

The Life of Martin Harris

PATTERNS OF HUMILITY AND REPENTANCE

*From the life of
Martin Harris
we learn that
when we are
humble, we
are blessed,
and that we
can make
important
contributions
to the Lord's
work despite
past mistakes.*

By Larry E. Morris

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Church history offers many stories of Saints who were shining examples of faith and devotion in the face of great pressure, persecution, and personal weakness. One of the most memorable examples comes from the life of Martin Harris. Although he is often remembered for his loss of the first 116 manuscript pages of the Book of Mormon, he overcame that fault to become a key figure in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon—one of the monumental events of the Restoration. As Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has said, “Martin’s subsequent faithfulness [after losing the manuscript] continues under a shadow from which this important man should be rescued.”¹

A Friend and Gentleman

In 1827, Martin was a well-respected and prosperous landowner in Palmyra, New

York, USA. That year he heard about the plight of Joseph Smith, a man more than 20 years his junior who lived on a farm just outside of Palmyra, who was translating golden plates and was having difficulty protecting the plates from thieves.

Although Martin knew that helping Joseph could damage his reputation as a farmer and businessman, Martin’s interest was piqued. He talked with Joseph and other members of the Smith family. Then, Martin reported, “I retired to my bedroom and prayed God to show me concerning these things.” An answer came through “the still small voice spoken in the soul. Then I was satisfied that it was the Lord’s work, and I was under a covenant to bring it forth.”² Martin gave Joseph 50 dollars, enabling Joseph and his wife, Emma, to move to Harmony, Pennsylvania, USA, where Emma’s parents lived.

Shortly thereafter, from April to June 1828, Martin acted as scribe for Joseph while the Prophet translated the plates. After the first



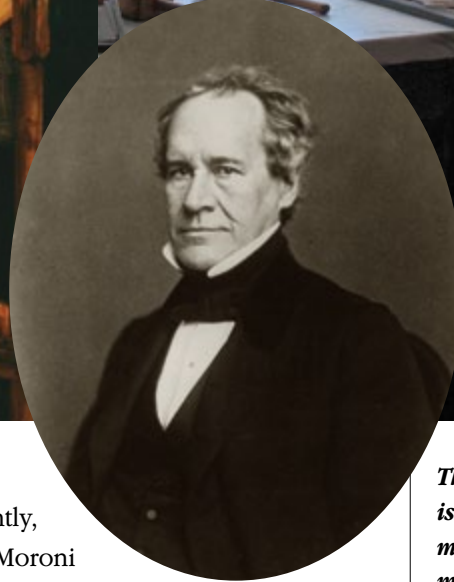
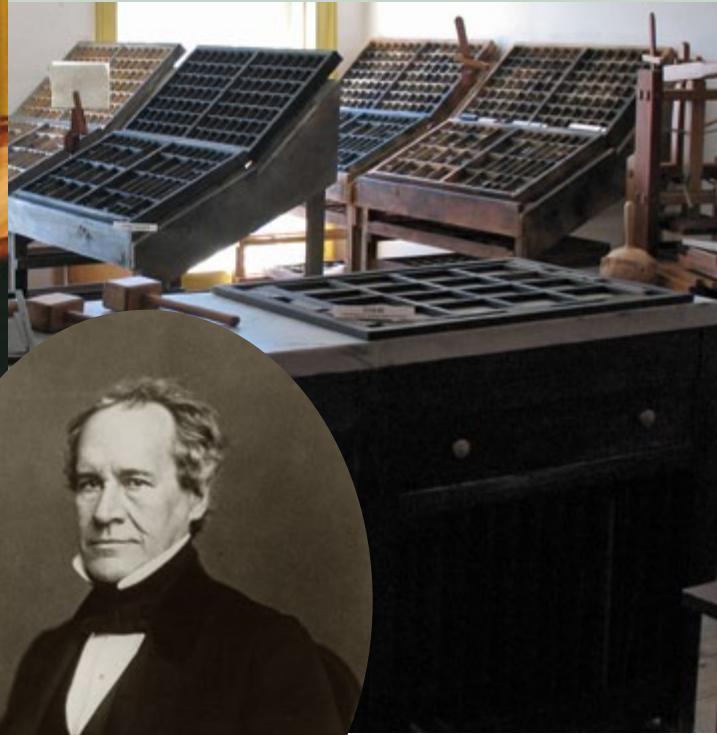
Martin Harris was a prosperous man with a large farm (above, left) and rich belongings (such as the engraved watch above). The house pictured here (above, right) currently sits on the farm Martin once mortgaged to pay for the printing of the Book of Mormon. His original house burned down and was replaced in 1852 by this one.

116 pages were translated, Martin began to plead with Joseph to let him show the Book of Mormon manuscript to friends and relatives. When Joseph finally agreed, the result was disastrous—Martin lost the precious document. A revelation called Martin “a wicked man” and reprimanded Joseph because he had “feared man more than God” (D&C 3:12, 7). In addition, the plates were taken from the Prophet, and he temporarily lost the gift to translate. However, both Joseph and Martin were sincerely repentant, and the Lord forgave them both. Translation of the plates resumed, though Martin no longer acted as scribe.

In spite of this humbling experience, the penitent Martin did not lose his faith. In the spring of 1829, he returned to Harmony, sincerely desiring an additional witness concerning the plates. A revelation sought at Martin’s request promised that “three of my servants . . . shall know of a surety that [Joseph’s claims about the plates] are true, for from heaven will I declare it unto them. I will give them power that they may behold and view these things as they are” (D&C 5:11–13).

Promised that he could be one of the three if he humbled himself before the Lord, (see D&C 5:23–28). Martin left Harmony rejoicing. While traveling, Martin enthusiastically told his fellow stagecoach passengers of his experiences with Joseph. One of these passengers later wrote of this event and recounted, “Smith read to him a good deal of the [gold] bible [and Martin] repeated to those in the Stage verse after verse of what Smith had read to him.”³ Firmly recommitted, Martin thus became one of the first to testify of the Book of Mormon.

About this same time, Martin’s wife, Lucy, who had grown quite hostile to Joseph Smith and his work, “entered a complaint against Joseph, before a certain magistrate of Lyons [New York],”⁴ accusing the Prophet of defrauding her husband. After three men claimed that Joseph had made up the story about the plates, Martin himself was called to testify. Once again demonstrating his humility and his loyalty to Joseph, Martin swore that Joseph had not defrauded him, adding that “as to the plates which he



professes to have, gentlemen, if you do not believe it, but continue to resist the truth, it will one day be the means of damning your souls." The magistrate promptly ended the proceeding and tore up the record of the testimony of the three hostile witnesses.⁵

Witness of the Book of Mormon

In April of 1829, a schoolteacher by the name of Oliver Cowdery volunteered to be Joseph Smith's scribe. The two of them worked at a blinding pace, completing the translation of the Book of Mormon in approximately 10 weeks. Shortly after that, Joseph announced to Martin, "You have got to humble yourself before your God this day, that you may obtain a forgiveness of your sins. If you do, it is the will of God that you should look upon the plates, in company with Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer."⁶

Joseph and Martin then walked to a nearby grove with Oliver and David, where they called upon the Lord. When the promised divine manifestation did not develop, Martin suggested that he was the cause and

withdrew. Subsequently, the angel Moroni appeared and showed the plates to Joseph, Oliver, and David. Joseph then sought out Martin and discovered him engaged in humble prayer. Then the two of them were blessed with a vision similar to the one that had just taken place with the other witnesses.⁷ When the four men returned to the Whitmer cabin, Martin "seemed almost overcome with joy, and testified boldly to what he had both seen and heard."⁸

In a declaration included in each of the more than 150 million copies of the Book of Mormon published since 1830, the Three Witnesses boldly testify that "an angel of God came down from heaven, and he brought and laid before our eyes, that we beheld and saw the plates." Further, "We also know that they have been translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice hath declared it unto us" ("The Testimony of Three Witnesses," Book of Mormon).

Though Martin Harris is remembered for his mistake of losing 116 manuscript pages of the Book of Mormon, he also was dedicated to seeing the Book of Mormon published and accepted by the public. He took a transcription of some of the book's ancient characters to professor Charles Anthon (above, inset) in hopes of obtaining a certificate of authenticity, and he worked with printer E. B. Grandin and Joseph Smith (depicted above with Martin) to finance the book's publication and sell copies.



Martin was chosen to be one of the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon. However, the angel did not appear to show the men the plates (depicted above, right) until Martin had withdrawn and prayed for forgiveness. When the Saints went west, he did not go with them. He listed himself in the 1860 census as a “Mormon preacher,” and he acted as the caretaker of the Kirtland Temple (above, left).



Financing the Publication of the Book of Mormon

Before the summer of 1829 had passed, Martin gave generously again. Joseph and Martin went in search of a printer who could publish the Book of Mormon and finally reached an agreement with Egbert B. Grandin, owner of a three-story building in Palmyra that included a bookstore, a printing shop, and a bindery. However, the cost of printing 5,000 copies of the Book of Mormon was \$3,000—a huge sum (approximately \$73,000 in today’s economy).⁹ It was simply impossible for the Smith family to raise even a small fraction of that amount. But Martin, who had plunged the small group of believers into the depths of despair a year earlier by losing the Book of Mormon manuscript, now proved his devotion once again by pledging his valuable farm to cover the tremendous expense.

Martin’s willingness to do so placed him “side by side with Joseph Smith in a negotiating role that proved vital to the Restoration.”¹⁰

Elder Oaks described the significance of Martin’s offering in this way: “One of Martin Harris’s greatest contributions to the Church, for which he should be honored for all time, was his financing the publication of the Book of Mormon.”¹¹

Final Testimony

Martin served faithfully through the coming years, but he separated himself from the Church during the turbulent time of the late 1830s. He was excommunicated in December of 1837, but he again humbled himself and was rebaptized in 1842. When the Saints migrated west, he stayed behind, even though his second wife and family eventually journeyed to Utah without him in 1856. Martin nevertheless “acted as a self-appointed



Martin's Faithfulness

"What do we learn from this example? (1) Witnesses are important, and the testimony of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon is impressive and reliable. (2) Happiness and spiritual progress lie in following the leaders of the Church. (3) There is hope for each of us, even if we have sinned and strayed from a favored position.

"The Lord's invitation is warm and loving: 'Come back and feast at the table of the Lord, and taste again the sweet and satisfying fruits of fellowship with the saints.' "

Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, "The Witness: Martin Harris," *Ensign*, May 1999, 37.



guide/caretaker of the deserted Kirtland Temple," bearing witness of the Book of Mormon, and even "listing himself in the 1860 census as 'Mormon preacher.'" ¹²

In 1870, at the urging and with the assistance of Brigham Young, Martin, now 87 years old, made the long trek by train and joined the Saints in Utah. Over the next five years, he bore powerful testimony of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon publicly, twice in the Tabernacle. Even on his deathbed, he proclaimed, "I did go in the woods with Joseph Smith . . . and beheld an

angel descend from heaven in a dazzling light of glory. . . . I saw the gold plates. I saw him turn the leaves over one by one . . . and I was commanded by God's voice to testify to all the world what I had seen and heard." ¹³

The patterns of humility and repentance in the life of Martin Harris powerfully illustrate that humility allows the Spirit to be with us. Such an attitude fosters a desire to follow the Savior, do His work, and serve others. As Martin's remarkable experience shows, repentance is the key to remaining humble. The Savior's Atonement in our behalf makes this possible. ■

NOTES

1. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Witness: Martin Harris," *Ensign*, May 1999, 36.
2. "Mormonism—No. II," *Tiffany's Monthly*, May 1859, 170.
3. William S. Sayre to James T. Cobb, August 31, 1878, Theodore A. Schroeder Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin, USA, cited in Larry E. Morris, "The Conversion of Oliver Cowdery," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2007): 15.
4. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (1853), 132.
5. Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 133–135.
6. Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 138.
7. See *History of the Church* 1:54–55.
8. Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 139.
9. Value calculated by finding relative worth of \$3,000 from 1829 to 2010 and analyzing the Consumer Price Index and GDP deflator from www.measuringworth.com/uscompare.
10. Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter, "For the Sum of Three Thousand Dollars," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2005): 6. On April 7, 1831, Martin sold a sizeable portion of his farm to pay the printing bill.
11. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Witness," 36.
12. Rhett Stephens James, "Harris, Martin," in Arnold K. Garr, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard O. Cowan, eds., *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History* (2000), 469.
13. William Pilkington, "A Dying Testimony Given by Martin Harris," Church History Library (spelling and capitalization standardized).



Throughout his life and even on his deathbed, Martin Harris stood by the testimony he received as one of the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon.

PHOTOGRAPH OF KIRTLAND TEMPLE BY WEIDEN C. ANDERSEN. © 2003 IRI. THE ANGEL MORONI SHOWING THE GOLD PLATES TO JOSEPH SMITH, OLIVER COWDERY, AND DAVID WHITNER. © GARY E. SMITH; PHOTOGRAPH OF MARTIN HARRIS IN THE 1870S BY CHARLES WILLIAM CARTER. COURTESY OF THE CHURCH HISTORY LIBRARY; MARTIN HARRIS GIVES HIS FINAL TESTIMONY. © MARION HAWS — DO NOT COPY