

From Darkness unto
LIGHT

JOSEPH SMITH'S TRANSLATION AND
PUBLICATION OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

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Translating with Emma

Once the translation began, Emma Smith and her brother Reuben Hale were the first of a series of scribes that recorded Joseph's dictation as he miraculously read the words from the ancient text as it appeared on the spectacles. Joseph's indigent circumstances forced him to rely on close family members rather than a paid professional to help him record the translation on paper. Joseph Knight Sr. remembered, "Now when he Began to translate he was poor and was put to it for provisions and had not one to write for him But his wife and his wifes Brother would sometimes write a little for him through the winter."¹⁷ Very little is known about Reuben Hale and his participation in the translation, but Emma soon became Joseph's first primary scribe.

Emma's experience as Joseph's scribe formed a cherished memory that she reflected back upon throughout her life, especially in the decades after Joseph died. In one instance, she stated, "When my husband was translating the Book of Mormon, I wrote a part of it, as he dictated each sentence, word for word."¹⁸ In an interview with Joseph's son Joseph Smith III, Emma remembered, "I frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table close by him." She explained that Joseph used the spectacles to translate, but not by looking through them at the plates, but instead by placing them in a large-brimmed hat with which he could block out the light. As Joseph excluded the light and looked onto the seer stones in the hat, he dictated the words he saw "hour after hour with nothing between us."¹⁹ Emma explained that he was not looking anywhere but at the stones in the hat; he was not looking at the plates and "had neither manuscript nor book to read from." When asked directly if Joseph could have been, as detractors later claimed, reading from a hidden manuscript or book, she replied emphatically, "If he had had anything of the kind he could not have concealed it from me."²⁰

Latter-day Saint art in the past has depicted the translation by excluding the spectacles or by showing Joseph looking through them at the plates. Yet none of Joseph's scribes left any accounts that fit those descriptions. In fact, only one early account includes the concept of looking *through* the spectacles, an interpretation given by Truman Coe, a pastor of the Old South Church in Kirtland, Ohio, and an antagonist of the Church.²¹ Both-ered by members of the Church in Kirtland, he wrote to a newspaper editor

in 1836 warning the public about a “sect of Religious Fanatics, who are collected in this town.” His warning, written to demonstrate his incredulity, revealed how he believed Joseph translated the Book of Mormon. He wrote, “The manner of translation was as wonderful as the discovery [of the plates]. By putting his finger on one of the characters and imploring divine aid, then looking through the Urim and Thummim, he would see the import written in plain English.”²² The word “spectacles” or “interpreters” likely



Emma Smith. Painting by Lee Greene Richards. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. All rights reserved.

led many to believe they were like eyeglasses, but it is clear that Joseph usually held the spectacles in the bottom of a hat, with no possibility of looking through them.

Furthermore, the plates were the object of inspiration, not the object of analysis and careful secular translation. Joseph did not place his finger on the plates to translate, as Coe bemoaned. According to Emma, the plates “often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment” other than a small linen tablecloth that Emma had provided to keep them covered from the glance of the naked eye. Joseph apparently never removed the thin covering to examine the leaves as he translated or to inspect the characters to see if they matched those that appeared on the spectacles, but Emma “once felt of the plates, as they thus lay on the table, tracing their outline and shape” with her finger. She felt them through the linen, explaining, “They seemed to be pliable like thick paper, and would rustle with a metallic sound when the edges were moved by the thumb, as one does sometimes thumb the edges of a book.” When her son Joseph III asked if she ever pulled the cover off the plates, Emma replied, “I did not attempt to handle the plates, other than I have told you, nor uncover them to look at them.” However, she “moved them from place to place on the table, as it was necessary in doing my work.” Her belief in the plates was not the result of a heavenly vision, nor was it simply blind faith in the words of her husband. She had physically handled the plates. They were as real as the table they lay upon; they were actual plates, with separate leaves that could be tangibly separated from each other. In her mind, she had little need to see what was under the linen. She told her son, “I was satisfied that it was the work of God, and therefore did not feel it to be necessary” to remove the cloth.

So, what was the purpose of having the plates if Joseph left them covered during the translation? Though Emma explained that Joseph did not use the plates, as a traditional translator would have, they were still deeply important to the translation. They represented where the words originated—demonstrating their historicity, and forming a sense of reality about the individuals described in the Book of Mormon. The plates were in essence the body for the spiritual words that fell from Joseph Smith’s lips as he translated. They created confidence in the minds of Joseph and his family and friends. They offered believers something physical and tangible to understand how and where the text of the Book of Mormon originated.

They were also invaluable for demonstrating that Joseph Smith was a chosen seer. The relationship between the plates, Joseph, and God was indelible for communicating the nature and purpose of the Book of Mormon. Without the plates, the translation was empty, and without Joseph's gift, it was not from God.

Emma explained that it would have been impossible for Joseph to dictate the translation without the power of God and the use of the spectacles, especially since he was not looking at the plates.²³ Emma argued that Joseph "could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter; let alone [dictate] a book like the Book of Mormon," and yet Joseph dictated passages for hours and days at a time. Emma went on to explain, "Though I was an active participant in the scenes that transpired, and was present during the translation of the plates, and had cognizance of things as they transpired, it is marvelous to me, 'a marvel and a wonder,' as much so as to anyone else." Fascinated by Joseph's gift, she declared, "as [Joseph] dictated each sentence, word for word," she recalled, "proper names he could not pronounce, or long words, he spelled them out, and while I was writing them, If any mistake in spelling, he would stop me and correct my spelling, although it was impossible for him to see me writing them down at the time."²⁴

Emma apparently never saw Joseph using the spectacles and the breastplate together; in fact, she never even mentioned that she saw Joseph wearing the breastplate. Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery, who were both scribes and witnesses of the translation process, left no accounts about the use of the breastplate during the translation either. Yet, it seems that once the Nephite interpreters and Joseph's seer stone were called the Urim and Thummim, they also took on qualities of the Old Testament device,²⁵ such as the Urim and Thummim's relationship with the priestly breastplate, which the Book of Mormon never describes, but Joseph eventually describes the Nephite interpreters as part of the breastplate. The most notable account that draws direct comparisons with the Urim and Thummim and the Nephite interpreters comes from an interview of William Smith in 1891. J. W. Peterson published the interview years later in 1924, but there is no way of knowing if it was an accurate reproduction of what William remembered in his eightieth year of life. It is also difficult to know what William knew firsthand and what he had heard

or extrapolated from others. William explained that, like the priestly Old Testament breastplate, "A pocket was prepared in the breastplate on the left side, immediately over the heart. When not in use the [interpreters were] placed in this pocket, the rod being of just the right length to allow it to be so deposited."²⁶ The breastplate was ostensibly intended to be fastened to the chest and the spectacles were then supposed to be fastened to the breastplate.²⁷ Though this was possible, since Joseph's history stated that he was given a breastplate with the Nephite interpreters, early accounts only describe Joseph setting the breastplate aside.²⁸

Outside of pulling the straps tighter, the breastplate was neither adjustable nor easy to work with, and the Book of Mormon explained that it was "large."²⁹ Frustrated, Joseph apparently stopped using it even before Emma ever started writing for him. By having the spectacles connected to the breastplate, there was no way of adjusting them back and forth to achieve the optimum viewing distance. As an alternative to the breastplate, he placed the spectacles into the bottom of a hat, allowing him to better control the distance from his eyes to the surface of the stones. The hat allowed Joseph to move the spectacles up and down as needed so he could focus on the translation; it also darkened the area around the seer stones to allow them, as the Book of Mormon explains, to "shine forth in darkness unto light."³⁰

Translating with Martin Harris

Like Emma's experience acting as Joseph's scribe, Martin Harris also witnessed the process. From mid-April to mid-June 1828, Martin Harris stayed at Joseph's house in Harmony, recording for him as he dictated the words that appeared on the spectacles. After observing the miraculous translation in Harmony, Martin Harris marveled at the fact that "Joseph knew not the contents of the Book of Mormon until it was translated."³¹ The process fascinated him and he was convinced that Joseph's dictation was only possible through the power of God.

Once Martin arrived in Harmony in April, he picked up where Emma had left off in her scribal work. He and Joseph completed a large manuscript called "the Book of Lehi" that Joseph and Emma had been working on for quite some time. Upon reflection, Harris expressed that "he was favored to write direct from the mouth of the Prophet Joseph Smith." He



Replica of the breastplate. Photo by Gerrit J. Dirkmaat.

further described that by the “aid of the seer stone, sentences would appear and were read by the Prophet and written by [Martin], and when finished he would say, ‘Written,’ and if correctly written, that sentence would disappear and another appear in its place, but if not written correctly it remained until corrected.” Though Harris was never able to look into the spectacles like Joseph, this process forced Joseph to explain to Martin what was happening, as he required him to change what he had written because it was incorrect or the text in the spectacles would not change.³²

While it is unknown how long Emma had spent recording Joseph’s translation before Martin arrived, Martin stayed in Harmony to write for Joseph for around two full months before he returned to his home in Palmyra. Emma had likely already written the majority of the “book of Lehi” before Harris ever arrived. Martin remembered, “There were not many pages translated while he [Martin] wrote; after which Oliver

Cowdery and others did the writing.” Martin stated that he wrote “about one third of the first part of the translation of the plates as [Joseph] interpreted them by the Urim and Thummim.”³³

While Latter-day Saints commonly teach that Joseph Smith used a sheet to veil the plates while he translated with Martin Harris, it seems to be something that occurred before the translation began. The idea appears to have come from the confused statements of those who heard Harris describe how Joseph copied the characters from the plates. But because Harris had already hefted the plates and their box, and because they were often left lying on the table with nothing but a linen cloth over them, it is hard to believe that Smith hung a sheet up between them during their translation in the summer of 1828. Though Joseph Smith may have used a sheet at one point to hide the plates from others who were in the room, it was evidently before Harris began writing for Smith in April 1828.³⁴

Some of the confusion surrounding reports of a sheet being involved in the translation process stems from Charles Anthon’s 1833 derogatory letter, in which he claimed that Martin had explained the translation process to him in February 1828 and had included the story of a sheet separating the two men.³⁵ Yet, despite Anthon’s version of events, Harris had not, by February 1828, participated in any *translation* of the Book of Mormon with Joseph. It would have been impossible for him to give an eyewitness account about how Joseph translated until several months after his trip to the East. Much more likely, Anthon was confusing Harris’s description of how Smith copied the characters with later reports of the actual translation process. At that early stage, Smith may have divided the room with a sheet to keep the plates hidden from Martin Harris, Reuben Hale, and Emma Smith, who were all apparently involved in creating or receiving copies of the characters. While it later became a popular way to describe Joseph’s translation, it seems that Joseph only used the sheet when he had the plates exposed in front of him while he transcribed the characters from the plates in the winter of 1827. John Clark, who saw copies of the characters before Harris helped Joseph with the translation, was the only other person to describe a sheet being used to separate Joseph and his scribe.³⁶

In any case, Harris was one of the few people who served as a scribe during the early translation of the gold plates, and he provided numerous

testimonies of both the process and the plates. Long before he claimed to have a visionary experience in which an angel miraculously showed him the plates, Harris had other witnesses. Harris lifted the box of plates numerous times and was present for over two months as Joseph Smith dictated the translation of the ancient record. In one later interview, Harris reported, as did Emma Smith, that Joseph simply had the plates “on a table in the room in which Smith was translating, covered over with a cloth.”³⁷ Though the plates largely remained in the house, they were also hidden outside in the woods.³⁸ In addition to numerous physical witnesses of the gold plates, Harris also apparently saw the spectacles Smith had retrieved with the gold plates. He later explained the spectacles to one newspaperman: “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 beside, we had a command to let no man look into them, except by the command of God. Lest [anyone] should ‘look aught and perish.’”³⁹ Martin later explained to Edward Stevenson that as the seer stones rested in the bottom of a hat “the Prophet would read sentence by sentence as Martin wrote.”⁴⁰

Martin Harris further explained that at one point during the translation, in order to make the mechanics of translation easier, Joseph stopped using the spectacles. He had already stopped using the cumbersome breast-plate, and the apparently large and unwieldy spectacles were also making the long hours of translating more difficult. One local Palmyra resident heard “that the glasses were as big as a breakfast plate.”⁴¹ Another claimed that Joseph described them as “having very large round glasses, larger than a silver dollar.”⁴² For his part, Martin Harris explained that the spectacles were around “eight inches” long.⁴³ Rather than continuing to work with the awkwardly large spectacles, according to Harris, Joseph began using a single seer stone instead of the spectacles. He stated that Joseph “possessed a seer stone, by which he was enabled to translate as well as from the Urim and Thummim [spectacles], and for convenience he then used the seer stone.”⁴⁴ For Wilford Woodruff, this transition from the device containing two stones to a single one was seen as a fulfillment of the prophecy in the Book of Mormon that “Gazelem,” a seer stone, would be used to bring forth the ancient records of the Nephites.⁴⁵



OLIVER COWDERY AND THE TRANSLATION OF THE BOOK OF MORMON



Joseph translating with Oliver Cowdery as his scribe. Watercolor by Anthony Sweat.

Oliver Cowdery arrived providentially at Joseph Smith's doorstep in Harmony, Pennsylvania, on 5 April 1829. He came after the Lord appeared to him and showed him the gold plates in a vision, commanding him to go to Harmony to record the translation as Joseph Smith dictated the text.¹ His response to that manifestation marked the beginning of a series of men who would serve as recorders, scribes, and historians writing down the words and prophecies given by Joseph Smith until his death in 1844. Like Emma Smith and Martin Harris before him, Oliver recorded Joseph's translation of the plates, but he also ushered in an era in which the number of documents created by Joseph increased dramatically.² By the end of June, not even three months later, Cowdery had recorded the entire Book of Mormon on a series of hundreds of sheets of paper as well as a dozen of Joseph's revelations.³ In addition, Cowdery would copy nearly the entire Book of Mormon manuscript later that fall and spring as they prepared it for publication.

Almost as soon as Oliver arrived in Harmony on the 5th, he and Joseph began recording the Book of Mormon. Cowdery wrote, "On Monday the 6th, I assisted him in arranging some business of a temporal nature, and on Tuesday the 7th, commenced to write the book of Mormon."⁴ Joseph

remembered that “two days after the arrival of Mr. Cowdery (being the seventh of April) I commenced to translate the book of Mormon and he commenced to write for me.”⁵ Oliver was a far more capable scribe than Martin or Emma, and the pace of the translation was faster than it had ever been before. Yet, even though they translated nearly all of the Book of Mormon in less than ninety days, they accomplished far more than just the translation during that period.

Seated at a small table in Joseph’s framed house, the topic of translation apparently filled their conversations in between the long hours of dictation and writing. Joseph Smith explained that “having continued [the translation] for some time I enquired of the Lord through the Urim and Thummim and obtained” a revelation for Oliver that explained to him that there were additional “records which contain much of my gospel, which have been kept back because of the wickedness of the people.” With quill and ink in hand, Oliver went on to record the revelation, which promised him, “if you have good desires, a desire to lay up treasures for yourself in heaven, then shall you assist in bringing to light, with your gift, those parts of my scriptures which have been hidden because of iniquity.” To his amazement, the revelation told Cowdery that he possessed the “gift” to translate, like Joseph. It stated, “I give unto you, and also unto my servant Joseph, the keys of this gift, which shall bring to light this ministry.” After Cowdery had observed Joseph’s gift to translate—which he could only comprehend as the “power of God”—he likely saw the comparison between him and Joseph as incredible, if not untenable.⁶

Additional revelations provided Oliver Cowdery with directions for learning how to translate, apparently through a similar process to what Joseph Smith himself went through in the winter of 1827 when he learned to translate.⁷ The Lord authoritatively declared to Oliver in one revelation, “Behold I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God” and affirmed that the words Joseph dictated from the seer stone were actually Christ’s words. The revelatory words that fell from Joseph’s lips read as if the words shining forth on the seer stone represented the Lord. They beckoned Cowdery to translate in the same manner as Joseph Smith. The Lord told Oliver, “I am the light which shineth in the darkness, and the darkness comprehendeth it not.” The Lord had also prophesied centuries earlier to the Book of Mormon prophet Alma that the light shining forth in darkness would unveil the

Lord’s words. Alma explained to his son Helaman that “the Lord said: I will prepare unto my servant Gazelem, a stone, which shall shine forth in darkness unto light.”⁸ These parallels between the way in which Joseph dictated revelations from words appearing on the seer stone and the similar way he translated the pages of the Book of Mormon may have taught Cowdery that the power of the Lord was the driving force behind Joseph’s gift. These revelations should have inspired him to recognize his own gift to translate.

Further piquing Oliver’s interest, the text of the Book of Mormon, which Joseph was dictating to Oliver, described the gift of translation and even mentioned lost manuscripts and records. Within the first portion of their translation work, Cowdery recorded the story of King Limhi, who possessed an ancient set of twenty-four gold plates that were “filled with engravings” that neither he nor his people could read. Searching for someone that could translate those plates, he was fortuitously visited by a missionary named Ammon, who knew of a man (King Mosiah) who had the gift to translate and a device that enabled him to do so. The words Cowdery recorded stated that “For he hath wherewith that he can *look*, and translate all records that are of ancient date; and it is a gift from God. And the things are called interpreters . . . And whosoever is commanded to look in them, the same is called seer . . . revelator, and a prophet.”⁹

Cowdery’s desire to translate, therefore, increased as he recorded Joseph’s dictation of the Book of Mormon throughout April. Furthermore, Joseph received another revelation that again encouraged Oliver to translate.¹⁰ Reflecting back upon that moment, Joseph Smith wrote that Cowdery “became exceedingly anxious to have the power to translate bestowed upon him.”¹¹ The previous revelation had motivated Cowdery by declaring that he would “know mysteries which are great and marvelous.”¹² Edging him forward, the revelation told Cowdery about the particulars of how to translate.¹³ It commanded him to ask with “an honest heart” and faith in Christ to receive the power to translate. Explaining that the translation was not just enveloped within the stone, but that the Lord would “tell [him] in [his] mind & in [his] heart by the Holy Ghost,” the revelation enlightened Cowdery to gifts that he already possessed that were relative to his attempts to translate. He apparently already possessed the “spirit of Revelation,” which was the same spirit “by which Moses brought the children of Israel through the red Sea on dry ground.” Encouraging him to

translate, the revelation also explained that Cowdery's "gift of working with the sprout," or his ability to use a divining rod to find underground pockets of water and buried ore, was a blessing from God.

The Lord compared Oliver's newly bestowed gift to translate to his previous skill at using a divining rod in order to equate translation with something he already understood. In fact, the Book of Mormon translation would soon teach Cowdery this concept prophetically, declaring, "The Lord God giveth light unto the understanding; for he speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding."¹⁴ The concept of working with a sprout, or newly torn Y-shaped branch of a young tree, represented the common belief that the unseen water under the ground would attract the water inside the branch. The diviner holding the sprout could reportedly feel the slight pull of the branch toward the water, located underground. Once the diviner found the location of the underground water, farmers and others could dig with more confidence for wells, knowing that there was water beneath them.¹⁵ By using a combination of advice that would bring Cowdery closer to the Holy Ghost and connecting his previous experience using a divining rod, the revelation attempted to teach Cowdery to translate.

One of Joseph's April revelations even provided Cowdery with an increased understanding of how Joseph translated an ancient document. This revelation came as Joseph and Oliver used the seer stone to settle a "difference of opinion" that arose between them about whether John the Apostle "died, or whether he continued" on earth awaiting the Second Coming of Christ.¹⁶ This question likely arose as a direct result of their translation work. The transcribed Book of Mormon text described the experience of the prophet Alma, who seemingly disappeared but actually was "taken up by the Spirit, or buried by the hand of the Lord." The passage went on to make a biblical comparison with Moses: "But behold, the scriptures saith the Lord took Moses unto himself; and we suppose that he has also received Alma in the spirit, unto himself; therefore, for this cause we know nothing concerning his death and burial."¹⁷ The men likely wondered if John's fate was also similar to Alma's fate. In the final chapter of the Gospel of John, Peter asked Christ what would happen to his fellow Apostle John, to which Christ responded, "If I will that he should tarry till I come, what is that to thee?"¹⁸ Whatever the impetus of the disagreement,

Joseph remembered that he and Oliver "mutually agreed to settle it by the Urim and Thummim."

What Joseph saw as he looked into the stone demonstrated to Cowdery, just as the text of the Book of Mormon had, that there were still ancient documents lost to the world that would come forth by the power of God.¹⁹ As Joseph looked into the stone he saw a long-lost document that John had written centuries earlier, "translated from parchment, written and hid up" by John himself.²⁰ There are no accounts that suggest that Joseph ever possessed or held this parchment; in fact, he explained that he had obtained the translation of the parchment solely through "the Urim and Thummim."²¹ The text of the revelation is in first-person voice of John the Apostle, who related Christ's statement on the fate of John, stating that he "shalt tarry until I come in my glory."²² This experience clearly demonstrated to Oliver Joseph's ability as a seer and that the translation occurred only through the power of God by way of the seer stone.

Unfortunately for Cowdery, when he finally attempted to translate he was unsuccessful. Joseph received an additional revelation, which explained to him: "You have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought, save it was to ask me." It further explained, "The work which you are called to do, is to write for my servant Joseph."²³ However, the revelation also comforted Cowdery over his failure to translate and promised him that he would be able to translate at another future time.

The Translation of the Gold Plates

Like the revelation Joseph had received about the lost parchment of John, in which the parchment was never laid in front of them, the gold plates were apparently never consulted during their translation either. Instead, Joseph always had them apparently covered with a cloth or concealed within a box. He did not check back and forth between the plates and the seer stone to assure he was translating the plates correctly. In fact, he likely never correlated any given character on the gold plates with the translated text that appeared on the seer stone. Even if he had checked back and forth, he would not have known what the characters⁴ meant without the seer stones. The only way that Joseph knew what portion of the plates he was translating was by reading the transcribed text of the Book of Mormon, which described the organization of the gold plates in several places.