The Manner of Translating the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: This article quotes Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and other contemporary accounts to show how and where Joseph obtained the plates. It also quotes Emma Smith and the Three Witnesses to explain that the Book of Mormon was translated with divine aid and with the use of the Urim and Thummim.
The Manner of Translating

The BOOK of MORMON

By DR. FRANCIS W. KIRKHAM

The contemporary record and the testimony of eye-witnesses shed light on a subject of perennial interest.

Another short statement by the Prophet was published in the Times and Seasons at Nauvoo, May 1, 1842. He was then mayor of the largest and most rapidly growing city in Illinois and the Lieutenant-General of a military organization consisting of all its able-bodied male citizens:

Nauvoo, Illinois, March 1, 1842. At the request of Mr. John Wentworth, Editor and Proprietor of the Chicago Democrat, I have written the following sketch of the rise, progress, persecution, and faith of the Latter-day Saints—of which, I have the honor, under God, of being founder. Mr. Wentworth says that he wishes to furnish Mr. Barstow, a friend of his, who is writing the history of New Hampshire, with this document.

As Mr. Barstow has taken the proper steps to obtain correct information, all I shall ask at his hands is that he publish the account entire, ungarnished, and without misrepresentation... .

On the evening of the 21st of September, A. D. 1823, while I was praying unto God and endeavoring to exercise faith in the precious promises of Scripture, on a sudden a light like that of day, only of a far purer and more glorious appearance and brightness, burst into the room; indeed the first sight was as though the house were filled with consuming fire. The appearance produced a shock that affected the whole body. In a moment a personage stood before me surrounded with a glory yet greater than that by which I was already surrounded. The messenger proclaimed himself to be an angel of God, sent to bring the joyful tidings that the covenants which God made with ancient Israel were at hand to be fulfilled: that the preparatory work for the second coming of the Messiah was speedily to commence; that the time was at hand for the Gospel in all its fulness to be preached in power unto all nations, that a people might be prepared for the millennial reign. I was informed that I was chosen to be an instrument in the hands of God to bring about some of His purposes in this glorious dispensation.

I was informed also concerning the aboriginal inhabitants of this country, and shown who they were, and from whence they came: a brief sketch of their origin, progress, civilization, laws, governments, of their righteousness and iniquity and the blessings of God being finally withdrawn from them as a people was made known unto me.

I was also told where there were deposited some plates, on which was engraved an abridgment of the records of the ancient peoples that had existed on this
Early in 1838 the Prophet began
the writing of his own life and
which with other information has be-
come the Documentary History of
the Church. In this remarkable ac-
count he tells frankly and honestly
the details and circumstances of the
divine origin of the Book of Mormon
so that these may be traced histor-
ically. (See Source Material Con-
cerning Origin of the Book of Mor-
non, by Francis W. Kirkham.)
He declares that Moroni, the immortal
messenger from God, entrusted to
him gold plates upon which was re-
corded "the fulness of the everlasting
Gospel as delivered to the ancient
inhabitants of this continent." With
these plates were "two stones in sil-
vier bows, fastened to a breastplate,
called the Urim and Thummim.
"By the use of this instrument" and
"by the gift and power of God," he
translated part of the plates into the
Book of Mormon.

In a letter addressed to N. F.
Seaton, the Prophet makes the fol-
lowing statement (Times and Sea-

The Book of Mormon is a record of
the forefathers of our Western tribes of
Indians, having been found through the
inspections of an holy angel, and trans-
lated into our own language by the gift
and power of God, after having been
up in the earth for the last 1400 years,
containing the word of God which was
delivered unto them.

The earliest printed account of the
composing of the Book of Mormon
is a series of eight letters by
Oliver Cowdery published in the

Messenger and Advocate, Kirtland,
Ohio, beginning October, 1834. In
an introductory letter, Oliver Cowd-
ery declares:

That our narrative may be correct, and
particularly the introduction, it is proper
in informing our patrons that our brother
Joseph Smith, Jr., has offered to assist us.
Indeed, there are many items connected
with the fore part of this subject that render
his labor indispensable. With his labor,
and with authentic documents now in our
possession, we hope to render this a pleas-
ing and agreeable narrative, well worth the
examination and perusal of the Saints.

Here is evidence that the person
responsible under God for the book
which has become a companion book
to the Bible, knew the contents of
these letters and had the opportunity
to edit and correct them.

Oliver Cowdery writes:

Near the time of the setting of the sun,
Saturday evening, April 5th, 1829, with my natural
eyes for the first time beheld this brother.
He then resided in Harmony, Susquehanna
County, Pennsylvania. 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. These days were never to be
forgotten—to sit under the sound of a voice
dicted by the inspiration of heaven, awak-
ened the utmost gratitude of this bosom.
Day after day I continued, uninterupted,
to write from his mouth as he trans-
lated with the Urim and Thummim, or, as the
Nephites would have said, "interpreters,
the history or record called the "Book of Mormon."

Further on in his narrative Mr.
Cowdery, with the apparent ap-
proval of the Prophet, quotes
Moroni as declaring:

Therefore, remember, that they are to be
translated by the gift and power of God.
By this gift the Lord will do many
marvelous works: the wisdom of the wise
shall come as naught, and the understanding
of the prudent shall be hid, and because
the wisdom of God shall be despised, those
who profess to know the truth but walk
in deceit, shall tremble with anger; but with
signs and with wonders, with gifts and
with healings, with the revelations of
the power of God, and with the Holy Ghost,
shall the hearts of the faithful be com-
forted.

About a year and a half after the
publication of this divine record, 44
Elders, 10 Priests, and 10 Teachers
were in conference at the home of
Brother Sirenes Burnett, at Orange,
Cuyahoga County, Ohio (October
25, 1831). In the minutes of this
conference the following appears (pp. 14 and 15):

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

Brother Joseph Smith, Jr., said "That it
was not intended to tell the world all the
particulars of the coming forth of the Book
of Mormon," and also said, "that it was
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THE DEAN OF TRAILERITES

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picturesque intermountain region. I have bagged every variety of game from a coyote and rabbit to silver tip bear and moose. I have enjoyed many a battle with the trout of turbulent mountain streams. I recall the early wilderness of the West, now converted into a vast empire of wealth. To me the land of the setting sun, the windswept, desert plains and sun-scorched hills of the Golden West, is the land of lofty scenes and familiar faces. I am happy to say that I can still climb mountains with men half my age. Last summer, while touring British Columbia, Alberta, and the world-famous Canadian Rockies, I climbed to the top of a range of glaciers. This celestial sojourn necessitated a round trip of sixteen miles of ups and downs. Here I found myself on the roof of the earth, in the midst of moss-covered crags and vertical walls, where mountains rise on mountains and the glittering peaks try to pierce the sky. Amid these celestial scenes and influences—far above the competitive struggles of mankind—one finds his haven of rest. Here we breathe the air of freedom and live in a strange and future world—a world conforming with the hopeful dreams of the master minds of the ages.

But we have many mountains yet to climb, in our eternal journey, before the spiritual and moral grandeur of mankind achieve the grandeur of this glorious earthly paradise on which we live.

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not expedient for him to relate these things, etc.

A careful reading of the writings of the Prophet including his messages and sermons fails to reveal any further information regarding the manner of the translation of the Book of Mormon.

Explanations have been advanced by students to explain the diction, form, and construction of the language of the book. Reasons for the appearance of quotations from the King James’ Bible in the Book of Mormon have also been given.

Here it is emphasized that the only information left us by the Prophet Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, his scribe, may be stated in a sentence. "Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon by the gift and power of God with the aid of the Urim and Thummim from gold plates entrusted to him by Moroni, who being dead was raised again th Thrusa.

Other witnesses to the writing of the Book of Mormon were Emma Smith, wife of the Prophet, David Whitmer, Martin Harris, and John Whitmer. The writings of all these are claimed to be in the manuscript at Independence, Missouri. The Saints’ Advocate, October, 1879, gives the last testimony of Emma Smith Bidamon, wife of the Prophet Joseph Smith. The questions were by her son, Joseph Smith, and were asked in the presence of Bishop Rogers, W. W. Blair, and H. A. Stubble. A part of the interview follows:

Question: When did you first know Sidney Rigdon?
Answer: I was residing at Father Whitmer’s when I first saw Sidney Rigdon. I think he came there.
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he had left off, without either seeing the manuscript or having any portion of it read to her. She would have been able to tell that a learned man could do this; and, for one so... unlearned as he was, it was simply impossible.

The question and the answers she had given to them, were read to my mother by me, the day before my leaving Nauvoo for home and were affirmed by her. Major Biddulph, who had frequently conversed with her on the subject of the translation of the Book of Mormon, and her present answers were substantially what she had always stated in regard to it.

Signed, Joseph Smith.
Who is the son of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

IN THE March, 1836, issue of the Messenger and Advocate, John Whitmer writes as follows:

It may not be amiss in this place, to give a statement to the world concerning the work of the Lord, as I have been a member of this Church of Latter-day Saints from its beginning. I say that the Book of Mormon is a revelation from God. I have no hesitancy; but with all confidence have signed my name to it as such; and I hope that my patrons will indulge me in speaking freely on this subject, as I am about leaving the editorial department—therefore I desire to testify to all that will come to the knowledge of this address, that I have handled these plates, and know of a surety that Joseph Smith, Jr., has translated the Book of Mormon by the gift and power of God, and in this thing the wisdom of the wise most assuredly has perished: therefore, know ye, O ye inhabitants of the earth, wherever this address may come, that I have in this thing freed my garments of your blood, whether you believe or disbelieve the statements of your unworthy friend and well-wisher.

In 1887 David Whitmer writes an address "to all Believers in Christ." This was fifty years after he had separated himself from the Church. He was now past 82 years of age. In this address David Whitmer bears a faithful testimony to the divine origin of the Book of Mormon. He states:

I will say once more to all mankind that I have never at any time denied that testimony or any part thereof. I also testify to the world that neither Oliver Cowdery nor Martin Harris at any time denied their testimony: they both died reaffirming the true authenticity of the truth of the Book of Mormon. I was present at the deathbed of Oliver Cowdery and his last words were, "Brother David, be true to your testimony to the Book of Mormon."

He also declares:

I testify to the world I am an eyewitness to the translation of the greater part of the Book of Mormon. Part of it was translated in my father's house in Fayette, Seneca County, New York.

He also wrote as follows:

I will now give you a description of the manner in which the Book of Mormon was translated. Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear. Thus the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God, and not by any power of man.

The Deseret Evening News, September 5, 1870, reports in part an address in the Salt Lake Tabernacle as follows:

Martin Harris related an incident that occurred during the time that he wrote the portion of the translation of the Book of Mormon which he was favored to write direct from the mouth of the Prophet Joseph Smith. He said that the Prophet possessed (Concluded on page 632)
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a seer stone, by which he was enabled to translate as well as from the Urim and Thummim, and for convenience he then used the seer stone. Martin explained the translation as follows: By 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, so that the translation was just as it was engraved on the plates, precisely in the language then used.

Both David Whitmer and Martin Harris knew positively that they had been shown the plates by Moroni and had so declared since the time of the experience, but the Prophet declared in October, 1831, that no one knew the manner of the translation, neither was "it expedient for him to relate these things." (See quotation above.) When both these men were past eighty years of age, and about fifty years after the event, they undertook to describe the manner of translation, which Elder Brigham H. Roberts has clearly shown is not in harmony with the manner indicated in Section 8 of the Doctrine and Covenants. (See New Witness for God, Vol. II, pages 106-133 by B. H. Roberts.) Moreover, they refer to the use of a seer stone by the Prophet. But no publication during his life contains such a statement.

A neighbor, Willard Chase, asserted Joseph stole a "singularly appearing stone" which he had found in 1822 when Joseph and his brother Alvin were employed by him.

BIRTHDAY

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for his beloved son! Rather to have been poor and to have worked his fingers to the bone than this. Riches could not buy life, could not prevent accident.

When the doctors had told him after the accident that there was no hope and that his son would never regain consciousness, he had crept past them out of the room. Like Hagar he could not watch his son die. They had said they would do all that was humanly possible to the last. At least his wife had been spared this agony. He alone must bear it—he alone.

With sudden determination he brought his will to attention and squared his shoulders. He would go to them and face his problem.

The eternal God is my refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms; . . . surely He will deliver thee from the snare of the fowler and from the noisome pestilence. . . .

Calmly he folded the papers and returned them to his pocket. A sudden gust of wind brought down a shower of crisp leaves about his feet as the door to the sitting room opened. Stephen Porter walked to meet a woman in nurse's uniform who stood in the doorway. She said, "Come and see him; he is conscious and resting easily. The doctors are most wonderful; they are so happy to give him back to you."

"Why," he said, "you are crying," and suddenly he sat down on the low step and burst into uncontrollable weeping.

TAHITI

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colony, is approximately the same distance south of the equator as Hawaii is north. Geographically, the islands are divided into groups known respectively as the Society, Tuamotu, Gambier, and Marquesas archipelagos. In times past there has been proselyting in each group, as well as in the Cook Islands, British possessions, but more recently work has been discontinued in the Gambier, Marquesas, and Cook Islands, and concentrated in the Society, Austral, and Tuamotu archipelagos.

BEGINNING and ending at Papeete on the island of Tahiti, mission headquarters, Elder Hardy's cruise took him on a huge circuit of the Tuamotu group, including the islands of Niau, Fakarava, Takaroa, Nihiru, Hikueru, and Hao to the north and east, and of Tubuai to the south, a member of the Austral group. (See map, page 592.) While the members of the Society and Austral archipelagos are mountainous islands of volcanic origin—the romantic South Sea islands of popular imagination—the Tuamotu Archipelago, often called the "Dangerous" or "Low Archipelago," consists merely of thin strips of low-lying land, or coral rock, encircling lagoons whose size varies from a few miles to forty-two miles in length. There are fifty-six such coral atolls in the group, scattered over several hundred thousand square miles of ocean.

It is upon islands of this archipelago that fourteen of the eighteen branches in the Tahitian Mission have been established. Largest branch is found on Takaroa, with Tuamata a Mapuhi, graduate of the one-time L. D. S. Maori Agricultural College in New Zealand, as president. On Fakarava, Elder Hardy found the branch president to be Maeva a Marunui, governor of the island, with his first counselor, the island's head policeman. On the island of Taenga Elder Hardy dedicated a house as dwelling-place for the Elders, built by the combined efforts of the three branches of Taenga, Nihiru, and Makemo. Everywhere the Paumotu people, as the inhabitants of the Tuamotu group are called, expressed joy at the visit of one of the General Authorities. Gifts, feasts, special demonstrations marked Elder Hardy's stay at each island.

At Tubuai, due south of Tahiti, a local missionary, Brother Teao a Mauta, was set apart, for there the French government will no longer permit foreigners to carry on proselyting. With three branches fully organized and well-housed in chapels of rock construction, with beau-