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Early Mormon Dcouments, Volume 2 (Early Mormon Documents)

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Who else, besides Joseph Smith, saw the gold plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated? Martin Harris, one of the Three Witnesses, said that he saw the holy record with his “spiritual eyes,” that the plates were otherwise kept concealed in a wooden box, wrapped in a cloth, and that nobody saw them. The Eight Witnesses, according to Harris, hesitated to sign a written testimonial for the same reason; they had not seen the plates with their natural eyes.

Early Mormon Documents: Volume Two provides all of the available statements by Harris and Oliver Cowdery (other witnesses are featured in subsequent volumes) so that readers can judge for themselves the meaning of these testimonies. In addition, Harris and Cowdery recall Joseph Smith’s treasure hunting, his spiritual gifts, and the process of translating the gold plates. Together their accounts constitute a thoroughly documented, first-person narrative of Mormon origins.

One section of *Volume Two* contains reminiscences by non-Mormon typesetter John Gilbert, whose contribution to the Book of Mormon has previously been inadequately acknowledged. When the printer’s manuscript was delivered to Gilbert’s office in downtown Palmyra, New York, it was unpunctuated—a stream of words without sentence breaks, commas, paragraph indentations, or capitalization—and Cowdery relied on Gilbert’s copy-editing skills. Smith was at the time living near his inlaws’ house in Pennsylvania. Gilbert’s interpretations have appeared in published editions of the Book of Mormon ever since.

Finally, editor Dan Vogel has included in this volume interviews with the Smiths’ Palmyra neighbors. That “a prophet is not without honor except in his home town” was true in Joseph Smith’s case. When he announced that God had called him to do a “marvelous work,” people reacted with astonishment. Not that he was a particularly troublesome young man; he simply lacked the credentials usually associated with religious leadership. He was “a clever, jovial boy” with a penchant for adventure and mischief, according to neighbors, and one who enjoyed a whiskey-and-water with friends and occasionally got into a scuffle. Such adolescent behavior assumed sinister overtones only later in light of Joseph’s blossoming religiosity. His claims antagonized not only the pious members of the local society but also his former treasure-hunting companions. Meanwhile the local press lampooned his vision of the “spirit of the money diggers,” describing this apparition as “a little old man . . . clad [in an] Indian blanket and moccasins” who spoke “reformed Egyptian.”

Although similar bias is evident in some neighbors’ accounts, their memories are significant in instances where they corroborate statements made by Smith family members and early Mormon converts. In addition, some of Smith’s early acquaintances—John Stafford, the brothers Benjamin, Lorenzo, and Orlando Saunders—are “friendly sources,” according to Vogel. Others provide information about the general cultural environment. For instance, Willard Chase, whose sister was a village scryer, criticized Smith for having borrowed a seer stone without returning it. While Chase and others denied belief in mysticism, they nonetheless confirmed its prevalence in western New York.

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