

Witnesses of the Book of Mormon — Insights Episode 12: Who were the Danites?

Voice over as David Whitmer reads letter: You shall have 3 days after you receive this communication to you to depart with your families peaceably. If you do not depart, we will use the means in our power to cause you depart, so help us, God.

Rider: David!

Rider 2: He's either hiding or he's gone.

Rider 1: You said you were leaving. I didn't believe it. You can't truly believe that they'll hurt you?

David Whitmer: You read the letter.

Rider 1: I read it. Those were Dr. Avar's words.

David Whitmer: Maybe. [To horse] Let's go, girl.

Camrey Bagley Fox: Welcome to our series about the witnesses of The Book of Mormon. My name is Camrey Bagley Fox, and we are joined today by Dr. Gerritt Dirkmaat. Gerritt is an expert on early Church history, and we are thrilled to have him with us today.

Gerritt Dirkmaat: Glad to be here.

CBF: Gerritt, can you tell me about the Danites? I know virtually nothing about them.

GD: Well, I think that actually probably would be most people, it's something they might have heard of, but what exactly is it? So in Missouri, in 1838, there is an increase in threats of violence against the Latter-day Saints. Now, violence to Latter-day saints in Missouri is not a theoretical happenstance, right? They've already been violently driven out of Jackson County.

GD: And, it makes pretty good political capital among Missouri legislators to be an Anti-Mormon. I mean, there are politicians who run on the basis of, 'And if you elect me, we'll make sure that there's no Mormons allowed to live in this county.' And that's a popular position to take.

So as it seemed that there's a rising tide of these possible mobocratic threats, there is also this reaction to it, that there are many members of the Church that, frankly, they're done with this. 'You know, we're American citizens, why am I not allowed to fight back? Why are you allowed to come here with a gun and chase me out of my home. If you come here with a gun, I'm going

to defend my home.' There's a real frustration, many of the members are being driven out of Kirtland now because of all the difficulties there.

But apparently, there's a collection of Latter-day Saint men who decide that they're going to form up into a group to defend themselves against the mob, if the mob comes. AND, even more so, to take proactive steps. If we know this mob is over here burning down some houses, we're going to go burn down some of their houses. We are going to fight fire with fire. What's unknown is the degree to which Joseph Smith is involved in its either, creation or its methods.

Now, those who are a part of it AFTER the fact will, of course, all claim, 'Oh yeah, Joseph is the one who told me this.'

CBF: Mmhm.

GD: But Joseph himself, while he seems to know that there are people that are planning to try to defend themselves, he doesn't seem to know, or at least he writes to Emma, and says, 'There were some things that were done under my name that I didn't know about, or I didn't understand.'

But usually when it's talked about, in the case of the Witnesses, this idea that there's this kind of vigilante group of Latter-day Saints, militant Latter-day Saints, who are going to say, 'We aren't going to allow any mobbing here.' Well, in previous places, dissent and apostasy had preceded mobocracy. Right? Look at what happened to Joseph and Sidney in Hiram, Ohio. You know, there are former members of the Church leading that mob that's dragging them into the streets and tarring and feathering them.

Joseph!

Call out to your God for help!

You will receive no mercy!

Let him go!

GD: And so the Danites are going to make threats against some of these apostates and dissenters in Far West. People like W.W. Phelps, people like John Whitmer and David Whitmer. And they are going to FEEL as if there's this not-so-subtle threat that's coming from these zealots inside the Church. That, 'if you don't leave, we're going to make you leave.'

CBF: And can you tell me about the Danite Manifesto?

GD: So this is a document that is later produced, it is something that is claimed to have been something that was drawn up with Joseph Smith's blessing. Now, Joseph Smith himself is saying that he ISN'T a part of it, so it actually becomes a kind of political football in that regard. Most of what we get of Joseph's involvement with the Danites, and the Danite Manifesto, actually comes from Samson Avar. So he is actually going to, in return for immunity, testify AGAINST Joseph Smith, and AGAINST the other leaders of the Church. And as you can see, that's a little

bit of a complicated source, because while he is someone who knows, because he is certainly a part of it, and by some accounts, the leader of the Danites, he's also giving his testimony in order to exonerate himself and to place the blame on someone else.

What do we know? We know that there were some Latter-day saints who wanted to take vigilante measures to defend the Church and its property, and to drive dissenters out of their ranks, because in their view, if you allowed someone to stay in your community who is saying, 'Yeah, Joseph Smith's a false prophet,' all that does is actually INVITE mobocratic action from the outside.

The Danite Manifesto seems to factor FAR more prominently in OUR discussion of Joseph Smith today than it --

CBF: Than it did back then.

GD: I mean, CERTAINLY, for the people that are dissenters in Missouri, they point to that as, 'See, this is proof that things went off the rails.' But those dissenters had already left the Church. I mean, W.W. Phelps isn't leaving the Church over the Danite manifesto. He's already left the Church. John Whitmer's already been excommunicated. David Whitmer's already been excommunicated. So, I think it's important not to confuse something that exacerbates the tensions, like the Danites and their manifesto, with what causes those men to leave the Church or to be excommunicated in the first place. They're actually separate things.

GD: For our purposes, the Witnesses, they're already out of the Church before you have this kind of tension building with the vigilante justice. But because they are some dissenters, living in Caldwell County, they are the targets of that vigilante justice from the Danites.

CBF: Mm. So, the fear of being persecuted, is that a catalyst for having them leave?

GD: It certainly is going to make the ones living in Far West want to leave Far West, but they are already out of the Church at the time of that fear. The reason why they have a fear --

CBF: IS because they're not part of that group.

GD: Exactly. They are living inside of this Church community, but they have been excommunicated, and have spoken out publicly against Joseph Smith and against the Church.

In the excommunication hearings for people like David Whitmer, one of the claims that is made is that he is offering support to those other dissenters. So that kind of places dissent as part of reason he's excommunicated in the first place. And so you can see why someone might say, 'We've got to get him out of the community, or he's going to invite these mob reprisals.' Certainly they will say that they felt threatened by things like Sidney Rigdon's Salt Sermon, and the formation of the Danites and the 4th of July Sermon that is taking very militaristic rhetoric

saying, 'We are going to fight if we have to. And the dissenters who want to undermine us, they better get out of Dodge,' so to speak.

CBF: So can you tell me more about the Salt Sermon?

GD: So the Salt Sermon is something that's given in June of 1838, and we don't actually have a transcript of it, I wish we did because it sounds like it was an amazing sermon. And it was given by Sidney Rigdon, and as we talked about, Sidney Rigdon is a powerful orator.

CBF: Right.

GD: He has the ability to become quite carried away in his sermonizing. He gives this sermon, essentially trying to quell this dissent. There's still a lot of dissent in early 1838, still stemming from the loss of Kirtland, and the Kirtland Safety Society, and the fact that other people have tried to set up their own churches, that some people have claimed, 'Well, David Whitmer should be the new leader of the Church,' or that Warren Parrish and his church should be the Church.

And so Sidney Rigdon's sermon likens these dissenters or these apostates to the sermon of Jesus, you know, 'Ye are the salt of the Earth.'

Sidney Rigdon: Ye are the salt of the Earth!

Crowd: Hear, hear.

Sidney: But if the salt hath lost his savor, wherewith shall it be salted?

Sidney: Have you lost your savor?! Then you are good for nothing but to be cast out and trod under foot of men!

Sidney: Cast them out!

GD: The implication, according to the people hearing it, is that Sidney Rigdon was saying, 'If YOU are an apostate, you are like the salt that's now worthless.' And the only thing it's good for is to be cast out and trodden under—that's not exactly a POSITIVE message if you happen to be one of those people—

CBF: Right.

GD: —who was excommunicated. And THEY certainly see that as a ratcheting up of, 'So you're saying you're going to hurt me and my family if we stay here?' And so, it certainly is a ratcheting up of tensions in Missouri.

CBF: All right, thank you.

GD: You're welcome.