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By the Gift and Power of God

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Abstract: The Lord did not need an educated man to translate the Nephite records, but one like Joseph Smith who would capture the spirit and message of the original document through divine aid.

Joseph Smith brought forth the Book of Mormon, translating the great Nephite message from gold plates . . .

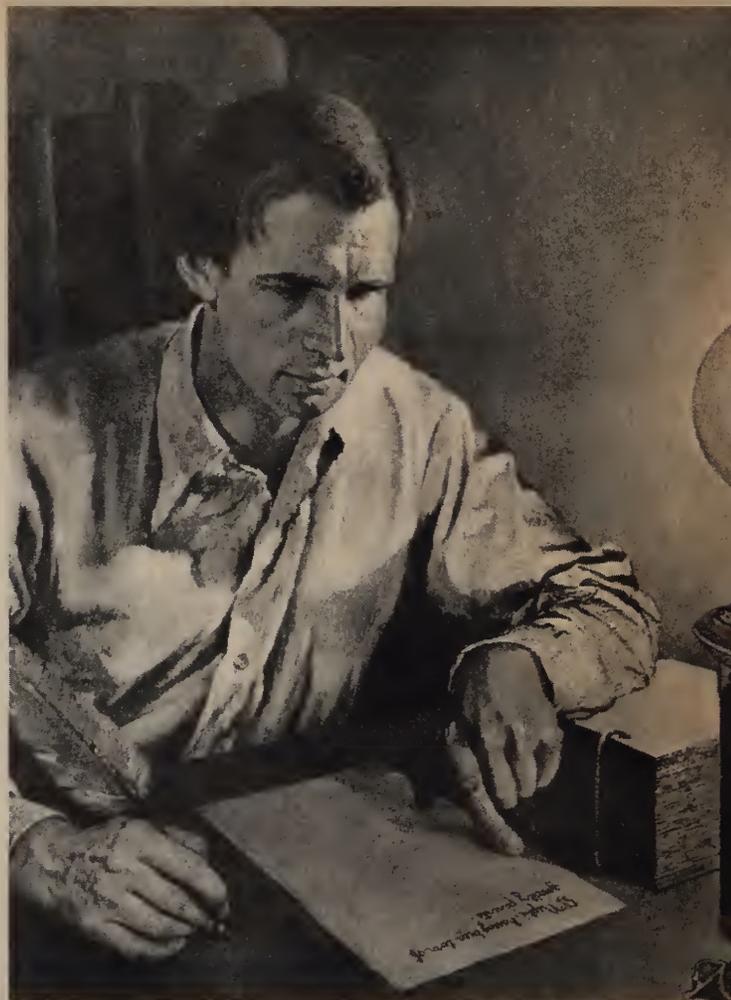
“BY THE GIFT AND POWER OF GOD”

*by Eldon L. Haag**

The potter of ancient Palestine was proud of his skill. To assure a product that could be sold to discerning housewives, the craftsman first chose his clay carefully and kneaded it to the desired consistency. Then, selecting just the right amount, he placed it upon the upper of two disks connected by an axle. The lower disk was spun by foot while the hand molded the clay into conical shape. Inserting his thumb at the top of the cone, the potter fashioned the whirling clay into a vessel, sometimes delicate and fragile, at other times coarse and functional. Occasionally during the drama of creation he stopped his work and crumbled the malleable mass into a ball to start again. When the finished product was satisfactory, it was placed outside to be wind-dried and finally baked until hardened.

The Prophet Jeremiah was led by the Lord into the potter's district in Jerusalem to see the work-

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Art by Dale Kilbourn.

men's skill and to be taught a lesson from the whirling disks and the moistened clay. The Lord explained, "Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand. . . ." (Jeremiah 18:6.) Judah was spoken of as clay that when marred would be rejected by the potter. With no inconsistency the symbol of the potter and his clay can be applied to the individual. In fact, Paul does just this when he asks, "Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?" (Romans 9:20-21.)

Moist and Pliable Clay

The potter's skill is best shown when the clay is moist and pliable. The hardened vessel offers little

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hope of change and cracks under the pressure of those who would remake it. It is remarkable how many times the Lord chose the rustic, the uneducated, and the youthful to be his servants rather than the suave, educated men of the world. The prophets Enoch, Samuel, and Jeremiah were each to receive their calls while young. (See Moses 6:31; Samuel 3:1-20; Jeremiah 1:6-7.) The Prophet Joseph Smith referred to himself as a "huge, rough stone rolling down from a high mountain; and the only polishing . . . is when some corner gets rubbed off by coming in contact with something else. . . ."¹ These men shared the common quality of teachableness and in the hands of the Divine Potter became effective witnesses for God.

Each prophet is called to a specific task relevant to his times, and the nature of the task unquestionably influences the selection of the man. To speak eloquently in Uzziah's court, the poetic Isaiah became God's tool. It took a Moses, raised in the atmosphere of Pharaoh's palace where great decisions were a matter of routine, to transform a nation of slaves into the stature of God's chosen people.

The primary task before young Joseph was the translation of Mormon's gold record.

The Task of Translating

When we speak of translation, we somehow think mainly of the highly technical task of working with syntax and verb forms. Translation is more than the mechanics of grammar; it involves capturing the spirit or message of the original document. The task is much more complex when the language being translated is ancient. The Book of Mormon writers were aware of some of these difficulties:

And now, behold, we have written this record according to our knowledge, in the characters which are called among us the reformed Egyptian, being handed down and altered by us. . . .

But the Lord knoweth the things which we have written, and also that none other people knoweth our language; therefore he hath prepared means for the interpretation thereof. (Mormon 9:32, 34.)

Joseph was faced with the calling of working with and translating a record written in a language unknown to any man. The Nephites had used Egyptian characters, but in a manner meaningful only to themselves. By doing this they had placed the translation of the record outside the normal discipline of the trained translator or skilled Egyptologist.

The Brother of Jared had been instructed by the

¹Alma P. Burton, *Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*; Deseret Book Company, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1965; page 21.

Lord to write his record in a "language that . . . cannot be read." (Ether 3:22.) The command was purposeful; it made obvious the fact that the translation of the record would not depend on any scientific study of Jaredite languages. With this in mind the Lord gave Joseph Smith two stones—hardly the device used by the trained linguist—to assist in the translation of the Book of Mormon. The prophet tells us that these stones constituted the Urim and Thummim.

By the Gift and Power of God

Elder John A. Widtsoe wrote:

However, it was not a word-for-word translation. As nearly as can be understood, the ideas set forth by the characters were revealed to the Prophet. He then expressed the ideas in English as best he could. . . .²

Dr. Sidney B. Sperry adds:

For the time being the Prophet had an intuitive sense of, or natural feeling for, the Nephite language, which enabled him to understand the writing on the gold plates in his possession. He then proceeded to convey the thoughts expressed on the plates into the best English at his command.³

Joseph Smith never pretended to be a master of languages, though he later studied several. But we have seen that God was not seeking these gifts when he chose a translator for this work. The Prophet testified that he "translated the record by the gift and power of God."⁴ It was Joseph's trust in God, his profound faith, and his deep spirituality that qualified him to receive of God the meaning of the Nephite scriptures. When this spirituality waned under concern for "earthly things," he was unable to translate. Only after humbling himself in prayer did he regain the "intuitive sense" for the language that Dr. Sperry speaks about.

The Lord spoke from the heavens to verify the validity of the Book of Mormon, and by so doing affirmed his divine role in the mechanics of translation:

These plates have been revealed by the power of God, and they have been translated by the power of God. The translation of them which you have seen is correct and I command you to bear record of what you now see and hear.⁵

²John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith*; Deseret News Press, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1951; page 42.

³Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium*; Bookcraft, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1968; page 30.

⁴H. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Vol. I; Deseret News Press, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1930; page 127.

⁵B. H. Roberts, *History of the Church*, Volume 1, page 138. Library File Reference: JOSEPH SMITH—REVELATION.