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A Preliminary Report by Jerald Tanner

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August 22, 1984

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THE MONEY-DIGGING LETTERS

A Preliminary Report

By Jerald Tanner

August 22, 1984

During the past few months there have been a great many rumors circulating concerning the discovery of important letters proving that the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith was involved in the money-digging business and that he used magical practices in finding buried treasures. It is reported that there are three or four important letters concerning the subject.

Smith's 1838 Letter

The first letter has recently been published by the Mormon scholar Dean Jessee in his book *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*. This book, which is published by the Mormon Church's Deseret Book Company, includes a photograph of the letter. According to Jessee, it is in the handwriting of Joseph Smith and is addressed to his brother, Hyrum. Jessee says that it was mailed from Far West Missouri to Plattisgrove on May 25, 1838. The text is very short:

Verily thus Saith the Lord unto Hiram Smith if he will come strateaway 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 obtain a grate treasure in the earth even so Amen

According to Dean Jessee, this letter is stored in the "LDS Church Archives." He does not say how long it has been there. In any case, the letter was written just after Joseph Smith explored some mounds. His *History of the Church*, Vol. 3, page 37, indicates that he believed these mounds contained treasures:

. . . I returned to camp . . . We discovered some antiquities about one mile west of the camp, consisting of stone mounds. . . These mounds were probably erected by the aborigines of the land, to secrete treassures.

The "Scriptory Book of Joseph Smith" reported that "valuable treasures" were deposited in these mounds (see the text in our publication *Joseph Smith's 1838-39 Diaries*,

page 10). The reader will note that this is more than just a letter; it actually purports to be a revelation from "the Lord." This appears to be the second false revelation Joseph Smith wrote concerning the location of buried treasures. The other revelation is actually canonized in the Mormon Church's *Doctrine and Covenants*—one of the four standard works of the 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.

Ebenezer Robinson sadly commented, "It is needless to say they failed to find that treasure, or the gold and silver spoken of in the revelation" (*The Return*, Vol. 1, p. 106). For a more complete treatment of this matter see our book, *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality?* page 49.

It is interesting to note that Joseph Rogers claimed that Joseph Smith had been giving money-digging revelations since he was a young man. In an affidavit Rogers stated: "When a young man he claimed to receive revelations from the Lord where treasures were buried" (*Naked Truths About Mormonism*, April 1888, p. 258).

Smith's 1825 Letter

The second letter has never been published. It is also reported to be in the possession of the LDS Church. Although its existence has been known by Mormon scholars for months, the Church has never publicly announced that it has possession of it. This is rather remarkable since it would be the earliest letter written by Joseph Smith. We have been told that Dean Jessee confirmed its existence, and when he was asked why he did not publish it in his book, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, he said that it would take an entire volume to explain it. In any case, the text of the document has leaked out. A number of scholars received typed copies

Letter from Joseph Smith to Josiah Stowel

Canandaigua, New York

June 18, 1825

Dear Sir:

My father has shown me your letter informing him and me of your success in locating the mine of which you told me, but we are of the opinion that if you have not ascertained the particulars, you should not dig for it till 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 cut, cleave it just in the middle and lay it asunder on the mine so that both inner parts of the stick hang up one right against the other one inch distant. If there is a treasure, after a while it will draw them both together unto themselves. Let me know how it is that you were here. I have almost decided to accept your offer. If you should make the decision to come this way, I shall be ready to accompany you if nothing happens more than I know of. I am,

Respectfully yours,

JOSEPH SMITH, JUN.

in the mail. The letters were sent anonymously from New York City. Although we were not sent a copy, we were able to obtain one from a friend. On the preceding page the reader will find a photograph of this copy.

The spelling and punctuation appear to be too good for Joseph Smith. We must conclude, therefore, that they have been corrected by the person who copied it. In any case, when the original is made available to scholars the spelling, words used and the grammar should be checked against other things known to have been written by Joseph Smith. This may present a few problems since we do not have anything else written by Smith at this early period of his life. His testimony in the 1826 trial shows that he received some of his schooling after the date appearing on the letter. One question that needs to be studied is if Joseph Smith was able to write so well at this early period.

As far as the historical setting of the letter is concerned, we see no obvious problems. 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 his 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, p. 17).

In his 1826 trial Smith admitted 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 hazel 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, p. 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, 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 3:7). 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 the "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, p. 82).

Although we can see no historical problems with the letter to Stowell, we will withhold judgment concerning its authenticity until we obtain more information concerning it. We have learned, however, that it was discovered by Mark Hoffmann.

Harris' 1830 Letter

In the *Salt Lake City Messenger* for March 1984 we reported:

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. The document was apparently purchased by Mark Hofmann, a Mormon scholar who has made a number of significant discoveries in the last few years. Mr. Hofmann in turn sold the document to Steven Christensen, who is planning to publish it in *Sunstone*.

We published a few extracts from this letter in the March issue of the *Messenger*. Later we learned that Mr. Christensen had decided not to publish the letter in *Sunstone*, but to include it in a book which a number of Mormon scholars are working on. On March 7, 1984, Steven Christensen issued a "Press Release" in which he acknowledged the existence of the letter. A copy of this statement appears on the next page. In this statement Mr. Christensen said that "professional tests have not yet been performed on the document. Before I will release transcripts or photographs of the document to the public, I wish to first determine the document's historicity as much as possible." Five months have passed since this statement was issued but still nothing concerning the contents of the letter or the tests made on it has appeared.

When Andrew Ehat's charges against us were heard in court by Judge A. Sherman Christensen, Ehat's lawyer, Gordon A. Madsen, said that he was calling

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March 7, 1984

PRESS RELEASE

RE: LETTER FROM MARTIN HARRIS TO WILLIAM W. PHELPS
DATED OCTOBER 23, 1830

"It is true that I am the owner of a letter written by Martin Harris to William W. Phelps, dated October 23, 1830. The opening words of the letter are as follows: 'Your letter of yesterday is received & I hasten to answer as fully as I can -' Harris then continues for 1½ pages in his reply to Phelps.

"While it is hoped that the letter is authentic, professional tests have not yet been performed on the document. Before I will release transcripts or photographs of the document to the public, I wish to first determine the document's historicity as much as possible. I have therefore sought the help and advice of competent historians to assist me in determining the reliability of the contents of the letter.

"Until the above referenced research and tests have further progressed, I do not feel at liberty to share the full contents of the letter. It is unfortunate that publicity of the document has preceded its historical authentication. This has lead to some cases of misstatement as well as numerous phrases being taken out of context.

"I look forward to the time when I will be able to offer a more complete presentation to the public and the media."

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "S.F. Christensen", written over a horizontal line.

Steven F. Christensen

Steven Christensen to testify against us because we had printed portions of the Harris letter without permission. Mr. Christensen came to the trial but was never called upon to testify. We pointed out that the mere ownership of a document does not give publication rights. If there were any literary rights, they would belong to the family of Martin Harris, and since the letter is supposed to be 154 years old, we doubt that anyone would even attempt to claim these rights. Even if Steven Christensen had the manuscript rights to the so-called "Salamander Letter," we quoted only a few sentences from it. This would certainly fall well within the limits of "fair use," and would not be considered a copyright violation. The fact that Christensen would be willing to testify against us, however, seems to demonstrate that we had genuine quotations from the letter. In questioning us about the matter, Ehat's lawyer never made any attempt to say we had misquoted the letter. In the *Trial Brief*, page 14, he charged we had printed "excerpts from Mr. Christensen's letter without permission, knowing full well who owned the document, that the same has not been previously published, and completely disregarded the rights of Mr. Christensen."

In the March 1984 issue of the *Messenger*, we wrote the following:

At the outset we should state that we have some reservations concerning the authenticity of the letter, and at the present time we are not prepared to say that it was actually penned by Martin Harris. The serious implications of this whole matter, however, cry out for discussion. 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. We will give the reasons for our skepticism as we proceed with this article.

Since Martin Harris was one of the three special witnesses to the gold plates of the Book of Mormon (see his testimony in the front of the book), he is held in high esteem by the Mormon people. Mormon writers have commended him for his honesty. Although many Mormon critics may disagree with this view, everyone agrees that Harris played such an important role in early Mormonism that anything coming from his pen is of great significance. In this letter, written just after the Book of Mormon was published, we find these revealing statements concerning how Joseph Smith obtained the gold plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated:

I found it 4 years ago with my stone but only 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 . . ." (Letter purported to have been written by Martin Harris to W. W. Phelps, dated Oct. 23, 1830, typed extract)

On the fourth page of the same issue of the *Messenger*, we observed:

Since we have been deeply involved in research having to do with the relationship of Mormonism to magic and have written a book entitled, *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry*, we were delighted to get the report that Martin Harris had written a letter relating to the subject. As we learned of the contents, we felt that it would provide additional evidence to support our thesis. Some time later, we were told of another letter, written by W. W. Phelps, which seemed to prove the authenticity of the letter attributed to Harris. This letter is printed in Howe's book, pages 273-274. In the letter, Phelps tells of Martin Harris' statements concerning the Book of Mormon. There are some remarkable parallels between the two letters. Both letters refer to the Urim and Thummim as "silver spectacle[s]." Both accounts tell of Martin Harris taking a copy of the Book of Mormon characters to "Utica, Albany and New York," and both talk of the Book of Mormon language as "shorthand Egyptian." Since Phelps' letter is dated Jan. 15, 1831 (less than three months after the letter which was reported to have been written by Harris), it seemed safe to conclude that Phelps used the Harris letter in preparing his own. In all fairness, however, we made another discovery which we feel we must report. Just two pages after Phelps' letter, we found a statement written by E. D. Howe which is strangely similar to the "Harris" letter. The reader will remember that the letter said, "the spirit transfigured himself from a white salamander in the bottom of the hole." E. D. Howe's statement reads as follows: ". . . looked into the hole, where he saw a toad, which immediately transformed itself into a spirit, . . ." Notice that both accounts use the words "that hole" as well as "spirit," and the words "transfigured himself" resemble "transformed itself." Howe's statement appears to be his own summary of the Willard Chase affidavit which we have already cited: "He saw in the box something like a toad which soon assumed the appearance of a man, . . ."

That Howe's statement (*Mormonism Unveiled*, page 276) is so much like the one of the "Harris" letter is a little disturbing. Even more disconcerting, however, is the fact that it appears just two pages

from a letter by W. W. Phelps which also bears remarkable parallels. This, of course, might all be a coincidence, and if it can be established that the letter was actually penned before Howe's book was published in 1834, it will probably be accepted as a genuine letter. . . .

Although a great deal of the contents of the "Harris" letter can also be found in Howe's book, there are some portions that resemble other writings. For instance, the letter relates a conversation Joseph had with the "old spirit": "... Joseph says when can I have it . . ." This is identical to Joseph Knight's statement published in *BYU Studies*, Autumn 1976, p. 31: "Joseph says, 'when can I have it?'"

While we would really like to believe that the letter attributed to Harris is authentic, we do not feel that we can endorse it until further evidence comes forth.

We have recently been given a complete transcript of the Salamander letter. The more we examine this letter attributed to Harris, the more questions we have about its authenticity.

Now that we have the complete text of the letter, we are certain that there is a relationship between it and the Phelps letter published in *Mormonism Unveiled*. The Phelps letter says that Harris took the characters to "Utica, Albany and New York; at New York, they were shown to Dr. Mitchell, and he referred to professor Anthon who translated and declared them to be the ancient shorthand Egyptian." In the Salamander letter, Harris says that he took the characters to "Utica, Albany & New York the last place Dr. Mitchell gives me an introduction to Professor Anthon says he they are shorthand Egyptian . . ."

The parallel concerning the silver spectacles is also more impressive now that we have the text of the letter. These words appear in the "Harris" letter, "silver spectacles with the plates." In the Phelps letter we read, "silver spectacles, found with the plates." (It is interesting to note that in an interview published in *Tiffany's Monthly* in 1859, Harris does not use the words "silver spectacles" but refers to the instrument as "the two stones set in a bow of silver.")

While it can still be argued that Phelps borrowed from Harris' letter, the presence of the strong parallel about the transformation of the toad or salamander into a spirit (which appears just two pages over in Howe's book) is rather suspicious. The reader will remember that Howe's book, *Mormonism Unveiled*, did not appear until four years after the Salamander letter was supposed to have been written.

As we have already shown, in the March 1984 *Messenger* we pointed out a similarity to Joseph Knight's account of Joseph Smith finding the plates. Knight's account was published by Dean Jessee in *Brigham Young*

University Studies, Autumn 1976, pages 29-39. According to Jessee, it was not written for at least three years after the "Harris" letter was supposed to have been penned. In examining the complete transcript of the letter, we see more striking parallels to this document. For instance, the Knight account quotes Joseph Smith as saying that in the Urim and Thummim he "can see any thing" (page 33). The Salamander letter likewise says that Joseph "can see anything" in his "stone." The Knight account says that after Smith found the "Book" (the gold plates), he "laid [it] Down" to "Cover the place over" (page 31). The wording in the letter is similar: "I lay it down to cover over the hole." We have already pointed out in the *Messenger* that both accounts use the identical words, "Joseph says when can I have it." In both accounts the plates are taken away from Smith because he laid them down. The Salamander letter and the Knight account also agree that Joseph was commanded to bring his brother Alvin when he returned for the plates. The Knight account says that "his oldest Brother Died" before it was time to come again for the plates. In the "Harris" letter, Joseph says, "my brother is dead." In both stories Joseph goes back to the place where the plates were deposited. The Knight account says that he was told that he "Could not have it." The Salamander letter likewise says he "cannot have it." In both cases Joseph does not know who to bring with him to obtain the plates. The Knight version says that "he looked in his glass and found it was Emma Hale." The Salamander letter also identified Emma as the person he sees in the stone: "the spirit says I tricked you again look to the stone Joseph looked & sees his wife." Both accounts go on to tell of Smith putting the sacred instrument into a hat to translate the Book of Mormon. The Knight account says, "he put the urim and thummim into his hat and Darkened his Eyes. . . Thus was the hol [whole] translated." The "Harris" letter claims that "he puts them in an old hat & in the darkness reads the words in this way its all translated & written down." (There are, of course, a number of similar accounts of the use of the hat in the translation. Book of Mormon witness, David Whitmer, for instance, gives essentially the same version.)

Another thing we noticed in the Knight account that could have had an influence on the Salamander letter is the use of the words "says he" and "says I." On page 37, as published in *Brigham Young University Studies*, we find the following: "Says he, . . . Says he, . . . Says I, . . . Says I, . . . Says he." In the "Harris" letter we read: "... says he . . . says he . . . says I . . . says I . . ."

There are also parallels to other documents which are easily available to students of Mormon history. For instance, in his book *A New Witness for Christ in America*, Vol. 1, page 151, Francis W. Kirkham includes

an article from the September 5, 1829 issue of the *Gem*, a newspaper published in Rochester. This article stated that Martin Harris gave “something like the following account” of the discovery of the gold plates: “. . . after a third visit from the same spirit in a dream he proceeded to the spot, . . .” The Salamander letter states: “the old spirit come to me 3 times in the same dream & says dig up the gold . . .” On page 150 of Kirkham’s book, he reproduces an article from the Rochester *Advertiser and Telegraph*, August 31, 1829. This article reports that “In the fall of 1827” Joseph Smith obtained the “golden Bible.” The “Harris” letter states: “in the fall of 1827 I hear Joseph found the gold Bible.”

We have already mentioned the interview with Martin Harris which is published in *Tiffany’s Monthly*, May 1859. This article is used by both Mormon and anti-Mormon writers. In this interview, Harris says that Smith “found them [the gold plates] by looking in the stone” (p. 169). The Salamander letter quotes Smith as saying, “I found it 4 years ago with my stone.” While there are a few other parallels with this interview, the dissimilarities seem to be much more significant. For example, the Salamander letter has very little to say about the gold plates of the Book of Mormon, whereas in the interview in *Tiffany’s Monthly*, Harris goes into great detail about the plates. He speaks of their size, thickness, weight and how they were buried. He gives a similar description of the Urim and Thummim. The Salamander letter gives no description of these “silver spectacles.”

The interview in *Tiffany’s Monthly* also raises a very serious question about the lack of religious material in the Salamander letter. In the interview, Harris quoted at least five portions of the Bible. He used the words *revelation*, *Moses*, *Scripture* and *Christ* at least once. He used the word *prayed* twice, and mentioned the *devil* four times. The word *angel* or *angels* appears five times. *God* is mentioned seven times, and the word *Lord* appears ten times. In the Salamander letter all of these words are absent. In fact, there is nothing we can find concerning religion. Spirits are mentioned many times in the letter, but they are never linked to God in any way. Instead they are linked to money-digging. They are the guardians of the treasures.

This total lack of religious material seems to be out of character for Martin Harris. A person might try to maintain that Harris was more interested in religion in 1859, but the evidence shows that he was always that way. E. D. Howe described him as follows:

He was naturally of a very visionary turn of mind on the subject of religion, . . . He frequently declares that he has conversed with Jesus Christ, Angels and the Devil. . . .

Martin is an exceedingly fast talker. He frequently gathers a crowd around him in bar-rooms and in the streets.—Here he appears to be in his element, answering and explaining all manner of dark and abstruse theological questions, from Genesis to Revelations; declaring that every thing has been revealed to him by the “power of God.” During these flights of fancy, he frequently prophecies of the coming of Christ, the destruction of the world, and the damnation of certain individuals (*Mormonism Unveiled*, 1834, pp. 13-15).

The article we have cited which was published in the *Gem* in 1829 claimed that Harris mentioned the “Almighty” in relationship to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. An article which appeared in the *Painville Telegraph* in 1831 contained this information: “Martin Harris . . . told all about the gold plates, Angels, Spirits, and Jo Smith—He had seen and handled them all, by the power of God! . . . Every idea that he advanced, he knew to be absolutely true, as he said, by the spirit and power of God” (*Painville Telegraph*, March 15, 1831, as cited in *A New Witness for Christ in America*, Vol. 2, p. 97).

It is interesting to note that the Salamander letter, which seems to remove all religious elements out of the Book of Mormon story, comes right on the heels of the discovery of another letter reported to have been written by Martin Harris in 1873. This letter is supposed to be in the handwriting of Martin Harris’ son, although it bears the signature of Harris himself. It is a strong affirmation of the testimony of the Angel appearing to Harris to show him the gold plates:

. . . as I was praying unto the Lord that I might behold the ancient record, lo there appeared to view a holy Angel, . . . the Angel did take up the plates, and turn them over so as we could plainly see the engravings thereon, and lo there came a voice from heaven saying “I am the Lord,” and that the plates were translated by God and not by men, and also that we should bear record of it to all the world. . . . (*The Ensign*, December 1983, pp. 44-45)

The Salamander letter almost appears to be a rebuttal to the powerful testimony in the 1873 letter. When it comes to Harris’ view of the gold plates it merely states: “. . . 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 . . .”

While it is true that Martin Harris believed in money-digging and the superstitions connected with it, it seems very hard to believe that he would write a prospective convert like Phelps and leave out all the divine elements of the Book of Mormon story.

We do not know if Mark Hofmann had anything to do with the 1873 letter, but in an interview with *Sunstone Review*, September 1982, he seems to have been referring to it:

And I know of a super good letter written by Martin Harris. . . . He gives details in that letter which are not found anywhere else concerning hearing the voice of the Lord . . . and the angel appearing, etc. (p. 18)

Just about a year after this, Mark Hofmann began talking about the Salamander letter. We understand that he tried to sell it to the Mormon Church for a large amount of money. In the past Mr. Hofmann acted under the theory that the Church will 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 given at the Mormon History Association, Mark Hofmann stated that he did not want “to come across like I 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 its 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—Don being the first person I had contacted. Since I had previously made several trades with Don in this same price range which were completed immediately . . . (not wanting to come across like I was trying to blackmail the Church) I fully expected to relinquish ownership immediately. (*Sunstone Review*, August 1982, p. 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. (We understand that the last Book of Commandments sold brought \$20,000, but it is believed they are now worth \$30,000.) 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 sacrifice \$15,000 just so the Mormon Church could hide the blessing document.

In any case, Schmidt did not jump at the offer. Hofmann later commented: “It surprised me a bit that

the Church didn’t buy it up quick and stash it away somewhere . . .” (*Sunstone Review*, September 1982, p. 19). Hofmann then offered the document to officials from the Reorganized Church, and they agreed to give him a Book of Commandments. Instead of selling it to them, however, he turned it over to the Mormon Church. This caused the Reorganized Church Historian, Richard Howard, to accuse Hofmann of “duplicious negotiating” and to consider “the possibility of legal action in response to Hofmann’s breach of contract. (His written, self-imposed deadline of March 8, extended verbally to March 17, had been violated by his March 6 sale of the document to the LDS Church).” (Statement of Richard Howard, published in *Sunstone Review*, August 1982, p. 7). In an attempt to bring about a peaceful settlement, the Mormon Church turned over the blessing document to the Reorganized Church in exchange for a Book of Commandments.

However this may be, it is reported that the Mormon Church felt that Hofmann’s price was too high on the Salamander letter and refused his offer. The document was later sold to Steven Christensen.

We feel 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 would feel much better about the matter if it could even be traced back prior to 1976, when Knight’s account of the finding of the Book of Mormon plates was first published. Mr. Hofmann is usually very cautious about this information, claiming that it will hinder his work as a document collector if people know his sources. *Seventh East Press* printed the following in an article by Jeffrey E. Keller:

It has been alleged that the important Lucy Mack Smith letter exhibited by collector Brent Ashworth was also purchased by Hofmann. Hofmann would neither confirm nor deny the rumor. He stated, “You will find that serious collectors are a pretty closed-mouth group.” (*Seventh East Press*, September 28, 1982, p. 7)

It has been suggested that this letter sold for \$30,000 (see *Sunstone Review*, September 1982, p. 16).

In his public statement about the Joseph Smith III Blessing document Hofmann has said he acquired it from a descendant of Thomas Bullock. An official from the Reorganized Church told us that when he asked Hofmann the specific source of this document, he would

not reveal it. The same man asked us the question, “Would you want to buy a used car from someone who wouldn’t tell you who the last owner was?” At any rate, he was given a name by the Mormon Church historians, but never followed up on the matter because he was told it could prove embarrassing for the Mormon Church. The reason why it would prove embarrassing was not explained. Tests were later made on the document which indicated that it was authentic. We have also heard that tests have been made on the Anthon transcript (another document found by Hofmann), but a noted Mormon historian told us that he could not divulge the results of those tests.

While we sympathize with Hofmann’s desire not to reveal the source of his discoveries, we feel that it is very important that historians know the source of these finds. Some kind of a compromise needs to be worked out.

In any case, a number of important documents have come to light during the 1980’s. The questions raised by the Salamander letter have forced us to take a closer look at some of these documents. If anyone has any information about the Salamander letter or any other documents, please let us know.

Updated October 24, 1984

Since completing our report on August 22, 1984, some important new material concerning the money-digging letters has come to light. For instance, Michael Marquardt has called our attention to a reference which seems to link Smith’s use of a divining rod (mentioned in the 1825 letter) to his work for Josiah Stowell in Pennsylvania. This is Fayette Lapham’s recollection of an interview with Joseph Smith, Senior, which took place at about the time the Book of Mormon was first published:

I think it was in the year 1830 . . . I set out to find the Smith family . . . Joseph, Junior, afterwards so well known, not being at home, we applied to his father for the information we wanted. This Joseph Smith, Senior, we soon learned, from his own lips, was a firm believer in witchcraft and other supernatural things; and had brought up his family in the same belief. He also believed that there was a vast amount of money buried somewhere in the country; that it would some day be found; that he himself had spent both time and money searching for it, with divining rods, but had not succeeded in finding any, though sure that he eventually would. . . . Joseph went to the town of Harmony, in the State of Pennsylvania, at the request of some one who

wanted the assistance of his divining rod and stone in finding hidden treasure, supposed to have been deposited there by the Indians or others. (*Historical Magazine*, May 1870, pp. 305-307)

We have in our possession another typescript of what purports to be Joseph Smith’s 1825 letter to Josiah Stowell. Although it gives the same basic story as the one mailed from New York, it does have some textual differences. Because it is supposed to be more accurate than the one we have reproduced in the first part of this study, we have decided to reproduce it here:

Canandaigua June 18, 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 as you cannot ascertain any particulars you should not dig for [it] [un?]til 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 cut 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 distance if there is treasure after awhile it will draw and join together again unto themselves let me know how it is since you were here I have almost decided to accept your offer and if you should [make or find?] it convenient to come this way I shall be ready to accompany you if nothing happens more that I know of

I am respectfully yours,
Joseph Smith Jr.

Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, August 25, 1984, John Dart said that Jan Shipps “mentioned in her speech another letter, reportedly written by Smith in 1825, that advises one Josiah Stowel (also spelled Stool) how to divine the location of a rich mine with a stick. “You know the treasure must be guarded by some clever spirit, and if such is discovered, so also is the treasure,” Smith wrote, according to a reportedly typed copy circulated to some historians and news reporters.

However, the letter has not been confirmed publicly to exist. At any rate, Shipps said, she was

already convinced that Smith and Stowel had worked together attempting to find a mine that would yield treasure.

Writing in the *Arizona Republic*, September 22, 1984, Richard Lessner reported:

The second letter, signed by Smith and dated summer 1825, was addressed to another early Mormon supporter, Josiah Stowell (sometimes spelled "Stoal"). . . . several Mormons close to the church in Salt Lake City believe it is owned by one of the general authorities.

Although neither transcripts of the letters nor the originals have been made available to the public, *The Arizona Republic* has obtained reconstructions compiled by persons who claim to have seen the originals.

In our report on Joseph Smith's 1838 letter (which contains a revelation concerning money-digging) we neglected to mention an important parallel between it and the revelation published in the *Doctrine and Covenants* as Section 111. After telling of the "gold and silver" which Joseph Smith would find at Salem, Section 111, verse 5, says: "Concern not yourselves about your debts, for I will give you power to pay them." The 1838 letter likewise indicates that Hyrum Smith would obtain a "grate treasure" and be "freed from deb[t]." Hyrum Smith was a member of the First Presidency of the Church, and the members of the Presidency were having a real problem with their debts. Just a little over a month after the revelation to Hyrum Smith failed, Joseph Smith gave his important revelation on tithing which provided money for the payment of the debts of the First Presidency:

1. Verily, thus saith the Lord, I require all their surplus property to be put into the hands of the bishop of my church in Zion,

2. For the building of mine house, and for the laying of the foundation of Zion and for the priesthood, and for the debts of the Presidency of my Church.

3. And this shall be the beginning of the tithing of my people.

4. And after that, those who have thus been tithed shall pay one-tenth of all their interest annually; and this shall be a standing law unto them forever, for my holy priesthood, saith the Lord. (*Doctrine and Covenants*, Section 109)

We have still not obtained any information as to how the Mormon Church acquired Joseph Smith's 1838 letter.

More on the Salamander Letter

On August 23, 1984, Sandra Tanner talked to Mark Hofmann concerning the authenticity of the Salamander letter and other matters mentioned in the first part of this report. With regard to the question about revealing the source of the letter, Mr. Hofmann said that he had told the buyer (Steven Christensen) where he obtained it, but could not reveal this information to anyone else. According to Hofmann, we will have to wait until Christensen decides to release this information.

As to the lack of religious material in the document, Hofmann suggested that Phelps may have been a money-digger, and this would account for Harris emphasizing this aspect of the story and suppressing the divine element. While it is possible that Harris would stress the things that were appealing to a money-digger, it still seems somewhat strange that he would leave out all mention of God or angels.

With regard to the Joseph Smith III Blessing, Hofmann indicated that he had given the Mormon Church an affidavit which stated where he had obtained it. He could not reveal the 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 those 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. It is possible, then, that the Church is suppressing a number of important documents obtained from Hofmann. We have no idea how many documents Mr. Hofmann has sold to the Church and other private collectors. On September 28, 1982, the *7th East Press* reported:

. . . Hofmann has bought and sold many other important historical documents that have not come to the media's attention . . . Hofmann did not make copies of any of these historically significant documents for Church historians because, in his words, "of course, that would make the document less valuable." Speaking specifically of the McClellan journal, Hofmann remarked that he was sorry that historians will not soon have the chance to study the journal, but "I am not in the business for historians: I am in it to make a living."

Among the many articles Hofmann is currently trying to find are the lost 116 pages of the first Book of Mormon manuscript.

The same article relates 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.”

Some historians are troubled by the fact that important historical documents are being discovered and then sold to private collectors who suppress them. While Mark Hofmann has a right to do this, from a historian’s point of view it would be much better if he would make a public announcement concerning each document, release photographs and then sell it to the highest bidder.

We have been informed that a man by the name of Lynn Jacobs may have been involved in transactions regarding the Salamander letter and may also know something about Joseph Smith’s 1825 letter. If any of our readers have any information regarding this matter, we would appreciate it if they would let us know.

In the first part of this report we said that we understood that Mark Hofmann had tried to sell the Salamander letter “to the Mormon Church for a large amount of money.” The *Salt Lake Tribune* for September 2, 1984, does not mention Hofmann’s name, but it does confirm that the letter was 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.

On September 22, 1984, Richard Lessner wrote the following in an article published in *The Arizona Republic*:

White salamanders, ancient spirits, peep stones and divining rods are the stuff of magic and 19th-century American frontier folklore.

According to two recently discovered letters dating from the beginnings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, they were also the stuff of prophet Joseph Smith’s early life and the origins of Mormonism. . .

The Harris letter was purchased in January by Steven Christensen, . . . In a telephone interview with *The Arizona Republic*, Christensen said he is not at liberty to reveal how or from whom he acquired the letter or how much he paid for it.

Jerry Cahill . . . said he did not know why the church did not buy the letter but suspects the church’s general authorities could not come to terms with the owner.

The *Deseret News* for September 1, 1984, also said that Christensen “purchased the letter in January 1984.”

The same paper reported that he will not release it to the public until a book is completed on the subject:

“The letter, if it is proved genuine, will be released when a book on the origins of Mormonism is released early next year,” Christensen said. Christensen, a Salt Lake businessman, is a bishop in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. . . .

“Already, thousands of man-hours have gone into research for the book,” Christensen said. “The letter has been a catalyst to dig into events leading to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the organization of the LDS Church by Joseph Smith on April 6, 1830.

“The research, it appears, will show how the Harris letter fits comfortably into the overall account of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.”

Authors of the book are Dr. Ronald W. Walker, Dr. Dean C. Jessee and Brent Metcalfe. Walker and Jessee, associate professors at Brigham Young University, are widely published specialists on Mormon history. (*Deseret News*, September 1, 1984)

We have been informed that the three researchers have found a great deal of material linking early Mormonism to magic and money-digging. The Church’s *Deseret News* quoted Dr. Walker as saying:

“We are looking at re-examining the environment from which Mormonism had its beginnings. We have focused on institutional religion. Now we are finding strains of religion we have not studied before. Some of them are very old, extending back before American history. Activities in which Joseph Smith was engaged were not unusual for his time.” (*Deseret News*, September 1, 1984)

The *Arizona Republic* reported the following concerning the letter:

Dean C. Jessie of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute . . . said the letter appears authentic, but a final determination can only be made after the paper and ink tests.

“This letter is in the same ballpark with other early Mormon literature. There is nothing in either the handwriting or the content that does not look authentic,” he said. . . .

Walker said: “This helps us to see Joseph as a product of his environment, not of a late 20th-century environment with a different world-view, a different belief system.

“He was not a modern, scientific man. We neatly disentangled magic and religion about 100 years ago, but they were still intertwined in Joseph’s day. . . .

"Some of this (magic) will sound very strange to our modern ears," Jesse said. "In the context of our time, it is unusual. But in the context of Joseph's time, it isn't unusual at all.

"Scholars have known for some time about Smith's involvement in treasure hunting and dowsing. This letter, if authentic, will enable us to put him in the context of his times and to interpret some other apparently contradictory materials." (*The Arizona Republic*, September 22, 1984)

A number of years ago we discovered there were serious falsifications in Joseph Smith's *History of the Church*. Some Mormon scholars have tried to minimize the problem by saying that many non-Mormon scholars also falsified history in the 19th century. It appears that a similar approach will be used with regard to Joseph Smith's involvement in magic and money-digging. The *Salt Lake Tribune* for September 2, 1984, reported:

Much of the time so far has been spent researching the religious culture at the time the letter was written, Mr. Walker said. He said researchers have discovered a "folk religion" of sorts that was not attached to the "institutional" religions of that day.

Smith's activities were "neither unique nor disreputable," Mr. Walker said, when they are considered in the context of the day.

"If the document is authentic it will require us to do some rethinking of Mormon past," he said. . . .

Mr. Jesse[e] of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History at BYU . . . said if the letter is authentic, historians will need to look again at the era during which the letter was published so that it can be considered in context.

"It's obvious that it is going to require a little more attention than we have given it in the past," he said.

Mr. Jesse[e] said that even if the document is found authentic it would not shake his faith.

"Oh no, it wouldn't bother me at all," he said. "If I had to guess I would guess on the side that it probably is authentic."

John Dart made these comments in an article published in the *Los Angeles Times*, August 25, 1984:

SALT LAKE CITY — A letter purportedly written in 1830 by Mormonism's first convert is now threatening to alter the idealized portrait of church founder Joseph Smith. . . . It reportedly says that Smith found the golden plates, which later resulted in the Book of Mormon, with the help of a "seer stone," a kind of magical looking glass. It also claims that Smith was prevented at first from gaining possession of the plates by an "old spirit" that had transfigured itself from a white salamander. . . .

The First Presidency's Gordon Hinckley said the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had earlier indicated that no comment would be made until the letter's analysis was completed.

But insiders here say there are indications that the letter may be valid.

Even if it is not, a respected non-Mormon authority on Mormon origins said the white salamander letter is consistent with other evidence that Joseph Smith had his occult side.

Jan Shipps, a Methodist who once served as president of the Mormon History Assn., made what may have been the first public talk about the letter in Mormon circles Wednesday night . . .

Shipps was one of three historians who addressed about 800 people attending the Sunstone Theological Symposium, an independent publishing group based here. Referring to existing evidence that Smith engaged in a popular activity of his time in New York State—hunting for treasure—Richard L. Bushman asked whether it was more "inherently evil" to pursue such a pastime than to play poker. Bushman, whose "Joseph Smith and the Beginning of Mormonism" will be published next month, urged Mormons to be tolerant "about this culture of magic invading the life of the prophet."

In the *Salt Lake Tribune*, August 27, 1984, the Church responded to Mr. Dart's charge that the Harris letter "threatened to alter the idealized portrait of church founder Joseph Smith":

A letter known as the "white salamander letter" which, according to historians, may provide new information on the character of Joseph Smith, "poses no threat to what is already known about the prophet or the beginning of the Church," said Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints spokesman Jerry Cahill.

Mr. Cahill said Sunday he hasn't seen the letter yet nor does the church have a comment on its authenticity, but, "It certainly sounds consistent with the times and possibly is an interesting sidelight to what is known."

The letter was written by . . . Martin Harris in 1830 and says Joseph Smith was first barred from the golden plates by a spirit who metamorphosized from a white salamander. The letter also says Joseph Smith found the plates, later to become the Book of Mormon, with a magical looking glass.

The Church Section of the Mormon newspaper *Deseret News* went so far as to publish an article with the title, "Harris Letter Could Be Further Witness," (September 9, 1984, page 11). On September 2, 1984, the *Salt Lake Tribune* printed the following:

The Tanners and other critics of the church think, however, that the letter is “damaging and embarrassing” to the church. Ms. Tanner said that if the church were to try and incorporate the new information in the letter into the missionary presentations that it would make “the story hard to sell.”

“It is not going to grab at your heart in the same way,” she said. Ms. Tanner said that she can remember a time when the church founder’s involvement in “money digging and . . . magic” was not acknowledged by most Mormon historians.

“When I first started reading about this stuff everyone absolutely denied it,” Ms. Tanner said. (*Salt Lake Tribune*, September 2, 1984)

According to the *Deseret News*, August 27-28, Steven F. Christensen

brought the document to President Gordon B. Hinckley, second counselor in the First Presidency, and showed it to him earlier this year.

“We felt that no public comment by us was in order until the authenticity of the letter had been thoroughly researched,” Cahill said. “We were pleased to learn that the owner had engaged professionals to do such research, both as to authenticity and also to the context of the time and the environment in which the letter may have been written.

“The owner has not yet disclosed the results of that research, so any comment on the letter is pure speculation. It would be inappropriate for us to seek to add to that speculation.”

The Mormon scholar Rhett S. James made the astounding claim that the portion of the Harris letter concerning the salamander transforming itself into an “old spirit” could be reconciled with Joseph Smith’s story of the visit of the Angel Moroni:

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, Utah, . . .

James, who received a bachelor’s degree in history from Washington State University, said it is the salamander imagery that intrigues him. “If you look the word up in the Oxford Dictionary, it has many uses and meanings not known in the modern world, not just the amphibian we think of today.”

According to James, the salamander’s somewhat magical connotation began in 16th century Germany, when people noticed that salamanders, which hid inside old logs, ran out of them when the logs were put on the fire.

“By the time of Martin Harris, the word *salamander* also meant *angel*. It also referred to brave soldiers who would run into the heat of battle,” James said. “The bravest soldiers in the French Revolution were known as salamanders.”

In regards to the reference purported in the letter that the “old spirit” prevented him from obtaining the plates, James said, “Joseph Smith’s own account was that the family was very poor, and he originally looked on the plates as possible monetary gain. But when he reached for them, the angel Moroni chastened him for that thought.” (*Deseret News*, Church Section, September 9, 1984)

While Mr. James would like us to believe that the “salamander” which turns into the “old spirit” can be equated with Joseph Smith’s statements concerning the Angel Moroni, we find this explanation very difficult to accept. According to the official account, Moroni is very dignified and straightforward. The “old spirit,” on the other hand, is devious (“I tricked you again”) and rather violent (“the spirit . . . struck me 3 times”). We find it far easier to believe that a salamander would be associated with magic and money-digging than with an angel sent from God.

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 on 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, . . . salamanders do not burn in fire. This seems incredible but God is almighty. . . . 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 Theophrates Von Hohenheim, Called Paracelsus*, Baltimore, 1941, pp. 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.

With regard to the “old spirit” mentioned in the Salamander letter, it is interesting to note that in his book, *A New Witness for Christ in America*, Vol. 2, page 71, Francis Kirkham cited an article from *The Reflector*, February 14, 1831, which tells of Joseph Smith’s father describing the spirit as an “old man”: “. . . the elder Smith declared that his son Jo had seen the SPIRIT, (which he then described as a little old man with a long beard,) and was informed that he (Jo) under certain circumstances, eventually should obtain great treasures, . . .”

While we would like to print the entire text of the Salamander letter in this report, Mr. Christensen feels very strongly that he should be the first to publish it. Although we do not believe that he has any legal rights, we feel that since he paid a large amount of money for the document, it seems appropriate that he should be allowed the privilege of publishing it first. If he waits too long, however, we will probably print it in the *Salt Lake City Messenger* or some other publication. Although there is evidence that Mr. Christensen is sincere about printing the letter, it has already been ten months since he obtained it.

In any case, we will have a copy of the transcript of the letter on display at our bookstore, and we are including a summary of its contents in this report. To begin with, Martin Harris stated that Joseph Smith first came “to my notice” in 1824. Harris was amazed that Joseph was able to do a great amount of work in a short period of time. When he asked about this, Joseph said he had special “assistance.” Harris asked Joseph Smith’s father about the matter and was told that “Joseph often sees Spirits here with great kettles of coin money.” Harris then told of a dream which he himself had in which he conversed with spirits and they “let me count their money.” He awoke with a dollar in his hand, and when he consulted Joseph Smith, Smith told him that the spirits were “grieved” because he kept the dollar. Harris, therefore, threw the dollar back.

Harris then told about Joseph Smith relating how an “old spirit” came to him in a dream and informed him that he should “dig up the gold”—i.e., the gold plates. When he attempted to get the plates the spirit “transfigured himself from a white salamander” and “struck me 3 times.” The spirit took the plates away from him because he had disobeyed his orders. Later the spirit said that he must bring his brother Alvin. Smith informed the spirit that “my brother is dead shall I bring what remains.” Joseph tried again to obtain the plates, but the spirit would not let him have them because he did not bring his brother (his body?). The spirit told Joseph to look to the seer stone, but he was unable to see who to bring. The spirit mockingly said, “I tricked you again.” Joseph finally saw his wife in the “stone” and obtained the “gold bible.”

Harris gave Joseph “\$50.00” so he could move to Pennsylvania. Later Joseph gave Harris a copy of the hieroglyphics which appeared on the gold plates to take to Professor Anthon. Anthon confirmed that they were “shorthand Egyptian” and wanted the “old book” so he could translate it. Harris then told how Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon by putting the “giant silver spectacles” in an “old hat” and reading the words which appeared in the darkness. Harris concluded his relation of facts concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon by saying that Joseph showed him the gold plates and that he (Harris) had the Book of Mormon printed with “my own money.”

It is interesting to compare the first part of the Salamander letter with other sources. Harris tells that he first noticed Joseph Smith “in the summer of” 1824 when “I contracted with his father to build a fence upon my property.” Joseph, his father and two brothers worked for Martin Harris, and it was then that Harris learned that Joseph “Often sees Spirits” and had power with them because he made “no attempt on their money.” In his book, *A.B.C. History of Palmyra and the Beginning of “Mormonism,”* page 35, Willard Bean relates:

Up to this time the Smith family had kept the secret of Moroni’s visit well guarded, but during the summer of 1824 there was a small leak that soon grew larger. During the fall of 1824 Joseph Smith, sr., and his son, Hyrum, were walling a basement and digging and curbing a well for Martin Harris. Mr. Harris exhibited an unusual interest in Joseph’s vision in the grove, stating that he was much interested in it at the time, . . . Mr. Smith took Martin into his confidence and told him of Joseph’s wonderful experience with the angel, Moroni.

Willard Bean’s account differs from the Salamander letter in two respects. First, it does not mention Joseph Smith, Jun., as being present. Second, it says that Harris learned of the visit of the angel Moroni at this time, whereas the Salamander letter only says that Harris learned about Joseph Smith’s contact with the “Spirits.” In his thesis, “Martin Harris—Witness and Benefactor to the Book of Mormon,” pages 16-17, Wayne Cutler Gunnell says that Joseph Smith frequently worked on Harris’s farm, but he only mentions his father and Hyrum as being present when Harris was told “about Moroni’s visitation in the upper room in September, 1823.” Gunnell refers to the “Autobiography” of William Pilkington, Jr., pages 28-29. This manuscript is apparently in the Church Historical Department and could possibly throw some light on the authenticity of the Salamander letter.

The story of the discovery of the Salamander letter reveals a great deal concerning the way news is handled in Utah. In March 1983 we broke the story in the *Salt Lake City Messenger* and quoted portions of the letter. Although Lynn Packer of KSL TV did research on the subject, the newspapers in Salt Lake City chose to remain silent about the matter. It was not until the end of August that John Dart published his story in the *Los Angeles Times*. At that time the local newspapers scrambled to get stories on the subject, and the *Salt Lake Tribune* ended up quoting about 200 words from the *Messenger*. It seems that many times major newspapers outside of Utah have to break a story before it will be reported here. At any rate, both the *Salt Lake Tribune* and the *Deseret News* printed good stories concerning the letter. The Mormon Church's newspaper, in fact, gave a very accurate report on our position on the letter:

Jerald Tanner . . . studied a typescript of the document and wanted to believe it. But when he compared it to the 1834 book "Mormonism Unveiled" by E.D. Howe, he found highly similar stories about Smith viewing a toad that turned itself into a man or a spirit.

Another disturbing aspect, Tanner said, was the letter seemed out of character for Harris. "In the entire text of the letter, there is no mention of religion in the sense of religion as we know it," Tanner said.

But Tanner feels the document is an extremely important find. "It deserves a lot of attention," he said. "If it's authentic, it's extremely important in linking Mormonism to the occult. If it's a forgery, then it's important because there's a document forger out there." (*Deseret News*, September 1, 1984)

In the story published in the *Los Angeles Times*, John Dart wrote the following:

However, unusual caution about the letter's genuineness has been expressed by Jerald and Sandra Tanner, longtime evangelical critics of the Mormon Church. The Tanners wrote in their *Salt Lake City Messenger* newsletter last March that the purported Harris letter contains too many similarities to statements published in an 1834 book by E. D. Howe.

In the Howe book, there were two accounts as to how Smith found the plates. One said he looked into the hole which contained the plates and saw a toad, which changed into a man. The other said the toad transformed itself into a spirit.

The Tanners suggestion of forgery has surprised some Mormons, who note that the parallels in

wording also could be taken as evidence for authenticity. (*Los Angeles Times*, August 25, 1984)

While we agree with the statement that parallels "could be taken as evidence" for the authenticity of the Salamander letter, it is the close proximity of important parallels in Howe's book that causes concern. On the pages which follow we have reproduced the pages from Howe's book, *Mormonism Unveiled* and have underlined the important parallels.

As we have already pointed out in the first part of this report, both Howe and the Salamander letter use the words "the hole" when referring to the place where the creature was that transfigured itself into the spirit. Actually, the plates were supposed to have been in the ground in a stone box. Willard Chase said that Joseph Smith "saw in the box something like a toad . . ." (*Mormonism Unveiled*, p. 242). Martin Harris described this stone box in his interview with *Tiffany's Monthly*, page 165. On the same page Harris was quoted as saying, "Joseph did not dig for these plates." In the Salamander letter, however, Smith is instructed to "dig up the gold."

Experts Examine the Letter

We are happy to report that Steven Christensen has submitted the Salamander letter to some of the best experts in the country to determine its authenticity. On September 1, 1984, the *Deseret News* reported: "Christensen told the *Deseret News* a copy of the Harris letter has been sent to a recognized handwriting specialist in the East."

Handwriting experts are going to be confronted with a real problem with regard to this letter. As far as we know, there are no samples of Martin Harris's handwriting except for his signature on a few documents. The *Deseret News* for September 1, 1984, claimed that "Christensen said that as far as is known [now?] this is the only letter in Harris' handwriting that has surfaced." Steve Eaton wrote the following in the *Salt Lake Tribune* on September 2:

Because the only known samples of Harris' handwriting are his signatures, researchers will be "handicapped" as they attempt to authenticate the handwriting, Mr. Walker said.

There are very few alphabetical characters represented in Martin Harris' signature. We find the letter *r* three times. The letters *a* and *i* both appear twice, but the letters *h*, *m*, *n*, *s*, and *t* only appear once. In our alphabet there are 52 different written forms—26 small letters and 26 capital letters. The Harris signature only gives us 8 letters to test—6 small and 2 capital letters. Thus we



P. 275—276.

“Let the sots combine,
“With pious care a Monkey to enshrine.”—DRYDEN.

Utah

MORMONISM UNVAILED :

OR,

A FAITHFUL ACCOUNT OF THAT SINGULAR IMPOSITION AND
DELUSION,

FROM ITS RISE TO THE PRESENT TIME.

WITH SKETCHES OF THE CHARACTERS OF ITS
PROPAGATORS,

AND A FULL DETAIL OF THE MANNER IN WHICH THE FAMOUS

GOLDEN BIBLE

WAS BROUGHT BEFORE THE WORLD.

TO WHICH ARE ADDED,

INQUIRIES INTO THE PROBABILITY THAT THE HISTORICAL PART

OF THE SAID BIBLE WAS WRITTEN BY ONE

SOLOMON SPALDING,

MORE THAN TWENTY YEARS AGO, AND BY HIM INTENDED TO HAVE

BEEN PUBLISHED AS A ROMANCE.

.....
BY E. D. HOWE.
.....

PAINESVILLE :

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY THE AUTHOR.

1834.

fessor Anthon, they will undoubtedly deny, as this is their uniform practice, after being fully convinced of any act which militates against them; but in this case it will be in vain. The following letter from Wm. W. Phelps, a very important personage among them, (who was for a time denominated the Lord's printer) in answer to some enquiries touching the origin of Mormonism, will show what was taught him while a pupil under Smith and Rigdon, and that the story about Mr. Anthon's declarations, was one upon which they placed great reliance. We give the letter in full, for the purpose of further comments:

Canandaigua, Jan. 15, 1831.

Dear Sir—Yours of the 11th, is before me, but to give you a satisfactory answer, is out of my power. To be sure, I am acquainted with a number of the persons concerned in the publication, called the "*Book of Mormon*."—Joseph Smith is a person of very limited abilities in common learning—but his knowledge of *divine things*, since the appearance of his book, has astonished many. Mr. Harris, whose name is in the book, is a wealthy farmer, but of small literary acquirements; he is honest, and sincerely declares upon his soul's salvation that the book is true, and was interpreted by Joseph Smith, through a pair of silver spectacles found with the plates. The places where they dug for the plates, in Manchester, are to be seen. When the plates were said to have been found, a copy of one or two lines of the characters, were taken by Mr. Harris to Utica, Albany and New York; at New York, they were shown to Dr. Mitchell, and he referred to professor Anthon who translated and declared them to be the ancient short-hand Egyptian. So much is true. The family of Smiths is poor, and generally ignorant in common learning.

I have read the book, and many others have, but we have nothing by which we can positively detect it as an imposi-

tion, nor have we any thing more than what I have stated and the book itself, to show its genuineness. We doubt—supposing, if it is false, it will fall, and if of God, God will sustain it.

I had ten hours discourse with a man from your state, named Sidney Rigdon, a convert to its doctrines, and he declared it was true, and he knew it by the power of the Holy Ghost, which was again given to man in preparation for the millennium: he appeared to be a man of talents, and sincere in his profession. Should any new light be shed on the subject, I will apprise you. Respectfully,

E. D. HOWE, Esq.

W. W. PHELPS.

The author of the above letter is, perhaps, deserving of a little more notice. Before the rise of Mormonism, he was an avowed infidel; having a remarkable propensity for fame and eminence, he was supercilious, haughty and egotistical. His great ambition was to embark in some speculation where he could shine pre-eminent. He took an active part for several years in the political contests of New York, and made no little display as an editor of a partizan newspaper, and after being foiled in his desires to become a candidate for Lt. Governor of that state, his attention was suddenly diverted by the prospects which were held out to him in the Gold Bible speculation. In this he was sure of becoming a great man, and made the dupes believe he was master of fourteen different languages, of which they frequently boasted. But he soon found that the prophet would suffer no growing rivalships, whose sagacity he had not well calculated, until he was met by a revelation, which informed him that he could rise no higher than a printer: "Let my servant William stand in the office which I have appointed him, and receive his inheritance in the land, and also he hath need to repent, for I the Lord [Jo] am not pleased with him, for he seeketh to exult." It will be seen by the

foregoing letter, that he had already made up his mind to embrace Mormonism, but still wished to conceal his intentions. It was not till about six months after that he had made definite arrangements to join them; by first fully understanding what his business was to be. After being created an Elder and Lord's printer, he repaired to Missouri with the squad that first went out, and on his return called on us to "acknowledge his gratitude," as he expressed it, for first directing his attention to Mormonism, saying that he knew nothing about it, till the receipt of our letter—that he 'then commenced an investigation of the subject, "and found it to be true"! stating that he had made great sacrifices, and abandoned a business worth \$2500 a year. We mention these things to show the hypocrisy of the man.

His letter it will be seen is dated the 15th Jan. in answer to ours of the 11th, only *four* days intervening. During these four days, then, our letter must have travelled over 300 miles, he talked with Rigdon *ten* hours, examined the holes where Smith had dug for money, and obtained all the other information which he communicates. Besides it is a well known fact that, notwithstanding his large income, he had been thrown into jail on a small debt, and offered to sell out his printing establishment for *one hundred and fifty dollars*. For his *honesty*, however, the prophet has left him to till the soil in Missouri, while the business of printing has been transferred to Kirtland, Ohio, and placed under the direction of O. Cowdery.

REMARKABLE EVENTS—THE CUT.

The reader will already have observed, that a great variety of contradictory stories were related by the Smith family, before they had any fixed plan of operation, respecting the finding of the plates, from which their book was translated. One is, 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. Another is, that after he had got the plates, a spirit assaulted him with the intention of getting them from his possession, and actually jerked them out of his hands—Jo, nothing daunted, in return seized them again, and started to run, when his Satanic Majesty, (or the spirit) applied his foot to the prophet's seat of honor, which raised him three or four feet from the ground. This being the opening scene of Mormonism, we have represented the wonderful event in our frontispiece. That the prophet has related a story of this kind, to some of his "weak saints," we have no manner of doubt.

Here, then, is the finding of the plates, containing a new revelation from Heaven; and the *modus operandi* may seem to the Mormon, truly wonderful, and in character with that Being who upholds and sustains the Universe; but to the rational mind it can excite no other emotion than contempt for his species.

One scene in the drama of disposing of the plates, we have also placed upon the same cut—being two of the most important events in the history of Mormonism. The latter story was related by *Lemon Copley*, (who had been an elder of the society, and was at the time for aught that appeared) under oath, before two magistrates, of Painesville Township, on a trial where the prophet had sworn the peace against one of his seceding brethren.

Mr. Copley testified, that after the Mormon brethren arrived here from the Susquehannah, one of them, by the name of Joseph Knight, related to him a story as having been related to him by Joseph Smith, Jun. which excited some curiosity in his mind, he determined to ask Joseph more particularly about it, on the first opportunity. Not

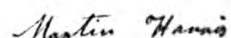
only have about 15% of the different forms represented. We understand that while a signature is very useful to compare against another signature, the form of the letters used may differ somewhat from one's normal writing because a signature is done almost automatically. When it comes to the spelling in the Salamander letter, we have nothing to compare it with. It should also be noted that we have no numbers or punctuation to make comparisons with, nor do we know what Harris' written style was like. We do have the 1873 Martin Harris letter, but since it is supposed to be in the handwriting of his son, it may not truly reflect Harris' written style. The style of the Salamander letter seems to differ from that of the 1873 letter. Although Harris was in his late forties at the time the Salamander letter was supposed to have been written, it appears to have been penned by someone who did not have a very good education. The 1873 letter, on the other hand, is very well written. One very obvious difference is that it uses the word *and* three times as often as the Salamander letter. The Salamander letter is composed mostly of short sentences (an average of 12 words in each sentence), whereas the 1873 letter has an average of 73 words per sentence. The two letters seem to bear little resemblance to each other.

As far as handwriting tests are concerned, we have some reservations concerning their reliability. A great deal, of course, depends upon the judgment of the individuals conducting the tests. For instance, in 1972 Clifford Irving forged some letters which fooled some of the handwriting experts. In 1976 what purported to be the will of Howard Hughes was found in the Mormon Church Office Building. The will was supposed to have left a large amount of money to the Mormon Church, Melvin Dummar and others. Henry Silver, a noted handwriting expert, seemed willing to stake his reputation on the will's authenticity. Another expert, John J. Harris, however, felt that it was "a rank forgery." It is believed today, of course, that the "Mormon Will" was a forgery (see our publication *Howard Hughes and the "Mormon Will"* [re-published as *Mormon Spies, Hughes and the C.I.A.*]).

In 1977 there was a great deal of controversy over the question of whether Solomon Spalding wrote 12 pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript. As it ended up, the authorities reached different conclusions. One handwriting expert withdrew from the case, and the other two were split in their opinion as to whether the pages were penned by Spalding. Writing in *Christianity Today*, October 21, 1977, Edward Plowman observed, "everyone seems to agree that handwriting analysis is not an exact science."

One interesting thing that has been called to our attention by Michael Marquardt is that the signature which we always believed was the genuine Martin Harris

signature was probably not written by Harris at all. This is the signature which appears under the printed testimony of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon in *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. When this signature is compared with a signature appearing on the Book of Mormon contract with E. B. Grandin, dated August 17, 1829, we find that there is no resemblance. The signature which appears on the 1873 letter seems to agree with the one found on the contract. If we assume that both these documents are authentic, then we have to conclude that the one which has been published by the Mormon Church for at least 50 years is not Martin Harris' signature. The following is a photograph of the signature which appears in *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Vol. 1, page 139. Below this is the signature which appears on the Book of Mormon contract with E. B. Grandin. This was published by the Mormon Church in *The Ensign*, December 1983, page 41 and the 1873 letter appears on page 45 of the same issue.

Why a false signature was used by the Church is not known, but it is possible that no good example of Harris' signature was readily available when the *Comprehensive History* was first published. Someone has suggested that it may really be the signature of Harris' son, Martin Harris, Jr.

One signature that is rather remarkable is the one found on the 1873 letter. Although Martin Harris was supposed to have been "eighty-nine years old" when he wrote it (*The Ensign*, November 1982, page 97), it looks almost the same as the one on the 1829 contract with Grandin (see *The Ensign*, December 1983, pages 41 and 45). It is certainly not what one would expect from a man who was just four months from his ninetieth birthday.

Recently we received a tip from someone in the East which led us to the discovery that the tests on the Salamander letter are being performed by Kenneth Rendell Incorporated of Newton, Massachusetts. This company is in the process of a rigorous examination. The signature on the letter was compared with four other signatures attributed to Martin Harris. Although we do not know whether a final verdict has been reached, the information which we have been able to obtain suggested that the verdict would probably be favorable to the document's authenticity. The paper the letter was written on was examined by Bill Kruger—an expert in this field who works in Appleton, Wisconsin. Mr. Kruger

took an actual sample of the paper and concluded that there was nothing in the chemical composition of the paper which would preclude its having been manufactured around 1830. Unfortunately, no watermark appeared in the paper. Fluorescent material (which could be used as evidence against an 1830 date) was found on the paper. Mr. Kruger concluded, however, that since this material did not extend deep into the fibers of the paper, it probably got there by someone's shirt or suit brushing against the letter in more recent times.

The fact that the paper appears to be old, of course, does not conclusively prove that the letter was penned in 1830. It is possible to obtain blank pieces of paper from that period. Mr. Kruger informed us that it is even possible for a very clever forger to manufacture paper at the present time which will pass through his tests without detection.

The most important thing, then, is to be able to determine when the ink was added to the paper. Dr. Antonio Kantu, one of the world's greatest experts on the detection of forgery by testing ink, was contacted by those who were working on the question of the authenticity of the Salamander letter. Unfortunately, there was a mix up in communications and Dr. Kantu had to leave the country. By the time he got back another expert had been asked to perform the tests.

In any case, we were able to get in touch with Dr. Kantu and ask him some questions concerning the tests that could be made on the ink. We had been told that Kantu could make tests which would prove almost beyond a shadow of doubt whether the ink was added to the paper in the early 1800's. Dr. Kantu, however, indicated that this was not the case. 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 could 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.

In his interview with *Sunstone Review*, Mark Hofmann indicated that a test concerning oxidation would show how long ink had been on paper:

REVIEW: Do you know of any Mormon forgeries?

HOFMANN: Only a couple. There was a forgery of a journal from a soldier in the Mormon Battalion.

REVIEW: A whole journal?

HOFMANN: Yes. But as far as a Joseph Smith letter, there are several laboratory tests that can be performed. In terms of handwriting, usually Dean Jessee speaks for the Church. . . . If it's something spectacular or earth shattering, something with important doctrinal

or historical implications, an all-out effort would likely be made. There is a very complicated science involved. For example, it is possible to determine the rate of oxidation of the ink in relation to the paper. This would show how long the two were in contact. (*Sunstone Review*, September 1982, p. 16)

When we asked Dr. Kantu about this matter, he replied that the test for oxidation would be of little value for documents which are supposed to be as old as the Salamander letter. He claimed that oxidation takes place within 10 years, and therefore a document that is 150 years of age would not be different in that respect from one that is only 10 years old. We did not ask Kantu concerning the possibility of someone speeding up the oxidation process by artificial means, but this is something that should also be considered.

We talked to Leslie Kress of Kenneth Rendell Incorporated about the tests being conducted on the letter. Although she acknowledged the work was being done, she was not able to reveal to us the results of the various tests. We have heard from another source, however, that the sealing wax used on the letter has been tested. It is also possible that tests will be performed on the postmark. We hope that there is some type of test which will give a conclusive answer as to the letter's authenticity.

In any case, if the tests conducted turn out to be favorable, the Salamander letter will probably be accepted as authentic. In the *Salt Lake City Messenger* for September 1984, we wrote:

While we have expressed some doubts about the authenticity of the letter, they are based strictly on the text itself. The results of tests on the document as well as the establishment of a pedigree could alter our conclusions.

If all the tests prove positive and Mr. Christensen can produce testimony that the document was in existence before 1976 (the year *BYU Studies* printed the Joseph Knight account), we will be inclined to accept it as genuine. It seems highly unlikely that anyone would have committed such a forgery while Harris and Phelps were alive, and Harris did not pass away until 1875. We do know, however, that there was a forger on the loose around the turn of the century because a spurious document purported to have been written by Book of Mormon witness Oliver Cowdery was published in 1906 under the title, *Defence of a Rehearsal of My Grounds for Separating Myself From the Latter Day Saints*. Our research on this subject is published in the pamphlet, *A Critical Look—A Study of the Overstreet "Confession" and the Cowdery "Defence."* While the *Defence* did not try to link Mormonism to money-digging, Mark Hofmann said that there was a 19th century forgery which tried to

do this very thing. Hofmann maintained that there is a woman in Bakersfield, California who has what purports to be a handwritten copy of the lost 116 pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript which was known as “the book of Lehi.” In the *Salt Lake City Messenger* for November 1983, we printed an article concerning these missing pages. On page 8 we stated:

. . . we heard that the missing pages had been located and read by different individuals and that the contents were “dynamite.” We now believe that a document purporting to be the missing portion of the Book of Mormon has been located. Unfortunately, however, there seems to be concern that it is a forgery. . . . It is reported that it resembles (at least to some extent) the Book of Mormon story as we have it today but also contains information on money digging—a practice Joseph Smith was involved in just before he wrote the Book of Mormon . . .

Mr. Hofmann claims that the document tells of a mine which Lehi had in the Old World. (This, of course, reminds us of Joseph Smith’s work in locating the lost mine for Josiah Stowell.) According to Hofmann, the document is a forgery because it quotes verbatim things that are peculiar to the “Wright” edition of the Book of Mormon. We do not know whether Hofmann was referring to spelling, punctuation or wording, but any one of these could be fatal to the case for authenticity. The “Wright” edition was published after Joseph Smith’s death and was apparently used by at least some members of the early RLDS Church. Hofmann believes that the forgery was committed back before the turn of the century. He said that the Mormon Church was interested in buying the forged document, but that the price was too high. If this document really exists, we hope Mr. Hofmann or the Church will release the name of the woman in Bakersfield. It should be examined to determine if there is any possible relationship between it and the Salamander letter.

Revelation to Sell Copyright

It has been claimed that a copy of the revelation to sell the copyright of the Book of Mormon has also been found. In his pamphlet, *An Address To All Believers In Christ*, Book of Mormon witness David Whitmer told of this revelation:

When the Book of Mormon was in the hands of the printer, more money was needed to finish the printing of it. We were waiting on Martin Harris who was doing his best to sell a part of his farm, . . . Hyrum was vexed with Brother Martin, and thought they should get the money by some means outside of him, and not let him have anything to do with

the publication of the Book, or receiving any of the profits thereof if any profits should accrue. . . . Brother Hyrum said it had been suggested to him that some of the brethren might go to Toronto, Canada, and sell the copy-right of the Book of Mormon for considerable money: and he persuaded Joseph to inquire of the Lord about it. . . . Joseph looked into the hat in which he placed the stone, and received a revelation that some of the brethren should go to Toronto, Canada, and that they would sell the copy-right of the Book of Mormon. Hiram Page and Oliver Cowdery went to Toronto on this mission, but they failed entirely to sell the copy-right, returning without any money. . . . Well, we were all in great trouble; and we asked Joseph how it was that he had received a revelation from the Lord for some brethren to go to Toronto and sell the copy-right, and the brethren had utterly failed in their undertaking. Joseph did not know how it was, so he enquired of the Lord about it, and behold the following revelation came through the stone: “Some revelations are of God: some revelations are of man: and some revelations are of the devil.” So we see that the revelation to go to Toronto and sell the copy-right was not of God, but was of the devil or of the heart of man. . . . I will say here, that I could tell you other false revelations that came through Brother Joseph as mouthpiece, . . . (*An Address To All Believers In Christ*, Richmond, Missouri, 1887, pp. 30-31)

In his book *Mormons Are Peculiar People*, published in 1954, G. T. Harrison printed what appears to be a copy of the revelation itself:

Hearken, O ye brethren of my Church, and give ear to the voice of the Living God, and attend to the words of wisdom which shall be given unto you, as touching this matter. I am Alpha and Omega, Christ the Lord. . .

Learn of me and listen to my words. . . Yea, it is wisdom in me that these difficulties have overtaken thee; nevertheless, God’s ways are not man’s ways, and God is greater than Satan; therefore, choose two or three of the brethren to go to Toronto, which is in the Providence of Canada, where they will meet wealthy servants of the Lord who have been preserved in mine own wisdom unto this day for this very work and mission. And mine servants will arrange for sale of the copyright of the Book of Mormon to the Lord’s servants there, whom I have chosen and preserved beforehand. And the price shall be One Hundred thousand dollars of the money of the United States and not of Canada; and in no event shall they sell mine copyright for less than Fifty thousand dollars of the money of the United States. . .

Therefore, let the brethren make haste on their journey to Toronto in the Canadas and be discrete, not revealing their mission to strangers on the way, lest Satan, that wicked one, overcome them, and make off with their money . . . (*Mormons Are Peculiar People*, pp. 74-75)

The only source Harrison gives for the revelation is *Whitmer's Address To All Believers In Christ*. Since the revelation does not appear there, we must conclude that it is a fictional account which came from G. T. Harrison's imagination.

When we recently heard that a copy of the Canadian revelation had been found, we were very suspicious that someone else might have tried their hand at creating the missing revelation.

It is reported that the recently discovered document sets a price of \$8,000 for the purchase of the copyright of the Book of Mormon. This is far more reasonable than the \$100,000 found in the Harrison version. Even \$8,000 was a very large sum of money in Joseph Smith's time. It has also been claimed that the revelation gives the money-diggers a share in the profits of the Book of Mormon. We do not know whether it specifically states this or whether this is an inference from the names that appear in the document. It is reported that the revelation was given to Oliver Cowdery, Hiram Page, Joseph Knight and Josiah Stowell. As we have already pointed out, Stowell was deeply involved in money-digging and hired Joseph Smith to divine for treasures. The Mormon historian B. H. Roberts said that "Joseph Smith had doubtless taken both Josiah Stool . . . and Joseph Knight . . . into his confidence concerning the time at which the Book of Mormon would be delivered to him for translation. . . . These two gentlemen, near neighbors, though separated by a county line, were guests at the Smith home in Palmyra at the time the Prophet obtained the Nephite plates . . ." (*A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Vol. 1, p. 85).

Although at first we found it very hard to believe that a copy of this revelation had survived, Michael Marquardt read us a typescript of a letter in the RLDS Church Archives which makes this a very real possibility. This letter, written in 1872 by William E. McLellin, formerly an Apostle in the Church, was addressed to Joseph Smith III. In it McLellin tells of Joseph Smith receiving this false revelation and claims that he himself made a copy of it. When we put this together with the fact that Mark Hofmann claimed to have found McLellin's diary (which is now being suppressed from Mormon scholars), we think that this whole matter is worthy of further investigation.

After we began writing the updated portion of this report, we learned that typed copies of the Salamander

letter had been mailed anonymously to different scholars from New York. We obtained a copy and found that it had a few portions of the letter which we did not have in our typescript. Our copy opened with the text of the letter and did not include the salutation. The copy from New York supplies this missing portion. If this copy is accurate, we may have another problem. One would expect the salutation to read, "Dear Mr. Phelps." Instead, the letter is addressed to, "Dear Bro. Phelps." If Phelps had been a member of the Church, one would expect such a greeting. After Phelps had been in the Church for a few years, he himself addressed a letter to a member of the Church as follows: "Dear Bro. in the Lord" (*Messenger and Advocate*, April 1835, Vol. 1, p. 97). While the Salamander letter is dated October 23, 1830, Phelps did not join the Church until June of 1831 (*History of the Church*, Vol. 1, p. 184). Phelps, however, stated that "notwithstanding my body was not baptized into this church till Thursday the 10th of June, 1831, yet my heart was there from the time I became acquainted with the book of Mormon; and my hope, steadfast like an anchor, and my faith increased like the grass after a refreshing shower, when I for the first time, held a conversation with our beloved brother Joseph (December 24th, 1830,) who I was willing to acknowledge as a prophet of the Lord, and to whom, and to whose godly account of himself and the work he was engaged in, I owe my first determination to quit the folly of my way, and the fancy and fame of this world, and seek the Lord . . ." (*Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1, p. 97).

According to Richard S. Van Wagoner and Steven C. Walker, W. W. Phelps "bought a copy of the Book of Mormon" just "Three days after the organization of the Church" (*A Book of Mormons*, p. 205). In his master's thesis, written at BYU in 1958, Walter Dean Bowen claimed that W. W. Phelps stayed up all night reading the Book of Mormon and "The following morning . . . exclaimed, 'I am going to join that church; I am convinced that it is true'" (*The Versatile W. W. Phelps—Mormon Writer, Educator, and Pioneer*, typed copy). Mr. Bowen claimed that this information was taken from an unpublished source but gave no indication when it was actually written.

Although Phelps may have been interested in the Church after reading the Book of Mormon, in the letter published in the *Messenger and Advocate* (cited above), he makes it clear that his conversion to "the Lord" occurred after Joseph Smith gave him a "godly account of himself and the work" on December 24, 1830.

Phelps's letter in the *Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1, page 97, would give the impression that some non-Mormons were afraid he would join the Mormons as early as April 30, 1830:

On the 30th of April, 1830, I was thrown into prison at Lyons, N.Y. by a couple of Presbyterian traders, for a small debt, for the purpose, as I was informed, of “keeping me from joining the Mormons.”

While this might give one the impression that Phelps was very seriously considering joining the Mormon Church before the Salamander letter was supposed to have been written, there is evidence that Phelps’s story has been misdated by one year. The *Wayne Sentinel* for May 13, 1831, printed a letter from Phelps which was written while he was in prison at Lyons. It is dated April 30, 1831—not 1830, as claimed in Phelps’s 1835 letter printed in the *Messenger and Advocate*.

In any case, if Phelps had expressed in his letter to Harris that he was a believer, we might expect Harris’ response to contain some mention of this. No such information is found in the Salamander letter, and nothing of a personal nature is mentioned. Other than the greeting, “Dear Bro. Phelps,” the letter gives no indication that Harris was acquainted with the person he was writing to. It should also be noted that the words “Dear Bro. Phelps” seem to be somewhat incongruous with the fact that the rest of the letter does not mention anything about the Church, God or angels. On the other hand, we must admit that it is possible that Harris could have used the term “Dear Bro.” when he addressed a non-Mormon who was interested in the origin of the Book of Mormon. *

If Martin Harris had never personally met W.W. Phelps, he was probably acquainted with his work as editor of the *Ontario Phoenix*, an anti-Masonic newspaper. According to the Mormon writer Richard L. Anderson, Martin Harris himself was anti-Masonic and was even appointed to “the Palmyra ‘committee of vigilance’ by the Wayne County anti-Masonic convention . . .” (*Improvement Era*, February 1969, p. 20). A newspaper published in Painesville, Ohio, reported that “Martin Harris, publicly declared that the ‘Golden Bible’ is the Anti-masonick Bible, and that all who do not believe in

it will be damned” (*Geauga Gazette*, March 15, 1831, typed copy). While one would think that Harris would have boasted about the Book of Mormon’s anti-Masonic position in a letter to Phelps, the Salamander letter is silent concerning the subject of Masonry.

Before we close the updated portion of this report, we should probably mention a few other things that have come to our attention:

In his letter to E. D. Howe, W. W. Phelps mentioned that Martin Harris was a man “of small literary acquirments” (*Mormonism Unveiled*, p. 273). Those who believe in the authenticity of the Salamander letter could possibly use this as evidence that Phelps had received a letter from Harris. On the other hand, of course, it could be argued that someone saw this statement published in Howe’s book and decided to create a letter which sounds like it came from a person “of small literary acquirments.”

We have previously mentioned the fact that the 1873 letter attributed to Harris differs in style and content from the Salamander letter. We have made a comparison of the religious content of the two letters and found the following: the 1873 letter uses the word *Lord* three times. The words *Angel* and *holy* appear twice, and the words *God*, *Christ*, *heaven*, *vision*, *Gospel* and *praying* all appear once. In the Salamander letter all of these words are missing, and since it is almost three times as long as the 1873 letter the discrepancy becomes even more important.

Within the last week a story has been circulated that pressure has been exerted to stop the report Christensen’s three researchers were working on. Although we have discovered that one of the researchers (the only one working full time on the project) has been released from Christensen’s employment, we have not been able to learn whether it is because of pressure or merely an internal problem. However this may be, if we learn that the publication has been delayed, we will seriously consider publishing the Salamander letter in the next issue of the *Salt Lake City Messenger*.

* NOTE ADDED MARCH 21, 1986. When we finally obtained a photocopy of the letter, we discovered that the salutation actually read, “Dear Sir.” While this would eliminate one of the problems we had with the Salamander letter, new problems have arisen. On February 4, 1986, Mark Hofmann was arrested for the bombings which killed two people. Hofmann was also charged with selling forged documents. Among the list of forgeries were the Salamander letter, the 1825 Joseph Smith letter, the Anthon transcript and the Joseph Smith III Blessing document. Kenneth Rendell, the man who authenticated the Salamander letter, now says that it is “very likely” that it is a forgery. Originally, Mark Hofmann and Lyn Jacobs claimed that the letter was discovered and purchased by Jacobs. After investigators began raising the question of forgery, however, Jacobs changed his story and said that he had never seen the document until Mark Hofmann showed it to him (*Sunstone*, Vol. 10, no. 8, p. 15). Jacobs maintained that Hofmann had obtained the letter from William Thoman, a dentist in Cortland, N.Y. Dr. Thoman, however, undercut the whole story by claiming that he never had any dealings with Mark Hofmann after 1982, when Hofmann ran up a bill for \$60 which he never paid. In view of this information, Hofmann could not have obtained the letter from him in “1983” as Jacobs maintained.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW WITH MARTIN HARRIS

Tiffany's Monthly

May, 1859

New York:

Published by Joel Tiffany

No. 6 4th Ave.

MORMONISM.

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accomplish for humanity by so doing? Change the beauty and the loveliness of that divine ideal to deformity and ugliness, and, if the fabled pit, with its satanic prince and subjects have existence, they would greet (*) you with infernal revel.

NOTE.—I have placed stars (*) thus at the margin through this article, signifying that at these places, there were raps by the invisible, while the article was being written. This is very common. These raps were produced upon a table entirely separate from me and at a distance of three or four feet. I usually give no heed to these sounds except to recognize the presence of an assisting intelligence, and to feel grateful for it.—EDITOR.

MORMONISM—No. II.

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

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

and while he was obtaining them, she kneeled down and prayed. He then took the plates and hid them in an old black oak tree top which was hollow. Mr. Stowel was at this time at old Mr. Smith's, digging for money. It was reported by these money-diggers, that they had found boxes, but before they could secure them, they would sink into the earth. A candid old Presbyterian told me, that on the Susquehannah flats he dug down to an iron chest, that he scraped the dirt off with his shovel, but had nothing with him to open the chest; that he went away to get help, and when they came to it, it moved away two or three rods into the earth, and they could not get it. There were a great many strange sights. One time the old log school-house south of Palmyra, was suddenly lighted up, and frightened them away. Samuel Lawrence told me that while they were digging, a large man who appeared to be eight or nine feet high, came and sat on the ridge of the barn, and motioned to them that they must leave. They motioned back that they would not; but that they afterwards became frightened and did leave. At another time while they were digging, a company of horsemen came and frightened them away. These things were real to them, I believe, because they were told to me in confidence, and told by different ones, and their stories agreed, and they seemed to be in earnest—I knew they were in earnest.

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

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

“The two stones set in a bow of silver were about two inches in diameter, perfectly round, and about five-eighths of an inch thick at the centre; but not so thick at the edges where they

came into the bow. They were joined by a round bar of silver, about three-eighths of an inch in diameter, and about four inches long, which, with the two stones, would make eight inches.

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

"These plates were usually kept in a cherry box made for that purpose, in the possession of Joseph and myself. The plates were kept from the sight of the world, and no one, save Oliver Cowdrey, myself, Joseph Smith, jr., and David Whitmer, ever saw them. Before the Lord showed the plates to me, Joseph wished me to see them. But I refused, unless the Lord should do it. At one time, before the Lord showed them to me, Joseph said I should see them. I asked him, why he would break the commands of the Lord! He said, you have done so much I am afraid you will not believe unless you see them. I replied, 'Joseph, I know all about it. The Lord has showed to me ten times more about it than you know.'"—Here we inquired of Mr. Harris—How did the Lord show you these things? He replied, "I am forbidden to say anything how the Lord showed them to me, except that by the power of God I have seen them."

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

"When Joseph had obtained the plates, he communicated the fact to his father and mother. The plates remained concealed in the tree top until he got the chest made. He then went after them and brought them home. While on his way home with the plates, he was met by what appeared to be a man, who demanded the plates, and struck him with a club on his side, which was all black and blue. Joseph knocked the man down, and then ran for home, and was much out of breath. When he arrived at home, he handed the plates in at the window, and they were received from him by his mother. They were then

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hidden under the hearth in his father's house. But the wall being partly down, it was feared that certain ones, who were trying to get possession of the plates, would get under the house and dig them out. Joseph then took them out, and hid them under the old cooper's shop, by taking up a board and digging in the ground and burying them. When they were taken from there, they were put into an old Ontario glass-box. Old Mr. Baman sawed off the ends, making the box the right length to put them in, and when they went in he said he heard them jink, but he was not permitted to see them. He told me so.

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

"These things had all occurred before I talked with Joseph respecting the plates. But I had the account of it from Joseph, his wife, brothers, sisters, his father and mother. I talked with them separately, that I might get the truth of the matter. The first time I heard of the matter, my brother Preserved Harris, who had been in the village of Palmyra, asked me if I had heard about Joseph Smith, jr., having a golden bible. My thoughts were that the money-diggers had probably dug up an old brass kettle, or something of the kind. I thought no more of it. This was about the first of October, 1827. The next day after the talk with my brother, I went to the village, and there I was asked what I thought of the Gold Bible! I replied, The Scripture says, He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is foolishness unto him. I do not wish to make myself a fool. I don't know anything about it. Then said I, what is it about Joe's Gold Bible! They then went on to say, that they put

whiskey into the old man's cider and got him half drunk, and he told them all about it. They then repeated his account, which I found afterwards to agree substantially with the account given by Joseph. Then said I to them, how do you know that he has not got such gold plates? They replied, 'Damn him! angels appear to men in this enlightened age! Damn him, he ought to be tarred and feathered for telling such a damned lie!' Then I said, suppose he has told a lie, as old Tom Jefferson said, it did matter to him whether a man believed in one god or twenty. It did not rob his pocket, nor break his shins. What is it to us if he has told a lie? He has it to answer for if he has lied. If you should tar and feather all the liars, you would soon be out of funds to purchase the material.

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

"A day or so before I was ready to visit Joseph, his mother came over to our house and wished to talk with me. I told her I had no time to spare, she might talk with my wife, and, in the evening when I had finished my work I would talk with her. When she commenced talking with me, she told me respecting his bringing home the plates, and many other things, and said that Joseph had sent her over and wished me to come and see him. I told her that I had a time appointed when I would go, and that when the time came I should then go, but I did not tell her when it was. I sent my boy to harness my horse and take her home. She wished my wife and daughter to go with her; and they went and spent most of the day. When they came home, I questioned them about them. My daughter said, they were about as much as she could lift. They were now in the glass-box, and my wife said they were very heavy. They both lifted them. I waited a day or two, when I got up in the morning, took my breakfast, and told my folks I was going to the village, but went directly to old Mr. Smith's. I found that Joseph

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

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

"While at Mr. Smith's I hefted the plates, and I knew from the heft that they were lead or gold, and I knew that Joseph

had not credit enough to buy so much lead. I left Mr. Smith's about eleven o'clock and went home. I retired to my bedroom and prayed God to show me concerning these things, and I covenanted that if it was his work and he would show me so, I would put forth my best ability to bring it before the world. He then showed me that it was his work, and that it was designed to bring in the fullness of his gospel to the gentiles to fulfill his word, that the first shall be last and the last first. He showed this to me by the still small voice spoken in the soul. Then I was satisfied that it was the Lord's work, and I was under a covenant to bring it forth.

"The excitement in the village upon the subject had become such that some had threatened to mob Joseph, and also to tar and feather him. They said he should never leave until he had shown the plates. It was unsafe for him to remain, so I determined that he must go to his father-in-law's in Pennsylvania. He wrote to his brother-in-law Alvah Hale, requesting him to come for him. I advised Joseph that he must pay all his debts before starting. I paid them for him, and furnished him money for his journey. I advised him to take time enough to get ready, so that he might start a day or two in advance: for he would be mobbed if it was known when he started. We put the box of plates into a barrel about one-third full of beans and headed it up. I informed Mr. Hale of the matter, and advised them to cut each a good cudgel and put into the wagon with them, which they did. It was understood that they were to start on Monday; but they started on Saturday night and got through safe. This was the last of October, 1827. It might have been the first of November."

Finis.

People sometimes wonder that the Mormon can revere Joseph Smith. That they can by any means make a Saint of him. But they must remember, that the Joseph Smith preached in England, and the one shot at Carthage, Ill., are not the same. The ideal prophet differs widely from the real person. To one, ignorant of his character, he may be idealized and be made the impersonation of every virtue. He may be associated in the mind with all that is pure, true, lovely and divine. Art may make him, indeed, an object of religious veneration. But remember, the Joseph Smith thus venerated, is not the real, actual Joseph Smith (*) known to the world, but one that art has created. There is nothing in nature like them but a statue.

