

THE CASE OF THE EIGHT WITNESSES TO THE TRUTH OF SMITH'S STORY OF THE ORIGIN OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

Joseph Smith (1805-1844), the Mormon founder, claimed to have had golden plates given to him by an angel. To back up this extraordinary claim, he had to have witnesses to silence people who thought that the plates never existed. He chose three witnesses who said they saw the plates as an angel turned the leaves for them to have a look. They testified also that Smith's miraculous translation of the plates was correct. Then he chose eight witnesses who said that they saw the plates close up. This testimony led to the foundation of the Church of Christ which later became the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. The translation is called the Book of Mormon.

The Mormons argue that Joseph Smith was too uneducated to produce the Book of Mormon. This despite the fact that he wrote revelations at the time he wrote the Book and the style matches the Book of Mormon. Plus he was close to Oliver Cowdery a schoolteacher who was one of the people who wrote the "translation" down for Smith.

2 Nephi 11:3 has God saying that by the word of three he will establish his word. This is contextually a prediction about the witnesses to the plates and correct translation of the Book of Mormon. In 2 Nephi 27:12 God says that nobody will see the book only three and he says they will see it by the power of God. This implies they will see in a vision. And then he says none other shall see it but a few. But the three are emphasised implying that their word will suffice. Ether 5 mentions only three.

There is evidence that the three witnesses who the Book of Mormon predicts will be sufficient and therefore outstanding witnesses did not see the vision of the plates at the same time. Not so impressive then after all! If the Mormons think it is impressive then do they know of something called self-induced hallucination?

THE EIGHT AND THE PLATES

Thomas Ford a former Governor of Illinois stated that the eight witnesses were persuaded that they saw the Plates in an empty box after hours of prayer and desperation to have a vision of the plates (page 37, Are the Mormon Scriptures Reliable?).

According to Ford the witnesses said they were "set to continual prayer and other spiritual exercises." Then Smith "assembled them in a room, and produced a box, which he said contained the precious treasure. The lid was opened; the witnesses peeped into it, but making no discovery, for the box was empty, they said, 'Brother Joseph, we do not see the plates.' The prophet answered them, 'O ye of little faith! how long will God bear with this wicked and perverse generation Down on your knees, brethren, every one of you, and pray God for the forgiveness of your sins '. The disciples dropped to their knees, and began to pray in the fervency of their spirit, supplicating God for more than two hours with fanatical earnestness; at the end of which time, looking again into the box, they were now persuaded that they saw the plates."

This testimony is supported by other evidence as we have seen. Ford was not a religious trickster and so he would not have known how Smith could get them to see a vision unless the story was true. Emma and William Smith stressed the tangibility of the plates (No Man Knows My History, page 80) but William was a notorious liar as were all the Smiths and Emma was no better when she married Joseph. She later joined the Reorganised Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints which was famous for arbitrarily picking what parts it liked out of the many revelations of Joseph Smith. Emma lied about Joseph when she said he was never a polygamist. Some believe that Oliver Cowdery was a blacksmith for a time (page 119-120, Comprehensive History of the Church) that he could have made a set of plates that looked like gold for Smith. But if that were so more people would have been shown the Plates.

It does no good to say that Ford was an anti-Mormon. That doesn't make him automatically dishonest. You can't dismiss every non-Mormon critic as an anti-Mormon liar. Oliver Cowdery lied in 1835 that Smith was acquitted of defrauding people with money digging claims and Mormons don't want to know so what business have they attacking Ford?

Mormons say the witnesses would not admit that they initially saw an empty box. They think Ford made this detail up. The witnesses would admit if they had seen an empty box. All they cared about was that eventually their eyes were opened to see the Plates. And Ford's writing does not refute the occurrence of a vision so it can be tallied with the testimony of the eight.

Mormons say the testimony of the eight was written before Ford wrote and so has greater authority. It does not for Ford's version is more believable. It explains the visions.

John Whitmer gave witness that the plates were seen by four witnesses at one time and then the other four later (Deseret Evening News, 6th August, 1878). That means that if the first four agreed to say they saw the plates the other two groups would probably do the same thinking that the others saw something. John also said, according to History of the Church, that they were shown to him by a supernatural power. You don't need power from Heaven to see physical plates.

According to a letter by Stephen Burnett of 1838 Martin Harris stated in public that he never saw the plates except with his imagination and that David Whitmer and Cowdery were the same and that the eight witnesses saw no plates either but were coerced to sign the testimony. This letter was corroborated by an independent letter also from 1838, which records the same incident and was written by George A Smith. William Smith one of the eight witnesses stated that the plates were not seen bare but were covered and felt through the cloth (Zion's Ensign, p. 6, January 13th, 1894). John H Gilbert who helped to print the Book of Mormon said that Harris said that God would kill all who did not accept Mormonism in two years and that Harris said he saw the plates with his spiritual eyes and not his natural eyes. The fact that Harris could see a future that never existed tells us that he must not be listened to.

The Book of Mormon speaks of tangible plates so there is something wrong if the witnesses saw visionary ones. Also when the witnesses took Smith's word for it that the Book of Mormon was a real translation that shows they were unduly biased towards backing him up and that they did not mind supporting a false word of God. God would not want them trusted.

Hiram Page was one of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon and he gave revelations using a stone like Smith who condemned his revelations as false. Mormons say, "There is a load of difference between Hiram Page seeing visions in a stone like a clairvoyant and him saying he saw and touched real Golden Plates. Page was inexperienced enough in religion to think that his visions were true." It still shows that he was willing to excessively support his illusions and that he believed what he wanted to believe.

We must remember that if a friend tells us he saw a vision we must not assume that that this vision was supernatural if there was a possibility that he might have been abusing drugs. There was a drug widely available in Joseph Smith's time and which all the housewives used as a miracle cure all on themselves and their children which mixed with alcohol could produce hallucinations. The drug was called Laudanum. Joseph Smith might have used this on his witnesses to manipulate them into seeing golden plates. Just like we can be very confused and disoriented after waking up in the middle of a dream so he could have taken advantage of the drug's affects to make his victims falsely remember seeing the plates when they actually saw everything but plates. Also, it might have had a lot to do with his own visions. It could be that Smith seemed so sincere that he chose the witnesses he perceived were so persuaded that he was telling the truth about the plates that they felt it was only a small lie to say they saw the plates and they were happy to tell it for they believed there really were plates. There is no evidence that if the witnesses were lying it would have affected their consciences in a serious way. That would explain why they never admitted to seeing the plates.

The fact that the testimony of the three and the testimony of the eight is so short suggests that there was nothing from Heaven going on. What should have been done was for independent outsiders to interview each witness in turn alone immediately after whatever happened and get each witness to sign and approve the statement. There should be a statement for each of the visionaries. The eight for example might not have seen the same thing or perhaps one of them or more thought he saw the plates just for a split second. These important things would be lost in a short testimony such as the one we have in the Book of Mormon and they are so important. The two testimonies are actually of very little value. The Mormon Church will no doubt point to short testimonies that have been reliable but you can only tell that if there are other reasons for trusting the testimonies.