

1859 Interview of Martin Harris

In May 1859 a newspaper mentioned Martin Harris, who resided at Kirtland, Ohio. He was a member of a small Church of Christ congregation. Concerning Harris, it reads: "He says that Joel Tiffany, well known as a leading Spiritualist some time since, has been out from New York lately on a visit to him, Harris, and that for four successive days without intermission, he unfolded the mysteries of godliness to Joel, which the latter copied at the time and is about to publish." "Mormon Times in Kirtland," *Cleveland Daily Plain Dealer* 15 (May 18, 1859), Cleveland, Ohio.

In late January 1859, Martin Harris as stated above was interviewed by Joel Tiffany. This interview was later published in New York City in *Tiffany's Monthly* 5 (August 1859):163-70. The article was titled, "Mormonism--No. II." An original copy is located at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. The quotation marks have been deleted and some paragraphs shortened for easier reading. Brackets have been added to clarify the report.

The following narration we took down from the lips of Martin Harris, and read the same to him after it was written, that we might be certain of giving his statement to the world. We made a journey to Ohio for the purpose of obtaining it, in the latter part of January, 1859. We did this that the world might have a connected account of the origin of Mormonism from the lips of one of the original witnesses, upon whose testimony it was first received. For it will be remembered that Martin Harris is one of the three witnesses selected to certify to the facts connected with the origin of that revelation.

Mr. Harris¹ says: Joseph Smith, jr.,² found at Palmyra,³ N.Y., on the 22d day of September, 1827, the plates of gold upon which was recorded in Arabic, Chaldaic, Syriac, and Egyptian, the Book of Life, or the Book of Mormon. I was not with him at the time, but I had a revelation the summer before, that God had a work for me to do. These plates were found at the north point of a hill two miles north of Manchester village. Joseph had a stone which was dug from the well of Mason Chase,⁴ twenty-four feet from the surface. In this stone he could see many things to my certain knowledge. It was by means of this stone he first discovered these plates.

In the first place, he told me of this stone, and proposed to bind it on his eyes, and run a race with me in the woods. A few days after this, I was at the house of his father⁵ in Manchester, two miles south of Palmyra village, and was picking my teeth with a pin while sitting on the bars. The pin caught in my teeth, and dropped from my fingers into shavings and straw. I jumped from the bars and looked for it. Joseph and Northrop Sweet⁶ also did the same. We could not find it. I then took Joseph on surprise, and said to him--I said, "Take your stone," I had never seen it, and did not know that he had it

¹ Martin Harris (1783-1875), was a resident of Palmyra, New York.

² Joseph Smith Jr. (1805-1844), was a treasure seeker.

³ Manchester, New York

⁴ Mason Chase (1795-?), was the older brother of Willard Chase (1798-1871). Their parents were Clark (1770-1821) and Phebe Mason Chase (1772-1854). The Chase family were neighbors of the Smith family.

⁵ Joseph Smith Sr. (1771-1840), was a treasure seeker; father of Hyrum and Joseph Smith Jr.

⁶ Northrop Sweet (1802-1881)

with him. He had it in his pocket. He took it [out] and placed it in his hat--the old white hat--and placed his face in his hat. I watched him closely to see that he did not look [to] one side; he reached out his hand beyond me on the right, and moved a little stick, and there I saw the pin, which he picked up and gave to me. I know he did not look out of the hat until after he had picked up the pin.

Joseph had had this stone for some time. There was a company there in that neighborhood, who were digging for money supposed to have been hidden by the ancients. Of this company were old Mr. Stowel[1]⁷ --I think his name was Josiah--also old Mr. Beman,⁸ also Samuel Lawrence,⁹ George Proper,¹⁰ Joseph Smith, jr., and his father, and his brother Hiram Smith.¹¹ They dug for money in Palmyra, Manchester, also in Pennsylvania, and other places. When Joseph found this stone, there was a company digging in Harmony, Pa., and they took Joseph to look in the stone for them, and he did so for a while, and then he told them the enchantment was so strong that he could not see, and they gave it up. There he became acquainted with his future wife,¹² the daughter of old Mr. Isaac Hale,¹³ where he boarded. He afterwards returned to Pennsylvania again, and married his wife,¹⁴ taking her off to old Mr. Stowel[1]'s, because her people would not consent to the marriage. She was of age, Joseph was not.

After this, on the 22nd of September, 1827, before day, Joseph took the horse and wagon of old Mr. Stowel[1], and taking his wife, he went to the place where the plates were concealed, and while he was obtaining them, she kneeled down and prayed. He then took the plates and hid them in an old black oak tree top which was hollow. Mr. Stowel[1] was at this time at old Mr. Smith's, digging for money.

It was reported by these money-diggers, that they had found boxes, but before they could secure them, they would sink into the earth. A candid old Presbyterian¹⁵ told me, that on the Susquehannah flats he dug down to an iron chest, that he scraped the dirt off with his shovel, but had nothing with him to open the chest; that he went away to get help, and when they came to it, it moved away two or three rods into the earth, and they could not get it.

There were a great many strange sights. One time the old log school-house south of Palmyra, was suddenly lighted up, and frightened them away. Samuel Lawrence told me that while they were digging, a large man who appeared to be eight or nine feet high, came and sat on the ridge of the barn, and motioned to them that they must leave. They motioned back that they would not; but that they afterwards became frightened and did leave. At another time while they were digging, a company of horsemen came and frightened them away. These things were real to them, I believe, because they were told to me in confidence, and told by different ones, and their stories agreed, and they seemed to be in earnest--I knew they were in earnest.

⁷ Josiah Stowell Sr. (1770-1844), was a treasure seeker.

⁸ Alvah Beman (1775-1837), was a treasure seeker.

⁹ Samuel Tyler Lawrence (1786-1847), was a treasure seeker.

¹⁰ George Proper (?-?), was a treasure seeker and resident of Palmyra, New York.

¹¹ Hiram Smith (1800-1844), was a treasure seeker.

¹² Emma Hale (1804-1879)

¹³ Isaac Hale (1763-1839)

¹⁴ January 18, 1827

¹⁵ Possibly Josiah Stowell Sr.

Joseph did not dig for these plates. They were placed in this way: four stones were set up and covered with a flat stone, oval on the upper side and flat on the bottom. Beneath this was a little platform upon which the plates were laid; and the two stones set in a bow of silver by means of which the plates were translated, were found underneath the plates.

These plates were seven inches wide by eight inches in length, and were of the thickness of plates of tin; and when piled one above the other, they were altogether about four inches thick; and they were put together on the back by three silver rings, so that they would open like a book.

The two stones set in a bow of silver were about two inches in diameter, perfectly round, and about five-eighths of an inch thick at the centre; but not so thick at the edges where they came into the bow. They were joined by a round bar of silver, about three-eighths of an inch in diameter, and about four inches long, which, with the two stones, would make eight inches.

The stones were white, like polished marble, with a few gray streaks. I never dared to look into them by placing them in the hat, because Moses said that "no man could see God and live," and we could see anything we wished by looking into them; and I could not keep the desire to see God out of my mind. And beside, we had a command to let no man look into them, except by the command of God, lest he should "look aught and perish."

These plates were usually kept in a cherry box made for that purpose, in the possession of Joseph and myself. The plates were kept from the sight of the world, and no one, save Oliver Cowdery,¹⁶ myself, Joseph Smith, jr., and David Whitmer,¹⁷ ever saw them. Before the Lord showed the plates to me, Joseph wished me to see them. But I refused, unless the Lord should do it.

At one time, before the Lord showed them to me, Joseph said I should see them. I asked him, why he would break the commands of the Lord? He said, you have done so much I am afraid you will not believe unless you see them. I replied, "Joseph, I know all about it. The Lord has showed to me ten times more about it than you know."--Here we inquired of Mr. Harris--How did the Lord show you these things? He replied, I am forbidden to say anything how the Lord showed them to me, except that by the power of God I have seen them.

Mr. Harris continues: I hefted the plates many times, and should think they weighed forty or fifty pounds.

When Joseph had obtained the plates, he communicated the fact to his father and mother. The plates remained concealed in the tree top until he got the chest made. He then went after them and brought them home. While on his way home with the plates, he was met by what appeared to be a man, who demanded the plates, and struck him with a club on his side, which was all black and blue. Joseph knocked the man down, and then ran for home, and was much out of breath. When he arrived at home, he handed the plates in at the window, and they were received from him by his mother. They were then hidden under the hearth in his father's house. But the wall being partly down, it was feared that certain ones, who were trying to get possession of the plates, would get under the house and dig them out.

¹⁶ Oliver Cowdery (1806-1850)

¹⁷ David Whitmer (1805-1888)

Joseph then took them out, and hid them under the old cooper's shop, by taking up a board and digging in the ground and burying them. When they were taken from there, they were put into an old Ontario glass-box. Old Mr. Beman sawed off the ends, making the box the right length to put them in, and when they went in he said he heard them jink [clink], but he was not permitted to see them. He told me so.

The money-diggers claimed that they had as much right to the plates as Joseph had, as they were in company together. They claimed that Joseph had been [a] traitor, and had appropriated to himself that which belonged to them. For this reason Joseph was afraid of them, and continued concealing the plates. After they had been concealed under the floor of the cooper's shop for a short time, Joseph was warned to remove them. He said he was warned by an angel. He took them out and hid them up in the chamber of the cooper's shop among the flags [flax]. That night some one came, took up the floor, and dug up the earth, and would have found the plates had they not been removed.

These things had all occurred before I talked with Joseph respecting the plates. But I had the account of it from Joseph, his wife, brothers, sisters, his father and mother. I talked with them separately, that I might get the truth of the matter.

The first time I heard of the matter, my brother Presarved [Preserved] Harris,¹⁸ who had been in the village of Palmyra, asked me if [I] had heard about Joseph Smith, jr., having a golden bible. My thoughts were that the money-diggers had probably dug up an old brass kettle, or something of the kind. I thought no more of it. This was about the first of October, 1827.

The next day after the talk with my brother, I went to the village, and there I was asked what I thought of the Gold Bible? I replied, The Scripture says, He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is foolishness unto him. I do not wish to make myself a fool. I don't know anything about it. Then said I, what is it about Joe's Gold Bible? They then went on to say, that they put whiskey into the old man's cider and got him half drunk, and he told them all about it. They then repeated his account, which I found afterwards to agree substantially with the account given by Joseph. Then said I to them, how do you know that he has not got such gold plates? They replied, "Damn him! angels appear to men in this enlightened age! Damn him, he ought to be tarred and feathered for telling such a damned lie!" Then I said, suppose he has told a lie, as old Tom Jefferson said, it did [not] matter to him whether a man believed in one god or twenty. It did not rob his pocket, nor break his shins. What is it to us if he has told a lie? He has it to answer for [it] if he has lied. If you should tar and feather all the liars, you would soon be out of funds to purchase the material.

I then thought of the words of Christ, The kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. I knew they were of the devil's kingdom, and if that is of the devil, his kingdom is divided against itself. I said in my heart, this is something besides smoke. There is some fire at the bottom of it. I then determined to go and see Joseph as soon as I could find time.

A day or so before I was ready to visit Joseph, his mother¹⁹ came over to our house and wished to talk with me. I told her I had no time to spare, she might talk with my

¹⁸ Preserved Harris (1785-1867)

¹⁹ Lucy Mack Smith (1775-1856)

wife,²⁰ and, in the evening when I had finished my work I would talk with her. When she commenced talking with me, she told me respecting his bringing home the plates, and many other things, and said that Joseph had sent her over and wished me to come and see him. I told her that I had a time appointed when I would go, and that when the time came I should then go, but I did not tell her when it was. I sent my boy to harness my horse and take her home. She wished my wife and daughter²¹ to go with her; and they went and spent most of the day. When they came home, I questioned them about them. My daughter said, they were about as much as she could lift. They were now in the glass-box, and my wife said they were very heavy. They both lifted them. I waited a day or two, when I got up in the morning, took my breakfast, and told my folks I was going to the village, but went directly to old Mr. Smith's.

I found that Joseph had gone away to work for Peter Ingersoll[1]²² to get some flour. I was glad he was absent, for that gave me an opportunity of talking with his wife and the family about the plates. I talked with them separately, to see if their stories agreed, and I found they did agree. When Joseph came home I did not wish him to know that I had been talking with them, so I took him by the arm and led him away from the rest, and requested him to tell me the story, which he did as follows. He said: "An angel had appeared to him, and told him it was God's work." Here Mr. Harris seemed to wander from the subject, when we requested him to continue and tell what Joseph then said. He replied, Joseph had before this described the manner of his finding the plates. He found them by looking in the stone found in the well of Mason Chase. The family had likewise told me the same thing.

Joseph said the angel told him he must quit the company of the money-diggers. That there were wicked men among them. He must have no more to do with them. He must not lie, nor swear, nor steal. He told him to go and look in the spectacles, and he would show him the man that would assist him. That he did so, and he saw myself, Martin Harris, standing before him. That struck me with surprise. I told him I wished him to be very careful about these things. "Well," said he, "I saw you standing before me as plainly as I do now." I said, if it is the devil's work I will have nothing to do with it; but if it is the Lord's, you can have all the money necessary to bring it before the world. He said the angel told him, that the plates must be translated, printed and sent before the world. I said, Joseph, you know my doctrine, that cursed is every one that putteth his trust in man, and maketh flesh his arm; and we know that the devil is to have great power in the latter days to deceive if possible the very elect; and I don't know that you are one of the elect. Now you must not blame me for not taking your word. If the Lord will show me that it is his work, you can have all the money you want.

While at Mr. Smith's I hefted the plates, and I knew from the heft that they were lead or gold, and I knew that Joseph had not credit enough to buy so much lead. I left Mr. Smith's about eleven o'clock and went home. I retired to my bedroom and prayed God to show me concerning these things, and I covenanted that if it was his work and he would show me so, I would put forth my best ability to bring it before the world. He then showed me that it was his work, and that it was designed to bring in the fullness of his gospel to the gentiles to fulfill his word, that the first shall be last and the last first.

²⁰ Lucy Harris (1792-1836), wife of Martin Harris.

²¹ Lucy Harris, daughter of Martin and Lucy Harris.

²² Peter Ingersoll (ca 1789-1867), was a resident of Palmyra, New York.

He showed this to me by the still small voice spoken in the soul. Then I was satisfied that it was the Lord's work, and I was under a covenant to bring it forth.

The excitement in the village upon the subject had become such that some had threatened to mob Joseph, and also to tar and feather him. They said he should never leave until he had shown the plates. It was unsafe for him to remain, so I determined that he must go to his father-in-law's in Pennsylvania.

He wrote to his brother-in-law Alvah Hale,²³ requesting him to come for him. I advised Joseph that he must pay all his debts before starting. I paid them for him, and furnished him money for his journey. I advised him to take time enough to get ready, so that he might start a day or two in advance: for he would be mobbed if it was known when he started. We put the box of plates into a barrel about one-third full of beans and headed it up. I informed Mr. Hale of the matter, and advised them to cut each a good cudgel and put into the wagon with them, which they did. It was understood that they were to start on Monday; but they started on Saturday night and got through safe. This was the last of October, 1827. It might have been the first of November.²⁴

²³ Alva Hale (1795-1881), was a son of Isaac and Elizabeth Lewis Hale.

²⁴ Evidently in December 1827.