Pennsylvania, in the early summer of 1829. It was the beginning of a lifetime commitment to Mormonism. Whitmer's sudden attraction to the young prophet can be explained by his early appraisal of the Mormon seer and by a host of numinous experiences that occurred in June 1829, which literally transformed his life.

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The Prophet apparently inspired confidence through his self-possession and his self-knowledge. However, Whitmer was particularly impressed that the founder of Mormonism was a "very humble and meek man" who "did the will of the Lord" (p. 23). Similarly, David Whitmer was completely struck with the Prophet's "power with God, to get any information he wished" (p. 192). For this future witness, the presence of miracles—the intervention of God in the process of the natural order—was an essential part of the drama of restoration in which Joseph Smith played a decisive role. Significantly, to Whitmer, these miracles were "real in fact" (p. 256). All his life he insisted that his faith and knowledge were the result of sense experiences, not based on some form of transcendentalism.<sup>1</sup> The printed testimony of David Whitmer (and the other witnesses), contained in the Book of Mormon, represents only one of the many miracles of the Restoration which he experienced first hand. Repeatedly, he offered his interviewers fragments of other supernatural experiences. These less publicized accounts—told in a series of flashbacks, crucial scenes of epiphany and self-discovery—were equally impressive to the witness, and must be seen in connection with the more frequently printed evidence to fully appreciate this eyewitness's testimony.

The combined effect of the interviews included in this volume is to show that the Prophet's miraculous powers were clearly a matter of utmost importance to David Whitmer and surely a foundation for his faith (see p. 213). Letters from Whitmer's friend, Oliver Cowdery, who had gone to northern Pennsylvania to meet Joseph Smith, caused him to shift from quiescence to active interest in the events of the Restoration. In his correspondence, Cowdery assured David Whitmer that Joseph Smith did, in fact, have in his possession gold plates containing ancient engravings. Also,

<sup>1</sup> Martin Harris on one or more occasions seemed to suggest that his experience as a witness was simply an apparition—a visible but immaterial appearance of the angel and the artifacts. See James H. Moyle's comment on this, pp. 166-167.

that the seer had supernatural powers of translation and could successfully inquire and obtain knowledge regarding antiquity. Furthermore, Cowdery characterized the Prophet as something of a mentalist who had "told him secrets of his life that he knew could not be known to any person but himself" (p. 114). One of Cowdery's letters requested Whitmer "to take a team and fetch Joseph and himself to my father's house, in Fayette, Seneca County, New York, where they would continue the translation" of the gold plates (p. 114).

It was important to Whitmer's faith that no sooner had he decided to assist the Mormon prophet that he himself became a beneficiary of supernatural powers. He had concluded to leave for Pennsylvania as soon as his spring plowing had been completed. But, one morning, when he found that someone had mysteriously plowed five acres of his field during the night, Whitmer dropped everything and left without delay. "It was a testimony to me," he remembered vividly, "that I did not have any business to put off going after Joseph" (p. 51).

Other wonders followed. When Whitmer arrived in Harmony, Oliver came out to meet him some distance from the house. According to David's oft-repeated report, "Oliver told me that Joseph had informed him when I started from home, where I had stopped the first night, how I read the sign at the tavern, where I stopped the next night, etc., and that I would be there that day before dinner . . . all of which was exactly as Joseph had told Oliver, at which I was greatly astonished" (emphasis added, see p. 41).

The trio started for Fayette, a two and a half day's wagon ride, about June 1st, 1829. Along the way, a peculiar thing happened. An elderly gentleman, "about 5 feet 10,

<sup>2</sup> Apparently this information was written down by Oliver Cowdery in a book (see p. 114), which if correct, would constitute the earliest written history of Mormonism. According to Whitmer, Joseph Smith obtained the information regarding the particulars of his trip by looking in a seer stone (p. 114).



heavy Set & on his back an old fashioned Army knapsack Straped over his Shoulders & Something Square in it, walked up alongside of the wagon. Whitmer reined his team and asked if the old man wanted a ride. Wiping the sweat from his face, the stranger declined the offer, saying, "I am going across to the hill Cumorah." As David started his horses, the three men felt the presence of a supernatural power and immediately directed their attention toward the stranger. But they "could see nothing of him, all around was clear." Oliver and David promptly implored Joseph Smith to "ask the Lord about it." So the young seer sought an answer from God (apparently with the aid of a seer stone). And, according to Whitmer, the Prophet's face became "pale, almost transparent" while in supplication (p. 182). Presently, the Prophet informed them that the stranger was, in fact, "one of the Nephites," disguised as an elderly-looking man and that "he had the plates in the knapsack" (pp. 13, 182).

At the Whitmer farm, in Fayette, another round of miracles occurred. And these marvelous experiences succeeded in galvanizing the support of the whole Whitmer clan for Joseph Smith. Soon after David Whitmer and his guests arrived in Fayette, "they were impressed" that the stranger encountered along the way from Pennsylvania was under one of the beds in the Peter Whitmer, Sr., home, and "informed [by Joseph Smith] that it was so" (p. 13). Then, the following morning, Mary Whitmer, David's mother, had a face-to-face meeting with the stranger. Unfortunately, we do not have Mrs. Whitmer's own account of her experience, but the second-hand report of her son, David. In any case, as she was going to the shed to milk the cows, she was met by the same old man who said to her, "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" (p. 42). He then "took the plates from a box and showed

them to her." She reported to her son that they were "fastened with rings" and that he "turned the leaves over" so she could see them. According to David, "this was a satisfaction to her" (p. 13).

Perhaps the most curious of all of the miracles was the translation process performed by the Prophet with the use of an oval-shaped, chocolate-colored seer stone, a little larger than an egg, though more flat. According to Whitmer, because 116 pages of Book of Mormon manuscript were carelessly lost in 1828, the gold plates and the interpreters (later called urim and thummim) were taken away from Joseph Smith by an angel. Therefore, the young seer had to accomplish the tedious work of translation by other means (p. 157). This was done by placing a stone into the crown of a hat and by Joseph Smith's placing his face into the hat, so as to close out the light. By this process he "would see, not the stone, but what appeared like an oblong piece of parchment, on which the hieroglyphics would appear," and below the ancient writing, "the translation in the English language, all appearing in bright luminous letters" (pp. 115, 157-158). "Joseph would then read it to Oliver, who would write it down as spoken." Then, when the words had been written correctly, "the characters and the interpretation would disappear and be replaced by other characters and their interpretation" (pp. 115, 124, 158).<sup>3</sup>

David Whitmer reported that the most impressive Restoration events occurred towards the end of June 1829. About 11 o'clock, one morning, while David was plowing with his team in the field, he saw a personage or messenger and heard a voice. Reports are not clear if the voice was that of the personage or from some other source. But whatever its origin, Whitmer clearly heard an audible voice say, "Blessed

<sup>3</sup> Because several eyewitnesses confirm this method of translation it is undoubtedly a reliable description of the process. See pp. 54, 55, 72, and 234.

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is the name of the Lord and they who keep his commandments" (p. 181). This message was to serve as prelude for what was soon to follow. For, as David continued making his rounds, plowing the field, he was met by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery. They "came along and said, 'David you are chosen to be one of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon'" (pp. 108, 181). In obedience to the words of the voice and confirmed in his faith by the miraculous events which he had experienced that month, he "left his team tied up to the fence" and, accompanied by his companions, "went through a clearing and into the edge of the woods" and sat on a log (p. 181).

After talking awhile, the three men "kneeled down and prayed. Joseph prayed." Then they "got up and sat on the log and were talking" when all at once they "beheld a dazzlingly brilliant light that surpassed in brightness even the sun at noonday and which seemed to envelope the woods for a considerable distance around. Simultaneous with the light came a strange entrancing influence which permeated [David Whitmer] so powerfully that he felt chained to the spot, while he also experienced a sensation of joy absolutely indescribable. While trying to realize what had come over him, there appeared immediately in front of the little party a personage clothed in white and near him a table containing the ancient artifacts—the gold plates, the brass plates, the interpreters, the ball or directors, and the sword of Laban (pp. 86 and 197-198).<sup>4</sup> The angel, who did not identify himself nor apparently speak to the witnesses, turned over the leaves of the gold plates so that they could be visually inspected. At this moment, an audible voice was heard, not

<sup>4</sup> P. Wilhelm Poulson claimed that Whitmer said the witnesses saw a "breastplate" (see p. 20). However, this is not corroborated in any other account, and a close reading of Poulson's printed interview suggests that he embellished it or was simply a poor reporter. See Appendix, pp. 241-242.

<sup>5</sup> Although he was misquoted on this point, Whitmer made it abundantly clear that the three witnesses did not handle the plates, the table on which they lay, nor any of the ancient artifacts. See pp. 152 and 188.

Did not touch!

the voice of the angel but the voice of God.<sup>6</sup> "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" (p. 40).<sup>7</sup> After seeing the angel, the artifacts, and hearing the voice of God, the vision ended.<sup>8</sup>

The series of miracles described above openly exhibited the power of God, and they were the basis of David Whitmer's faith in what became known as Mormonism. To this chief witness, the presence of the supernatural was the *sine qua non* of the Restoration. The miracles were proof positive that God again was establishing a new dispensation, that Joseph Smith had a special, divine calling, and that the Book of Mormon was the new word of God. But notwithstanding the auspicious beginnings of this new religious drama and its dynamic potential, David Whitmer primarily viewed it as a provincial movement. In western New York, the body of believers essentially consisted only of three, extended families—the Smiths, the Whitmers, and the Knights. And, although Joseph Smith was accorded special recognition as leader, the group was, in its social and political attitudes, remarkably homogeneous, communal, and democratic. The movement lacked the formalism now present in the church's liturgy, ideology, and structure of authority, and the teachings were given with immeasurable innocence. Moreover, the notion and practice of common consent actually guaranteed freedom of opinion and speech to every member of the congregation.

<sup>6</sup> P. Wilhelm Poulson claimed that Whitmer said the angel spoke to the witnesses. See p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Stevenson reported that Whitmer said the voice commanded the witnesses "to bear testimony of these things to the world" (p. 181).

<sup>8</sup> According to Whitmer, Marrin Harris was not present on the above-mentioned occasion, but subsequently became a witness. The reports suggest that this was later that same day or perhaps the following day. See pp. 15, 21, 24, 64, 76 and 109.

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It was the attempt to transform the regional religious community into a national movement that placed Whitmer at odds with the Mormon leader. If at first Joseph Smith appeared to the witness as humble and meek, the success of missionaries in Ohio and the conversion of the illustrious Sidney Rigdon gave the witness fresh insights into the Prophet's protean nature. Significantly, Rigdon's conversion to Mormonism was the beginning of a painful rift between David Whitmer and Joseph Smith. By 1831, with the help of Rigdon, who had remarkable knowledge of Christian theology and power to teach and inspire, the amorphous ideas of the movement were taking on a specific shape and focus. To attract large numbers of converts, order and structure were necessary. David Whitmer resisted this kind of change precisely because it undermined his privileged status in the movement and because a corporate religious system, however administered, would tend toward a procrustean order that would naturally compromise the church's original simplicity and egalitarian framework. Furthermore, the witness worried that money and power needed for a broad-based, corporate church, would rob it of its moral force.

Joseph Smith was a cosmic visionary, but, by 1831, he was also the leader of a new, rapidly expanding religious order that had plainly outgrown its provincial beginnings. The Mormon leader was caught between his native impulses and the needs of a growing church. Power brings its own temptations and suspicions, especially a power based on revelation which requires insight, persuasion, and honesty. The fact that revelation played such a great role in the Restoration naturally caused some disciples ultimately to doubt the prophetic office itself. When the Prophet's revelations began to address the question of corporate expansion—elaborate hierarchical structure, finance, business enterprises, real estate—David Whitmer's faith was profoundly tested. The growing institutionalization of Mormonism as well as the witness's belief that the leadership

of the church had "developed an obsession with earthly power and station" undercut his original faith. For the Mormon prophet, the transition from simple to more complex organization was normal and necessary. However, for the witness, these innovations were the result of overweening pride—they were simply a sign of a shift from self-denial to self-indulgence. Whitmer insisted that Joseph Smith had "abandoned the primitive faith" and "drifted into error and spiritual blindness."<sup>10</sup>

David Whitmer was not alone in his hostility to these new arrangements. By 1832, Joseph Smith's leadership was challenged by some of his best supporters who protested his personal power; resented the office of president of the high priesthood, and considered his plans inchoate. The decline in the apostle's morale and faith, in consequence of these changes, cannot be measured by extant records of the 1830s. Nevertheless, according to later testimony, Whitmer underwent a paroxysm of personal soul-searching while seeking to retain his faith. "I clung on in patience," he recalled, "trusting everything would eventually be put right" (p. 205).

An individualist at the core who saw true religious structure as democratic, Whitmer was sooner or later bound to annoy a growing authoritarianism. Unlike Joseph Smith, who was a man of immense energy and of extraordinary power of leadership, David Whitmer had little charisma and no great ambitions. The witness had forsaken his ancestral religion, not for fame or fortune, but because of the gnosis; God had revealed a new, greater truth and he was compelled by the spirit. So even though the witness was treated with

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth H. Winn, *Exiles in a Land of Liberty: Mormons in America, 1830-1846* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), p. 112.

<sup>10</sup> See p. 203 and *An Address to all Believers*, p. 59.



respect for the rigor of his principles and was quite conscious of the drama in which he was playing a part, he did not himself have the means of directing the dynamic forces within the movement.

By 1835, David Whitmer had grown increasingly impatient with Joseph Smith and the direction the church was taking. He feared that Joseph Smith had plans for a monarchical priesthood (*rex et sacerdos*) and regarded the creation of the First Presidency in the church as "an assumption of power unauthorized by the books of the law of Christ" (p. 155). The witness repudiated the order of High Priests claiming that the holy guild "originated in the church because of desire to obtain greater power than what had been given" (p. 154). Whitmer was committed to lay leadership and disliked the idea of presiding councils governing the church because of the potential of creating priesthood idolatry. He was himself much more comfortable with ecclesiastical equality and common consent, "conferring one with the other," in order that difficulties and differences could be settled by the "united wisdom of [the] many guided by the law [of the gospel]" (p. 156).

Moreover, David Whitmer argued that Joseph Smith originally taught that the Bible and the Book of Mormon contained "God's law in its completeness."<sup>11</sup> The revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants, therefore, he considered unnecessary for the church at large; they were "purely personal," for a specific time and place, and, in any case, "not to be published until Christ should come" (p. 156).<sup>12</sup> Besides, said the pioneer witness, textual changes had been made to the original revelations; the wording of the printed

<sup>11</sup> "We understood that they [the Bible and the Book of Mormon] alone should be taught as doctrine, [that] revelations and visions would assist individuals but were not to be taught as doctrine in any case" (pp. 155-156).

<sup>12</sup> "Brother Joseph was led on and on receiving revelations every year, to establish offices and doctrines which are not even mentioned in the teaching of Christ in the written word" (*An Address to all Believers*, p. 59).

revelations had been altered and, therefore, could not stand exegesis.<sup>13</sup>

Other areas of contention included polygamy, changing the name of the church, and restoration of authority. Unable to tolerate the prurience, the Restoration apostle took an uncompromising stand against polygamy. He believed from oral and printed reports that Joseph Smith, no doubt, had cohabited with several women, but stated that he did not have any personal knowledge of it. Regardless, he thought the entire concept of having multiple wives was shocking to the senses and stultifying however it was explained. Another complaint consisted in changing the name of the church from "The Church of Christ" (by which the organization was known from 1830-1834) to "The Church of the Latter Day Saints."<sup>14</sup> Whitmer said that the change occurred through the influence of Sidney Rigdon. "What name was the church to wear—what name did Christ want His church to take upon themselves? What name did Christ command them to take? It is important for any church organization to have a name. Christ considered it of great importance for His church to have a name, and he gave it a name, telling them that it was necessary for His church to wear a certain name, and that if they wore any other name, that they were not His church. Are you so blinded that you cannot see and understand this? What right has any man or men to change the name which Christ decided the church should wear? God have mercy upon the man who says that the name should be changed to any other than that which Christ gave us."<sup>15</sup>

Finally, David Whitmer categorically denied the restoration of priesthood power through John the Baptist,

<sup>13</sup> See *An Address to all Believers*, p. 61.

<sup>14</sup> For some, the change of the name of the church in 1838 (see D&C 115) was simply an attempt to assuage the feelings of those who were opposed to "dropping out the name of Christ." See *An Address to all Believers*, p. 73.

<sup>15</sup> *An Address to all Believers*, pp. 74-75.

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Peter, James, John, Moses, and Elias. These accounts, "got up" in 1834 and later, he explained, were simply a ploy to establish a claim to authority superior to any other on earth. By 1835, church policy insisted that anything less than a complete, unequivocal restoration of authority by angelic messengers would fall short of a new dispensation. Restoration of priesthood power without these ancient prophets and apostles would constitute a simulacrum of power without the reality. However, for the pioneer witness there was a logical continuity between the power to acquire revelation and translate ancient manuscripts and the power to teach, baptize and confer authority. Therefore, to David Whitmer's way of thinking, angelic messengers personally dispensing new authority to men on earth was not only gross fabrication but unnecessary as well. "I do not believe that John the Baptist ever ordained Joseph and Oliver," he remarked, "I regard that as an error" (see pp. 155, 205). David Whitmer claimed that he tried to recall Joseph Smith to the pure faith but without success. When the influence of the Mormon leader became so great, the chief witness had to openly oppose the Prophet in order to survive as an individual.

By the spring of 1837, Whitmer was part of a small but influential group of Kirtland Saints who had rebelled against the Prophet's leadership. When he returned to Missouri that summer to join his family and resume his duties as leader of the church there, the witness was persona non grata, and his known opposition to the Mormon leader was addressed promptly by the high council. In (January 1838, high priests, with two of the twelve apostles, called Whitmer, his brother, and William W. Phelps to accounting for their dissenting behavior and apparent lack of faith. David was accused of using tea and coffee in violation of the Word of Wisdom, not encouraging members to consecrate their properties, and for not acknowledging the authority of the high council. Whitmer was so insulted that a handful of church leaders

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could sit in judgment over him—preferring, instead, that the church, at large, hear the case—that he did not bother to answer the charges. For not attending the church council, the tribunal dropped Whitmer as president of the church in Missouri.

Then, in April 1838, after Joseph Smith had taken up residence in Missouri, David Whitmer was tried for his membership. A council of high priests, with the Mormon leader present, heard the case. The charges included failure to observe the Word of Wisdom, unchristianlike conduct, neglecting to attend meetings, and for "uniting with, and possessing the same spirit as the dissenters."<sup>16</sup> Again the witness refused to attend the tribunal. "A majority of this Church," he wrote, "have decided that certain Councils were legal by which it is said I have been deprived of my office as one of the Presidents of the Church I have thought and still think they were not agreeable to the revelations of God,<sup>17</sup> which I believe and by my now attending this Council, and answering to charges as a High Priest, should be acknowledging the correctness and legality of those former assumed Councils, which I shall not do." For refusing to attend the council and for writing the above, the court ruled that "it was not considered necessary to investigate the case," and David Whitmer, one of the chief witnesses of Mormonism, was summarily excommunicated from the church.<sup>18</sup>

Overflowing with emotion, the witness clung to his beliefs with an instinctive feeling that his family was more to be trusted than the leadership of the church. He believed his

<sup>16</sup> See Far West Record: Minutes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1844, eds., Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1983), p. 177.

<sup>17</sup> Whitmer has reference to the notion of common consent.  
<sup>18</sup> See Far West Record, p. 177.



removal from the church was the ultimate betrayal inasmuch as the Mormon leader had participated as a member of the tribunal and had assented to its decision. Naturally, the whole Whitmer clan was deeply wounded by the scandal, but shocked and unrepentant, they closed ranks with David.

Soon after the church withdrew fellowship from Whitmer, he was invited to leave town by the oath-bound Danites. Alienated by the leadership of the church and threatened by loyalists, the Whitmer family determined to leave the church permanently. In the summer of 1838, the Whitmers and their extended families (including the Cowderys and the Pages) moved to Richmond, Missouri, where they would start a new life, free at last from the dissensions of the church and the persecutions of society.

After reading these interviews it becomes quite clear that David Whitmer was perfectly infused with Mormonism and inspired by it, it flowed out of his inner consciousness as if it were part of his very being. Pain and bitterness mingle in his reminiscences, but he never wavered in his faith. He was friendly, unpretentious, and sincere, yet a man of vigorous opinions. Even a non-Mormon visitor, who viewed the witness with considerable skepticism, was moved to admit that this chief witness "believes what he says." His responses to interviewers, if at first somewhat reluctant, were neither feigned nor didactic. Because he had been misrepresented by at least one reporter, John Murphy, of Polo, Missouri, in 1880, the witness made a habit of having others present when he was interviewed by strangers (see p. 85).

By 1870, Whitmer was himself a visionary who cut a rather quaint figure, but his words and images were as fresh as ever. If he allowed himself to reminisce with a large admixture of sentimentality, his strength lay in his unswerving testimony. Often the old man came lethargic from his bedroom to answer callers and seekers, repeating all his routine excuses for not granting an interview. But

invariably the mere mention of the origin of the Book of Mormon put this emeritus apostle of Mormonism into an ebullience that his responses now became lyrical. His voice was not in itself remarkable—he was a man of God who spoke the language of the average citizen—but when "fired up" he had a hypnotic fluency and an almost kinetic intimacy with his audience. Apparently an interview with David Whitmer was an overwhelming emotional experience.

With one exception, all of the known interviews with David Whitmer occurred within a twenty-year period—1869-1888, while the witness resided in Richmond, Missouri. As a citizen of Richmond, this apostle of the Restoration was a model of propriety and Christian living. He led an even-keeled and unsensational life. He was a social, accessible, generous man—a man of business who had served as mayor and in the city council. To his credit, he retained a sound mind until his death. Richmond was a rural town with its isolation and hidebound traditional values. Like other small towns, it offered roots and stability, a chance to breathe, neighbors who knew each other, country pleasures, simpler needs and a sense of identity. But it was also a narrow world, in thrall to hard work and distrustful of leisure, intellect, and the arts.

Whitmer's entire Richmond era is best characterized by frustration and waiting. His rupture with the Mormon prophet and the church troubled him all his life. Whitmer was a *laudator temporis acti*, forever recalling the "good old days" when the church was in its infancy and he and Joseph Smith were friends. He knew how much he owed to the Mormon leader and consistently referred to him as a prophet and gave him credit for bringing forth the Book of Mormon and founding the church. Although his own experience with the Restoration was fraught with tragedy, he insisted on idealizing Mormonism. In his interviews, all the furrows and blemishes of his own religious life are overlaid with recollections of consistency and courage. Yet for all his depth



of belief, a comparison of his responses and accounts of the Restoration reveal a blindness to the ambiguities of his unswerving faith in Mormonism and his lack of commitment to Joseph Smith.

David Whitmer wrote and published a 75-page pamphlet in 1887, titled *An Address to all Believers in Christ*.<sup>19</sup> It is a binary work, an address to non-Mormon Christians and an address to Mormons. Written at age 82, it is a humble appeal to bring believing Christians to Mormonism and to unite the scattered believers of the original faith. It is poorly organized and sentimentalized—not so much a detailed record as almost obsessive ruminations of a few themes—but it does sum up both Whitmer's views and his nature. It confirms the details of his participation in the Restoration as he perceived them, but it is a sweeping rejection of Joseph Smith and the church after 1834. The dominant subjects are the miracles, his opposition to Rigdon, the corporate church, and his estrangement from Joseph Smith.

David Whitmer had set aside a backroom as a sanctum for the sacred relics of the Restoration—the Book of Mormon manuscript and the Anthon transcripts. The witness claimed that Oliver Cowdery "charged me to keep them, and Joseph said my father's house should keep records. I consider these things sacred, and would not part with nor barter them for money" (p. 43). The Whitmer family believed that some tutelary deity watched over the records and their custodian. In his interview with the witness, Joseph F. Smith recorded that the "whole Whitmer family are deeply impressed with the sacredness of this relic [the manuscript of the Book of Mormon]. And so thoroughly imbued are they with the idea and faith that it is under the immediate

<sup>19</sup> After losing his thumb on his right hand about 1870, Whitmer did very little writing himself, employing secretaries instead.

protection of the Almighty, that, in their estimation, not only are the Mss. themselves safe from all possible contingencies, but that they are a source of protection to the place or house in which they may be kept, and, it may be to those who have possession of them" (p. 45). When a cyclone smashed the homes and businesses in Richmond, Missouri, in June 1878, the room in which the manuscript was kept "was the only part of the [Whitmer] house which was not demolished" (p. 44).

David Whitmer was an inexhaustible source of inspiration for his family—his children and grandchildren. Despite his relentless efforts to save their souls, he won his family's love and respect, and, as a leading personality, he was both a formidable father figure and God's surrogate. Rehearsing his visions in New York, he was as close to God as his children could get. For years, after his disaffection from the church, Whitmer was encouraged by energumens and disgruntled Mormons alike to take up the prophetic mantle. This he patently refused to do. However, in the 1870s, at the insistence of his own family, he consented to organize a church—The Church of Christ. The small band included those of his own extended family and a handful of friends who had long worshipped with him. As his health began to fail him in the 1880s, Whitmer's scope of movement was correspondingly limited. Potential interviewers found it more difficult to gain access to the venerable patriarch as members of his own family discouraged or screened them. Whitmer had a close brush with death in 1886, but rallied to write and publish his pamphlet the following year. In January 1888, David Whitmer, one of the chief eyewitnesses of the Restoration, died of old age and was buried in Richmond, Missouri.

If Whitmer is a credible witness of the events of early Mormonism (and the consistency and sincerity of the interviews contained herein demonstrate that he is), then thoughtful students of history should attempt to understand

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the full range of his thinking. Selected, ellipsized quotations that tend only to support official accounts of the Restoration should be read with active suspicion. Students of Mormonism should not be fooled into thinking that Whitmer's denial of certain aspects of the Restoration or his ultimate rejection of Joseph Smith (and later Brigham Young) was a psychosis which they can then subtract from his testimony. That testimony should stand as complete as possible.

For Latter-day Saints to know Whitmer only in the washed and bowdlerized versions of his thought (cited in official writings and multi-media productions) is at best a distortion of the truth and at worst a perversion of history and an injustice to both the witness and the congregation of believers. Admittedly, these interviews could be disturbing in their implications for the faithful. But after they are sorted out, anatomized, and pondered for awhile they will begin to render up sense.

Whitmer had no patience with the institutional church. And he was at pains to have it known that he believed Joseph Smith to be a fallen prophet. But he was a believer in Mormonism. The simultaneous acceptance and rejection of Joseph Smith, which are apparently entirely contradictory ideas, Whitmer combined into a single, coherent vision of reality which, however confusing to others, should at least be respected. These interviews, recorded by many different individuals over two decades, run parallel, share a spirit and a theme. Although Whitmer's listeners did not always get the facts right, most of them were able to sense the awe, to grasp the spiritual message of his eloquent pictures. At the center of all of the interviews was his undying belief in the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, his faith that Joseph Smith had been divinely called, and that by miraculous power God had again restored his truth to the earth.

## Interviews