

Witnesses of the Book of Mormon — Insights Episode 31: John Whitmer and the Plates

Gerritt Dirkmaat: Joseph Smith is very adamant that they shouldn't sell any of their lands in Jackson County, that those lands are given to them by God, and that eventually God is going to give them back to them. So that's the official Church position. On the ground in Missouri, when you see people suffering because they don't have adequate means, and you know that it would take a few strokes of a pen, and 'we would suddenly have cash to be able to take care of these people and ourselves as we try to rebuild here in Caldwell County,' it's easy to see why David Whitmore might say, 'I know that Joseph says that, but if he saw what it was really like here, he would say, "Yeah, you better sell that land and we'll just buy it again some other time, but we need to take care of the people here."'

Paul Wuthrich, Narrator of *Undaunted: Witnesses of the Book of Mormon*: The Saints were losing confidence in Missouri Church leadership. In February of 1838, the high council tried John Whitmer and William Phelps for misusing Church funds. Oliver Cowdery and David Witmer were accused of selling lands, held in their names, in Jackson County. The entire Missouri Church presidency was removed from their positions.

GD: I don't know what was going on inside David Whitmer's head, but I do know that Missouri Church presidency does make the decision to try to sell property in Jackson County, even though Joseph has told them not to do it. In their defense, they are probably saying, 'This is what is practical; this what it is now.'

There are multiple things that are proffered against David Whitmer at his excommunication hearing. Of course, one of the easy claims that's made is that David Whitmer is speaking out against Joseph Smith. Which, of course he is, right? If Joseph is saying, 'You can't sell the property,' and David Whitmer does, well that's clearly that he's speaking out against what the prophet is saying. At any rate, David Whitmer and the entire Missouri Church presidency are going to be excommunicated. The Whitmers are such a tight-knit family. An affront to David Whitmer is an affront to all of them, as far as they are concerned. And so they'll all leave the Church.

While the Whitmers will become disaffected and they won't ever rejoin the Church, they don't ever deny their testimony. In fact, it becomes the basis of the church that they are going to form—the Book of Mormon is true, even though Joseph Smith became a fallen prophet.

Camry Bagley Fox: Welcome to our series on the witnesses of the Book of Mormon. My name is Camry Bagley Fox, and we are joined today by Daniel Peterson, the president of the Interpreter Foundation, and executive producer of the *Witnesses* project. Thank you for being here.

Daniel Peterson: Thank you.

CBF: Dan, we've talked a lot about all the various witnesses, but I want to know, do you have a favorite?

DP: Well, it would be hard to choose one, but I think if I had to, oddly enough, it would be one of the eight, and that would be John Whitmer. And the reason I like John Whitmer's testimony is he comes the closest of any of the witnesses to denying his testimony. Now, why is that interesting? It's interesting to me because of the way he almost does, but doesn't. He is excommunicated from the Church. The whole Whitmer family basically leaves en masse, just as they had kind of joined as a group. And so, they follow each other out and eventually just carry on sort of a little family church, where they venerate the Book of Mormon and the Bible, and do their own thing for years and years and years. They don't return.

But, for the first little while after his excommunication, and, by the way, the fact that the Church was willing and able to excommunicate the witnesses is really interesting to me, because there again, if these are co-conspirators, you think, 'Man, this the last thing we dare do. What are they going to say if we cut them off?' Well, the thing is, I think they knew, they had confidence that they would continue to bear their testimonies, no matter how angry they were.

Well, John was really angry in the first month or so after his excommunication—doesn't feel that it was just. He feels the Church is off-course and all that kind of thing. And there's a man by the name of Theodore Turley who comes back into Missouri, who's been sent there to try to sell some of the property owned by the Latter-day Saints to get some money, at least, to help the Saints re-settle in Illinois. They fled penniless, and if he can get a few cents on the dollar, at least that will help. (It's a pretty daring thing for him to do, by the way, to go back into a state where there is an extermination order out for Latter-day Saints.)

But, in the course of going around and checking on things, he runs into John Whitmer and he says, 'Brother Whitmer, you were one of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon. Do you no longer believe the book to be true?' John Whitmer says, remember, at the DEPTHS of his disaffection and his anger at the Church, he says, 'I don't know if the Book of Mormon is true or not. I couldn't read the writing on those plates.'

Now, to me that's really interesting because the eight witnesses, remember, don't hear a divine voice saying the translation is true. They don't see an angel. They just see this peculiar set of gold objects out in the woods, and they turn through the pages. And so, he doesn't have a divine witness, in that sense, of the divinity of the translation. But at his worst, at his lowest, what he will say is, 'Well, there were plates.' He estimates their weight between 40 and 60 pounds and 'I turned the pages and they had the appearance of ancient work.' That's fascinating to me, because that's the ONE thing I need him, as one of the eight witnesses, to say, which is, 'There were plates. I saw them, I held them,' and he never backs off from that, even at his most bitter.

Now, later on he'll be faithful to his testimony and an enthusiastic advocate of the Book of Mormon for the rest of his life. But there when he's really, really mad, he still says there were plates. The one subject he can speak on with authority is what he saw out there in that grove, and on that he never backs away.

It's like interviewing a witness to a car accident. I don't care if the person who saw the accident has opinions about Fords versus Chevys, that's irrelevant to me. What I want to know is what he saw.

CBF: Mmhm.

DP: What were the drivers DOING when they had this accident? Don't give me your opinions on grand opera, I don't care to know, and you have no special standing. But on that, in the area where you're a witness, you have an authority that almost nobody else has. And that's where John stands out, at his worst, he's still faithful. So, I'm struck by that, that **he has his chance** now to say, not only, 'I don't know if the Book of Mormon is true or not,' but, 'Eh, you know, those plates look fake to me. I think they were phony; I think Joseph Smith's a fraud.' That he **doesn't do**, but he could have, but he doesn't, because he knows what he seen, and what he's held.

CBF: That is so interesting. Thank you.