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**CASE FILE: The Testimony
of the Three Witnesses**

**An Investigation into the Foundational
Evidence for the Book of Mormon**

Case File: Prophetic Foundation

The Book of Mormon Prophecies Its Own Witnesses

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Before any witnesses existed, the text of the Book of Mormon declared they would come. This created a prophetic mandate that would soon need to be fulfilled.

Direct Evidence: Scriptural Mandate

Ether 5:3-4

...unto three shall they be shown by the power of God; wherefore they shall know of a surety that these things are true. And in the mouth of three witnesses shall these things be established...

Specific Count: 3 Witnesses

2 Nephi 27:12

...I will show the plates unto those who shall assist to bring forth this work... And behold, ye may be privileged that ye may show the plates unto those who shall be chosen, even unto three...

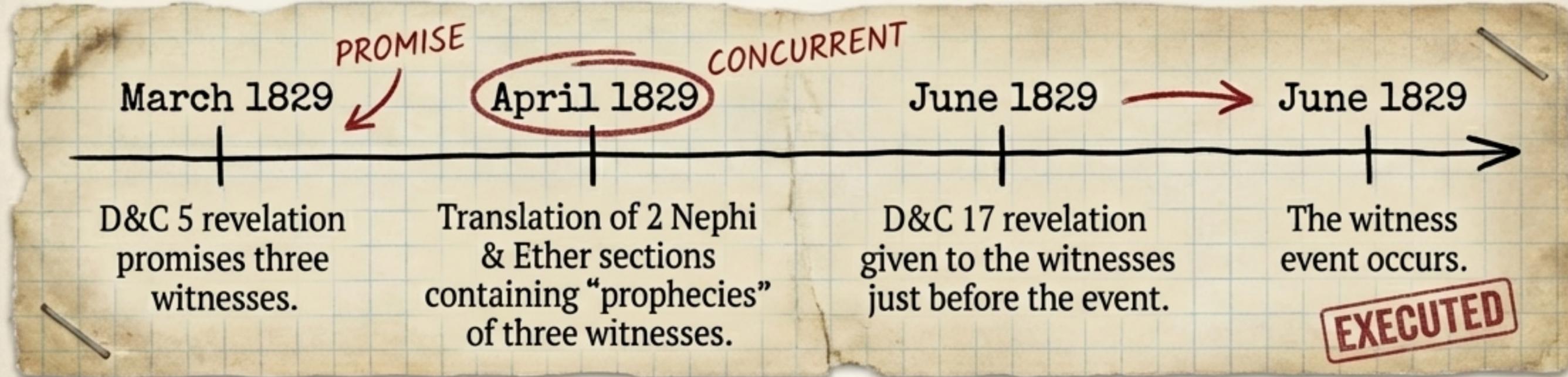
Divine Selection: "Those chosen"

Foreshadowing the Testimony.

Joseph Smith's Revelations Prepare the Chosen Three

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In the months leading up to the event, Joseph Smith delivered revelations specifically naming the witnesses and defining the nature of their experience. The timeline suggests the revelations coincided with the “prophecies” being written into the Book of Mormon text.



From Joseph Smith History:

“Almost immediately after we had made this discovery... Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and... Martin Harris... became so very solicitous and teased me so much that at length I complied...”

Witness Pressure & Compliance

Exhibit A: The Official Testimony of the Three Witnesses

EXHIBIT A

BE IT KNOWN unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people... we, through the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, have seen the plates which contain this record... And we also know that they have been translated by the gift and power of God... we declare with words of soberness, that an angel of God came down from heaven, and he brought and laid before our eyes, that we beheld and saw the plates, and the engravings thereon... the voice of God commanded us that we should bear record of it...

OLIVER COWDERY, DAVID WHITMER, MARTIN HARRIS.

The Central Question of This Investigation

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“Did the witnesses see a physical object with their natural eyes, or did they experience a subjective vision? u

The official testimony implies a literal, physical event. However, dozens of firsthand and secondhand accounts from the witnesses themselves complicate this narrative. The nature of their experience is the key to understanding their testimony.

Key discrepancy!

Witness Examination: Martin Harris Describes a Vision

Throughout his life, Martin Harris was repeatedly questioned about the event. His descriptions consistently point to a spiritual, not physical, experience.

EVIDENCE TAG
001

"...he never saw the plates with his natural eyes, only in vision or imagination." (Stephen Burnett, 1838)

EVIDENCE TAG
003

"I never saw the Golden Plates only in a visionary or entranced state."
(Anthony Metcalf, 1875)

EVIDENCE TAG
002

"I did not see them as I do that pencil case, yet I saw them with the eye of faith... though at the time they were covered with a cloth." (John A. Clark, 1842)

EVIDENCE TAG
004

"Martin looked down for an instant, raised his eyes up and said, 'No, I saw them with a spiritual eye.'"
(John H. Gilbert, 1892)

Witness Examination: David Whitmer Confirms a Spiritual View

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David Whitmer, who never rejoined the mainstream church, also described the event in non-physical terms, clarifying what 'seeing' meant in this context.



Key testimony

- **On the angel:** "It had no appearance or shape... Nothing in the way you understand it... Just so, **merely a feeling.**" (John Murphy interview, 1880)
- **On the plates:** When asked if he **touched them:** "We did not touch nor handle the plates." When asked if the table was **literal wood:** "The table had the appearance of literal wood **as shown in the vision.**" (Zenas H. Gurley interview, 1885)
- **The Clarification:** "Of course we were **in the spirit when we had the view, for no man can behold the face of an angel except in a spiritual view... there in a vision, or in the spirit, we saw and heard...**" (Anthony Metcalf interview, published 1887)

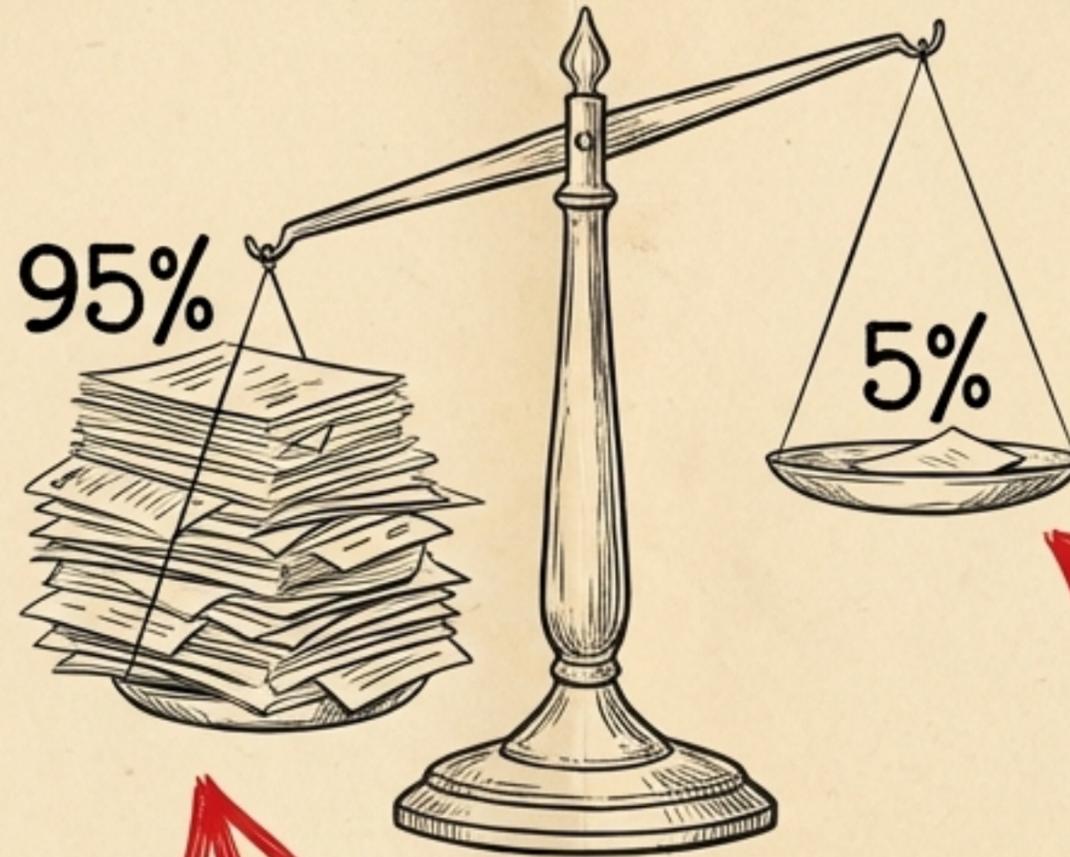
Re-evaluating the Evidence: Does the 5% Invalidate the 95%?

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Apologetic Argument

"I've got about 200 times when one of the witnesses said 'I did sign the statement... I saw the angel... I saw the angel... I saw the plates'... and I'm dealing today with about eight [that say otherwise]... The question is, do you believe the 95% or do you believe the 5%?"

— Richard Lloyd Anderson



Investigative Rebuttal

This creates a false binary. The question is not whether to believe one set of statements over the other.

Does the 5% change our understanding of the 95%?
The visionary accounts don't say the experience didn't happen; they explain how it happened. "Seeing" was understood as a spiritual, visionary event.

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FINAL REPORT

Assessing Credibility: A 'Magic Worldview'

The chosen witnesses were not objective skeptics. They were already immersed in the culture of folk magic, treasure digging, and seer stones, making them primed for a visionary experience.

WITNESS
PROFILE

EVIDENCE
LINK



Martin
Harris

- Belonged to 5 different churches before Mormonism.
- Claimed to have seen Jesus as a deer and the devil as a "sleek-haired fellow with four feet."
- Witness for other prophets with plates (James Strang, Gladden Bishop).



Oliver
Cowdery

- A "clerk, teacher, Justice of the Peace, a lawyer."
 - Used a **divining rod** (the "gift of the sprout"), a practice rooted in **folk magic**.
 - Claimed to have dreams about the plates before meeting Joseph.
- Dowaing Connection* →



David
Whitmer

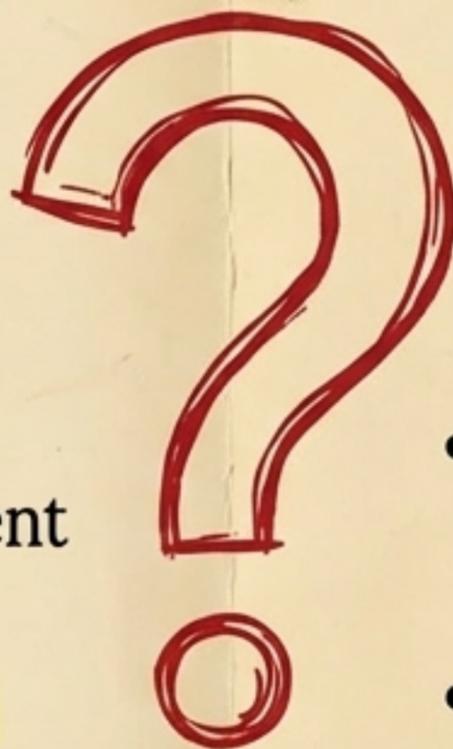
- Believed in **seer stones** and owned at least two of his own.
- His family was deeply involved, with many becoming witnesses themselves.

Further Investigation Reveals Conflicting Narratives

Beyond the nature of the vision, the witnesses' accounts differ on fundamental details of the event itself.

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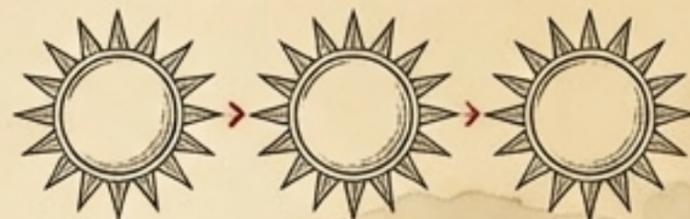
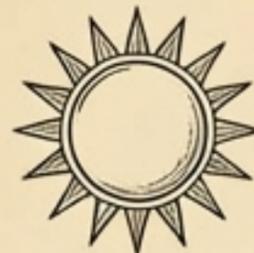
The Location: Woods or Field?



- **Official History (Joseph Smith):** "...retired to a piece of woods convenient to Mr. Whitmer's house."
- **Oliver Cowdery (1829):** "...in a remote field."
- **David Whitmer (1831):** "...led by Smith into an open field on his father's farm."

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The Timing: Same Day or Three Days Later?



- **Official History (Joseph Smith):** Joseph finds Martin praying later the same day and joins him for the vision.
- **Martin Harris (Reported by Anthony Metcalf):** "In about three days, I went into the woods to pray... I passed into a state of entrancement and in that state I saw the angel and the plates."

Forensic Analysis: A Single Scribe for All Signatures

An examination of the printer's manuscript for the Book of Mormon reveals that all eleven witness signatures (both the Three and the Eight) are written in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery.

**FORENSIC
ANALYSIS**

Oliver Cowdery
David Whitmer
Martin Harris

Key Finding:

While the witnesses may have verbally assented, there is no surviving original document that they personally signed. The statement presented as their collective, signed testimony was, at best, a prepared statement they agreed to, copied by a single person. This is less credible than individual, handwritten affidavits.

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The Aftermath: Excommunication and Divergence

The official narrative of unshakable lifelong testimony is complicated by the fact that all three witnesses had bitter falling-outs with Joseph Smith and were excommunicated from the church.

1837: Martin Harris is excommunicated. He later follows other prophets like James Strang.

1838: Oliver Cowdery is excommunicated after accusing Joseph Smith of adultery with Fanny Alger. He joins the Methodist Church.

1838: David Whitmer is excommunicated. He starts his own church and publicly states Joseph Smith later invented the Priesthood restoration story.

“If you believe my testimony to the Book of Mormon... then I tell you that in June, 1838, God spake to me again... and told me to separate myself from among the Latter Day Saints.”

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Case Summary: Re-evaluating the Meaning of "Witness"

The evidence strongly suggests the witness event was not a literal, physical encounter. It was a subjective, spiritual experience, likely guided by Joseph Smith, involving men predisposed to such visions.

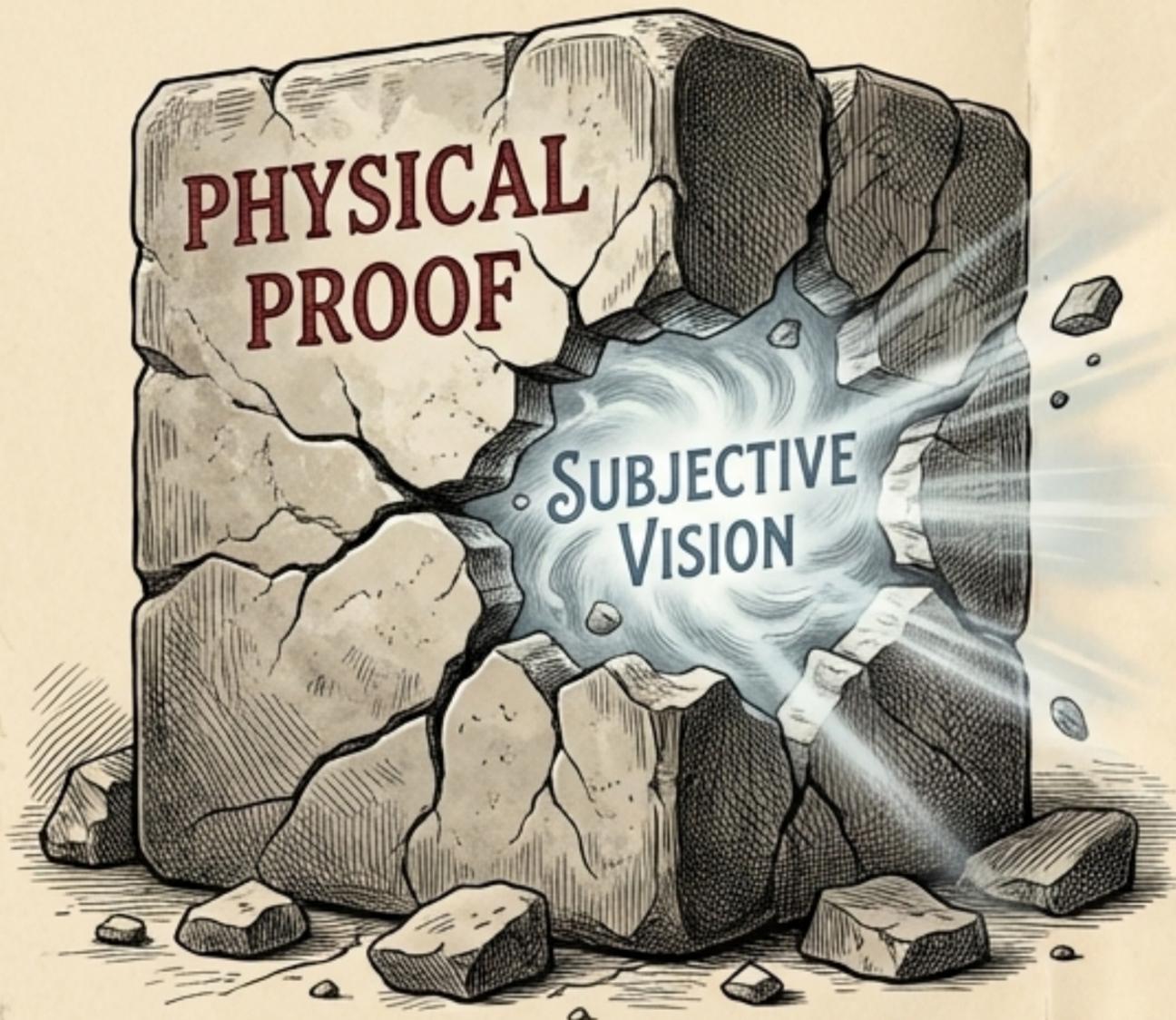
Summary of Findings

- ✓ The event was orchestrated through "prophecies" in the Book of Mormon and direct revelations.
- ✓ The witnesses consistently described the event using the language of vision: "spiritual eyes," "eye of faith," "in the spirit."
- ✓ Their accounts contain contradictions on basic details like location and timing.
- ✓ Their credibility is impacted by their "magic worldview" and subsequent excommunications.
- ✓ The signed "testimony" itself is a transcribed statement, not a personally signed affidavit.

CASE CLOSED

The Verdict: Why the Distinction Matters

The purpose of the Three Witnesses was to provide tangible, external proof for Joseph Smith's extraordinary claims, moving the Book of Mormon from personal revelation to verifiable fact. However, the historical record shows the opposite occurred.



✓ A **physical event** could serve as proof to the outside world. A **private vision** cannot be verified and serves only to confirm the faith of those already inclined to believe.

✓ The witnesses never *denied* their testimony, but their own words redefine it. They testified to a powerful spiritual experience, not to the existence of a physical, historical artifact they inspected with their natural eyes.

✓ Therefore, the 'cornerstone' evidence for the Book of Mormon is not the simple, unimpeachable proof it is presented as. It is a complex, contradictory, and subjective visionary event.

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