

# “SALAMANDERGATE”

## MORMON CHURCH CAUGHT IN MAGIC COVER-UP

On April 6, 1830, the very day the Mormon Church was organized, the prophet Joseph Smith gave a revelation in which he was commanded to see that a history of the Church was kept:

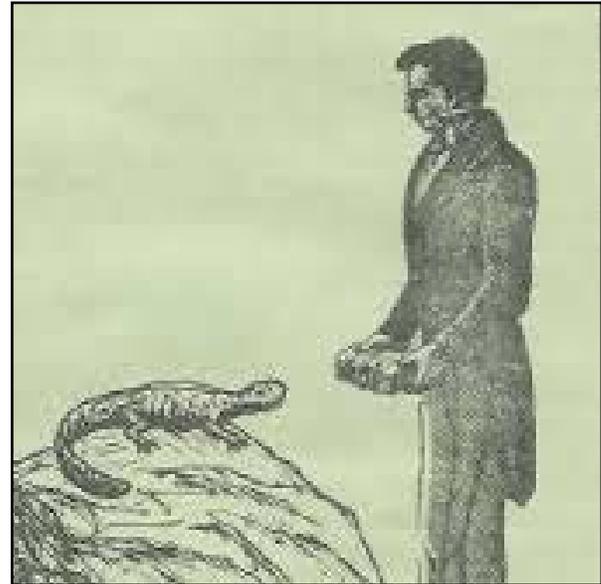
Behold, there shall be a record kept among you; and in it thou shalt be called a seer, a translator, a prophet, an apostle of Jesus Christ, . . . (*Doctrine and Covenants* 21:1)

Book of Mormon witness Oliver Cowdery was appointed to keep this history. Joseph Fielding Smith, who later became the tenth President of the Church, claimed that the Historian’s Office had preserved this important history:

Oliver Cowdery was the first one appointed to assist Joseph in transcribing and keeping a history of the Church; John Whitmer took his place, when Oliver Cowdery was given something else to do. We have on file in the Historian’s Office the records written in the hand writing of Oliver Cowdery, the first historian, or recorder of the Church. (*Doctrines of Salvation*, vol. 2, page 201)

In 1961 we tried to get the Church to make Cowdery’s history and other documents available. We were informed by the Assistant Church Historian, however, that Joseph Fielding Smith was “not interested in the project you have in mind.” In our book, *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry* (published 22 years after our request was turned down), we reported that the Cowdery history could provide important information on the relationship of Mormonism and Magic:

We have been told that there is a very important document being suppressed which may relate to the involvement of the early Mormon leaders in magic. This is a history of the Church written by Oliver Cowdery. Cowdery, of course, was one of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon. According to Joseph Fielding Smith, he was “appointed to assist Joseph in . . . keeping a history of the Church . . .” John Whitmer was commanded “to keep the church record and history continually; for Oliver



Cowdery I have appointed to another office” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 47:3). In John Whitmer’s history of the Church, he wrote that “Oliver Cowdery has written the commencement of the church history, commencing at the time of the finding of the plates, up to June 12, 1831” (*John Whitmer’s History*, page 4). . . .

We understand that a number of documents which were originally stored in the Church Historian’s Office were later moved to the vault of the First Presidency. This was undoubtedly done to keep them out of the hands of the public. The Mormon leaders were especially concerned about this matter when Dr. Leonard J. Arrington became Church Historian. In any case, we understand that the Cowdery history of the Church (not to be confused with the history that was published in the *Messenger and Advocate*) is now located in the First Presidency’s vault. At one time an inventory was made of what was contained in the vault. When the Cowdery history was opened, it was discovered that it contained **magic characters!** . . . Since Cowdery’s history is supposed to go back to the time Joseph Smith found the plates, it may contain many things that would be

embarrassing to the Church. If any of our readers have any additional information on the contents of Cowdery's history (especially with regard to the charge that it contains magic characters) we would appreciate hearing about it. (*Mormonism, Magic and Masonry*, pages 43 and 46) [first edition]

### “Taunting Salamander”

We heard nothing more concerning the Cowdery history until just recently. On May 15, 1985, we read this startling heading in the *Salt Lake Tribune*: **“Researcher Says LDS History Disputes Golden Plates Story.”** In the article we find the following information:

A little-known history written by an important early Mormon leader contains an account of Joseph Smith's brother Alvin finding the gold plates, rather than the Mormon prophet himself, according to a research historian.

An LDS spokesman will neither confirm nor deny the contents of the history. . . .

Brent Metcalfe, who worked on authenticating an earlier Mormon letter, said officials of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have the history written by Oliver Cowdery, who at one time was second in importance only to Joseph Smith. . . .

Mr. Metcalfe said his source is a private eye-witness account of the Cowdery history. The document tells of Joseph Smith's brother Alvin first finding the gold plates by means of a stone, according to Mr. Metcalfe.

Mr. Metcalfe quoted the document as saying: “A taunting Salamander appears to Alvin and prevents him and his companions from digging up the gold plates.”

Early Mormon letters, recently released by LDS Church officials, link Joseph Smith to folk magic and to an “old spirit” that commanded Mr. Smith to return with his brother Alvin, who was dead at the time.

Traditional accounts of the founding or “restoring” of the LDS Church tell of heavenly visitations from angels, rather than salamanders. A cornerstone of Mormonism is the belief that Joseph Smith, not his older brother Alvin, found the gold plates. . . .

LDS spokesman Jerry Cahill said the LDS Historical Department does not have the Cowdery history. He said he would not ask members of the church's ruling First Presidency if the history is locked up in a special presidency's vault.

When asked about references to a Cowdery history in a book written by former President Smith, Mr. Cahill said he assumes the church has the history but it is no longer in the church's Historical Department.

“I don't intend to respond to every report or rumor of documents in the First Presidency's vault,” said Mr. Cahill. “I have no idea if the history is there, nor do I intend to ask. I can't have my life ordered about by rumors. Where does it end? . . .”

Former LDS President Joseph Fielding Smith wrote: “The earliest records of the Church are in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery. . . .”

President Smith said the records “are invaluable.” . . .

Mr. Cahill said he has no way of “confirming or denying rumors,” and he will “not pursue the matter” of the Cowdery history.

The document which Brent Metcalfe cites is apparently a summary of the Cowdery history by an individual who had access to it. In an interview on KUER Radio, May 17, 1985, Mr. Metcalfe gave further details:

**Brent Metcalfe.** . . . I do know that Joseph Fielding Smith on at least two occasions claimed that the Church did in fact have possession of the document and so I don't think that there's too much question there. Perhaps a possible reconstruction of its genealogy after that time is that Joseph Fielding Smith may have placed it in his own private vault which we know he kept, and then at the time of his death it may have been assimilated into the First Presidency's vault. However, in the course of my research and trying to get more historical insight regarding the Harris letter, I did come across a document which claimed first-hand knowledge of the content of the Cowdery history relating to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon . . . and apparently . . . the information in the Cowdery history does go back prior to 1827, and it does discuss, it mentions, the Salamander three times and it appears to Joseph Smith much like we have in the Martin Harris letter. But perhaps what I found after spending a year full-time with the Harris letter, what I found to be intriguing was that it apparently indicates that the salamander first appears to Joseph Smith's brother Alvin and that it was, in fact, Alvin who first discovers the gold plates and not Joseph Smith. And that at the time of the death of Alvin in November of 1823, Joseph Smith then takes over as the seer who then proceeds to try to break the enchantment to get the plates, and then his story begins in 1824. This, by the way, . . . may in fact solve a great perplexing situation for historians who have tried to reconstruct this event because there has in fact been quite a lacuna in what some have supposed to be 1826. Where we suppose that there's a year missing, but apparently we have all the information. The event that we have missing is the first year which appears to be Alvin's experience and not Joseph's.

**Interviewer.** Okay, . . . let's just take this one step at a time because this is rather remarkable information. You have not seen this document?

**Brent Metcalfe.** I have not, no. No, I have not seen the Cowdery history, but I did come across a source in which a person was recording his reading of the document.

**Interviewer.** And this is a current source?

**Brent Metcalfe.** Yes, [a] current source.

**Interviewer.** Would you like to name that source?

**Brent Metcalfe.** No. . . . all I can say is that it's an extremely reliable source and I know, personally I know of no other sources that are more reliable than this one.

**Interviewer.** Okay, and what this source says is that Oliver Cowdery wrote a history of the Church and in that history he says that the salamander, now we're back to the salamander—

**Brent Metcalfe.** Yes, Uh huh.

**Interviewer.** Appeared to Alvin Smith who was Joseph's older brother.

**Brent Metcalfe.** Yes.

**Interviewer.** In 1824?

**Brent Metcalfe.** Yes, or 1823, 23. We do have indications from different documents that Alvin did play a prominent role. . . .

(Interview with Brent Metcalfe, KUER Radio, May 17, 1985.

In not making the Cowdery history available the Mormon Church finds itself in a cover-up situation. According to the *Doctrine and Covenants*, God Himself instructed Joseph Smith that "there shall be a record kept among you; . . ." It hardly makes any sense for the Mormon leaders to say that God commanded the history to be kept and then lock it up in a vault so that no one can read it. We have always suspected that this history provides no support for Joseph Smith's First Vision of 1820, and it has recently been reported that it does not support the restoration of the Melchizedek priesthood by Peter, James and John.

In any case, the cover-up situation the Mormon Church finds itself in is reminiscent of the Watergate scandal. The reader will remember that it was discovered that President Nixon had made tape-recordings of his conversations. He claimed that these tapes would support his side of the story, but he refused to release them. As it turned out, the tapes turned out to be the smoking gun which caused his downfall. Nixon's tapes might be compared to the Cowdery history. As far as the Church is concerned, this history should provide the best evidence concerning its origin, having been written closest to when the events occurred, yet the Mormon leaders stubbornly refuse to release it. This refusal can only lead people to conclude that Brent Metcalfe has told the truth. If the

history supports the traditional version of Joseph Smith's story, why not release it and silence him?

The "Salamandergate" cover-up even has its own "Deep Throat"—that mysterious and unidentified person who had access to Nixon's secrets and leaked them to the press. Only a very limited number of people could have had access to the material in the vault of the First Presidency. It is reported that Brent Metcalfe will not name his source for fear that he will get the individual into trouble with the Church.

## Alvin the Prophet?

The *Salt Lake Tribune* for May 15, 1985, reported that Brent Metcalfe "said Alvin Smith was a great influence on the prophet Joseph Smith, and perhaps even played a greater role of prophet, in light of the history written by Mr. Cowdery."

There does seem to be some evidence that Joseph Smith's brother Alvin was originally supposed to be the prophet. J. H. Kennedy wrote the following in 1888:

. . . long before the removal to New York she [Lucy Smith] announced the advent of a prophet in her family, and on the death of Alvah [Alvin], the first born, the commission that had been intended for him was laid upon Joseph. (*Early Days of Mormonism*, page 12)

This footnote is found on the bottom of the same page: *Littell's Living Age*, vol. 30, page 429:

. . . Mrs. Smith was of strong, uncultivated intellect; . . . The incipient hints, the first givings out that a prophet was to spring from her humble household came from her; . . . Their son Alvah was originally intended or designated, by fireside consultations and solemn and mysterious outdoor hints, as the forthcoming prophet. The mother and the father said he was the chosen one; but Alvah, however spiritual he may have been, had a carnal appetite; ate too many green turnips, sickened and died. Thus the world lost a prophet, and Mormonism a leader. . . . The mantle of the prophet, . . . fell upon their next eldest son, Joseph Smith, Jr.

The report that Alvin originally found the gold plates deals a devastating blow to Joseph Smith's own story that the angel told him, "there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, . . ." (*Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith 1:34).

For many years we have known that there was something strange about Alvin's relationship to the Book of Mormon. According to Joseph Smith's own story, he did not learn of the plates until September 21, 1823. Since Alvin's death occurred on November 19, 1823, this gives

less than two month that Alvin could have known about the plates. In her history, Joseph Smith's mother gives the impression that Alvin was more interested in the gold plates than anyone in the family:

Alvin manifested, if such could be the case, greater zeal and anxiety in regard to the Record that had been shown to Joseph, than any of the rest of the family; in consequence of which we could not bear to hear anything said upon the subject. Whenever Joseph spoke of the Record, it would immediately bring Alvin to our minds, with all his zeal, and with all his kindness; and, when we looked to his place, . . . we all with one accord wept over our irretrievable loss, . . . (*Joseph Smith's History By His Mother*, pages 89-90)

Now that we have the story about Alvin being the one who discovered the gold plates, we can understand why mention of the plates "would immediately bring Alvin" to their minds. Before his death, Alvin instructed Joseph to "do everything that lies in your power to obtain the Record" (*Ibid.*, page 88). The reader will remember that according to the report in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, Cowdery's history is supposed to tell about "Alvin first finding the gold plates by means of a stone." Peter Ingersoll's affidavit confirms that Alvin did use a stone to find treasures:

The general employment of the [Smith] family, was digging for money. . . . When we arrived near the place at which he thought there was money, he [Joseph Smith, Sen.] cut a small witch hazel bush and gave me direction how to hold it. He then went off some rods, and told me to say to the rod, "work to the money," which I did, in an audible voice. . . . Now, says he, if you only knew the value there is back of my house, . . . there, exclaimed he, is one chest of gold and another of silver. He then put the stone which I had given him, into his hat, and stooping forward, he bowed and made sundry maneuvers, quite similar to those of a stool pigeon. At length he took down his hat, and being very much exhausted, said in a faint voice, "If you knew what I had seen, you would believe." . . . His son Alvin then went through the same performance, which was equally disgusting. (*Mormonism Unveiled*, 1834, pages 232-233)

According to Willard Chase, he employed Alvin to help dig the well in which Joseph Smith's seer stone was discovered (*Ibid.*, pages 240-241).

The claim that Cowdery's history mentions Alvin as the one who originally discovered the gold plates also seems to clarify an account written by one of Joseph Smith's best friends, Joseph Knight. Knight was a faithful Mormon whose wagon was used by Joseph Smith to obtain the gold plates. Knight's account mentions that

Joseph Smith was denied the plates when he was unable to bring Alvin to the Hill Cumorah:

Joseph says, "when can I have it?" The answer was the 22nd Day of September next if you Bring the right person with you. Joseph says, "who is the right person?" The answer was "your oldest Brother."

But before September Came his oldest Brother Died. Then he was disapinted and did not [k]now what to do. But when the 22nd Day of September Came he went to the place and the personage appeard and told him he Could not have it now. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Autumn 1976, page 31)

The Mormon historian Dean Jessee informs us that this "manuscript is incomplete, missing at least one beginning page" (*Ibid.*, page 30). Since the manuscript now begins with Joseph Smith coming to the hill to get the plates, there is no way of knowing whether it originally mentioned Alvin finding the plates with his stone. It would, of course, be impossible to determine whether the first part of the manuscript was deliberately suppressed or just fell off. In any case, Willard Chase also claimed that the "spirit" told Joseph he must bring his "oldest brother" to obtain the plates and that when he showed up the next year without Alvin, the "spirit" would not let him have the plates.

The Salamander letter, which we will discuss in more detail as we proceed, adds a very spooky element to the story. This letter, which was supposed to have been written by Book of Mormon witness Martin Harris in 1830, claims that when Joseph Smith looked in his stone, "the spirit says bring your brother Alvin Joseph says he is dead shall I bring what remains . . ." That Joseph Smith would offer to bring his own brother's body to the hill is shocking, to say the least. In *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry* we point out that graves and human remains are very important to some of those who use seer stones and practice magic. If Alvin originally found the plates, Joseph Smith may have felt that his corpse would be highly prized by the spirit. It is reported that when Joseph Smith was digging for money in Pennsylvania, he claimed at one time that the "enchantment" was so strong "that it was necessary that one of the company should die" before it could be broken. One of the company was in fact murdered (not by anyone in the money-digging group) and this was considered "a Providential occurrence." (For more details on this matter see *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry*, pages 34-36.) Willard Chase claimed that after Alvin's death, his father said it "was an accidental providence."

However this may be, it is interesting to note that there was a rumor that Alvin's body had been disinterred. On September 29, 1824, just one week after Joseph Smith was supposed to have been visited by the angel at the Hill

Cumorah, his father printed the following in the *Wayne Sentinel*, the local newspaper:

WHEREAS reports have been industriously put in circulation that my son Alvin had been removed from the place of his internment and dissected, . . . for the purpose of ascertaining the truth of such reports, I, with some of my neighbors, this morning [September 25] repaired to the grave, and removing the earth, found the body which had not been disturbed. (*Wayne Sentinel*, September 29, 1824)

Since Brent Metcalfe relates that the Cowdery history tells that Alvin had companions who were with him when he tried to dig up the gold plates, it is possible that Mr. Smith was worried that one of these money-digging companions had taken his son's remains to the Hill Cumorah so that he could gain favor with the spirit and obtain the treasure.

Even without access to the Cowdery history it seems clear that there were magic elements in the early story of how Joseph Smith obtained the gold plates. That some material has been suppressed is evident from the minutes of a meeting held October 21, 1831:

Brother Hyrum Smith said that he thought best that the information of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon be related by Joseph himself to the Elders present, that all might know for themselves.

Brother Joseph Smith, Jun., said that it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon; and also said that it was not expedient for him to relate these things . . . (*History of the Church*, vol. 1, page 220)

### Salamander Letter

We now give the full text of the letter which Martin Harris, one of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon, wrote to W. W. Phelps on October 23, 1830:

Palmyra Oct 23d 1830

Dear Sir

Your letter of yesterday is received & I hasten to answer as fully as I can—Joseph Smith Jr first come to my notice in the year 1824 in the summer of that year I contracted with his father to build a fence on my property in the corse of that work I aproach Joseph & ask how it is in a half day you put up what requires your father & 2 brothers a full day working together he says I have not been with out assistance but can not say more only you better find out the next day I take the older Smith

by the arm & he says Joseph can see any thing he wishes by looking at a stone Joseph often sees Spirits here with great kettles of coin money it was Spirits who brought up rock because Joseph made no attempt on their money I latter dream I converse with spirits which let me count their money when I awake I have in my hand a dollar coin which I take for a sign Joseph describes what I seen in every particular says he the spirits are grieved so I through back the dollar in the fall of the year 1827 I hear Joseph found a gold bible I take Joseph aside & he says it is true I found it 4 years ago with my stone but only just got it because of the enchantment 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 & held the treasure & would not let me have it because I lay it down to cover over the hole when the spirit says do not lay it down Joseph says when can I have it the spirit says one year from to day if you obey me look to the stone after a few days he looks the spirit says bring your brother Alvin Joseph says he is dead shall I bring what remains but the spirit is gone Joseph goes to get the gold bible but the spirit says you did not bring your brother you can not have it look to the stone Joseph looks but can not see who to bring the spirit says I tricked you again look to the stone Joseph looks & sees his wife on the 22nd day of Sept 1827 they get the gold bible—I give Joseph \$50 to move him down to Pa Joseph says when you visit me I will give you a sign he gives me some hiroglyphics I take them to Utica Albany & New York in the last place Dr. Mitchell gives me a introduction to Professor Anthon says he they are short hand Egyptian the same what was used in ancent times bring me the old book & I will translate says I it is made of precious gold & is sealed from view says he I can not read a sealed book—Joseph found some giant silver specticles with the plates he puts them in a old hat & in the darkness reads the words & in this way it is all translated & written down—about the middle of June 1829 Joseph takes me together with Oliver Cowdrey & David Whitmer to have a view of the plates our names are appended to the book of Mormon which I had printed with my own money—space and time both prevent me from writing more at presant if there is any thing further you wish to inquire I shall attend to it

Yours Respectfully  
Martin Harris

W W Phelps Esq

Pulchra Oct 23<sup>rd</sup> 1838

Dear Sir

Your letter of yesterday is received & I hasten to answer as fully as I can - Joseph Smith Jr first come to my notice in the year 1824 in the summer of that year I contacted with his father to build a fence on my property in the course of that work I approach Joseph & ask how it is in a half day you put up what requires your father & 2 brothers a full day working together he says I have not been without assistance but can not say more only you better find out the next day I take the old man Smith by the arm & he says Joseph can see any thing he wishes by looking at a stone Joseph often sees Spirits here with great kettles of coin money it was Spirits who brought up rock because Joseph made no attempt on their money's latter day I converse with spirits which let me count their money when I awake I have in my hand a dollar coin which I take for a sign Joseph describes what I see in every particular says he the spirits are deceived so I through back the dollar In the fall of the year 1827 I hear Joseph found a gold bible I take Joseph aside & he says it is true I found it 4 years ago with my stone but only just got it because of the enchantment the old spirit come to me 3 times in the same place & 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 & held the treasure & would not let me have it because I lay it down to cover over the hole when the spirit says do not lay it down Joseph says when can I have it the spirit says one year from to day if you obey me look to the stone after a few days he looks the spirit says bring your brother Joseph says he is dead shall I bring what remains but the spirit is gone Joseph goes to get the gold bible but the spirit says you did not bring your brother you can not have it look to the stone Joseph looks but can not see who to bring the spirit says I touched you again look to the stone Joseph looks & sees his wife on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Sept 1827 they get the gold bible & give Joseph \$50 to move him

down to Pa Joseph says when you visit me I will give  
 you a sign he gives me some hieroglyphics I take them to  
 Utica Albany & New York in the last place Dr Mitchell  
 gives me a introduction to Professor Anthon says he  
 they are short hand Egyptian the same what was used  
 in ancient times being in the old book & I will tour  
 late days & it is made of precious gold & is sealed from  
 from view says he I can not read a sealed book—  
 Joseph found some giant silver spectacles with the plates he  
 puts them in a old hat & in the darkness reads the words  
 & in this way it is all translated & written down—about  
 the middle of June 1829 Joseph takes me together with  
 Oliver Cowdery & David Whitmer to have a view of the plates  
 our names are appended to the book of Mormon which I  
 had printed with my own money—space & time both  
 prevent me from writing more at present if there is any  
 thing further you wish to inquire I shall attend to it  
 Yours Respectfully  
 Wm Phelps Esq  
 Austin Hays

W W Phelps Esq  
 Canandaigua N Y

In the *Salt Lake City Messenger* for March 1984, over a year before the Salamander letter was officially released, we quoted from its contents and told of its relationship to magic. On the first page of that newsletter we stated:

For a month or two there have been rumors circulating that an extremely important letter written by Book of Mormon witness Martin Harris has been discovered. Although there has been an attempt to keep the matter quiet until the document has been published, we have been able to piece together the story and to learn of the remarkable contents of this letter. . . . If the letter is authentic, it is one of the greatest evidences against the divine origin of the Book of Mormon. If, on the other hand, it is a forgery, it needs to be exposed as such so that millions of people will not be misled.

In the *Messenger* for January 1985, we commented: “Because of some problems in the text of the Salamander letter we have been exceptionally cautious about endorsing it as authentic.” One of the editors of this publication (Jerald Tanner) expressed serious doubts concerning the letter’s authenticity and prepared a list of parallels between it and books that were published after the date which appeared on the letter. It was noted that these parallels could be viewed in two totally different ways: One, that the letter is a forgery which was plagiarized from printed sources. Two, that the letter is authentic and that the parallels only tend to confirm that a common story was known by Martin Harris and other writers. The parallels, then, could become evidence for the letter’s authenticity. In any case, the most disturbing parallel was to Howe’s *Mormonism Unveiled*, published in 1834. On pages 275-276, Howe told of one report “that after the plates were taken from their hiding place by Jo, he, again laid them down, looked into the hole, where he saw a toad, which immediately transformed itself into a spirit, and gave him a tremendous blow.” Howe’s statement appears to be a paraphrase of Willard Chase’s affidavit: “He saw in the box something like a toad, which soon assumed the appearance of a man, and struck him on the side of his head.” Howe’s paraphrase appeared to be suspiciously like Martin Harris’s account, which he claimed was derived from Joseph Smith himself: “. . . 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 . . .” We were unable to find any reference to this transformation in any Mormon book or manuscript which we were familiar with. The question, therefore, arose as to whether some clever forger might have “transformed” Howe’s toad into a “white salamander.”

If the Church leaders had not refused our request to make Cowdery’s history available, we would have

known that the salamander had an important place in early Mormon history and that the two references in Howe’s book were apparently derived from Joseph Smith’s own account. The creature which Chase described as “something like a toad” would undoubtedly be the salamander. Viewing the matter in this light, Howe’s book might provide evidence for the Salamander letter. We would, of course, still like to examine the text of the Cowdery history, but we seriously doubt the Mormon Church will release it.

It is interesting to note that when we published our book *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry* in 1983, we included a reference which linked salamanders to magic stones:

“One of the oldest ways to explore the future is to have it looked for, by means of a pure boy, in a crystal, in a glass, or in the transparency of water.” Sir Walter Scott says that the old astrologers “affirmed that they could bind to their service and imprison in a ring, a mirror, or a stone, some fairy, sylph, or salamander, and compel it to appear when called, and render answers to such questions as the viewer should propose. (*Crystal-Gazing*, pages 1 and 2, as cited in *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry*, page 12)

In the Salamander letter, Joseph Smith used the “stone” to contact the “old spirit”/“salamander.”

*Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language* (Unabridged) gives this information about salamanders: “1. a mythological reptile resembling the lizard, supposed to be able to endure or live in fire; an elemental spirit in Paracelsus’ theory of elementals.” In his book, *The History of Magic*, page 77, Kurt Seligmann reported:

Agrippa, basing his opinion on Aristotle, Dioscorides and Pliny the Elder, said that fire shelters salamanders and crickets. . . . From Pliny we learn that similar beliefs concerning the marvelous virtues of salamanders existed in Egypt and Babylon. . . . Thus did a superstitious belief perpetuate itself for about two thousand years.

Joseph Ennemoser said that “Paracelsus deserves one of the most eminent places in the history of magic.” Paracelsus, who was born in 1493, wrote a book entitled, *A Book of Nymphs, Sylphs, Pygmies, and Salamanders, and on the Other Spirits*. Henry E. Sigerist wrote the following in an introduction to this book:

Such strange creatures are the mysterious beings—Paracelsus usually calls them ding, things—that inhabit the four elements, the nymphs, sylphs, pygmies and salamanders and, related to them, the sirens, giants and dwarfs. . . . water is chaos to the nymphs, earth to the

pygmies, fire to the salamanders, while the sylphs have the same chaos as man. They are at home in their chaos and, therefore, nymphs do not drown in water, pygmies are not choked in earth and salamanders do not burn in fire. This seems incredible but God is almighty. Why should he not be able to create such beings? . . . God created them for a special purpose—and here Paracelsus is writing as a theologian and scientist. God created these elemental beings as makers and guardians of the treasures of the earth. There is an infinite wealth of minerals in the earth. They are made in the depths of mountains under the influence of fire, and this is where the salamanders come in. Once the mineral ores are made they are guarded, those in the earth by the pygmies, those on the surface by the sylphs, and those at the bottom of the waters by the nymphs. (*Four Treatises of Theophrastus Von Hohenheim, Called Paracelsus*, Baltimore, 1941, pages 216-220)

Since the gold plates of the Book of Mormon were considered to be a very valuable treasure, we can see why a believer in magic might choose to have a salamander guarding them.

One concern we had with regard to the Salamander letter was that we could not find its genealogy. We wrote that “one of the most important tests of the letter’s authenticity is its history since it was written. If Mr. Hofmann will tell historians where he obtained the letter, then it may be possible to trace it back to its original source. If, for instance, it had been in the Phelps family for many years, this would add a great deal to a case for its authenticity.” We did suggest that a man by the name of Lyn Jacobs may have been involved in the matter. This was confirmed in the Church Section of the *Deseret News*, April 28, 1985:

The letter was part of a stamp collection in New England until discovered by Lyn Jacobs, an LDS collector. The letter was purchased in late 1983 by Jacobs and Mark Hofmann, another LDS collector.

On May 10, we called Lyn Jacobs to see if he would provide specific information. Unfortunately, Mr. Jacobs said he would not give us any information with regard to the discovery. Mark Hofmann and Lyn Jacobs are both dealers in rare Mormon documents and it is felt by some people that if they reveal their sources it may tend to hurt their business. While we sympathize with their desire not to reveal the source of their discoveries, we feel that it is very important that historians know the source of these finds. Some kind of compromise needs to be worked out.

Although we can not get their side of the story, we have been told that the letter was considered somewhat defective by the collector who had it (possibly because of an unclear postmark) and was sold to Jacobs for \$20 or less.

One problem with allowing the suppression of important information concerning the source of discoveries is that it could encourage forgers to enter the Mormon document business. Since there is already a great deal of money involved in these transactions (the Lucy Smith letter was reported to have been sold for \$30,000), there would be a temptation to create such documents and palm them off on unsuspecting collectors by merely saying: “I obtained these from a collector in \_\_\_\_.” If we allow this type of thing to go on, it will certainly encourage the forgery of Mormon documents. Since these documents have an important affect on the religious beliefs of many people, it is crucial that their pedigree be revealed to historians.

### Secret Dealings

On October 24, 1984, we reported that before the Salamander letter was sold to Steven Christensen, there was an attempt to sell it “to the Mormon Church for a large amount of money.” The *Salt Lake Tribune* for September 2, 1984, confirmed that the letter was originally offered to the Church: “Jerry Cahill, church spokesman, said that someone had offered to sell the letter to the church before it was sold to its present owner earlier this year.”

In the past Mr. Hofmann acted under the theory that the Church would buy up embarrassing documents to suppress them. This is very clear from his own account of how he handled the discovery of the Joseph Smith III Blessing. In a paper read at the Mormon History Association, Mark Hofmann stated that he did not want to give the impression that he was trying to blackmail the Church, but he acknowledged that if the Church had wanted him to, he would have promised to never tell anyone about the discovery:

On February 16th 1981 I first showed a xerox of the Blessing to the LDS Archivist, Don Schmidt. . . . I was also willing to promise not to breathe a word of its existence to anyone . . . (Not wanting to come across like I was trying to blackmail the Church) I fully expected to relinquish ownership immediately. (*Sunstone Review*, August 1982, page 1)

The whole transaction seems to have been rather bizarre. Hofmann told Schmidt that he thought the Reorganized LDS Church “might possibly trade a *Book of Commandments* for it,” yet he was “willing to trade the document [to the Mormon Church] for about a quarter of the value of a *Book of Commandments*” (*Ibid.*). This would mean that Hofmann would take approximately \$5,000 when he could have obtained \$20,000. In the

September 1982 issue of *Sunstone Review*, page 17, Hofmann says, "I'm in this for the money." If this is the case, we find it a little hard to understand why he would be willing to sacrifice \$15,000 just so the Mormon Church could hide the blessing document. Mr. Hofmann, who has served as a Mormon missionary, may be concerned about protecting the Church's image, or it could be that he feels that he receives some other compensation which makes up for the loss. We do know, for instance, that he has had special access to the First Presidency's vault. (As we pointed out earlier, only the most trusted individuals can see documents from that vault.) On September 28, 1982, the *Seventh East Press* reported that since the discovery of the Anthon transcript, Hofmann has "enjoyed privileged access to otherwise restricted Church archive material, including the First Presidency's vault. One reason for this privileged access, Hofmann thinks, is the fact that 'I am not a historian. I'm not going to write an expose of Mormonism.'"

In our research with regard to the Joseph Smith III Blessing, we discovered that Mr. Hofmann was apparently helping the Church cover-up some important documents relating to President Brigham Young. When we heard that Hofmann would not reveal the exact source from which he obtained the blessing document, we questioned him about the matter. He indicated that he had given the Mormon Church an affidavit which stated where he had obtained it. He could not reveal that source to the public, however, because the member of the Bullock family from whom he had purchased the document also had important papers concerning Brigham Young's finances that would be embarrassing to the Church. While Mr. Hofmann did not indicate whether he had sold these papers to the Church, in the interview published in the *Sunstone Review*, August 1982, page 1, he said that he "had previously made several trades" with the Church Archivist before obtaining the blessing.

As we will show later, in 1983 Mr. Hofmann sold an important letter written by Joseph Smith on divination and money-digging to the Church, and it was suppressed for two years before scholars forced the Church to make it available. This whole business of secret dealings with the Church is very disturbing. While dealers have a right to operate in this way, from a historian's point of view it is deplorable. We can not see any real reason for all the secrecy that surrounds these transactions. It would seem to us that it would be far better if Hofmann and other collectors would make a public announcement of each find, release photographs and then sell it to the highest bidder.

## God is Missing

The reader who takes time to carefully examine the Salamander letter, will find that there is no mention of God, angels or religion. As we have pointed out in our earlier writings, the evidence shows that Martin Harris could hardly open his mouth without mentioning these subjects. This presents a problem which we do not really have an answer for. That he would write a letter of over 600 words, detailing the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, without mentioning religion seems remarkable. While Professor Anthon claimed that Harris suppressed the fact that the plates were translated "by the gift of God" when he talked to him (*Mormonism Unveiled*, page 271), there seems to be a reasonable explanation for this—he would not want religious bias to enter into Anthon's judgment on the Book of Mormon characters. Anthon wrote that when Harris visited a second time, he spoke of the "curse of God."

It is hard to understand why in the letter to Phelps, Martin Harris would suppress all the divine elements and emphasize the aspects of the story relating to money-digging and magic. In fact, he seems to deliberately link the "old spirit" who reveals the Book of Mormon plates to the spirits connected with buried treasures. He says that, "Joseph often sees Spirits here with great kettles of coin money . . ." The letter goes on to say that "Joseph made no attempt on their money," and therefore the spirits gave him supernatural help. The letter even says that the spirits let Harris "count their money." When it comes to the part of the story where Joseph Smith is told to get the plates for the Book of Mormon, it quotes Smith as saying, "the old spirit . . . says dig up the **gold** but when I take it up . . ." The absence of the word *plates* after "gold" seems to emphasize the fact that the Book of Mormon was a valuable treasure which was controlled by the "old spirit." The letter shows an obsession with money and treasures which is reminiscent of the wife's statement that he was very materialistic: ". . . I told him he had better leave the company of the Smiths, as their religion was false; to which he replied, if you would let me alone, I could make money by it" (*Mormonism Unveiled*, page 256). There can be little doubt that Martin Harris was a money-digger himself. In *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality?* page 38, we show that after Joseph Smith found the gold plates, Harris admitted that he went out to the hill to dig for some more boxes or gold. He claimed, in fact, that he found a box but that it slipped back into the hill.

Mark Hofmann has suggested that W. W. Phelps, the recipient of the Salamander letter, may have been a money-digger and that this would account for Harris emphasizing this aspect of the story and suppressing the divine elements. So far we have not found any evidence to this effect, but in a letter dated January 15, 1831, he did seem to be aware of the fact that the Mormons had been actively involved in digging in Joseph Smith's neighborhood: "The places where they dug for the plates, in Manchester, are to be seen" (*Mormonism Unveiled*, page 273). While we do not know for certain what Phelps's position was on magic and money-digging, he did reprint an article in his anti-Masonic newspaper just a month before the Salamander letter was supposed to have been written which ridiculed the practice of trying to win the "faculty of Abrac":

A very ancient Masonic charm, or the way of winning the Faculty of Abrac,—is meant the chimerical virtues ascribed to the magical term—ABRACADABRA, written or repeated in a particular manner, and is thought to be efficacious in curing agues, and preventing Fits and other masonic diseases. (*Ontario Phoenix*, August 25, 1830)

The evidence seems to show that the Smith family was involved to some extent in trying to win the "faculty of Abrac" (see *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry*, pages 20-21).

### Church Says Authentic

Steven Christensen, the man who purchased the Salamander letter after the Church decided not to buy it, has to be commended for his work with regard to the letter. He not only enlisted some of the top Mormon scholars to help him determine its authenticity, but he also sent it to a noted document examiner, Kenneth Rendell, Incorporated, for a careful examination. We understand that these tests cost about \$6,000. The *Salt Lake Tribune* reported:

Tests included where the paper had been milled. Ink, sealing wax and the stamp were also studied, along with seemingly insignificant determinations such as whether the letter had been folded after it had been written and pressure points in drawing individual letters. (April 28, 1985)

On April 12, 1985, Steven Christensen donated the Harris letter to the Church. As the meetings of the Mormon History Association approached, it became apparent that someone was going to print it. We have been told, in fact, that a reporter from *Time* magazine actually had a

photograph of the letter. The Mormon leaders apparently felt that it would be best if the Church itself published it with comments which would make it appear in the most favorable light possible. They must have reasoned that even though the contents of the letter are absolutely devastating, they could not keep their members from reading it, and therefore it would be best to put it forth as if they were not ashamed of it. It was published in the Church Section of the *Deseret News* on April 28, 1985. The title on one of the articles about the letter reads: "**1830 Harris letter authenticated.**" In another article we find the following:

A letter purportedly written by Martin Harris to W. W. Phelps was recently presented to the Church by Steven F. Christensen, . . . With the letter was presented a copy of a report which points out factors which indicate that the letter was written about the time of the date it bears and on materials which were likely manufactured about that time. The examiner concludes his statement by saying "that there is no indication that this letter is a forgery."

In another article published in the Church Section, these comments appear:

A letter written early in Church history by Martin Harris and sent to William W. Phelps is almost certainly authentic and has been donated to the Church

Dean C. Jessee, research historian and handwriting expert at the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History at BYU, and others have studied and tested the letter extensively for almost a year. . . . In the letter, Harris confirms the 1823 date of the Angel Moroni's visit to Joseph Smith. He also reconfirms in his own writing the experience with Prof. Charles Anthon and the "sealed book" prophecy. . . .

According to Jessee, handwriting analysis "shows that the writer of the 1830 letter is the same person who wrote the authentic Harris signatures. On the basis of the paper, ink and handwriting tests, the Harris letter appears authentic.

"However confusing the letter appears by present standards, neither Martin Harris in writing the letter, nor William Phelps in receiving it, perceived its message as out of the ordinary. That readers in our time do probably tells more about our present mind-set than anything else." . . . Dr. Ronald W. Walker, another historian with the Smith Institute, said that in order to appeal to Phelps, Harris used a traditional sort of "religious folk language" that was extremely prevalent at the time. . . .

"My hunch is that Harris was talking to someone whom he knew had an understanding of the folk customs of the region," said Walker, "a person to whom this way of describing that experience would have appealed." . . .

“Members should realize this letter was written very early in the church, long before the restoration of the gospel was complete. At that point, it was logical that the religious folklore of the time was prevalent, and had not been replaced with the language of the gospel.” . . .

This language involves two aspects that can be understood only in the context of the times, said Walker.

First, Harris makes reference to . . . “an old spirit that transforms himself from a white salamander.” In this context, said Walker, a salamander was a supernatural contact with spirits, and could mean a spirit or intermediary. A salamander was commonly believed to be a spirit that lived in fire. The “old spirit” referred to by Harris was surely synonymous in his mind with the Angel Moroni.

Second, continued Walker, this folk religion was thoroughly tied up in treasure hunting. “Seeking buried treasures for some people, particularly those coming out of Vermont, was extremely prevalent,” he said. . . .

“Josiah Stowell, who once hired Joseph to dig for treasure, was a prosperous man and a deacon in the Presbyterian Church, an outstanding citizen. There was no dichotomy in his mind between religion and treasure hunting in those days. Men like Stowell and Harris saw them as a package. Here are men with a reputation for veracity, hard work and good judgment.” (*Deseret News*, Church Section, April 28, 1985)

While the Church Section of the *Deseret News* tried to soften the blow for the faithful, Gordon B. Hinckley, a member of the First Presidency, gave the whole thing away when he stated: “No one, of course, can be certain that Martin Harris wrote the document. However, at this point we accept the judgment of the examiner that there is no indication of forgery. This does not preclude the possibility that it may have been forged at a time when the Church had many enemies” (*Ibid.*).

The astute reader will perceive that President Hinckley is saying that the letter really looks like something written by an enemy of the Church rather than by Martin Harris, one of the three special witnesses to the Book of Mormon.

During the first week in May we went back to Kansas City to attend the meetings of the Mormon History Association. We felt it was important to keep abreast of recent developments with regard to the Salamander letter. In his presentation, Dean Jessee gave some information concerning the handwriting examination. He said that there were three letters which could have been actually penned by Martin Harris—i.e., the 1830 Salamander letter, an 1846 letter and a letter written in 1855. A comparison with examples of Harris’s signature from other documents revealed that two of the three letters were not from the pen

of Harris. According to Jessee, the only letter that checked out was the Salamander letter. There was one document bearing four words in addition to Harris’s signature. Jessee felt that this document was written by Harris. It was the longest document used to check the Salamander letter. Jessee reported concerning a number of important tests that had been conducted and said that he felt the tests proved the letter authentic. Comments were made on the document by three Mormon scholars and Richard Howard of the Reorganized LDS Church. Ronald Walker gave an excellent presentation of the research he had done with the assistance of Brent Metcalfe. Their findings certainly cast the whole Book of Mormon story in the context of magic and money-digging practice of the time.

All four of the speakers at the Mormon History Association freely admitted Joseph Smith’s connection to magic and money-digging, and as far as we could tell, those who attended the meetings seemed to agree with their research. Mormon historians, who have fought against these charges for many years, seemed to just cave in under the weight of the evidence.

## Forgery Charged

As we indicated earlier, when the Salamander letter first came to our attention we publicly expressed doubts concerning its authenticity. Rhett James, a Mormon scholar who has done extensive research on the life of Martin Harris, did not seem to share our reservations about the letter. In an article published in the Church Section of the Mormon newspaper, *Deseret News*, September 9, 1984, we find the following:

The so-called “Martin Harris letter” is no repudiation of Joseph Smith, but rather probably is a further witness of the Prophet’s own account of the discovery of the golden plates.

This is the feeling of historian Rhett S. James of Logan, . . .

James spent about 2 1/2 years researching the life of Harris . . .

“Martin Harris was enamored of classic Greek culture and its symbolism,” said James. . . .

James said it was “highly likely” that Harris would use the kind of language and symbolism purported to be contained in the Harris letter.

“Martin Harris . . . was writing to Phelps, who himself was an author and a poet, and so he likely would have written in a poetic style.”

James . . . said it is the salamander imagery that intrigues him.

As time went on Rhett James began to develop serious doubts about the letter. These doubts did not subside with the announcement by the Church that the letter had been authenticated. On May 19, 1985, the *Deseret News* reported the following:

Rhett James, a Mormon bishop . . . said Thursday he has completed a computer analysis that indicates the letter by Martin Harris may have been forged . . .

James said there are only eight known Martin Harris letters. The others have averaged 30 words per sentence, compared to 13 words per sentence in the 1830 letter. The computer also analyzed the types of words used.

“I’ve found differences in the comparisons too great to ignore,” James said.

We had pointed out that there were discrepancies in style and length of sentences between the 1830 letter and other letters attributed to Martin Harris in *The Money-Digging Letters* (updated portion, October 24, 1984). Although we still feel that this type of approach has some merit, it has one serious flaw—i.e., according to Dean Jessee, none of the other letters are actually written in Martin Harris’s own hand. We do not know how much influence the scribes and editors may have had on the style of the letters. If we could find just one letter which we could prove was written in Harris’s own hand, it would throw important light on the subject.

In any case, the *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 20, 1985, reported that Mr. James claimed that he “had been assured that church officials were looking anew at the Harris letter in light of his doubts. “I was assured the document will be very carefully examined during the next few weeks,” James said.

The same article stated that “Cache Valley historian A. J. Simmonds, in charge of special collections at the Utah State University Library, says he agrees with James’ suspicions about the letter.” A. J. Simmond’s opposition to the Salamander letter comes as somewhat of a surprise. Simmonds was the one who assisted Mark Hofmann with one of his most important finds—the Anthon transcript. Writing in *BYU Studies*, Spring 1980, page 327, Danel W. Bachman stated:

To avoid the risk of damaging the document further, Mr. Hofmann took it the next day to the office of A. J. Simmonds, curator of the Utah State University Special Collections and Archives, who helped him separate the glued edges.

The *Salt Lake Tribune* for May 20, 1985, quoted Rhett James as saying: “‘I don’t know whether or not I think the “Salamander Letter” is a modern forgery or a forgery from the 1830s, but I do think it is a forgery’ . . .” A. J. Simmonds seems to feel that if the Salamander letter is a forgery, it comes from recent times.

As we have indicated earlier, President Gordon B. Hinckley has said that the Church accepts the opinion of the document examiners that there is no evidence of forgery, but he has also hinted that there is a possibility that the Salamander letter could have been forged “when the Church had many enemies.” We feel that the idea of a forgery in Martin Harris’s lifetime is untenable. It seems highly unlikely that a forger would create such a document while the sender and recipient were both alive and could deny its authenticity. (It is interesting to note also that Harris and Phelps lived into the 1870s.) Even if this were the case, a person would have to explain why the letter was never used. It would seem like a lot of effort for nothing. The postmark alone would be a real problem to forge. To maintain that the letter is a forgery, one is almost forced to the conclusion that it would have to be a recent forgery. Brent Metcalfe’s revelation that the Cowdery history mentions a salamander three different times throws important light on this question. Most scholars will probably use the Cowdery history as evidence that the letter is genuine. Those who still suspect forgery will almost be forced to the conclusion that it is a modern forgery. Since knowledge of the salamander’s role in early Mormon history was suppressed in the First Presidency’s vault until just recently, no one would have known to create a document mentioning that fact until after the leak occurred.

In the light of the new evidence, President Hinckley’s suggestion that the Salamander letter could have been written when the Church had many “enemies” seems to be very unlikely. Furthermore, it seems improbable that any open enemy of the Church could have had access to the information which Mr. Metcalfe mentioned. Those who had access to the vault would probably be very tight-lipped about the matter. They would only want to share this information with Mormons who could be trusted not to leak it to the enemy. It would seem, therefore, that it is unlikely that anyone but a Mormon could have had the knowledge necessary to commit such a forgery.

The tests which have been made on the Salamander letter, indicate that no ordinary person could have forged it. It would have to be the work of a very skilled forger. Only a person familiar with old documents, chemistry and the process of document authentication could prepare a letter that would have a chance of passing through these tests.

### Editors Divided

Unfortunately, the editors of the *Messenger* find themselves divided over how to deal with the Salamander letter. We feel that it is best, therefore, to give our readers both viewpoints.

**Sandra Tanner:** As Jerald has pointed out, there are impressive parallels between the Martin Harris letter and different printed versions. These can be viewed either as proofs of plagiarism or authenticity. I, too, am bothered by the lack of information on the history of the letter and the lack of specific information on the tests given the letter. However, the information I have been able to gather on the testing seems impressive. I was told that the letter was sent to a paper specialist who removed a small piece for testing and found it was consistent with the type of paper used in 1830. In addition, it was determined the ink was put on the paper before the letter was folded. This establishes that someone didn't use an old blank piece of paper that had been used as a cover for another letter.

The ink was also tested and is consistent with that used in 1830. The ink was also sufficiently faded for the age of the letter and was applied before the paper aged. The ink used for the postmark and postage amount was faded red, as it should be. Also, the amount of the postage was correct. The wax seal on the letter also seems authentic.

The flow of the ink was examined to determine the speed of writing. The letter appears to have been written at an even speed and normal rate. Presumably a forger would need to write slower with additional pauses in order to imitate someone else's handwriting.

In looking at the actual writing on the letter it seems to be consistent with a few samples we have of Martin Harris's handwriting. He had a distinct way of making his capital "P," capital "M," capital "H" and his lower case "r." Another item of interest is the way the double "s" is made in the words "assistance" and "Professor." In 1830 many people still used this old form which is foreign to us today.

When I look at all the different items used in authenticating the letter I wonder if it would be possible for a forger to have faked all these points without detection? I don't think so. Those Mormon scholars who have read the test results all seem satisfied that the letter is indeed authentic.

**Jerald Tanner:** At the outset I will state that I originally approached the Salamander letter with a strong bias towards its authenticity. It seemed to completely substantiate the thesis I had worked for years to prove—i.e., Joseph Smith was deeply involved in magic and money-digging and that the Book of Mormon was a product of this involvement. No one could possibly have had a greater desire to prove the Salamander letter authentic, and I doubt that many people have invested

the time and effort that I have in sifting the evidence. This letter has been constantly on my mind for well over a year. My desire has been to come up with a definite answer concerning its reliability. At the present time, however, I still find myself with some serious doubts. Notwithstanding the extensive tests that the letter has been submitted to and the proclamation by some of the Church's leading scholars that it is authentic, I can not seem to gain an absolute "testimony" to the validity of the Salamander letter. While I do believe in miracles, I cannot help wondering if this is not just too good to be true. The Salamander letter fits perfectly into my case against the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon, but I have to ask myself this question: if the Mormons brought out a letter which was supposed to have been written in 1830 which said that Joseph Smith saw both The Father and the Son in 1820, and this letter had strong parallels to sources printed at a later date and also contained elements which seemed foreign to the purported author, would I keep silent about the matter? The answer, of course, is *no*. I would proclaim these findings to the world.

When I originally took a stand against the Salamander letter, some people thought I was just trying to force the Mormon researchers to come out with their research. They felt that as soon as the letter was published I would jump on the band wagon. The truth of the matter, however, is that my statements were made out of a strong conviction, and the release of the letter has done nothing to calm the apprehension I have about the letter's authenticity. At the present time I feel almost alone. Even the Mormon historians accept the letter, and I am under a great deal of pressure to get into step with the scholars.

As I have indicated in other issues of the *Messenger*, my doubts about the Harris letter come mainly from the text of the letter and from parallels to other printed documents. While most people seem to feel that physical tests are more important, everyone would concede that if the letter mentioned Joseph Smith watching television or using a flash light, it could not possibly be valid. In that case the evidence from the text would outweigh anything obtained from physical testing. The reader may remember the "Mormon Will" which was supposed to have been written by Howard Hughes. It was found in the Mormon Church Office Building in Salt Lake City. This will left a great deal of money to the Mormon Church and a Mormon named Melvin Dummar. It was later discovered that Dummar himself planted the will in the Church Office Building. Henry Silver, a noted handwriting expert, seemed willing to stake his reputation on the will's authenticity. A number of experts joined

Silver in proclaiming the will genuine, and the Mormon Church itself funded the side which was trying to prove its authenticity. We took a strong stand against the will. Within a month of the discovery, we published a booklet entitled *Howard Hughes and the Mormon Will*. In this booklet we pointed out parallels between things that had been published just prior to the will's discovery and also pointed out discrepancies in the text. As it turned out, Melvin Dummar finally confessed that he lied about the will and it was declared a forgery.

It is also interesting to note that in 1972 Clifford Irving claimed to have some letters written by Howard Hughes. Wallace Turner reported that Irving's "publishers took the handwriting samples to Osborn Associates, a New York firm that specialized in examining questioned documents. The Irving material was compared with known samples of Mr. Hughes's writing, and the experts said it had all been written by the same person.

"This was not so, as Mr. Irving explained before going to jail to serve a term for fraud. He had written the letters . . ." (*New York Times*, May 3, 1976). Wallace Turner observed that "Handwriting identification is far from an expert science. When it is used in court, expert witnesses frequently take opposite sides on such matters" (*Ibid.*).

While I must admit that I see nothing in the handwriting that would show that the Harris letter is a fraud, I am certainly not qualified to pass judgment upon it. One thing that might cause me some concern is that it appears to have only one word written over the line and no words or letters crossed out. A Joseph Smith letter of this size would probably have about twenty mistakes of this nature. Unfortunately, there is no other material in Harris's own hand to compare it with.

As far as the form of the double "s" is concerned, I am convinced that anyone who works with documents of this age would be familiar with this. In any case, a person could learn this from our book, *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality?* page 33:

When the letter "s" was repeated in documents of Joseph Smith's time, as in the word, "glass," the two letters appeared as a "p."

The fact that the ink was put on the paper before the paper was folded does not impress me very much. If someone had tried to use a cover sheet from an old letter, the name and address would have been written in a different hand and it would therefore have been unusable.

As far as the examination of the paper itself, Bill Kruger, who performed the test on the Salamander letter, told me that it is possible for a very clever forger to manufacture paper at the present time which will pass through his tests without detection. Dr. Antonio Kantu,

who is with the FBI and is considered to be one of the world's greatest experts on the detection of forgery by testing ink, told me that he could examine the ink to determine if its chemical properties were like those of ink used at this early period, but he would not be able to say for certain that this was actually ink in use in 1830 or if it was added to the paper at that date. He indicated that by merely applying heat to a document, a forger would give the appearance of great age. He knew of no ink test that could be made on the Salamander letter that would be absolutely conclusive.

Before making any final decision with regard to the letter's authenticity, I would like to do further research with regard to a number of items. For instance, I would like to find out if there is any evidence that someone owned the letter before Lyn Jacobs. I would also like to obtain a copy of the report from the document examiner, and the four-word inscription attributed to Martin Harris by Dean Jessee. So far these important items have not been made available to the public. Furthermore, I have been informed that Brent Metcalfe has a photocopy of a longer inscription attributed to Martin Harris which appears in a Book of Mormon. This inscription was not used in testing the document. Since it might be the longest example of Harris's handwriting, I feel that it would be important to compare it to the Salamander letter.

Another thing that I feel should be made available is a purported forgery of the 116 pages which were lost from the Book of Mormon manuscript. It was Mark Hofmann himself who told me of this forgery. I feel that it could have a very important relationship to the Salamander letter. The reader will remember that although the Salamander letter removed the divine elements from the story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, it has some of the basic facts of the traditional version. Interwoven with these facts, however, we find important elements of money-digging. At any rate, Mr. Hofmann claimed that he was aware of a forgery of the 116 pages which were lost from the Book of Mormon (the Book of Lehi) and that these pages contain money-digging interspersed with portions that are similar to the story found in the printed Book of Mormon. I told Mr. Hofmann that this forgery should be made available, but he has never given me the name of the person who is supposed to have it (see *The Money-Digging Letters*, page 21).

If this manuscript really exists, I can see no reason why Mr. Hofmann has suppressed its location. It could throw important light on the origin of the Salamander letter. If, on the other hand, the manuscript does not exist, it does show that the idea of money-digging being inserted into an important Mormon document was in somebody's mind prior to the discovery of the Salamander letter.

Although I probably did not discuss the matter with Mr. Hofmann until after the discovery of the Salamander letter, he was telling others about it prior to that time, and we reported the story in the *Messenger* in November 1983. The *Sunstone Review*, September 1982, page 18, Mr. Hofmann claimed that he had “spent thousands of dollars in the pursuit” of the “lost 116 manuscript pages.” In any case, I cannot help thinking that there might be some connection between the story of the forged Book of Lehi pages and the Salamander letter.

The item I would like to see most of all, however, is the Cowdery history. The release of this document could answer many questions about the Salamander letter. Since we wrote the first part of this newsletter, Church spokesman Jerry Cahill has admitted that the Church does have the Cowdery history. In an Associated Press story, Michael White reported:

Brent Metcalfe, who researches old Mormon documents for a Utah publishing firm, says the multivolume history by Oliver Cowdery states that it was not Joseph Smith, but his brother, Alvin who first saw the golden plates by using a “seer stone.” . . .

Church spokesman Jerry Cahill said that Cowdery’s history had been in the church’s possession since around 1900 and probably is locked away in the private vault of the governing First Presidency.

But Cahill said he did not know whether it contained the information described by Metcalfe, and he would not try to find out.

“Frankly, I don’t intend to raise the question. Obviously, it’s in the possession of the church, but what shelf it is on I don’t know,” he said.

He would not speculate on whether the First Presidency would make the history available for study. (*The Oregonian*, May 21, 1985)

It is reported that the Cowdery history may have been dictated by Joseph Smith himself. If this is the case, it could be far more significant than the Salamander letter. In fact, it could be the most devastating document that has ever been discovered. Since it undoubtedly has a good pedigree which would go back to early times, I doubt that I would have any question regarding its authenticity. If any question were to arise, It could be checked with numerous samples from Oliver Cowdery’s pen.

At any rate, I wish to withhold judgment on the Salamander letter until I have done further research concerning it. My mind is still open to any new information. If anyone has any information (whether pro or con) on the subject, I would be very happy to receive

it. I would also appreciate any information regarding the discovery or concerning Mark Hofmann and Lyn Jacobs. Anyone who wishes to learn more about my position should read *The Money-Digging Letters* (Price \$1.00), and issues 53 and 55 of the *Messenger* (free upon request).

In conclusion I should say that although I have serious doubts about the Salamander letter, I still stand behind the thesis we presented in *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry*. I feel that there is very good evidence linking Joseph Smith to magic.

## Suppressed Letter

On May 10, 1985, the Mormon Church’s newspaper, *Deseret News*, announced what was claimed to be “The Earliest known surviving document written by Joseph Smith Jr. . . .” The article went on to state: “The letter, believed by church leaders to be authentic, was written June 18, 1825, five years before the church was organized.” The text of the letter was also printed. It reads as follows:

Dear Sir

My father has shown me your letter informing him and me of your Success in locating the mine as you Suppose but we are of the oppinion that since you cannot asertain any particulars you Should not dig more untill you first discover if any valluables remain you know the treasure must be guarded by some clever spirit and if such is discovered so also is the treasure so do this take a hasel stick one yard long being new Cut and cleave it Just in the middle and lay it asunder on the mine so that both inner parts of the stick may look one right against the other one inch distant and if there is treasure after a while you shall see them draw and Join together again of themselves let me know how it is Since you were here I have almost decided to accept your offer and if you can make it convenient to come this way I shall be ready to accompany you if nothing happens more than I know of I am very respectfully

Joseph Smith Jr.  
(*Deseret News*, May 10, 1985)

Although there is certainly nothing spiritual about this letter and it obviously relates to magic, it bears a remarkable resemblance to Ezekiel 37:16-17, a prophesy Mormons use to prove the Book of Mormon:

. . . take thee one stick, and write upon it, for Judah,  
. . . then take another stick, and write upon it, for Joseph,  
. . . And join them one to another into one stick; . . .

Canandaigua June 18<sup>th</sup> 1825

Dear Sir

My Father has shown me your letter informing him and me of your success in locating the mine as you suppose but we are of the opinion that since you cannot ascertain any particulars you should not dig more until you first discover if any valuables remain you know the treasure must be guarded by some clever spirit and if such is discovered so also is the treasure so do this take a hazel stick one yard long being new but well cleave it just in the middle and lay it across on the mine so that both inner parts of the stick may look one right against the other one inch distant and if there is treasure after a while you shall see them draw and join together again if themselves let me know how it is since you were here I have almost decided to accept your offer and if you can make it convenient to come this way I shall be ready to accompany you if nothing happens more than I know of I am very respectfully

Joseph Smith Jr

According to Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, Joseph Smith's widow, Emma, claimed that at the time he wrote the Book of Mormon, he "could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter; let alone dictating a book like the Book of Mormon . . ." (*Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*, 1984, page 26). The 1825 letter hardly seems to support this conclusion. Actually, the spelling in the letter is much better than we would have expected, and for some reason appears to be even better than in some letters written in the 1830s. This is surprising because the testimony Joseph Smith gave in the 1826 trial shows that he received some of his schooling after the date which appears on the letter (June 18, 1825). According to our research, Joseph Smith made only 2.8 spelling mistakes per hundred words in the 1825 letter. From Dean Jessee's book, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, we learn that the first extant letter in the handwriting of Joseph Smith after the 1825 letter is dated March 3, 1831. Using Dean Jessee's typescript of the letter (pages 230-232), we find that Smith made 7.1 mistakes per hundred words. The next letter is dated June 6, 1832, and contains 4.9 mistakes per hundred words (see pages 238-239). The third letter is dated October 13, 1832. This letter has 6.2 mistakes per hundred words (see pages 252-254). We are unable to explain why the spelling would seem to get worse, but it could be that the 1825 letter is too short (only 180 words) to make a good comparison. There is one place in the June 6, 1832, letter where Joseph Smith wrote 215 words with only 4 spelling errors (1.9 mistakes per hundred words). On the other hand, in another place in the same letter he wrote 109 words and made 11 mistakes (10 errors per hundred words). The fact that Joseph Smith would make 10 errors per hundred words in one part of a letter and only 1.9 in another part may indicate that he could actually spell better than the 109 word section would indicate. Distraction, haste, or fatigue may account for many of his spelling errors. Spelling, of course, can also be affected by what a person is writing about.

There is one other document which might be used to make a spelling comparison with the 1825 letter. This is the recently discovered Anthon Transcript. On the back side is some writing which Dean Jessee feels was written by Joseph Smith (see *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, pages 223-226). Although it is undated, Jessee believes it was probably written in February 1828—just about three years after the 1825 letter was supposed to have been written. This document, which has only 58 words, has 7 spelling errors (12.2 errors per hundred words). This is strikingly different from the 2.8 errors per hundred words in the 1825 letter.

One other thing about the 1825 letter which is somewhat different from Joseph Smith's other writings is

that it does not seem to have any words or parts of words crossed out and no words or parts of words are inserted above the lines. In the three later letters and the Anthon Transcript we find numerous examples of this type of thing. There are, in fact, an average of four words or portions of words added or deleted per hundred words in the four documents. The 1825 letter, therefore, should have about seven of these mistakes to be consistent with the other documents. That the 1825 letter has no examples of this nature could be a cause for concern, and we feel that it should be carefully checked by experts who are qualified to make meaningful judgments with regard to spelling, grammar and style.

Although Mark Hofmann, the dealer who discovered the letter, has not revealed where it came from, the handwriting appears to be the same as that found in the other Joseph Smith letters and writings. Of course we are not handwriting experts and cannot say for certain that it is the same hand. The *Los Angeles Times* for May 11, 1985, quoted Charles Hamilton, "a prominent New York City autograph collector," as saying: "... the second I saw this one I recognized it as the Mormon prophet's signature . . ." The Church Section of the *Deseret News* for May 12, 1985, contained the following:

The 1825 Joseph Smith letter is almost certainly authentic, said Dean C. Jessee, associate professor of Church history and research historian at the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History at BYU. He is a leading expert on early historical documents relating to the Church.

"The document appears definitely to be in the hand of Joseph Smith," he said. "As such, it is the earliest document we have that is written and signed by the prophet."

Although it would not necessarily prove the letter authentic, its contents seem to fit well into the context of what we know Joseph Smith was doing at the time. For instance, the letter is addressed to Josiah Stowell. Joseph Smith acknowledged in his history that "In the month of October, 1825, I hired with an old gentleman by the name of Josiah Stowel, . . . He had heard something of a silver mine having been opened by the Spaniards . . . After I went to live with him, he took me, with the rest of the hands, to dig for the silver mine, . . . Hence arose the very prevalent story of my having been a money-digger" (*History of the Church*, vol. 1, page 17).

Joseph Smith's use of divination led him into trouble with the law, and while he was working for Mr. Stowell he was brought to trial. In the trial, which was held March 20, 1826, Joseph Smith testified that "he had a certain stone which he occasionally looked at to determine where

hidden treasures in the bowels of the earth were; that he professed to tell in this manner where gold mines were a distance under ground, and had looked for Mr. Stowel several times, and had informed him where he could find these treasures, and Mr. Stowel had been engaged in digging for them.” (See *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality?* page 32, for the complete text of the trial.)

As to Joseph Smith’s use of “a hasel stick” to find treasures, C. M. Stafford said that Smith “claimed he could tell where money was buried, with a witch hazel consisting of a forked stick of hazel. He held it one fork in each hand and claimed the upper end was attracted by the money” (*Naked Truths About Mormonism*, April 1888, page 1).

In the *Vermont Historical Gazetteer*, 1877, vol. 3, pages 810-819, we find an article on the use of the hazel stick. This article says that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery “commenced their education with the use of the hazel-rod or forked stick, in searching for hidden treasures—though afterwards they used what they called enchanted stones.”

In a revelation given by Joseph Smith to Oliver Cowdery in 1829, we read that Cowdery had the “gift of working with the rod: behold it has told you things: behold there is no other power save God, that can cause this rod of nature, to work in your hands, . . .” (*Book of Commandments*, Chapter 7:3). When this revelation was reprinted in the *Doctrine and Covenants*, Section 8:6-7, the words “the gift of working with the rod” were changed to “the gift of Aaron.” The other mention of the “rod of nature” was also replaced with the words, “this gift of Aaron.” The Mormon writer D. Michael Quinn presents some evidence that this same rod was brought to Salt Lake City and that Brigham Young used it to point out where the temple should be built (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Fall 1978, page 82).

The Church’s newspaper tried to defuse the explosive contents of the letter by saying:

The use of a device similar to the “dowsing rod” that is still used by some rural societies to find water is not unusual in context of the early 1800s, the First Presidency said. Folk magic was a common phenomenon, and Smith was reflecting the beliefs of the society in which he lived. (*Deseret News*, May 10, 1985)

Although the publication of the letter in the Mormon Church’s own newspaper would lead one to believe that the Church has been open and straightforward about the whole matter, all the evidence demonstrates just the opposite. Church leaders, in fact, did their best to suppress the letter and were caught in a cover-up situation. In his interview on KUER Radio, Brent Metcalfe related that he first learned of the existence of the 1825 letter in the spring

of 1983. Charles Hamilton claimed that Mark Hofmann told him he sold the letter to the Church two years ago:

Charles Hamilton, . . . said Thursday by telephone that he was shown the Joseph Smith letter two years ago by manuscript collector Mark Hofmann of Salt Lake City, . . . “I said it was probably of great historical interest and was worth about \$15,000. Hofmann told me he sold it within three weeks to the church for \$25,000.” (*Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 1985)

Although the Church later claimed that it had possession of the letter, in a letter to the editor of the *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 6, 1985, the Mormon scholar George D. Smith said that it was his understanding that “Gordon B. Hinckley, second counsellor to President Spencer W. Kimball, purchased the letter in 1983 in his own name from collector Mark Hofmann (after authentication by chemical and handwriting analysis).”

If President Hinckley bought the document in his own name, this must have been an attempt to give the Church deniability—i.e., the letter could be safely kept out of the hands of the public, and yet the Church could officially deny that it had it. In any case, last year we became aware of the letter’s existence and discussed the matter with one of the top historians in the Mormon Church. He lamented that the Church had allowed itself to become involved in a cover-up situation with regard to the 1825 letter. In the September 1984 issue of the *Messenger* we published a typed copy of the text of this letter and commented that we would “withhold judgment concerning its authenticity until we obtain more information concerning it.” As far as we know, the first Mormon scholar to print anything about the letter was Marvin S. Hill of the History Department at Brigham Young University. Professor Hill did not quote the actual text of the letter nor mention where it was located, but he revealed the following:

The 1825 letter to Stowell makes it clear that Joseph, Jr., not his father, is the guiding genius in the money digging business. It is Joseph who answers Stowell’s inquiry. It is he who has the special knowledge and powers, and it is he who makes the decision to join Stowell and lead the search. . . . Joseph, Jr. alone, as far as the record shows, had the talent with the stone that was essential. (*Journal of Mormon History*, vol. 11, 1984, page 132)

On April 29, 1985, *Salt Lake Tribune* reporter Dawn Tracy wrote:

A letter reportedly written by Mormon church founder Joseph Smith describing money-digging pursuits and treasure guarded by a clever spirit seems to have disappeared from view.

If authentic, the letter could link Joseph Smith directly—by his own admission—to folk magic. . . .

Dr. Hill said he is convinced the letter is authentic or he wouldn't have cited the document in the article. He said he doesn't know where the letter is located now.

"It's a sad business that the letter is buried," said Dr. Hill. "With copies of the letter circulating, I can't see much benefit."

Research historian Brent Metcalfe said he knows from "very reliable, first-hand sources" the letter exists, and the Mormon Church has possession of it.

Church spokesman Jerry Cahill denied the claim.

"The church doesn't have the letter," said Mr. Cahill. "It's not in the church archives or the First Presidency's vault." . . . He said none of the confidential documents is the 1825 letter.

Someone may be playing word games, said George Smith, president of Signature Books, a Mormon publishing house focusing on scholarly publications.

"The church clearly has possession of the letter," he said. "If the exact question isn't asked, someone can wink and say the church doesn't have it."

No, said Mr. Cahill, the church does not have possession of the letter. (*Salt Lake Tribune*, April 29, 1985)

George Smith was very disturbed about the Church denying that it had possession of the letter. He was so disturbed, in fact, that he read the letter at a meeting of the Mormon History Association. A few days later (May 6) the *Salt Lake Tribune* published his letter to the editor. In this letter he revealed that "some scholars have reported seeing it at the church offices, . . . A number of scholars have photocopies of the letter, . . ." When it became apparent to the Church leaders that the letter was going to be published without their consent, they decided to back down and admit the existence of the letter. Jerry Cahill, Director of Public Affairs for the Church, admitted in a letter to the editor that his earlier statement was incorrect:

. . . staff writer Dawn Tracy correctly quoted my statement to her that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints doesn't have a letter purportedly written in 1825 by Joseph Smith to Josiah Stowel (or Stoal) either in the church archives or in the First Presidency's vault.

My statement, however, was in error, for which I apologize and for which I alone am responsible. Some months ago I was asked the same question by another inquirer and made a thorough check before responding. Dawn Tracy called me twice as she prepared her article and I responded without checking again.

When my published statement came to his attention, President Gordon B. Hinckley of the First Presidency of the church, informed me of my error. The purported letter was indeed acquired by the church. For the present it is stored in the First Presidency's archives and perhaps

some day may be the subject of the kind of critical study recent given to the purported letter of Martin Harris to W. W. Phelps. (*Salt Lake Tribune*, May 7, 1985)

It is very obvious from all this that the Mormon leaders have been caught in a very embarrassing cover-up with regard to the letter and that they only published it because their own scholars were preparing to release it to the press. Since the Church or President Hinckley secretly bought this letter in 1983 and never mentioned its existence, it is obvious that Church leaders intended to suppress it. *Time* magazine for May 20, 1985, reported that "The church offered no explanation for withholding news of the earliest extant document written by Smith, . . ." John Dart commented:

As it became clear during this week that photocopies of the letter would soon be circulated by sources outside the official church, Cahill announced that the church would discuss the contents and release a photocopy of the letter. (*Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 1985)

It seems obvious that if the letter had supported the Church in any way, it would have been published immediately in the *Deseret News* with a large headline announcing its discovery. When Joseph Smith's mother's 1829 letter was discovered, Mormon officials proclaimed it to be "the earliest known dated document" relating to the Church, and it was hailed as a vindication of Joseph Smith's work. Since the letter to Stowell was supposed to have been written by the Prophet himself some four years earlier, we would expect it to receive even greater publicity. Instead, the Mormon leaders buried it and engaged in a cover-up.

### **"Incredible Crisis"**

The Bible strongly condemns the practice of magic. In the book of Deuteronomy we read:

When thou art come into the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not learn to do after the abominations of those nations.

There shall not be found among you any one . . . that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch,

Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer.

For all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord: and because of these abominations the Lord thy God doth drive them out from before thee. (Deuteronomy 18:9-12)

The Mormon leaders have sided with the Bible in declaring that divination and all forms of magic are extremely evil. They have also done their best to cover up Joseph Smith's involvement with magic. Apostle Bruce R. McConkie wrote:

Use of power gained from the assistance or control of evil spirits is called sorcery. Frequently this power is used in divination, necromancy, and witchcraft. . . .

Sorcery has been a sinful evil in all ages. . . . sorcerers will be destroyed . . . they shall be cast into that hell which is prepared for them . . . and finally, having paid the utmost farthing for their crimes, they shall be debased with a telestial inheritance in eternity. (*Mormon Doctrine*, 1979, page 747)

Now that a great deal of evidence has come to light linking Joseph Smith to magic, Mormon apologists are trying to play down the serious implication of Smith's participation in the occult. It is claimed, in fact, that Smith's divination with a hazel stick "is not unusual in context of the early 1800s, the First Presidency said. Folk magic was a common phenomenon . . ." (*Deseret News*, May 10, 1985).

While it may be true that there were many people involved in magic and money-digging in Joseph Smith's time (just as there are many people involved in the occult today), its prevalence should not be exaggerated. The reader will remember that E. D. Howe's book was published in 1834. In this book, Howe linked Joseph Smith to money-digging and the occult. The fact that the book caused Joseph Smith so much trouble shows that these practices were frowned upon by a large portion of the people in his day. Joseph Smith's 1826 trial seems to demonstrate the same thing. In any case, even if everyone else was practicing magic, this would not give a license for a man who professed to be a prophet of God to become involved in it. The *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 1985, printed an important observation by Peggy Fletcher:

On the other hand, Peggy Fletcher, publisher-editor of the independent Mormon-oriented magazine *Sunstone*, questioned the approach by Walker and Howard: "Why does it not make me feel better to hear that everybody was into magic then? I think historians are naive if they think members are going to buy this."

Although the Mormon leaders are now soft-peddling their stand against magic, we cannot forget Apostle McConkie's statement that those who are involved in "False religions" are the ones who are "engaging in divination. . . . The Lord's people are commanded not to engage in divination of any sort" (*Mormon Doctrine*, pages 202-203).

In accepting the letters of Joseph Smith and Martin Harris as authentic, the Mormon leaders find themselves

in a very strange position. These two letters and the report concerning the Cowdery history all combine to present a devastating case against the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon. In fact, they give strong support to an idea referred to in our book *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry*, page 40:

Joseph Smith himself seems to have been convinced that there were guardians over the treasures. As we have already shown, in the 1826 trial Jonathan Thompson testified that when he was engaged in money digging with Joseph Smith, Smith claimed that he looked into his seer stone and discovered "distinctly the two Indians who buried the trunk: that a quarrel ensued between them, and that one of said Indians was killed by the other, and thrown into the hole beside of the trunk, to guard it, as he supposed." After reading this a person can not help but wonder if Joseph Smith transformed the guardian of the treasure into the angel who gave him the gold plates from which the Book of Mormon was supposed to have been translated. Support for this idea comes from a number of sources.

On pages 31-32 of the same book, we also quoted information from the affidavit of William Stafford which showed that Joseph Smith used his seer stone to spy on evil spirits:

I, William Stafford, . . . do say, that I first became acquainted with Joseph, Sen., and his family in the year 1820 . . . A great deal of their time was devoted to digging for money: . . . They would say, . . . Joseph, Jr. could see, by placing a stone of singular appearance in his hat, in such a manner as to exclude all light; at which time they pretended he could see all things within and under the earth,—that he could see within the above mentioned caves, large gold bars and silver plates—that he could also discover the spirits in whose charge these treasures were, . . .

Joseph Smith, Sen., came to me one night, and told me, that Joseph Jr. had been looking in his glass, and had seen, not many rods from his house, two or three kegs of gold and silver, some feet under the surface of the earth; and that none others but the elder Joseph and myself could get them. I . . . repaired to the place of deposit. Joseph, Sen. first made a circle, twelve or fourteen feet in diameter. This circle, said he, contains the treasure. He then stuck in the ground a row of witch hazel sticks, around the said circle, for the purpose of keeping off the evil spirits. . . . He next stuck a steel rod in the centre of the circles, and then enjoined profound silence upon us, lest we should arouse the evil spirit who had the charge of these treasures. . . . the old man by signs and motions, asked leave of absence, . . . He soon returned and said, that Joseph had remained all this time in the house, looking in his stone and watching the motion of the evil spirit—that he saw the spirit come up

to the ring and as soon as it beheld the cone which we had formed around the rod, it caused the money to sink.

The reader will remember that in the letter to Josiah Stowell, Joseph Smith said, “the treasure must be guarded by some clever spirit and if such is discovered so also is the treasure.” Smith then recommends the use of “a hasel stick” for divination to discover the presence of the “treasure.” The reader will notice that in Stafford’s account a whole “row of witch hazel sticks” are used “for the purpose of keeping off the evil spirits.”

While the 1825 letter does not mention the gold plates of the Book of Mormon, it absolutely ties Joseph Smith to divination and shows that he was tampering around with evil or “clever” spirits at the very time he was supposed to be having dealings with the Angel Moroni. This letter lacks only one thing—i.e., it does not link magic and money-digging directly to the Book of Mormon plates. The Salamander letter, however, picks up the story at this very point and completes the occultic picture. It clearly points out that the “old spirit” who reveals the gold plates is one of the clever spirits mentioned in the 1825 letter. It claims, in fact, that “the spirit says I tricked you again . . .” As if this is not bad enough, on one occasion the spirit transformed himself from a magic salamander and violently struck Joseph Smith three times. According to Brent Metcalfe’s report concerning the Cowdery history, the “taunting Salamander” prevented Alvin from digging up the plates. *Webster’s Twentieth Century Dictionary* gives this definition of taunt: “1. to reproach with scornful or insulting words; to jeer at; to revile; to upbraid; to deride.” While this violent, tricky and taunting spirit/salamander fits well in an occult setting, it would be ridiculous to equate it with an angel of God.

If Joseph Smith’s participation in magic had been limited to the time previous to the Lord calling him, we could probably excuse the whole matter. Instead, however, we find that he is deeply involved at the very time the Angel Moroni is preparing him to receive the gold plates of the Book of Mormon. In his *History* he claimed that he was first visited by the angel in 1823 and that he continued to meet with the angel every year until he received the plates in 1827. In the 1826 trial, however, he admitted that he had been “looking through this stone to find lost property for three years, . . .” This would mean, then, that his involvement with the occult started at about the same time the angel first visited him, and according to the Mormon scholar Marvin Hill, “Joseph was still digging in 1827 . . . at no time did he give up belief in the usefulness of his stone to find treasure” (*Journal of Mormon History*, vol. 11, 1984, page 130). According to Book of Mormon witnesses Martin Harris and David Whitmer, Joseph Smith used the seer stone to translate the Book of Mormon itself

(see *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality?* pages 41-42). He used the stone to give revelations, and in one of the revelations he endorsed Oliver Cowdery’s gift of working with a divining rod. Six years after publishing the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith gave a revelation concerning money-digging. It is actually canonized in the Mormon Church’s *Doctrine and Covenants*—one of the four standard works of the Mormon Church. In Section 111, verses 1, 2 and 4 we read:

I, the Lord your God, am not displeased with your coming this journey, . . . I have much treasure in this city for you, . . . I will give this city into your hands . . . and its wealth pertaining to gold and silver shall be yours.

Although this revelation was a complete failure, this did not stop Joseph Smith from giving another revelation on the same subject. In 1838 Joseph Smith inspected some mounds “erected by the aborigines of the land, to secrete treasures,” and sent this revelation to his brother:

Verily thus Saith the Lord unto Hiram Smith if he will come strate-away to Far West and in=quire of his brother it shall be shown him how that he may be freed from de[b]t and ob=tain a grate treasure in the earth even so Amen (Revelation mailed May 25, 1838, photographically reproduced in *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, page 358)

The “grate treasure,” of course, turned out to be only a figment of Joseph Smith’s imagination.

Mormon scholar Reed Durham pointed out that Joseph Smith owned a “Jupiter talisman” which he carried in his pocket. His brother, Hyrum, had some magic parchments and a knife which have been preserved until the present time. As we examine the evidence, we find that Joseph Smith’s “restored” church seems to have been deeply rooted in the occult. Our book *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry* deals in depth with these issues and also contains photographs of Joseph Smith’s talisman and the Hyrum Smith magic parchments and knife. We have demonstrated beyond all question that this paraphernalia comes from the occult. One of the Mormon scholars who spoke at the Mormon History Association publicly recommended our research on these matters. *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry*, which contains a wealth of information, is available for only \$3.00 a copy (please add 10% postage and handling).

In *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry* we point out that in 1828 members of the Methodist Church were forced to make a decision with regard to Joseph Smith. He had taken steps to join their church, but they felt his dealings with the occult made him unfit to be a member. Joseph Lewis later wrote that he “thought it was a disgrace to the church to have a practicing necromancer,

a dealer in enchantments and bleeding ghosts, in it. So on Sunday we . . . Told him that his occupation, habits and moral character were at variance with the discipline, that his name would be a disgrace to the church, that there should have been recantation, confession and at least promised reformation—That he could that day publicly ask that his name be stricken from the class book, or stand investigation. He chose the former, and did that very day make request the his name be take off the class book.”

We summarized this section of *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry* by saying:

With the mounting evidence of Joseph Smith’s involvement in magic, members of the Mormon Church are faced with a very weighty decision—i.e., can they accept as a prophet a man who was involved in occult practices **at the very time he was supposed to have been receiving revelations from God?** From the standpoint of the bible, the question can only be answered no. As one former follower of Joseph Smith expressed it, a person must “come out from the company of Joseph the sorcerer.”

With the evidence that has come forth since 1983, we feel that it is even more imperative for those who want to follow Christ to “come out from among them” (2 Corinthians 6:17). *Time* magazine for May 20, 1985, reported the following concerning the reaction of Mormons to the new material:

“It’s an incredible crisis of faith for me,” says Mormon Klaus Hansen, who teaches at Queen’s University in Ontario. “It means our historical foundation becomes a nice story that has no connection to reality.” To Denise Olsen, a law student and mother of three in Bountiful, Utah, “it’s another evidence to me that things have gone awry in the church.” A devout Mormon couple in Whittier, Calif., in a letter to friends explaining why they have left the church, say new revelations about the Mormons’ founding prophet have destroyed their belief.

We really expect that the new information with regard to Mormonism and magic will eventually bring thousands out of the Church. This may be the most important development since we began our ministry. Christians should pray diligently that the Mormon people will turn to the Lord and find the strength which is necessary to carry them through this crisis. Jesus himself has given this invitation:

*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.* (Matthew 11:28)

## Cause for Concern

We have recently become aware of a man who has been making up material and attributing it to Joseph Smith. Since such an individual has the ability to create the text of a document like the Salamander letter, we are making a very serious investigation into this matter. We hope to have more to report on this in the next issue of the *Messenger*.

The reader may have noticed that this is the largest issue of the *Messenger* which we have ever published. In spite of the additional costs involved, we felt that it was extremely important to keep our readers well informed on the new and startling developments that have taken place. It will probably take a great deal more time and money to continue our investigation into these matters. While we hope to continue furnishing accurate and up-to-date information, we do have financial needs that must be met. We would certainly appreciate any donations that our readers are able to make. Remember that all donations are tax-deductible.

## Let Them Starve?

We have received some criticism of our ministry to help the starving people of the world. One letter expressed concern that the food may not be getting to those who need it. While we can understand this apprehension, we should point out that we are careful to see that the money does not go to questionable organizations.

One criticism that really bothers us, however, is that it is better to let the people starve so that the problem won’t be perpetuated. We feel that this is a very lame excuse and is completely unchristian. The Apostle John dealt with this type of thinking almost 2,000 years ago:

*But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?* (New King James Version, 1 John 3:17)

If the Lord is willing, we hope to expand our outreach to the needy. In the January 1985 issue of the *Messenger* we stated that we had stepped out in faith to provide support for five children through World Vision. We are happy to report that we have had the funds to meet this need and that we are now adding two more children to the list. We would ask our readers to pray that this work will continue to increase. Psalm 82:3 tells us that we should “*Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy.*”

## Blood Atonement Chosen

In the last issue of the *Messenger* we told how Daniel and Ronald Lafferty murdered their brother's wife and daughter by cutting their throats. We pointed out that the Laffertys had been excommunicated from the Mormon Church. They had become what is known as "Mormon fundamentalists"—i.e., believers in polygamy and other doctrines taught by the early leaders of the Church. The Laffertys seem to have been influenced by Brigham Young's doctrine of "blood atonement":

Will you love your brothers or sisters likewise, when they have committed a sin that cannot be atoned for without the shedding of their blood? Will you love that man or woman well enough to shed their blood? . . . I have known a great many men who left this church for whom there is no chance whatever for exaltation, but if their blood had been spilled, it would have been better for them, . . . (*Deseret News*, February 18, 1857)

On page 11 of the March 1985 issue of the *Messenger*, we pointed out that the Laffertys "could have worked hand in hand with Brigham Young as he put his blood atonement doctrine into practice. Orrin Porter Rockwell, Bill Hickman, John D. Lee and a number of other men caused a great deal of blood to flow in early Utah (see *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality?* pages 444-450, 493-515).

In the same issue of the *Messenger* we printed part of a revelation in which Ronald Lafferty claimed God commanded the murder of his "brother's wife Brenda and her baby." We had not seen the complete revelation at that time, but it was printed in the *Salt Lake Tribune* on April 29, 1985. The complete text lends support to our observation that the Laffertys "could have worked hand

in hand" with people like Orrin Porter Rockwell—one of Brigham Young's "destroying angels." The revelation states that the Lord had raised up "my servant Todd" to perform the murders and then asked this question concerning Todd: ". . . and is he not like unto my servant Porter Rockwell?"

At the time that we printed the March newsletter, only Daniel Lafferty had been convicted of the murders. On May 8, 1985, the *Salt Lake Tribune* reported that Ronald Lafferty was "sentenced to die for the throat slashing murders." He chose death by a firing squad instead of lethal injection. His lawyer pointed out that his client "chose the firing squad 'because of blood atonement.'"

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