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Chapter 7

Fellow Servants

This is chapter 7 of the new four-volume narrative history of the Church titled Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days. The book is available in 14 languages in print, in the Church History section of the Gospel Library app, and at saints.lds.org. The preceding chapters were published in previous issues and are available in 47 languages in the Gospel Library app and at saints.lds.org.

The spring of 1829 was cold and wet well into May. While farmers around Harmony stayed indoors, putting off their spring planting until the weather improved, Joseph and Oliver translated as much of the record as they could.¹

They had come to an account of what happened among the Nephites and Lamanites when Jesus died in Jerusalem. It told of massive earthquakes and storms that devastated the people and altered the shape of the land. Some cities sank into the ground, while others caught fire and burned. Lightning split the sky for hours and the sun disappeared, shrouding the survivors in thick darkness. For three days people cried out, mourning for their dead.²

Finally, the voice of Jesus Christ pierced the gloom. “Will ye not now return unto me,” He asked, “and repent of your sins, and be converted, that I may heal you?”³ He lifted the darkness, and the people repented. Soon, many of them gathered to a temple in a place called Bountiful, where they spoke of the incredible changes to the land.⁴

While the people talked with one another, they saw the Son of God descend out of heaven. “I am Jesus Christ,” He said, “whom the prophets testified shall come into the world.”⁵ He stayed among them for a time, taught His gospel, and commanded them to be baptized by immersion for the remission of sins.

“Whoso believeth in me, and is baptized, the same shall be saved,” He declared. “They are they who shall inherit the kingdom of God.”⁶ Before ascending to heaven, He gave righteous men authority to baptize those who believed in Him.⁷

As they translated, Joseph and Oliver were struck by these teachings. Like his brother Alvin, Joseph had never been baptized, and he wanted to know more about the ordinance and the authority necessary to perform it.⁸

On May 15, 1829, the rains cleared and Joseph and Oliver walked into the woods near the Susquehanna River. Kneeling, they asked God about baptism and the remission of sins. As they prayed, the voice of the Redeemer spoke peace to them, and an angel appeared in a cloud of light. He introduced himself as John the Baptist and placed his hands on their heads. Joy filled their hearts as God’s love surrounded them.

“Upon you my fellow servants,” John declared, “in the name of Messiah I confer the Priesthood of Aaron, which holds the keys of the ministering of angels, and of the gospel of repentance, and of baptism by immersion for the remission of sins.”⁹

The angel’s voice was mild, but it seemed to pierce Joseph and Oliver to the core.¹⁰ He explained that the Aaronic Priesthood authorized them to perform baptisms, and he commanded them to baptize each other after he departed. He also said they would receive additional priesthood power later, which would give them authority to confer the gift of the Holy Ghost on each other and on those they baptized.

After John the Baptist left, Joseph and Oliver walked to the river and waded in. Joseph baptized Oliver first, and as soon as he came out of the water, Oliver began to prophesy about things that would soon happen. Oliver then baptized Joseph, who rose from the river prophesying about the rise of Christ’s Church, which the Lord had promised to establish among them.¹¹

Following John the Baptist’s instructions, they returned to the woods and ordained each other to the Aaronic

Priesthood. In their study of the Bible, as well as their translation of the ancient record, Joseph and Oliver had often read about the authority to act in God’s name. Now they carried that authority themselves.

After their baptism, Joseph and Oliver found that scriptures that once seemed dense and mysterious suddenly became clearer. Truth and understanding flooded their minds.¹²

Back in New York, Oliver’s friend David Whitmer was eager to learn more about Joseph’s work. Though David lived in Fayette, about 30 miles (48 km) from Manchester, he and Oliver had become friends while Oliver was teaching school and living with the Smiths. They often talked about the gold plates, and when Oliver moved to Harmony, he promised to write David about the translation.

Letters started arriving a short time later. Oliver wrote that Joseph knew details about his life that no one could have known except by revelation from God. He described the Lord’s words to Joseph and the translation of the record. In one letter, Oliver shared a few lines of the translation, testifying of its truthfulness.

Another letter informed David that it was God’s will for him to bring his team and wagon to Harmony to help

Joseph, Emma, and Oliver move to the Whitmer home in Fayette, where they would finish the translation.¹³ People in Harmony had become less welcoming to the Smiths. Some men had even threatened to attack them, and had it not been for the influence of Emma’s family, they might have been seriously hurt.¹⁴

David shared Oliver’s letters with his parents and siblings, who agreed to welcome Joseph, Emma, and Oliver into their home. The Whitmers were descendants of German-speaking settlers in the area and had a reputation for hard work and piety. Their farm was close enough to



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he felt the Spirit tell him to finish his work at home before going to Harmony.

The next morning, David walked out to the fields and saw rows of dark furrows in ground that had been unplowed the evening before. Exploring the fields further, he saw that about six acres had been plowed overnight, and the plow was waiting for him in the last furrow, ready for him to finish the job.

David's father was astonished when he learned what had happened. "There must be an overruling hand in this," he said, "and I think you had better go down to Pennsylvania as soon as your plaster of paris is sown."

David worked hard to plow the remaining fields and prepare the soil for a successful planting. When he finished, he hitched his wagon to a strong team of horses and set out for Harmony earlier than expected.¹⁶

Once Joseph, Emma, and Oliver moved to Fayette, David's mother had her hands full. Mary Whitmer and her husband, Peter, already had eight

the Smith home for a visit but far enough away to keep thieves from disturbing them.¹⁵

David wanted to go to Harmony immediately, but his father reminded him that he had two days of heavy work to do before he could leave. It was planting season, and David needed to plow 20 acres and enrich the soil with plaster of paris to help their wheat grow. His father said he ought to pray first to learn if it was absolutely necessary to leave now.

David took his father's advice, and as he prayed,

children between the ages of 15 and 30, and the few who did not still live at home resided nearby. Tending to their needs filled Mary's days with work, and the three house-guests added more labor. Mary had faith in Joseph's calling and did not complain, but she was getting tired.¹⁷

The heat in Fayette that summer was sweltering. As Mary washed clothes and prepared meals, Joseph dictated the translation in an upstairs room. Oliver usually wrote for him, but occasionally Emma or one of the Whitmers took a turn with the pen.¹⁸ Sometimes, when Joseph and Oliver tired

of the strain of translating, they would walk out to a nearby pond and skip stones across the surface of the water.

Mary had little time to relax herself, and the added work and the strain placed on her were hard to bear.

One day, while she was out by the barn where the cows were milked, she saw a gray-haired man with a knapsack slung across his shoulder. His sudden appearance frightened her, but as he approached, he spoke to her in a kind voice that set her at ease.

“My name is Moroni,” he said. “You have become pretty tired with all the extra work you have to do.” He swung the knapsack off his shoulder, and Mary watched as he started to untie it.¹⁹

“You have been very faithful and diligent in your labors,” he continued. “It is proper, therefore, that you should receive a witness that your faith may be strengthened.”²⁰

Moroni opened his knapsack and removed the gold plates. He held them in front of her and turned their pages so she could see the writings on them. After he turned the last page, he urged her to be patient and faithful as she carried the extra burden a little longer. He promised she would be blessed for it.²¹

The old man vanished a moment later, leaving Mary alone. She still had work to do, but that no longer troubled her.²²

At the Whitmer farm, Joseph translated rapidly, but some days were challenging. His mind would wander to other matters, and he could not focus on spiritual things.²³ The Whitmers’ small house was always busy and full of

distractions. Moving there had meant giving up the relative privacy he and Emma had enjoyed in Harmony.

One morning, as he was getting ready to translate, Joseph became upset with Emma. Later, when he joined Oliver and David in the upstairs room where they worked, he could not translate a syllable.



He left the room and walked outside to the orchard. He stayed away for about an hour, praying. When he came back, he apologized to Emma and asked for forgiveness. He then went back to translating as usual.²⁴

He was now translating the last part of the record, known as the small plates of Nephi, which would actually serve as the beginning of the book. Revealing a history similar to the one he and Martin had translated and lost, the small plates told of a young man named Nephi, whose family God had guided from Jerusalem to a new promised land. It explained the origins of the record and the early struggles between the Nephite and Lamanite peoples. More important, it bore a powerful testimony of Jesus Christ and His Atonement.

When Joseph translated the writing on the final plate, he found that it explained the record's purpose and gave it a title, The Book of Mormon, after the ancient prophet-historian who had compiled the book.²⁵

Since he started translating the Book of Mormon, Joseph had learned much about his future role in God's work. In its pages, he recognized basic teachings he had learned from the Bible as well as new truths and insights about Jesus Christ and His gospel. He also uncovered passages about the latter days that prophesied of a chosen seer named Joseph, who would bring forth the Lord's word and restore lost knowledge and covenants.²⁶

In the record, he learned that Nephi expanded on Isaiah's prophecy about a sealed book that learned men could not read. As Joseph read the prophecy, he thought of Martin Harris's interview with Professor Anthon. It affirmed that only God could bring forth the book out of the earth and establish the Church of Christ in the last days.²⁷

As Joseph and his friends finished the translation, their minds turned to a promise the Lord had given in the Book of Mormon and in His revelations—to show the plates to

three witnesses. Joseph's parents and Martin Harris were visiting the Whitmer farm at the time, and one morning Martin, Oliver, and David pleaded with Joseph to let them be the witnesses. Joseph prayed and the Lord answered, saying that if they relied on Him wholeheartedly and committed to testify of the truth, they could see the plates.²⁸

"You have got to humble yourself before your God this day," Joseph told Martin specifically, "and obtain if possible a forgiveness of your sins."²⁹

Later that day, Joseph led the three men into the woods near the Whitmer home. They knelt, and each took a turn praying to be shown the plates, but nothing happened. They tried a second time, but still nothing happened. Finally, Martin rose and walked away, saying he was the reason the heavens remained closed.

Joseph, Oliver, and David returned to prayer, and soon an angel appeared in a brilliant light above them.³⁰ He had the plates in his hands and turned them over one by one, showing the men the symbols engraved on each page. A table appeared beside him, and on it were ancient artifacts described in the Book of Mormon: the interpreters, the breastplate, a sword, and the miraculous compass that guided Nephi's family from Jerusalem to the promised land.

The men heard the voice of God declare, "These plates have been revealed by the power of God, and they have been translated by the power of God. The translation of them, which you have seen, is correct, and I command you to bear record of what you now see and hear."³¹

When the angel departed, Joseph walked deeper into the woods and found Martin on his knees. Martin told him he had not yet received a witness from the Lord, but he still wanted to see the plates. He asked Joseph to pray with him. Joseph knelt beside him, and before their words were half-uttered, they saw the same angel displaying the plates and the other ancient objects.



Moroni held the gold plates in front of Mary Whitmer and turned their pages so she could see the writings on them.



“Tis enough! ’Tis enough!” Martin cried. “Mine eyes have beheld! Mine eyes have beheld!”³²

Joseph and the Three Witnesses returned to the Whitmer house later that afternoon. Mary Whitmer was chatting with Joseph’s parents when Joseph rushed into the room. “Father! Mother!” he said. “You do not know how happy I am!”

He flung himself down beside his mother. “The Lord has caused the plates to be shown to three more besides me,” he said. “They know for themselves that I do not go about to deceive the people.”

He felt as if a burden had been lifted off his shoulders. “They will now have to bear a part,” he said. “I am not any longer to be entirely alone in the world.”

Martin came into the room next, almost bursting with joy. “I have now seen an angel from heaven!” he cried. “I bless God in the sincerity of my soul that he has condescended to make me—even me—a witness of the greatness of His work!”³³

A few days later, the Whitmers joined the Smith family at their farm in Manchester. Knowing the Lord had

promised to establish His words “in the mouth of as many witnesses as seemeth him good,” Joseph went into the woods with his father, Hyrum, and Samuel, as well as four of David Whitmer’s brothers—Christian, Jacob, Peter Jr., and John—and their brother-in-law Hiram Page.³⁴

The eight men gathered at a spot where the Smith family often went to pray privately. With the Lord’s permission, Joseph uncovered the plates and showed them to the group. They did not see an angel as the Three Witnesses had, but Joseph let them hold the record in their hands, turn its pages, and inspect its ancient writing. Handling the plates affirmed their faith that Joseph’s testimony about the angel and the ancient record was true.³⁵

Now that the translation was over and he had witnesses to support his miraculous testimony, Joseph no longer needed the plates. After the men left the woods and went back to the house, the angel appeared and Joseph returned the sacred record to his care.³⁶ ■

A complete list of works cited is available at saints.lds.org.

The word *Topic* in the notes indicates additional information online at saints.lds.org.

Joseph let the Eight Witnesses hold the record in their hands, turn its pages, and inspect its ancient writing.

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- 4. 3 Nephi 10:9; 11:1.
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