

# Martin Harris: Mormonism's Early Convert

*Ronald W. Walker*

IT BEGAN IN THE AUTUMN OF 1874 with a knock that interrupted Pilkingtons' evening devotions. The stranger at the door explained that he wished to hire a boy to do chores and promised room, board, and a two-year-old heifer in exchange for a year's labor. Moments later, fourteen-year-old Willie Pilkington, several months removed from a Lancashire sweat shop, found himself leaving his family and sitting down in the stranger's log house, the first that he had seen since arriving in Utah territory. His new employer gave Willie a pan of bread and milk for supper, supplied him with two quilts — one to soften the cabin's floor and the other to barely shield him from the autumn mountain air — and quickly went to bed in another part of the house.

Willie thought he was alone, but then he heard a noise from the corner of the room that his small oil lamp failed to explain. Unnerved but not knowing what else to do, the boy quickly finished his supper and was trying to fashion a bed on the floor when he saw in the dark corner an emaciated man, who beckoned him to pull up a chair. "Now, Willie," the old man said after learning his name, "tomorrow night after your chores are done and we have had supper and all the folks have gone to bed, I want you to sit down in this chair, close to mine, for I have lots to tell" (Pilkington n.d., 7–9).

So it began. During the next nine months, first at their Smithfield, Utah, farm and later when the family moved across the valley to Clarkston, the old man compulsively told and retold his story whenever he had a chance. At times it seemed his very existence required it. He spoke about himself and his past, of an ancient religious history written on plates made from gold and unearthed from their hiding place, of a new religion that restored God's ways. In all this, he claimed a central role. His money had been crucial. Moreover, he

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had seen the golden plates, spoken with an angel, and literally heard the voice of God.

Had the old-timer been more reflective, his account might have contained an element of self-torment or perhaps catharsis. His role had not always been exemplary. As it was, his self-importance, which had been his undoing from the beginning, at times diminished the obvious sincerity of his tale. Willie remembered the exaggeration and the self-consciousness when the old gentleman first revealed his name. Shuffling to his feet, the ninety-two year old placed his walking cane in his left hand, drew himself upright, and dramatically struck his right hand against his breast.

"I am Martin Harris," he announced (Pilkington n.d., 9).

It was, in fact, a name worth remembering.

Perhaps Thomas Harris, Martin's earliest Harris family progenitor in America, had set the pattern. Thomas rejected the Elizabethans' religious compromise, the Thirty-nine Articles of Belief, and was among the first wave of Dissenters to come to America. But the Massachusetts Bay colony proved inhospitable. Thomas, who had known the religious radical Roger Williams in England and had travelled with him to America, continued to follow the Separatist leader in Massachusetts. After Williams fled the colony during the winter of 1634-35, Thomas and his brother William joined him in his Rhode Island wilderness. However according to family lore, Thomas returned to Boston, asked permission to occupy the pulpit, and delivered a scorching sermon that enraged his listeners. If later reports can be credited, Thomas was dragged by his hair from the church, lashed by a cat'o'nine tails, and jailed without bread or water (Gunnell 1955, 1-5; Harris and Jay [n.d.], 1; Brockunier 1940).

Thomas Harris's stubborn religious enthusiasm apparently lay fallow for several generations. His great-great grandson, Nathan Harris, Martin's father, seemed more motivated toward economic betterment. About 1780 Nathan left Rhode Island, where the Harrises had lived for four generations, for the opportunity of upstate New York. His first two children were born near Albany, and apparently in the early 1790s, Harris and his wife, Rhoda Lap-ham, began to establish roots in western New York's primitive Ontario County.<sup>1</sup> By 1794 Nathan had purchased for about \$300 New York currency 600 acres of rich loamed soil near present-day Palmyra, New York, and began tilling the land (Cook 1930, 202).

How much Nathan himself worked on the project is unclear. Early accounts speak of Rhoda's domestic energy and of Nathan's talent as a hunter and sportsman, which in after years assumed proportions of folklore. According to one account, a single haul of Nathan's seine at Ganargua Creek netted eighteen salmon. Neighbors also talked about his ability to bring down migrat-

<sup>1</sup> Following the *Palmyra Courier*, 24 May 1872, and Cook 1930, most historians have placed the Harris family's arrival in western New York in 1794. However, Harris Family Group Sheets, Latter-day Saint Genealogical Society, Salt Lake City, show Nathan Harris children born in the area as early as 1785.

ing birds with his fowling gun and credited him with slaying the last wolf in the locality, killed as the aging Harris pursued him on a horse at full gallop. A later generation found his distinctive, large-bore musket balls ubiquitously lodged throughout the neighborhood woods. But whatever their respective contributions, farming or hunting, Nathan and Rhoda cleared their land, planted crops and orchards, and eventually transformed their log home into a frame house set at the north end of Wintergreen Hill (Cook 1930, 204; Durfee in Turner 1851, 384).

The neighborhood grew up around them. During the early years, the outlying Harris homestead was tied to the main settlement by a simple trail, one and a quarter miles long, which was later improved to a road running out of the village on the north side of Mud Creek. At first the village was called "Swift's Landing" or "Swift's Town," for General John Swift, the early settler and land speculator from whom the pioneers had secured their titles. As the township grew it was twice rechristened, first as "Toland," and then in 1796, after a town meeting, as "Palmyra," presumably more in keeping with classicism of the Federal era. Growth was steady. Less than a decade after the Harrises' migration, the township had about 1,137 settlers. In another ten years the figure doubled (Cook 1930, 204; Gunnell 1955, 13; Backman 1971, 14, 45; Bean 1938, 12-13).

Young Martin grew up pioneering. He was born 18 May 1783 at East Town, Saratoga County, New York, the second of the Harrises' eight children. We know little about his youth; but if his later personality and activity are guides, the boy partook of the sturdy values of his neighborhood which included work, honesty, rudimentary education, and a godly fear. Martin undoubtedly labored beside his parents, grubbing out underbrush, cutting the stubborn stands of hardwood timber, and learning to plant, harvest, and perhaps sell the New York wheat for which his region increasingly became known. Young men at the time understood that, if things went well, such work might lay the foundations for their own future. A family with enough cleared acreage had the means to provide a patrimony.

Our information is equally scant about Martin's education. Because no New York State law required common or public schools until 1812, the early settlers shifted for themselves. In 1792, when Martin was already ten years old, Palmyra built its first formal school, a rough-hewn log building, on land donated by General Swift. Two subsequent schools, denominated respectively as "Federal" and "Democrat," reflected the strong political currents of the time. In addition there certainly were other neighborhood or cottage learning groups (Cook 1930, 265-67). Perhaps Martin attended one or more of these; but as a later associate said, he secured during his life but "small literary acquirements (Phelps to Howe, 1831). Reading, writing, and the basic mathematical skills necessary for farming were the frontier's usual curriculum.

Successful farming, of course, demanded more than the three "R's." But whatever ingredients were required, whether industry, judgment, or shrewd practicality, Martin clearly had them in abundance. He may have continued farming with Nathan until his mid-twenties, perhaps renting a portion of the

land or working with his father for shares; but in 1813 he paid \$800 for 121 acres situated on the north end of the farm. Three months later he added another twenty-five acres for \$250. Such cash outlays, handsome for the time, testified of the young man's talent and growing prosperity. During the next fourteen years, he secured at least another six parcels, totalling almost 120 acres at an expense of more than \$1600.<sup>2</sup>

Fortune seemed ascendent. He married his almost sixteen year old cousin, Lucy Harris, in 1808. They had at least five children, three of whom lived to adulthood. Martin established his family in a white, one-and-a-half story, eight- or nine-room frame home with hemlock-boarded sheds and barns nearby (Cook 1930, 206; Tuckett and Wilson 1983, 10). He served briefly and without injury in the War of 1812 (Tuckett and Wilson 1983, 12). And as he entered life's mid-passage, Palmyra consistently awarded him a series of minor offices appropriate to his growing status. Beginning in 1814 when he was forty-one, he was elected seven times as one the township's twenty-eight Overseers of Highways, serving first in District 9 and later in District 13. Six of these years he was given the additional duty of "Fence Viewer," which provided the nominal compensation of fifty cents a day.<sup>3</sup> These civic trusts were of the nature of *oblige*, conduct expected from and accorded by responsible citizens.

At a time when farming practices remained encrusted by superstition ("We plant, we sow, we reap and mow," complained one agriculture editor, "when the moon is auspicious" [American 1819]), Harris sought reform. He regularly won prizes offered by other improvement-minded farmers. During the early 1820s, he was recognized at the local fair for the manufacture of bed ticking, coverlets, worsted stockings, and flannel, and for the best "pair of rose blankets." Harris himself occasionally played a leadership role at these fairs. One year he helped judge swine. At another he was elected one of two Palmyra managers for the Ontario Agricultural Society (*Ontario Repository* [Title varies] [Canandaigua, New York], 29 Oct. 1822 and 11 Nov. 1823; *Wayne Sentinel* [Palmyra] 19 Nov. 1823, 17 Nov. 1824). "The beneficial effects to be realized from these societies, . . . must be gradually unfolded as a spirit of emulation is excited," lauded a local newspaper. "In some parts of this county these effects have already been seen" (*Palmyra Herald*, 6 Nov. 1822).

Harris may have also dabbled in political causes. During the Greek Revolution of the 1820s, he served on a committee of eleven to raise "donations and subscriptions" for the revolutionaries' relief, his selection influenced no doubt

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<sup>2</sup> Ontario and Wayne County, New York Deeds, microfilm copies, Genealogical Society of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah. These poorly indexed and difficult-to-read records may not fully list the entirety of Harris's holdings. Martin and his wife Lucy may have held 320 acres, and even then the total may be understated. See, for instance, *Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 18 May 1837.

<sup>3</sup> "Minutes of the Annual Town Meeting." April 1814, pp. 178-79; April 1815, p. 185; April 1820, 2 April 1822, p. 219; 5 April 1825, p. 238; 3 April 1827, p. 265; 7 April 1829, pp. 286, 300. Palmyra Old Town Records, Palmyra Town Office. This information and several other items about Harris's Palmyra neighborhood were furnished by Don Enders, senior researcher, LDS Museum of Church History and Art, whose indepth research of the Palmyra area promises many insights about Mormonism's early environment.

by his potential purse. After Reverend Benjamin B. Stockton's erudite sermon in behalf of the cause, \$50 was raised (*Wayne Sentinel*, 21 and 28 Jan. 1824). Harris also may have taken a role in the anti-Masonic crusade which swept the region in the late 1820s. At an anti-Masonic convention meeting held at Lyons, New York, (one of ten in Palmyra's immediate vicinity), Harris was called to serve on his neighborhood's vigilance committee.<sup>4</sup> Though likely opposing the Masons' supposed elitism and terror, Harris left behind no record of sustained anti-Masonry.

Another dimension to Harris's life was far more compelling. At the age of thirty-five, he found himself deeply stirred by the competing claims of the religious revivalists. Some Palmyra citizens remembered Harris being "tossed to and fro." "He was first an orthodox Quaker, then a Universalist, next a Restorer, then a Baptist, [and] next a Presbyterian," recalled G. W. Stodard, a neighbor who had known him thirty years. (In Howe 1834, 261). Another Palmyra citizen added Methodism to the list, while a third villager remembered Harris's fondness for new creeds, "the more extravagant the better" (Clark 1842, 223; Turner 1851, 215).

Harris's version was less extravagant. On occasion he apparently visited Palmyra's several churches and established with churchgoers a mutual rapport. "All of the Sects called me brother because the Lord [had] enlightened me," he recollected. As a youth he may have worshipped with the Friends (the extended Harris family had Quaker ties), but since his midlife religious awakening, though "anxiously sought" by the "sectarians," he had felt "inspired of the Lord & taught of the Spirit" to refuse a formal commitment. Two issues bothered him. First, trinitarian formulas seemed absurdly convoluted. They defined a God that seemed too remote. How could he please such a being? His second question involved authority. Harris doubted that any church was properly authorized to act for God. "I might just as well plunge myself into the water as to have any one of the sects baptize me" (M. Harris 1870).

Religiously aroused, he turned to the good book. He "could quote more scripture than any man in the neighborhood," remembered one acquaintance (Gregg 1890, 37; also *Palmyra Courier* 24 May 1872; Tucker 1867, 40, 42). He mastered entire books from the Bible and would later "defy any man to show me any passage of scripture that I am not posted on or familiar with" (Harris to Emerson 1870). Among his encyclopedic collection of texts, however, there was a favorite, a paraphrase of I Corinthians 1:27: "God has chosen the weak things of this world to confound the wise" (Gregg 1890, 37).

Perhaps Harris saw something of himself in the passage. At times the self-taught evangelist boldly challenged Palmyra's traditional and perhaps better educated believers. "I have more proof to prove nine persons in the Trinity than you have of three," he facetiously argued. If the Father and Son were

<sup>4</sup> *Wayne Sentinel*, 5 Oct. 1827. It is unclear whether Harris attended the Lyons convention. No "official" Palmyra delegates attended; if other townsmen were present, no newspaper or convention minutes lists them. For an enumeration of local anti-Masonic conventions, see Thompson 1980, 16.

nothing more than spirits, he claimed the seven spirits of the Book of Revelation, with their bodies of similar composition, should join them in the Godhead. He accused the Methodists in the neighborhood of borrowing some of his own doctrinal teachings and threatened legal action. His reaction, however, was not always confrontive. He liked the name and probably many of the teachings of Palmyra's "Christian" church, which, if like other "Christian" congregations elsewhere, was a loosely organized group of believers seeking the simple lifestyle, doctrines, and pentacostalism of early Christianity. But Harris eventually rejected the congregation as lacking proper authority (M. Harris 1870, 3; Hatch 1980).

Looking back on these years, he remembered feeling a strong sense of mission. God, he was sure, "had a work for me to do" (Tiffany 1859, 163). He also perceived that great events lay at hand, which he listed in specific detail. In the future, an angel should restore godly power. He also felt that a great work of preaching and "gathering" was imminent, when God would "set His hand again the second time to restore the kingdom of Israel." And if his memory was accurate, he even sensed the possibility of the coming forth of a new book of scripture which would join the Bible in a latter-day work (M. Harris to Emerson 1870). In sum, as the *Palmyra Courier* (7 June 1872) later suggested, Martin "had read of the wonders to come in the latter day, and now believed that day had arrived, and that his peculiar fitness to act as seer and prophet, was not to be overlooked by the powers that controlled the future."

How Harris had learned of his mission and of the great prophetic events of the future, he was unprepared to declare. "I am forbidden to say anything how the Lord showed them to me," he asserted, "except that by the power of God I have seen them." The depth and importance of what he had learned, however, he regarded to be of great consequence. "The Lord has showed to me ten times more . . . [about His work] than you know," he later boasted to an associate (Tiffany 1859, 166).

Perhaps Harris allowed later events to color his memory. Certainly his prophecies were uncannily accurate. But whatever Harris believed and preached during the early 1820s, it was sufficiently unusual to stir neighborhood gossip and nettle the established clergy. During this time, some Palmyrans described Harris as a skeptic who was "not very religious" — a charge that probably stemmed from his refusal to accept the teachings of the traditional churches (Kelley 1881; *Palmyra Courier*, 24 May 1872). The established clergy were harsher. The Episcopalian Reverend John Clark described Harris as having "a manifest disputatious turn of mind" (Clark 1842, 223); while the Reverend Jesse Townsend, who had been installed at Palmyra's Western Presbyterian Church in 1817, found Harris an "unlearned conceited hypocrite" and a "visionary fanatic" (Townsend to Stiles 1833).

There was an element of truth to Townsend's malevolence. Many accounts suggest that Harris was a visionary. "Marvelousness" was his "predominating phrenological development," remembered Pomeroy Tucker, who seemed to like and respect the man. He was given to a "belief in dreams, ghosts, hobgob-

lins, 'special providences,' terrestrial visits of angels, [and] the interposition of 'devils' to afflict sinful men" (1867, 50). John Gilbert, the Palmyra printer, likewise found him to be "superstitious," someone who "pretended to see things" (Kelley 1881, 166). Lorenzo Saunders, who claimed to know the Harris family well, was more colloquial. "There can't anybody say a word against Martin Harris," he asserted. "Martin was a good citizen . . . a man that would do just as he agreed with you. But, he was a great man for seeing spooks (Kelley 1884[?], 4; see also *Palmyra Courier* 24 May 1872; Clark 1842, 223).

It was perhaps impossible for many of Martin's neighbors, not to mention our present generation, to fully understand his behavior. His imagination was excitable and fecund. Once while reading scripture, he reportedly mistook a candle's sputtering as a sign that the devil desired to stop him (Stephen Harding in Gregg 1890, 42-43). Another time he excitedly awoke from his sleep believing that a creature as large as a dog had been upon his chest, though a nearby associate could find nothing to confirm his fears (Knight in Jessee 1974, 37). Several hostile and perhaps unreliable accounts told of visionary experiences with Satan and Christ, Harris once reporting that Christ had been poised on a roof beam.<sup>5</sup> But such talk came easy. His exaggerated sense of the supernatural naturally produced caricature and tall and sometimes false tales.

Yet despite these eccentricities, more than a dozen of Harris's Palmyra contemporaries left descriptions of the man that describe his honor, honesty, industry, peacefulness, and respectability, his hard-headed, Yankee shrewdness and his growing wealth. Clearly, on matters of business and purse, Harris had unusual ability.

Taken together, weighing both foibles and strengths, he had a bright future before him. Stephen Harding, a youthful neighbor who later became a territorial governor of Utah, concluded that "none in all that neighborhood were more promising in their future prospects" than Lucy and Martin (Gregg, 37), an assessment with which Lorenzo Saunders agreed. He felt that Harris "stood as well as anybody in . . . town" and had the opportunity of becoming the richest man in the region (Kelley 1884). Lucy later estimated their wealth at the time, both in property and money at interest, at about \$10,000 (L. Harris 1833, 254).

In appearance, Harris was substantial (the *Palmyra Courier* says "conspicuous") and respectable. He typically wore gray homespun attire and a large stiff hat. At the time, he was a "fleshy, healthy, robust man," about five feet eight inches in height, with blue eyes that set off a light complexion. Like many successful yeoman of the time, he swept his hair to the side, allowing it to curl about his ears, and cultivated a stylish fringe of beard about his lower jaws and chin (Waddoups 1923, 980; C. Harris 1879, 70; *Palmyra Courier* 31 May 1872).

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<sup>5</sup> Mather, 1880, 198-99. Clark 1842, 258, claimed that Harris spoke with a deer in the belief that the animal was Christ.

There is evidence that Martin felt pleased with his situation. In the autumn of 1827, he completed a project or two around his property and declared himself free to assume a more leisurely pace. "My hands are altogether untied," he announced, "I can come and go and do as I please." He thought about hiring a hand to handle his affairs for a year so he could do some traveling (L. Smith 1853, 111).

About the time that Harris was resolving to slow his activity, Lucy Smith walked north out of Palmyra on the Chapel Street road. The events of the past several days had been momentous. Joseph, her twenty-one-year-old son, had finally secured the promised golden plates. For several years, the Smith family had privately talked about them. During their many evening devotions, Joseph had vividly described the ancient people who had once lived in their region, their dress, their manner of travel, their buildings and cities, their wars, and their religion. "This he would do," Lucy recalled, "with as much ease, seemingly, as if he had spent his whole life with them" (L. Smith 1853, 85; L. Smith 1845). The golden plates, Joseph promised, contained these details and much more. When translated and published, the record would begin a great religious revival.

Shortly after midnight on 22 September 1827, Joseph and his wife Emma, who had fitted herself in her bonnet and riding dress, borrowed a horse and wagon and set out for Cumorah Hill, the drumlin-incline that housed the plates. Returning shortly after the family had begun to breakfast, Joseph hardly contained his excitement. "It is ten times better than I expected," he said, as he described his experience in getting the plates, which had the appearance of gold. "They are written [on] in characters and I want them translated!" (Knight 1974, 33; L. Smith 1853, 100–101).

That was Lucy's errand — getting someone to help translate and publish the plates. Perhaps a few facsimiles of the characters could be taken to New York City to learn what the professors might say. Unfortunately such a trip was entirely beyond the Smiths' means. At the moment, there wasn't a shilling in the house. In their extremity, Joseph suggested that perhaps the Harrises might assist them. Would his mother visit them, convey the news about the plates, and possibly seek their assistance in getting them translated? (L. Smith 1845; L. Smith 1853, 110).

Lucy Smith approached the Harris home with much trepidation. She mistrusted Lucy Harris. In Mother Smith's view, Martin's wife was "peculiar," "jealous," and easily provoked (L. Smith 1853, 110). Hard of hearing and unable to completely understand words and events around her, Lucy Harris tended to be suspicious. Even close friends like Lorenzo Saunders agreed, "She was pretty high on combativeness" (Kelley 1884[?], 4; Lucy Smith 1853, 110). Perhaps to quiet Lucy and give her a measure of personal security, Martin had allowed her a "private purse" and in 1825 placed eighty acres in her name.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ontario and Wayne County, New York Deeds, 29 Nov. 1825. The transaction had Martin first selling the eighty acres to Peter Harris, a relative, who then transferred the land to Lucy. The price of both deals was \$600, apparently a "paper" exchange to satisfy New York state law.

Mother Smith consented to visit the Harrises only after Joseph agreed that she might approach Lucy first, apparently in the hopes of disarming her inevitable distrust. The interview was surprisingly cordial. Mother Smith had just begun her recital "so far as wisdom dictated and necessity demanded," when Mrs. Harris interrupted and quickly offered two hundred dollars to aid the translation. Mrs. Cobb, Lucy Harris's sister who lodged at the household, offered \$75. Probably neither religion nor charity entered the women's calculations. The publication of the golden plates promised high returns for their funds.

Martin's reaction was more deliberate. When approached by Lucy Smith, he postponed their conversation until later in the evening and then after listening to her plea remained noncommittal. When she urged him to visit Joseph, he replied obliquely, "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." In contrast his wife remained eager. "Yes, and I am coming to see him too," she volunteered, "and I will be there on Tuesday afternoon, and will stop over night." At the conclusion of their talk, Martin asked his son to harness a horse and take Mrs. Smith home (L. Smith 1853, 110-111; Tiffany 1859, 168).

During the previous weeks as rumors swept the village about the Smiths' prospective "golden bible," Harris had been equally restrained. He refused either to condemn or endorse Joseph's project, though he cautioned the villagers who were ready to dismiss the news of the golden plates out of hand. "'He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is foolishness unto him,'" the Bible-quoting farmer remembered himself saying (Tiffany 1859, 167; the scripture paraphrases Proverbs 18:13).

Harris's caution was not owing to surprise. For several years the Smith family had regarded Harris as their "confidential friend," worthy of their most privileged information. Their intimacy apparently had begun in the early 1820s, as the improvident Smiths sought work at Martin's farm. Young Joseph, for example, toiled "many times" for Harris as a fifty-cents-per-day laborer, hoeing corn side by side with his employer, and perhaps assisting with a well the Smith men dug near Martin's home (L. Smith 1853, 102, 109; Bean 1938, 35).

While Harris thought Smith was "a good hand to work," it was the young man's unusual gifts that most compelled him (Stevenson 1893, 30). Once the older man accidentally dropped a pin among some shavings and straw. Unable to find it himself, he finally challenged young Joseph to "Take your stone." His friend removed his stone from a pocket, placed it in his battered white stovepipe hat, and while squatting gazed intently into the receptacle. "I watched him closely to see that he did not look [to] one side," Harris later related. "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" (Tiffany 1859, 164). Such incidents had Harris believing that Smith "could see in his stone any thing he wished" (L. Harris 1833).

As the predetermined time for getting the plates approached, Harris's relationships with the Smith family deepened. Lucy Harris remembered her husband becoming "very intimate" with them about a year before the news that Joseph had secured the gold plates. Henry Harris, perhaps one of Martin's many cousins, told a similar story. He claimed that during this time Martin, Joseph, and others met privately together as part of the "Gold Bible Company" (L. Harris 1833; H. Harris in Howe 1834, 251). Indeed, Martin himself reportedly asserted that he had played an active role in finding the plates, although he later vigorously denied making such a statement (Dowen 1885, 1).

Thus when Lucy Smith announced that Joseph had received the "gold bible," Harris was already privy to a great deal. He was aware of their previous discovery, knew of the young seer's gifts, and had a close relationship with the family. Why then did Harris hesitate at Mother Smith's request? Perhaps he was unsure that the plates were of God. When rumors about the plates first circulated through Palmyra in October 1827, Martin at first entertained a more mundane idea. "My thoughts were that the money-diggers had probably dug up an old brass kettle, or something of the kind," and he claimed to have given the report no further immediate attention (Tiffany 1859, 167).

Harris's comment was revealing. It suggested that initially he connected the gold plates with the prevailing neighborhood practice of treasure digging. Moreover he knew what many other Palmyrans accepted as a commonplace: The Smith family including Joseph Smith, Jr., had formed a company to seek the treasure. Harris identified villagers Samuel Lawrence and George Proper, along with outsiders Alva Beman and Josiah Stowell, as additional members of the group (Tiffany 1859, 164–65).

From Greek, Semite, and even earlier times, men and women had spoken of troves hidden in caves or elsewhere in the bowels of the earth, of guardian spirits who sought to preserve or protect them, and of specially gifted seers, who by using their divining rods and revelatory stones, could find the treasure (Walker 1984). Such ideas clearly were current in the folk culture of upstate New York at the time. James Fenimore Cooper, who had spent his youth at the Susquehanna River's headwaters found "such superstition was frequent in the new settlements" (1899, 415). The *Palmyra Reflector* located the practice even closer to Harris's neighborhood. "Men and women without distinction of age or sex became marvellous[ly] wise in the occult sciences," the newspaper reported. "Many dreamed, and others saw visions disclosing to them, deep in the bowels of the earth, rich and shining treasures" (1 Feb. 1831, 92–93; Cooper 1899, 415).

Harris himself was not immune to such beliefs. In addition to crediting the Palmyra diggers with actual discoveries, he accepted the reality of seers, seer stones, and the gift of "second sight," which allowed its possessor to "see" beyond the limitations of time and space (Tiffany 1859; Mather 1880, 201fn). There were other indications of his belief. According to a report published after his death, he gave special religious significance to a Palmyra cave (Miner, n.d.). And on at least one recorded occasion, he participated in the treasure digging ritual himself. Sometime after Joseph Smith secured the plates, Harris

and two others ventured with tools in hand to Cumorah, looking for "more boxes of gold or something." Harris remembered their excitement when they in fact located a stone box, which they carefully dug around and prepared to unearth. According to Harris, at that moment "some unseen power slid the box into the hill, as we stood there looking at it." One of the men tried to hold the chest by driving a crowbar into its top. He succeeded only in knocking a corner from the lid, which in later years was viewed as a relic. "Some day that box will be found and you will see the corner knocked off," he insisted. "Then you will surely know that I have told you the truth."<sup>7</sup> Martin's account of elusive and peripatetic treasure was hardly unique. Treasure stories of the time often repeated the theme (Dorson 1946, 182; Hurley 1951, 203; Thompson 5:110-19).

It seems clear, then, when Joseph Smith first received his golden plates, Martin Harris was acquainted with the lore and perhaps the practices of treasure hunting and associated them with his young friend and his remarkable discovery. During the next several days, however, his understanding grew. "Joseph did not dig for these plates," according to the elaborate ways of the treasure hunters, Harris came to realize (Tiffany 1859, 165). Joseph's experience seemed something different. Furthermore, the implications of the phrase "golden bible" became more apparent. More than a valued artifact, like an "old brass kettle" that Harris first had surmised, Joseph's find was a "bible" with sufficient religious claims that Harris's life would be forever altered.

Lucy Harris was the first to sense the distinction. Within a day or two after Lucy Smith's visit, Martin's wife and daughter were at the Smiths' cabin in Manchester seeking further information and a view of the plates. If Joseph had them, "she *would* see them," she announced, and if she found that they existed, she was "determined" to assist in their publication.

Joseph countered with equal firmness. He could not show them to the curious as he might a secular object, he responded. The plates would be displayed only to those "whom the Lord should appoint to testify of them." As for her proffered assistance, the young prophet was brusque to the point of giving offense. "I always prefer dealing with men," he told Mrs. Harris, "rather than their wives" (L. Smith 1853, 111).

The interchange could not have pleased Mrs. Harris, who according to Mother Smith, regarded herself as "altogether superior" to her husband's business acumen. But when later questioned by Martin, her reaction was not entirely negative. She reported that both she and her daughter had been permitted to lift the Ontario glass-box that contained the plates. They had found

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<sup>7</sup> Jensen 1875, 1. While this statement was apparently first written years after Harris's telling, it has the weight of accurate circumstance, both when the event occurred and when Harris related the incident. It seems further confirmed by a statement of Brigham Young, 17 June 1877, *Journal of Discourses* 19:37-38. Harris may have also joined some of the Smiths' early Palmyra digs. When later recounting these years, despite his close association with the family, Harris implied that his friendship for them post-dated Joseph's receipt of the plates. His lack of candor, especially when coupled with his acceptance of Joseph's powers and his belief in this prevailing money digging lore, is at least suggestive. See his account in Tiffany 1859.

the container heavy, about as much as the Harris girl could manage (Tiffany 1859, 168). This news must have surprised Martin. He knew that the impoverished Smiths, if intent on a conspiracy, could not afford even lead plates to place within a box.

For the moment, Martin concealed his growing interest. He waited a day or two and then, after taking breakfast, explained he planned to visit the village. Instead he went directly to the Smiths. Joseph was working for a few hours at Peter Ingersol's farm, but Harris interviewed Joseph's wife, Emma, and then took aside one by one his brothers, sisters, and parents. To his questions about the discovery of the plates, each gave a similar recital. He later privately spoke with Joseph himself, who reconfirmed their details (Tiffany 1859, 169).

It would be fascinating to know precisely what Harris learned during his conversations. He subsequently told several versions of what he had heard. In 1829 he informed a Rochester editor that "the spirit of the Almighty" had informed the young seer about the plates and their location in a thrice occurring dream (*Rochester Gem*, 5 Sept. 1829). At other times, as when Harris gave his fullest statement of these happenings, his detail was more adorned. "An angel had appeared to him, and told him it was God's work," he then said. To this he added the information that the prophet had found the plates by looking in a stone [found] in Mason Chase's well (Tiffany 1859, 169).

However unusual some of these details now appear, in Martin's time they were certainly less so, especially for those with an understanding for the old folk culture. Within that environment, angels and godly revelation freely intermixed with thrice-occurring dreams, revelatory stones, and even enchanted treasure and intercessory spirits, who might test or try their initiates. It was all a part of the surviving set of ideas that continued in such backwater areas as New England's hill country, German Pennsylvania, or the emerging western frontier areas of the northwest.<sup>8</sup>

It is possible that Joseph and his family used at least some of "old way" motifs when explaining the "gold bible" event to Martin. If the many statements of their Palmyra neighbors can be credited, the Smiths (along with many of the villagers themselves) believed in supernaturalism and visionary religion. The same was certainly true with young Joseph. When he could escape the

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<sup>8</sup> Harris may have told another account of his interview with the Smiths, which explicitly used the treasure digging idiom of the time. "I found . . . [the gold bible] 4 years ago with my stone but only just got it because of the enchantment," Harris supposedly quoted Smith. "The old spirit come to me 3 times in the same dream & says dig up the gold[,] but when I take it up the next morning the spirit transfigured himself from a white salamander in the bottom of the hole & struck me 3 times . . ." According to this alleged account, Joseph secured the plates only after being tested for several years at the hands of the trickster guardian of the plates. Martin Harris to W. W. Phelps, 23 October 1830, text printed in Church News Section, *Deseret News*, 28 April 1985. This letter, which leading national forensic experts initially declared to be genuine, has been tellingly called into question by Salt Lake City prosecutors at the preliminary judicial hearing of accused murderer and forger Mark Hofmann. A conclusive judgment of the letter's authenticity awaits the complete judicial proceeding.

relentless toil that his family's penury required, his early spiritualism found expression in blessing crops, finding lost articles, predicting future events or prophesying, and using divining rods and seer stones — the classic labor of the Old Testament-oriented village seers (Austin 1882; Blackman 1873; Howe 1834, 11–12; Turner 1851, 216; Anderick 1888, 2; Porter and Shipp 1981, 205; Vanderhoof 1907, 138–39). And when his spiritual stirring set him on the course to find the golden plates, he quite naturally interpreted his experience from the perspective of his folk surroundings.

Whatever was said that day, Martin was clearly impressed. For one thing, he sensed a new solemnity about his young friend who appeared willing to direct his gifts to a higher cause. Joseph reported that the angel had instructed him to end his association with the money-diggers, for there were “wicked men” among them. That fact had indeed been born out in the past several days, as his former associates had resorted to every means to wrest the plates from him. He had also received an injunction to moral purity. “He must not lie, nor swear, nor steal,” he had been told. And according to Joseph, the angel indirectly had a message for Martin. Joseph was instructed to look into the special stones that had accompanied the plates to learn the identity of the man who would assist him in translating and publishing the plates to the world. “I saw you standing before me as plainly as I do now,” the prophet affirmed.

Martin remembered his surprise and urged caution about such an important matter. But with Joseph remaining steadfast, the farmer opened his soul. “Joseph, you know my doctrine, that cursed is every one that putteth his trust in man, and maketh flesh his arm,” he began. “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.” Then Martin paused and offered a promise. “You must not blame me for not taking your word. [But] if the Lord will show me that it is his work, you can have all the money you want” (Tiffany 1859, 169).

Before leaving the Smiths’ home, Martin lifted the box containing the plates and had his earlier judgment confirmed. Their dense weight suggested lead or gold, and Martin was sure that neither Joseph nor his family had the means, even on credit, to secure either.

It was almost noon when Martin finally excused himself and headed home. Joseph’s words kindled anew the religious fire that was within him. Perhaps here was the beginning of his long-felt mission. He went to his bedroom and, kneeling, made a covenant. If Joseph’s work was God’s work, he would do his best to bring it to the world. As Martin prayed, he felt confirmation from the Lord. He later explained: “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.” Martin made no elaborations about his revelation. He had heard no voices nor had he seen angels. In contrast with some of his other supernatural experiences, the results of this prayer were simple. God “showed . . . [the truth] to me by the still small voice spoken in the soul.” He seemed at once to understand that his prayer was pivotal. He had offered the Lord a covenant and now was bound. He must

assist Joseph's work. Indeed, he "was under covenant to bring it forth" (Tiffany 1859, 169-70).

Martin Harris had become a convert to the new faith.

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