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**Title**

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**Abstract** Review of *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (1991), edited by Lyndon W. Cook.

**Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness*. Orem: Grandin, 1991. xxvi + 276 pp. Index. \$18.95.**

Reviewed by Daniel C. Peterson

Lyndon W. Cook has done us a considerable service in gathering together all the reports of all the known interviews given by David Whitmer on the subject of the Book of Mormon, to which he was a witness. Seventy-two different accounts, ranging over the half-century from 1838 to 1888, are supplemented by eighteen letters and newspaper statements from Whitmer and others.

The collection is somewhat repetitious. But that is precisely the point. Time after time, year after year, before audiences both friendly and hostile, to newspaper reporters and Latter-day Saint missionaries and curious Reorganized Latter Day Saints, to former colleagues like Orson Pratt and to Mormon General Authorities like George Q. Cannon and Joseph F. Smith, David Whitmer told the same story. A literal angel, he insisted, showed literal plates to him and to his fellow witnesses. They saw the angel and the sacred objects with their ordinary, physical eyes.

In an introduction, Lyndon Cook tries to make sense of the entire career of David Whitmer, to account for both the faithful witness and the sometimes bitter dissenter. On the whole, he is successful. Whether or not one agrees with it, Whitmer's understanding of himself as an early Mormon believer who was left behind by a booming church that had evolved in wrong directions becomes entirely intelligible.

It is here, however, that I must lodge my one (small) objection. Cook rightly calls upon "thoughtful students of history" to examine "the full range of [David Whitmer's] thinking." But then he goes on, rather too stridently, to condemn the use of "selected, ellipsized quotations that tend only to support official accounts of the Restoration." "For Latter-day Saints to know Whitmer only in the washed and bowdlerized versions of his thought (cited in official writings and multi-media productions) is at best a distortion of the truth and at worst a perversion of history and an injustice to both the witness and the congregation of believers" (see pp. xxv-xxvi).

All right. Let it be conceded, once and for all, that David Whitmer rejected Mormonism as it developed after, roughly, the

mid-1830s. He repudiated Brigham Young and polygamy. He thought Joseph Smith ended his life as a fallen prophet. (A *fallen* prophet, be it noted—not a *false* prophet.) This is all true, and a fully rounded portrait of Whitmer must take such beliefs into account.

But the possession of “a fully rounded portrait of Whitmer” is essential only for very serious students of David Whitmer himself. Whitmer’s personal religious beliefs are no more important than those of any number of other early Latter-day Saint figures. What sets him apart, what makes him deeply significant for the history and claims of Mormonism, is his experience as a witness. Let me make this clear by means of a simple hypothetical story: When Mr. Johnson testifies in court about the automobile accident that he watched while standing on the curb, we are not particularly interested in his speculations about the relative merits of Mercedes Benz and Rolls Royce, or the use of police radar, or the best way to combat drunk driving. There are plenty of people with opinions on these subjects, opinions that are probably just as good as Johnson’s or perhaps even better. His unique, irreplaceable authority consists in, and is limited to, what he actually saw and heard. That is precisely what makes him a witness. So it is with David Whitmer. A biographer of Mr. Johnson, should there ever be one, might well want to discuss his views on various makes of automobiles, or his subsequent relations with the driver of one of the cars, or even his speculations on the history of Italian opera. But the traffic judge, whose only concern is to determine accurately what happened in the accident, is justified in focusing entirely on Johnson’s unique experience on the curb. So, too, advocates of Latter-day Saint belief are justified in focusing on that one element of David Whitmer’s life that distinguishes him from almost all other early participants in the Restoration—his experience with the angel.

And his experience is well worth such focus. David Whitmer offers powerful and persuasive evidence that cannot simply be brushed aside. If there really was an angel Moroni, if there really were golden plates, the likelihood that there were historical Nephites is vastly increased—and the plausibility of contemporary revisionist theories, which would make of the Book of Mormon a work of (inspired or uninspired) nineteenth-century fiction, is vastly reduced. If David Whitmer is right, supernatural involvement in the origin and rise of Mormonism is confirmed, and naturalistic counterexplanations are rendered ob-

solete. Furthermore, Whitmer's insistence upon the matter-of-fact literalness of his experience plays havoc with attempts to view the religious experiences of Joseph Smith and other early Latter-day Saints as "mystical"—and thereby, I suspect, to weaken their purchase on exterior reality. (Such endeavors have always puzzled me. Those really familiar with Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mysticism—to say nothing of Hinduism and the eastern religions—know that the experiences related by their adepts are utterly unlike revelation in Mormonism.)<sup>1</sup>

David Whitmer's testimony represents the kind of primary data with which honest theories of Mormon origins and honest evaluations of the Restoration must unavoidably come to terms. Everyone interested in early Mormonism should read this book. Everybody interested in the truth claims of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints should read it. David Whitmer's testimony will strengthen the faith of believers. It gravely challenges the disbelief of skeptics.

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh W. Nibley's brief essay on "Prophets and Mystics," in his *The World and the Prophets*, vol. 3 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, 3d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1987), 98–107, seems to me entirely right on this issue.