

BIOGRAPHY OF DAVID WHITMER.

BY H. H. SMITH.

(Continued from page 305.)

The reaffirmations David Whitmer made of his testimony to the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon are too many to give. We will quote several of them.

In 1878 Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith told of visiting him:

On Saturday morning, September 7 (1878), we met Mr. David Whitmer (at Richmond, Ray County, Missouri), the last remaining one of the three witnesses of the Book of Mormon. He is a good sized man, seventy-three years of age last January, and well preserved. He is close shaven, his hair perfectly white, and rather thin; he has a large head and a very pleasant, manly countenance that one would readily perceive to be an index to a conscientious, honest heart. He seemed wonderfully pleased, as well as surprised, at seeing Elder Orson Pratt, and said he would not have known him as he had grown so fat and stout; he remembered him as a slender, bashful, timid boy. After a few moments' conversation he excused himself, saying he would return again to see us. This meeting was in the barroom of the hotel. When he called again he was in company with Colonel Childs, a middle aged man, and a resident of the place. By invitation we accompanied them to Mr. Whitmer's office, where we were introduced to Mr. David J. Whitmer (eldest son of David), Mr. George Schweich (grandson of the old gentleman), Mr. John C. Whitmer (son of Jacob Whitmer), Col. James W. Black, of Richmond, and several others. A couple of hours were very pleasantly passed in conversation, principally on Utah matters, when we parted for dinner, agreeing to meet Mr. Whitmer again at his office, at 4.30 p. m. Agreeable to appointment we met Mr. Whitmer and his friends, at his office, but as the place was too public for private conversation, and as it seemed impossible to obtain a private personal interview with David Whitmer, by himself, we invited him and such of his friends as he saw proper to fetch along to our room in the hotel. Mr. Whitmer apologized for not inviting us to his house, as it was "wash day," and he and his wife were "worn out" with the extra labor, exposure, etc., etc., consequent on rebuilding since the cyclone. He accepted our invitation to our room and brought with him James R. B. Vancleave, a fine looking, intelligent, young newspaper man, of Chicago, George Schweich, John C. Whitmer, W. W. Warner and another person whose name we did not learn. In the

presence of these the following, in substance, as noticed in Bro. Joseph F. Smith's journal, is the account of the interview: . . .

Elder Orson Pratt to David Whitmer: "Do you remember what time you saw the plates?"

David Whitmer: "It was in June, 1829, the latter part of the month, and the eight witnesses saw them, I think, the next day or the day after (*i. e.*, one or two days after). Joseph showed them the plates himself, but 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 this 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 combinations 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, I can not tell how far, but in the midst of this light about as far off as he sits (pointing to John C. Whitmer, sitting a few feet from him), there appeared as it were, a table with many records or 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 (striking the bed beside him with his hand), 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."

Pratt: "Did you see the angel at this time?"

Whitmer: "Yes; he stood before us. Our testimony as recorded in the Book of Mormon is strictly and absolutely true, just as it is there written. Before I knew Joseph I had heard about him and the plates from persons who declared they knew he had them, and swore they would get them from him. When Oliver Cowdery went to Pennsylvania, he promised to write me what he should learn about these matters, which he did. He wrote me that Joseph had told him his (Oliver's) secret thoughts, and all he had meditated about going to see him, which no man on earth knew, as he supposed, but himself, and so he stopped to write for Joseph. Soon after this Joseph sent for me (Whitmer) to come to Harmony to get him and Oliver and bring them to my father's house. I did not know what to do, I was pressed with my work. I had some twenty acres to plow, so I concluded I would finish plowing and then go. I got up one morning to go to work as usual, and on going to the field, found between five and seven acres of my ground had been plowed during the night. I don't know who did it; but it was done just as I would have done it myself, and the plow was left standing in the furrow. This enabled me to start sooner. When I arrived at Harmony, Joseph and Oliver were coming

toward me, and met me some distance from the house. 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, and this was why they had come out to meet me; all of which was exactly as Joseph had told Oliver, at which I was greatly astonished. When I was returning to Fayette, with Joseph and Oliver, all of us riding in the wagon, Oliver and I on an old-fashioned wooden spring seat and Joseph behind us—when traveling along in a clear, open place, a very pleasant, nice looking old man suddenly appeared by the side of our wagon and saluted us with, ‘Good morning, it is very warm,’ at the same time wiping his face or forehead with his hand. We returned the salutation, and, by a sign from Joseph, I invited him to ride if he was going our way. But he said very pleasantly, ‘No, I am going to Cumorah.’ This name was something new to me, I did not know what Cumorah meant. We all gazed at him and at each other, and as I looked around inquiringly of Joseph, the old man instantly disappeared, so that I did not see him again.”

Joseph F. Smith: “Did you notice his appearance?”

Whitmer: “I should think I did. He was, I should think, about five feet, eight or nine inches tall, and heavy set, about such a man as James Vancleave there, but heavier; his face was as large; he was dressed in a suit of brown woolen clothes, his hair and beard were white, like Brother Pratt’s, but his beard was not so heavy. I also remember that he had on his back a sort of knapsack with something in, shaped like a book. It was the messenger who had the plates, who had taken them from Joseph just prior to our starting from Harmony. Soon after our arrival home, I saw something which led me to the belief that the plates were placed or concealed in my father’s barn. I frankly asked Joseph if my supposition was right, and he told me it was. Some time after this, my mother was going to milk the cows, when she was met out near the yard by the same old man (judging by her description of him), who said to her: ‘You have been very faithful and diligent in your labors, but you are tired because of the increase in your toil; it is proper, therefore, that you should receive a witness that your faith may be strengthened.’ Thereupon he showed her the plates. My father and mother had a large family of their own, 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. This circumstance, however, completely removed all such feelings and nerved her up for her increased responsibilities.” . . .

Pratt: “Have you in your possession the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon?”

Whitmer: “I have; they are in Oliver Cowdery’s handwriting. He placed them in my care at his death, and charged me to preserve them as long as I lived; they are safe and well preserved.”

Joseph F. Smith: "What will be done with them at your death?"

Whitmer: "I will leave them to my nephew, David Whitmer, son of my brother Jacob, and my namesake."

Pratt: "Would you not part with them to a purchaser?"

Whitmer: "No. Oliver charged me to keep them, and Joseph said my father's house should keep the records. I consider these things sacred, and would not part with nor barter them for money."

Joseph F. Smith: "We would not offer you money in the light of bartering for the manuscript, but we would like to see them preserved in some manner where they would be safe from casualties and from the caprices of men, in some institution that will not die as man does."

Whitmer: "That is all right. While camping around here in a tent, all my effects exposed to the weather, everything in the trunk where the manuscripts were kept became moldy, etc., but they were preserved, not even being discolored. (We supposed his camping in a tent, etc., had reference to his circumstances after the cyclone, in June last.) The room in which the manuscripts were kept, was the only part of the house which was not demolished, and even the ceiling of that room was but little impaired. 'Do you think,' said Philander Page, a son of Hiram Page, one of the eight witnesses, 'that the Almighty can not take care of his own!'"

Next day, (Sunday, September 8,) Mr. Whitmer invited us to his house, where, in the presence of David Whitmer, esq., (son of Jacob), Philander Page, James R. B. Vancleave, David J. Whitmer (son of David the witness), George Schweich (grandson of David), Colonel Childs, and others, David Whitmer brought out the manuscripts of the Book of Mormon. We examined them closely and those who knew the handwriting pronounced the whole of them, excepting comparatively a few pages, to be in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery. It was thought that these few pages were in the handwriting of Emma Smith and John and Christian Whitmer."—Jensen's Biographical Encyclopedia, pp. 266, 267, 268.

The Kansas City Journal for June 5, 1881, published the following interview with him:

Among other things Mr. Whitmer said:

"A few months after the translation was completed, that is, in the spring of 1830, Joseph had the book published, and this (showing a well worn volume) is a copy of the first edition, which I have had in my possession ever since it was printed."

"When did you see the plates?"

"It was in the latter part of June, 1829. Joseph, Oliver Cowdery, and myself were together, and the angel showed them to us. We not only saw the plates of the Book of Mormon, but he also showed us the brass plates of the book of Ether, and many others. They were shown to us in this way. Joseph and Oliver and I were sitting on a log when we were overshadowed by a light more glorious than that of the sun. In the midst of this light, but a few feet from us, appeared a table upon which

were many golden plates, also the sword of Laban and the directors. I saw them as plain as I see you now, and distinctly heard the voice of the Lord declaiming that the records of the plates of the Book of Mormon were translated by the gift and the power of God."

"Who else saw the plates at this time?"

"No one. Martin Harris, the other witness, saw them the same day, and the eight witnesses, Christian Whitmer, Hiram Page, Jacob Whitmer, Joseph Smith, sr., Peter Whitmer, jr., Hyrum Smith, John Whitmer, and Samuel H. Smith saw them next day."

"Did you see the angel?"

"Yes; he stood before us. Our testimony as recorded in the Book of Mormon is absolutely true, just as it is written there."

"Can you describe the plates?"

"They appeared to be of gold, about six by nine inches in size, about as thick as parchment, a great many in number, and bound together like the leaves of a book by massive rings passing through the back edges. The engraving upon them was very plain and of very curious appearance. Smith made facsimiles of some of the plates, and sent them by Martin Harris to Professors Anthon and Mitchell, of New York City, for examination. They pronounced the characters reformed Egyptian, but were unable to read them."

"Did Joseph Smith ever relate to you the circumstances of his finding the plates?"

"Yes; he told me that he first found the plates in the early spring of 1828; that during the fall of 1827¹ he had a vision, an angel appearing to him three times in one night and telling him that there was a record of an ancient people deposited in a hill near his father's house, called by the ancients 'Cumorah,' situated in the township of Manchester, Ontario County, New York. The angel pointed out the exact spot, and some time after he went and found the records or plates deposited in a stone box in the hill, just as had been described to him by the angel. It was some little time, however, before the angel would allow Smith to remove the plates from their place of deposit."

On September 15, 1881, Elders William H. Kelley and George A. Blakeslee, visited him. Elder Kelley wrote of this visit as follows:

We were soon on the way to Richmond, Ray County, to visit David Whitmer, one of the witnesses. Arrived about 8.30 a. m., and breakfasted at the hotel. Here we met David Whitmer, jr., eldest son of David Whitmer, sr. He looks to be about forty-five years of age. Is kind hearted and is a firm believer in the Book of Mormon and in the testi-

¹ These dates are probably typographical errors, as Joseph Smith saw the plates in September, 1823.

mony borne by his father concerning it. After breakfast we called on David Whitmer, sr., meeting him just outside of his residence, and introducing ourselves. He invited us into the house and directed us into a small room, presumably his own resting and sleeping apartment. John Whitmer, son of John Whitmer, deceased, and two or three more gentlemen, whose names are not remembered, were present. The women folks were house cleaning. (Just our luck.) Elder Whitmer remarked that he did not feel much like talking, as he had not been feeling well for some time. He appeared feeble. He is now upwards of seventy-six years of age, having been born January 7, 1805. He is of medium height, and rather of a slender build; but this appearance may be on account of age and recent illness. He has darkish brown eyes, and his hair is white and thin. He has a good head and honest face. He talks with ease and seemed at home with every subject suggested; and without an effort, seemingly, went on to amplify upon it, so that we had nothing to do but question, suggest, and listen. His intellect is far more vigorous and retentive than we expected to find. He is careful in his speech, for he studies to express himself in such a way as not to be misunderstood; and it hurts him to be misrepresented. A reporter called to see him some time ago, asked a few questions, and went off and published that he had denied his testimony concerning the truth of the Book of Mormon. This hurt him so, that he is very careful now, to have some known friends present when strangers call to see him. This accounts for the presence of others when we were there. Speaking of Joseph Smith the Seer, he said, and this is very nearly his wording: "It makes no difference what others say, I know Joseph Smith was a prophet of God, and he translated the Book of Mormon by the inspiration of God from the plates of the Nephites. . . ."

"Do you know anything against his character?"

"I know nothing against him. I have heard some things; these I know nothing about. I have nothing to say about the character of any one, only as I know. It is not my mission to talk about the character of any. My mission is to testify concerning the truth of the coming forth of the work of God."

"What kind of man was he when you knew him personally?"

"He was a religious and straightforward man. He had to be; for he was illiterate and he could do nothing of himself. He HAD to trust in God. He could not translate unless he was humble and possessed the right feelings towards everyone. To illustrate, so you can see. One morning when he was getting ready to continue the translation, something went wrong about the house and he was put out about it. Something that Emma, his wife, had done. Oliver and I went upstairs, and Joseph came up soon after to continue the translation, but he could not do anything. He could not translate a single syllable. He went downstairs, out into the orchard, and made supplication to the Lord; was gone about an hour—came back to the house, asked Emma's forgiveness, and then came

upstairs where we were and the translation went on all right. He could do nothing save he was humble and faithful."

His statement concerning the vision they had of the plates and the angel was as follows:

"I was plowing in the field one morning, and Joseph and Oliver came along with a revelation stating that I was to be one of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon. I got over the fence and we went out into the woods, near by, and sat down on a log and talked awhile. We then kneeled down and prayed. Joseph prayed. We then got up and sat on the log and were talking, when all at once a light came down from above us and encircled us for quite a little distance around; and the angel stood before us. He was dressed in white, and spoke and called me by name and said, 'Blessed is he that keepeth His commandments.' This is all that I heard the angel say. A table was set before us and on it the records were placed. The records of the Nephites, from which the Book of Mormon was translated, the brass plates, the Ball of Directors, the sword of Laban and other plates. While we were viewing them the voice of God spoke out of heaven saying that the book was true and the translation correct."

We then asked him, "Do you remember the peculiar sensation experienced upon that occasion?" He answered very slowly and definitely:

"Yes; I remember it very distinctly; and I never think of it from that day to this but what that same spirit is present with me."

"How did you know it was the voice of God?"

"We knew it was the voice of God. I knew it was the voice of God just as well as I knew anything."—*Saints' Herald*, vol. 29, p. 68.

Elders E. C. Briggs and Rudolph Etzenhouser visited him April 5, 1884. The following is the account of Elder Briggs:

The following are some of the facts as stated to us:

Oliver Cowdery's name being mentioned we asked as to his last statement. In response we were told, that it was reaffirmed, accompanied with a solemn charge to keep the manuscript as he had.

"Would you like to see them?"

I replied that we would. He stepped into an adjoining room and in a few moments brought them to us. They were large sheets of foolscap paper, were rather brown, or yellow colored, not so clear and white as the paper of nowadays; written closely in a fine hand, with capital letters in all proper places, and well preserved. He then remarked:

"I was present when Joseph gave these manuscripts to Oliver; O, it was such a solemn charge. He (Joseph) said, 'I feel it in my bones that there will be a division in the church, like it was with the Nephites and Lamanites, and if these manuscripts are not preserved, I fear that the church may be injured, and when you deliver them up to others, be sure they are left in good hands.' I now see why they should be preserved. A delegation once waited on me from Utah, Orson Pratt headed it, to secure them. And he said:

“Set your own price on them. There is millions in the treasury and we are authorized to draw any amount for them, so you may not be particular, ask any price.’

“I replied, ‘They are not for sale.’ He said,

“Why not?”

“I answered, ‘I know, and that is enough. There is not enough gold in the world to purchase them.’ Pratt urged the matter, saying:

“You are not very well off, and it will do your children good.’

“I then told him, ‘You have not got money enough in Utah to purchase them.’”

O, brethren, the above sentences were spoken by the good old man in such accents and tone, it fairly gave life to his sterling worth, as the man more precious than fine gold, even a man worth more than the golden wedge of Ophir. (Isaiah 13: 12.) His integrity is above suspicion. God bless his memory and his heart, evermore. Amen.

This brings to my mind a statement of the Elect Lady, Emma, in the winter of 1856. She said to me, “When you see David Whitmer you will see an honest man.” And in the same conversation, she remarked of her husband Joseph’s limited education while he was translating the Book of Mormon, and she was scribe at the time. “He could not pronounce the word Sariah. And one time while translating where it speaks of the walls of Jerusalem, he stopped and said, ‘Emma, did Jerusalem have walls surrounding it?’ When I informed him it had, he replied, ‘O, I thought I was deceived.’”

Brother Whitmer added that since Oliver’s death it was alleged that they both had denied their testimony. He said that preachers and others got this up and heralded it about.

NARRATIVE OF SEEING THE ANGEL.

“In June, 1829, I saw the angel by the power of God, Joseph, Oliver, and I were alone, and a light from heaven shone around us, and solemnity pervaded our minds. The angel appeared in the light as near as that young man. [Within five or six feet.] Between us and the angel there appeared a table, and there lay upon it the sword of Laban, the Ball of Directors, the Record, and Interpreters. The angel took the record, and turned the leaves, and showed it to us by the power of God. They were taken away by the angel to a cave, which we saw by the power of God while we were yet in the Spirit. My testimony in the Book of Mormon is true; I can’t deviate from it. I was troubled with so many by letter and otherwise, all over the United States, and some from Europe, that I made my proclamation of March 19, 1881. In this way thousands read it, who would never have done so otherwise. I have the original manuscripts. They have the printer’s marks. The printers here have examined them, and say they are genuine. When being printed, Oliver Cowdery would take about a dozen pages of them at a time, and remain and proof-read and see that the work was done properly, and continued his vigil to the end.”—Church History, vol. 4, pp. 466-448.

Elder Heman C. Smith thus, describes a visit by Elder William H. Kelley and himself on June 19, 1884:

We were met by an old lady, whom we supposed to be Mrs. Whitmer, and shown into the sitting room. Presently Father Whitmer entered the room, and I had a privilege I had long desired, of seeing and conversing with one who had seen the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated, as they were exhibited by an angel from heaven. He talked quite freely in regard to his experience in the church, and we were favorably impressed with his manner, and his evident love of truth. His frank, open countenance not only shows him to be one of nature's noble men, but impresses one that he is not of the type of men who could be coaxed, or bribed into a system of intrigue or deception.

He informed us that at one time he was told by five hundred armed men that if he did not renounce his testimony he should die; but in the face of death he affirmed the truth of his former testimony. He was with Oliver Cowdery in his last illness, and was by him admonished to never falter in his testimony of the Book of Mormon; for it was true. We saw and examined the original manuscript, and noticed particularly the capitals and punctuation marks, which so far as we examined are correctly inserted."—Church History, vol. 4, pp. 448, 449.

The manuscript of the Book of Mormon passed into the hands of the Reorganized Church in 1903, and still remains in possession of the church.

David Whitmer died at his home, Richmond, Ray County, Missouri, Wednesday, January 25, 1888.

On the top of the humble marble that marks his resting place in Richmond cemetery may be seen to-day the chiseled figure of the Bible, upon which lies one of the Book of Mormon, while underneath are inscribed some of his last words: "The Record of the Jews, and the Record of the Nephites are one. Truth is Eternal."

We can not close this sketch in any better way than to quote the words of David Whitmer to Elder James Caffall. Elder Caffall says:

"Before I bade him good-bye, I said to him, 'Can I, Father Whitmer, say, I this day have seen a living witness to the Book of Mormon?' Whereupon he raised his eyes heavenward, and said, 'AS MY TESTIMONY STANDS, SO IT IS; I HAVE NOT, NOR WILL I DENY IT.'"—*Saints' Herald*, vol. 21, p. 564.