

# The LAST WITNESS *of the* THREE WITNESSES

*Not one of the Three Witnesses ever denied his testimony of the Book of Mormon.*

By Michael R. Morris  
Church Magazines

If you were breathing your last breath and were about to pass through the veil, what would your last words be to those you were leaving behind?

If you were comedian Groucho Marx, you might say something funny like, “This is no way to live!”<sup>1</sup>

If you were multimillionaire Richard B. Mellon, who played a 70-year game of tag with his brother, you might call your brother to your deathbed, touch him, and say, “Last tag.”<sup>2</sup>

If you were President Brigham Young, you might utter the name of your beloved friend and mentor, the Prophet of the Restoration: “Joseph, Joseph, Joseph.”<sup>3</sup>

What if you were one of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon? Would you bear witness yet again that you heard the voice of God and that an angel laid the plates, the Liahona, the sword of Laban, and the Urim and Thummim before your eyes? Would you stand by your testimony one last time, even if you had been excommunicated from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

You would—because they did.

## Oliver Cowdery

Oliver Cowdery, like the other two Witnesses, was excommunicated from the Church in the late 1830s after becoming estranged from the Prophet Joseph Smith. He spent 10 years out of the Church before humbling himself, admitting his errors, and asking to be rebaptized in 1848—just 16 months before his death on March 3, 1850.

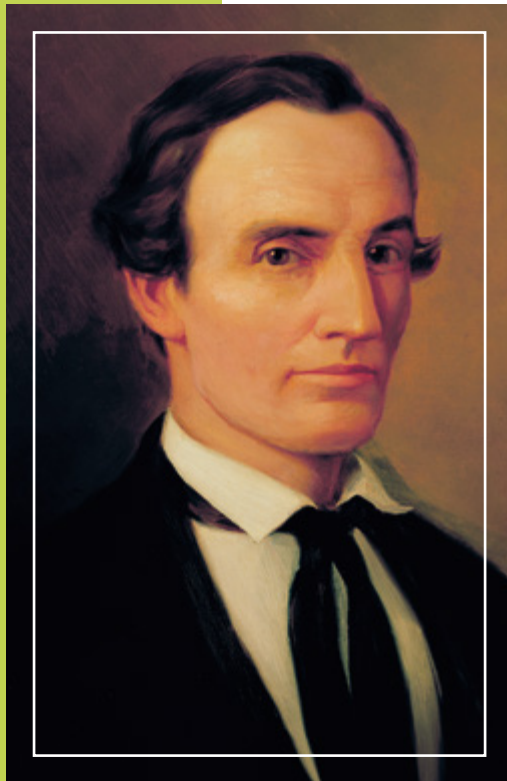
As Oliver sought rebaptism, “he bore testimony, in the most positive terms, to the truth of the Book of Mormon, the restoration of the priesthood to the earth, and mission of Joseph Smith as the prophet of the last days.”<sup>4</sup>

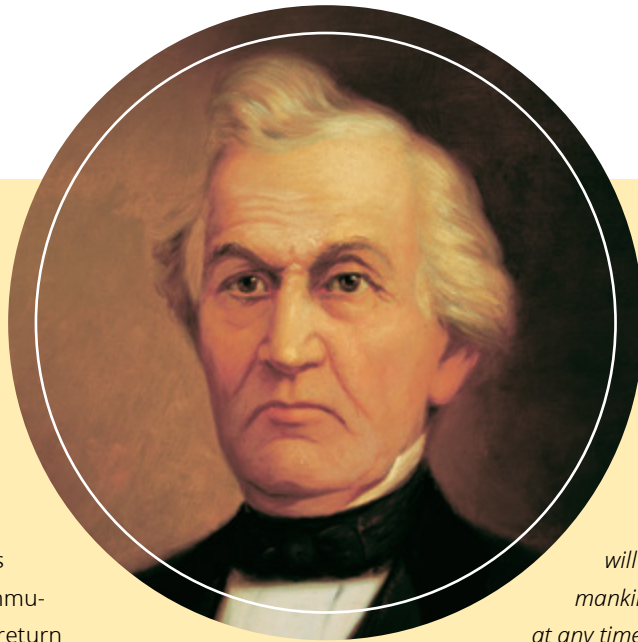
A few months before his death in Richmond, Missouri, Oliver told his old friend Jacob Gates: “I want you to remember what I say to you, I am a dying man, and what would it profit one to tell you a lie? I know . . . that this Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God. My eyes saw, my ears heard, and my understanding was touched, and I know that whereof I testified is true. It was no dream, no vain imagination of the mind—it was real.”<sup>5</sup>

Years after Oliver’s death, his wife, Elizabeth, described his lasting testimony in a letter to her brother David Whitmer: “From the hour when the glorious vision of the Holy Messenger revealed to mortal eyes the hidden prophecies which God

had promised his faithful followers should come forth in due time, until the moment when he passed away from earth, [Oliver] always without one doubt or shadow of turning affirmed the divinity and truth of the Book of Mormon.”<sup>6</sup>

David already knew that. Thirty-seven years earlier, joined by two of the Eight Witnesses (John Whitmer and Hyrum Page) and other family members and friends, he had heard Oliver declare his final testimony: “I was present at the deathbed of Oliver Cowdery,” he said, “and his last words were, ‘Brother David, be true to your testimony to the Book of Mormon.’”<sup>7</sup>





## David Whitmer

David Whitmer lived outside the Church for 50 years following his excommunication—never to return but never to deny his testimony. As the last surviving Witness, he was often interviewed—and often misquoted. To one man who claimed that David had recanted his testimony, he declared:

“That he may understand me now, if he did not then; and that the world may know the truth, I wish now, standing as it were, in the very sunset of life, and in the fear of God, once and for all to make this public statement:

*“That I have never at any time denied that testimony or any part thereof, which has so long since been published with that Book, as one of the three witnesses.”*<sup>8</sup>

A year before his death in Richmond, Missouri, David responded to two encyclopedias that claimed he and the other Witnesses had denied

their testimonies of the Book of Mormon.

He declared: *“I will say once more to all mankind, that I have never at any time denied that testimony or any part thereof. I also testify*

*to the world, that neither Oliver Cowdery or Martin Harris ever at any time denied their testimony. They both died affirming the truth of the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon.”*<sup>9</sup>

Three days before David died, on January 25, 1888, he called his family and his doctor to his bedside. “Doctor, do you consider that I am in my right mind?” he asked. His doctor replied, “Yes, you are in your right mind.”

Then David turned to his family and said: “I want to give my dying testimony. You must be faithful in Christ. I want to say to you all that the Bible and the record of the Nephites, the Book of Mormon, are true, so you can say that you have heard me bear my testimony on my deathbed.”<sup>10</sup>

### THE TESTIMONY OF THREE

When the angel Moroni showed the plates to the Three Witnesses, he fulfilled prophecy uttered at both the beginning and the end of the Book of Mormon. Nephi stated that “none shall behold it save it be that three witnesses shall behold it, by the power of God, . . . and they shall testify to the truth of the book and the things therein” (2 Nephi 27:12). Hundreds of years later, Moroni prophesied: “And in the mouth of three witnesses shall these things be established; and the testimony of three, and this work . . . shall stand as a testimony against the world at the last day” (Ether 5:4).

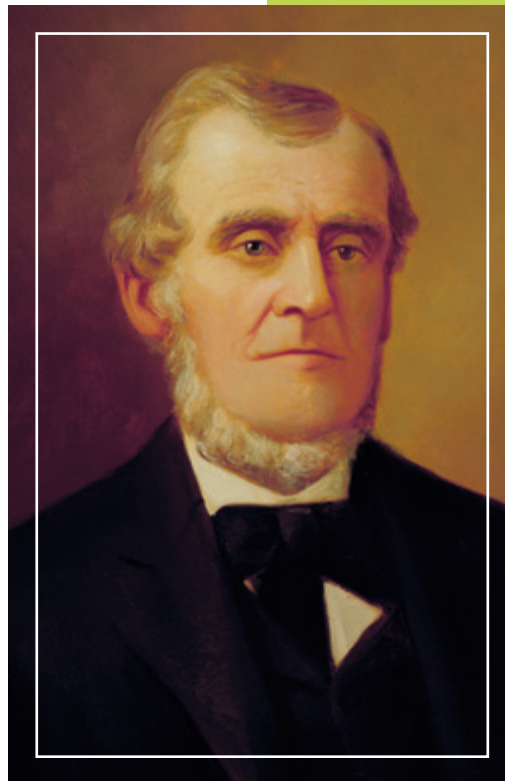
## Martin Harris

Martin, who mortgaged—and later lost—his farm to finance the publication of the Book of Mormon, was rebaptized in 1842 in Kirtland, Ohio. He didn't move to Utah, however, until 1870.

During the final five years of his life, Martin had ample opportunities to share his witness with the Saints. During the last year of his life, he testified: "I tell you of these things that you may tell others that what I have said is true, and I dare not deny it; I heard the voice of God commanding me to testify to the same."<sup>11</sup>

George Godfrey, a longtime acquaintance, sat up with Martin for many nights while he battled the illness that eventually claimed his life on July 10, 1875, in Clarkston, Utah. Just a few hours before Martin's death, Godfrey said, "I asked him if he did not feel that there was an element, at least, of fraudulence and deception in the things that were written and told of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and he replied as he had always done, so many, many times in my hearing, and with the same spirit he always manifested when enjoying health and vigor."

Martin then declared: "The Book of Mormon is no fake. I know what I know. I have seen what I have seen and I have heard what I have heard. I have seen the gold plates from which the Book of Mormon is written. An angel appeared to me and others and testified to the truthfulness of the record, and had I been willing to have perjured myself and sworn falsely to the testimony I now bear, I could have been a rich man, but I could not have testified other than I have done and am now doing, for these things are true."<sup>12</sup>



## YOU CAN BE A WITNESS TOO

"The testimony of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon stands forth

in great strength," President Dallin H. Oaks, First Counselor in the First Presidency, has said. "Each of the three had ample reason and opportunity to renounce his testimony if it had been false, or to equivocate on details if any had been inaccurate. . . . Yet to the end of their lives—periods ranging from 12 to 50 years after their excommunications—not one of these witnesses deviated from his published testimony or said anything that cast any shadow on its truthfulness."<sup>13</sup>

Today it's your turn. As surely as God sent the angel Moroni to Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris, he will manifest to you the truth of their testimony and the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon through the power of the Holy Ghost (see Moroni 10:4–5).

"If you are open to investigation and conviction," David Whitmer said, "I pray you to read the Book of Mormon with a prayerful heart. . . . The Book carries conviction with it."<sup>14</sup> **NE**

### NOTES

1. Groucho Marx, in Elena Holodny, "Famous Last Words of 19 Famous People," *Business Insider*, Feb. 15, 2017, businessinsider.com.
2. Richard B. Mellon, in Joseph W. Lewis, *Last and Near-Last Words of the Famous, Infamous and Those In-Between* (2016).
3. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (1997), 343.
4. In Tad R. Callister, *A Case for the Book of Mormon* (2019), 140.
5. In Callister, 154.
6. In Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (1981), 63.
7. In Callister, 140.
8. In Callister, 145.
9. In Callister, 146.
10. In Callister, 147; punctuation and capitalization modernized.
11. In Anderson, 118.
12. In Callister 150; punctuation modernized.
13. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Witness," *Ensign*, May 1999, 36.
14. In Anderson, 82.