

LESSON 3

Historical Background on Stephen Burnett's Statement

FOUNDATIONS OF THE RESTORATION TEACHER MATERIAL

Stephen Burnett joined the Church in 1830 and was ordained an elder in 1831. He served missions in the Eastern United States between 1832–1834. By 1838 he had apostatized from the Church and thought it was a “whole scene of lying and deception.”

While Burnett personally knew Martin Harris, he was not one of the three or eight witnesses.

In 1838, Burnett wrote a letter in which he claimed that Martin Harris said he “never saw the plates with his natural eyes, only in vision or imagination.” Burnett wrote that three other people “concurred” with his account. These three people were also apostates.

Martin Harris strongly objected to how Burnett described his testimony and “remained a convinced Book of Mormon believer.”

In contrast to Burnett's account, the “agreement of many interviews with Martin Harris proves that his intense certainty never varied from his vision of the angel and the plates in 1829 to the moment of his death in 1875.” In a private letter, written in 1871, he declared: “[N]o man ever heard me in any way deny the truth of the Book of Mormon, the administration of the angel that showed me the plates” (Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* [1981], 107–120, 155–157).

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