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“By the Gift and Power of God”

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“BY THE GIFT AND POWER OF GOD”

Elder Neal A. Maxwell

The coming forth of the Book of Mormon is a marvelous episode not only in Church history but also in human history. You and I owe many people for their roles in bringing us the Book of Mormon, a book filled with plain and precious salvational truths which came forth by “the gift and power of God” (Book of Mormon title page). Through the labors and sacrifices of many, the “marvellous work and a wonder” foreseen by Isaiah (Isaiah 29:14) restored vital truths which had been lost to mankind for centuries! We can best express our gratitude by reading and applying the teachings of the Book of Mormon.

A Divine Gift

After all, the Book of Mormon’s stated purpose is for “the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the

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Christ” (title page), making it a divine gift to the entire human family.

In fact, Nephi tells us that God “doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world” (2 Nephi 26:24). The knowledge concerning God’s plan of salvation, repeatedly and carefully set forth in the Book of Mormon, can counter the hopelessness and despair of some who lament the human predicament in which they feel mortals are “conceived without consent” and “wrenched whimpering into an alien universe.”¹ So many mortals desperately need to know there is divine design. No wonder the Lord told Joseph Smith that the Restoration came to increase faith in the earth! (see Doctrine and Covenants 1:21).

Originally translated from reformed Egyptian into English, the words of the Book of Mormon are now available in eighty-eight languages. Reaching one hundred languages is likely within the next several years. From its first edition of 5,000 copies in 1830 and on through 1995, nearly 78,000,000 copies are estimated to have been distributed.

We know the book’s influence will continue to grow. “Wherefore, these things shall go from generation to generation as long as the earth shall stand; and they shall go according to the will and pleasure of God; and the nations who shall possess them shall be judged of them according to the words which are written” (2 Nephi 25:22). Among other words foretelling the book’s growing influence are these: “The day cometh that the words of the book which were sealed shall be read upon the house tops” (2 Nephi 27:11). Hence the Book of Mormon’s best days still lie ahead!

Perspective on the Translation Process

The Prophet Joseph Smith worked by the gift and power of God amid numerous interruptions, bitter persecutions, and even the “most strenuous exertions” to wrest the actual plates from him (Joseph Smith—History 1:60). His was not the tranquil life of a detached scholar in some sheltered sanctuary where he could work at his uninterrupted leisure. Chores had to be done. His family had to be cared for. Joseph was so conscientious that the Lord counseled him: “Do not run faster or labor more than you have strength and means provided to enable you to translate; but be diligent unto the end” (Doctrine and Covenants 10:4).

Many who read the Book of Mormon understandably desire to know more about its coming forth, including the actual process of translation. This was certainly so with faithful and loyal Hyrum Smith. Upon inquiring, Hyrum was told by the Prophet Joseph that “it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon” and that “it was not expedient for him to relate these things.”² Thus what we do know about the actual coming forth of the Book of Mormon is adequate, but it is not comprehensive.

Our primary focus in studying the Book of Mormon should be on the principles of the gospel anyway, not on the process by which the book came forth. Yet because its coming so amply fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy of a “marvelous work and a wonder,” we may find strengthened faith in considering how marvelous and wondrous the translation really was.



TRANSLATION
PROCESS

“Sight and Power to Translate”



MARVELOUS
POWER TO
TRANSLATE

The Prophet Joseph alone knew the full process, and he was deliberately reluctant to describe details. We take passing notice of the words of David Whitmer, Joseph Knight, and Martin Harris, who were observers, not translators. David Whitmer indicated that as the Prophet used the divine instrumentalities provided to help him, “the hieroglyphics would appear, and also the translation in the English language . . . in bright luminous letters.” Then Joseph would read the words to Oliver.³ Martin Harris related of the seer stone: “Sentences would appear and were read by the Prophet and written by Martin.”⁴ Joseph Knight made similar observations.⁵

Oliver Cowdery is reported to have testified in court that the Urim and Thummim enabled Joseph “to read in English, the reformed Egyptian characters, which were engraved on the plates.”⁶ If these reports are accurate, they suggest a process indicative of God’s having given Joseph “sight and power to translate” (Doctrine and Covenants 3:12).

If by means of these divine instrumentalities the Prophet was seeing ancient words rendered in English and then dictating, he was not necessarily and constantly scrutinizing the characters on the plates—the usual translation process of going back and forth between pondering an ancient text and providing a modern rendering.

The revelatory process apparently did not require the Prophet to become expert in the ancient language. The constancy of revelation was more crucial than the constant presence of opened plates, which, by instruction, were to be kept from the view of unauthorized eyes anyway.

While the use of divine instrumentalities might also account for the rapid rate of translation, the Prophet some-

times may have used a less mechanical procedure. We simply do not know the details.

We do know that this faith-filled process was not easy, however. This fact was clearly demonstrated in Oliver Cowdery's own attempt at translation. Oliver failed because he "did not continue as [he] commenced," and because, lacking faith and works, he "took no thought save it was to ask" (Doctrine and Covenants 9:5, 7). He was not properly prepared to do it. Even so, we owe so much to Oliver Cowdery for his special service as a scribe.

Whatever the details of the process, it required Joseph's intense, personal efforts along with the aid of the revelatory instruments. The process may have varied as Joseph's capabilities grew, involving the Urim and Thummim but perhaps with less reliance upon such instrumentalities in the Prophet's later work of translation. Elder Orson Pratt of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said Joseph Smith told him that he used the Urim and Thummim when he was inexperienced at translation but that later he did not need it, which was the case in Joseph's translation of many verses of the Bible.⁷

Some additional things we know about the process of translation further qualify the Book of Mormon as a "marvellous work and a wonder."

A Marvelous Feat of Inspiration

One marvel is the very rapidity with which Joseph was translating—at an estimated average rate of eight of our printed pages per day! The total translation time was about sixty-five working days.⁸ By comparison, one able LDS translator in Japan, surrounded by reference books, language dictionaries, and translator colleagues ready to



SHORT
TRANSLATION
TIME

EVENTS SURROUNDING THE TRANSLATION OF THE BOOK OF MORMON, 1829–1830

<i>Jan.</i>	
<i>Feb.</i>	Joseph receives D&C 4 in Harmony, Pennsylvania The Lord appears to Oliver Cowdery
<i>Mar.</i>	Joseph translates a few pages of the Book of Mormon Martin Harris of Palmyra visits Joseph in Harmony
<i>Apr.</i>	Oliver arrives in Harmony to meet Joseph
<i>May</i>	Book of Mormon Translated April 7–End of June
<i>June</i>	
<i>July</i>	E. B. Grandin and T. Weed decline to print Book of Mormon
<i>Aug.</i>	Grandin agrees to print; typesetting begins Martin Harris mortgages his farm
<i>Sept.</i>	
<i>Oct.</i>	
<i>Nov.</i>	Printer's manuscript is prepared through Alma 36
<i>Dec.</i>	
<i>Jan.</i>	
<i>Feb.</i>	
<i>Mar.</i>	Printing is finished
<i>Apr.</i>	Restored Church of Christ officially organized

help if needed, indicated that he considered an output of one careful, final page a day to be productive. And he is retranslating from earlier Japanese to modern Japanese! More than fifty able English scholars labored for seven years, using previous translations, to produce the King James Version of the Bible, averaging about one precious page per day. The Prophet Joseph Smith would sometimes produce ten pages per day!⁹

A second marvel of the Book of Mormon translation process is that from what we know, rarely would Joseph go back, review, or revise what had already been done. There was a steady flow in the translation. The Prophet's dictating resulted—just as the compositor, John H. Gilbert, remembered—in no paragraphing.

Emma Smith said of the inspired process: “After meals, or after interruptions, [Joseph] would at once begin where he had left off, without either seeing the manuscript or having any portion of it read to him.”¹⁰ One who has dictated and been interrupted must usually resume by inquiring, “Now, where were we?” Not so with the Prophet!

If one were manufacturing a text, he would constantly need to cross-check himself, to edit, and to revise for consistency. Had the Prophet dictated and revised extensively, there would be more evidence of it. But there was no need to revise divinely supplied text. Whatever the details of the translation process, we are discussing a process that was truly astonishing!

With regard to the physical circumstances of the Prophet Joseph Smith and his scribe, Martin Harris was quoted as saying there was a blanket or curtain hung between himself and Joseph during the translation process. If Martin is accurately quoted, perhaps this occurred when the

Prophet was copying characters directly from the plates in the sample to be taken to Professor Charles Anthon, since the dates mentioned are several months before Martin Harris's brief scribal duties began. I say this because although David Whitmer mentions a blanket being used, it was only to partition off the living area in order to keep both the translator and scribe from the eyes of visitors.¹¹

In fact, Elizabeth Anne Whitmer Cowdery, Oliver's wife, said, "Joseph never had a curtain drawn between him and his scribe."¹² Emma likewise said of her days as scribe, early on, that Joseph dictated "hour after hour with nothing between us."¹³

Of course, the real revelatory process involved Joseph's mind and faith, which could not be seen by others in any case.

A third marvel of the translation process is that although he was intensely involved in translating an ancient record, the Prophet Joseph himself was clearly unschooled in things ancient. For example, early in the work he came across words concerning a wall around Jerusalem and asked Emma if the city indeed had walls. She affirmed what Joseph simply hadn't known.¹⁴

He knew nothing, either, of the literary form called chiasmus, which appears in the Bible at various places and, significantly, also appears in the Book of Mormon.

Emma does mention, however, and so does David Whitmer, the Prophet's spelling out of unfamiliar names, letter by letter, especially if asked by the scribe. For instance, Oliver Cowdery first wrote the name *Coriantumr* phonetically. He then immediately crossed out his phonetic spelling and spelled the name as we now have it in the Book of Mormon. *Coriantumr* with its "-mr" ending clearly would have required a letter-by-letter spelling out by the Prophet.

Fourth, we marvel that the Prophet Joseph Smith worked completely without referring to any other sources. None of the twelve people who either participated or merely observed mentioned Joseph's having any reference materials present. (The twelve people were Emma Smith, Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery, David Whitmer, William Smith, Lucy Mack Smith, Michael Morse, Sarah Hellor Conrad, Isaac Hale, Reuben Hale, and Joseph Knight Sr.) Since the Prophet dictated openly, these individuals would have been aware of any suspicious behavior or procedures. Emma was emphatic on this very point: "He had neither manuscript nor book to read from, [and] if he had anything of the kind he could not have concealed it from me."¹⁵

Thus the Book of Mormon came *through*, but not *from*, Joseph Smith!

There is need for caution in assuming or suggesting that the Prophet had great flexibility as to doctrine and as to the substance of the language he used. This may be gauged by his emphatic words about the title page of the Book of Mormon. On one occasion he said that "the title page of the Book of Mormon is a literal translation, taken from the very last leaf, on the left hand side of the collection or book of plates, which contained the record which has been translated; the language of the whole running the same as all Hebrew writing in general; and that, said *title page is not by any means a modern composition either of mine or of any other man's who has lived or does live in this generation.*"¹⁶

Our observation that the Prophet was not shaping the doctrine is no discredit to Joseph Smith. On the contrary, some of King Benjamin's words were not solely his either,

The Testimony of Three witnesses

Be it known unto ^{all} ~~every~~ nations kindreds tongues & people unto whom this work shall come that we through the grace of God the Father & our Lord Jesus Christ have seen the plates which contain this record which is a record of the people of Joseph & also of the Lamanites his brethren & also of the people of Jared which came from the tower of which hath been spoken & we also know that they have been translated by the gift & power of God for his voice hath declared it unto us wherefore we know of a surety that the work is true & we also testify that we have seen the engravings which are upon the plates & they have been shewn unto us by the power of God & not of man & we declare with words of soberness that an angel of God came down from Heaven & he brought & laid before our eyes that we beheld & saw the plates & the engravings thereon & we know that it is by the grace of God the Father & our Lord Jesus Christ that we beheld & have heard these things, and that it is marvellous in our eyes nevertheless the voice of the Lord commanded us that we should bear record of it Wherefore to be obedient unto the commandments of God we bear testimony of these things & we know that if we are faithful in Christ we shall rid our garments of the blood of all men & be found spotless before the judgement seat of Christ & shall dwell with him Eternally in Heaven & the honor be to the Father & to the Son & to the Holy Ghost

which is one God. Amen.

(Oliver Cowdery
David Whitmer
Martin Harris)

Testimony of the Three Witnesses
in Oliver Cowdery's hand

but “had been delivered unto him by the angel of the Lord” (Mosiah 4:1). Similarly, Nephi said his words “are the words of Christ, and he hath given them unto me” (2 Nephi 33:10).

Oliver Cowdery, the most constant and involved witness to the miraculous translation, always affirmed the divinity of the process. Though later disaffected for a time from the Church, he nevertheless came humbly back. He spoke forthrightly about how he “wrote with my own pen the intire book of Mormon (save a few pages) as it fell from the Lips of the prophet.”¹⁷ Oliver would not have humbly returned to the Church at all, especially seeking no station, had there been any kind of fraud!

Instead, at the approach of death, Oliver could not have been more dramatic about his testimony concerning the Book of Mormon. Oliver’s half-sister, Lucy P. Young, reported: “Just before he breathed his last he asked to be raised up in bed so he could talk to the family and friends and he told them to live according to the teachings in the [B]ook of Mormon and they would meet him in Heaven then he said lay me down and let me fall asleep in the arms of Jesus, and he fell asleep without a struggle.”¹⁸

What an exit endorsement!

The book’s spiritual significance, of course, lies in its capacity for “convincing . . . the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ.” This is the very same reason given by the Apostle John concerning some text he wrote: “But these are written, *that ye might believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name” (John 20:31; emphasis added). This is why prophets write, whether John, Nephi, Mormon, or Moroni.



Why do we not have more disclosure concerning the process of translation of the Book of Mormon? Perhaps the full process was not disclosed because we would not be ready to understand it, even if given. Perhaps, too, the Lord wanted to leave the Book of Mormon in the realm of faith, though it is drenched with intrinsic evidence. After all, Christ instructed Mormon, who was reviewing the Savior's own teachings among the Nephites, not to record all of them on the plates because "I will try the faith of my people" (3 Nephi 26:11). Perhaps the details of translation are withheld also because we are intended to immerse ourselves in the substance of the book rather than becoming unduly concerned with the process by which we received it.

"No Error in the Revelations Which I Have Taught"

In any case, as soon as the translation process was completed, it was necessary for the Prophet Joseph to move on quickly in what would be a very busy and highly compressed ministry. This ministry included retranslating hundreds of verses in the Bible; fully establishing the Church; receiving various priesthood keys, with each of which came new duties and new concerns, from heavenly messengers; leading the winnowing Zion's Camp march; and calling and training many of the Church leaders, including the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and others, as in the School of the Prophets. (Notably, the Prophet sent nine of the Twelve to England when he could least afford to send them.) He also continued receiving revelations; he oversaw large gatherings of Church members in Kirtland, Jackson County, and Nauvoo. He experienced awful and severe apostasy among members, especially in the Kirtland period and in Nau-

voo. On one illustrative occasion, when Wilford Woodruff met Joseph in Kirtland, the Prophet scrutinized him for a moment, then said: “Brother Woodruff, I am glad to see you. I hardly know when I meet those who have been my brethren in the Lord, who of them are my friends. They have become so scarce.”¹⁹ As his ministry progressed, he focused on temple building and temple ordinances—in many ways, the crowning achievement of his life.

The Prophet Joseph did all of these and so much more while serving simultaneously as father and husband. He and Emma lost six of their children to early death.

Finally, of course, came the engulfing events leading up to the Martyrdom.

So many large undertakings were compressed into such a small period of time! The Prophet’s ministry almost defies description. No wonder Joseph once said that if he hadn’t experienced his own life, he would not have believed it himself.²⁰

Near the end of his ministry, with so much betrayal about him, the Prophet Joseph said to the members, “I never told you I was perfect; but there is no error in the revelations which I have taught.”²¹ His summational statement includes the marvelous Book of Mormon, the coming forth of which we have examined briefly. Though it was not his book, Joseph was its remarkable translator. It was actually the book of prophets who had long preceded him. His intensive labors of translation let these prophets speak so eloquently for themselves—to millions of us! In fact, more printed pages of scripture have come through Joseph Smith than from any other human.

Mine is an apostolic witness of Jesus, the great Redeemer of mankind. It was He who called the Prophet Joseph

Smith, tutored him, and nurtured him through his adversities, which were to be “but a small moment” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:7). Once the Prophet Joseph hoped aloud that he might so live amid his own suffering that one day he could take his place among Abraham and the “ancients,” hoping to “hold an even w[e]ight in the balances with them.”²² I testify that Joseph so triumphed, which is why we rightly sing of his being “crowned in the midst of the prophets of old.”²³

NOTES

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2. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1946), 4:220.
3. Quoted in James H. Hart, “About the Book of Mormon,” *Deseret Evening News*, 25 March 1884, 2.
4. Quoted in Edward Stevenson, “One of the Three Witnesses: Incidents in the Life of Martin Harris,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star*, 6 February 1882, 86–87.
5. See Dean Jessee, “Joseph Knight’s Recollection of Early Mormon History,” *BYU Studies* 17/1 (1976): 35.
6. “Mormonites,” *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate*, 9 April 1831.
7. See *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star*, 11 August 1874, 498–99.
8. See “How long did it take Joseph Smith to translate the Book of Mormon?” I Have a Question, *Ensign*, January 1988, 47.
9. See the bulletin *Insights: An Ancient Window* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies), February 1986, 1.

10. Joseph Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *The Saints' Herald*, 1 October 1879, 290.
11. See Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 173.
12. Quoted in John W. Welch and Tim Rathbone, "The Translation of the Book of Mormon: Basic Historical Information," FARMS report WRR-86, 25.
13. Joseph Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," 289.
14. See E. C. Briggs, "Interview with David Whitmer," *The Saints' Herald*, 21 June 1884, 396.
15. Joseph Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," 289, 290.
16. *Times and Seasons*, 15 October 1842, 943; emphasis added.
17. Journal of Reuben Miller, October 1848, Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
18. Letter of Lucy Cowdery Young, 7 March 1887, Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
19. Quoted in Matthias F. Cowley, ed., *Wilford Woodruff, fourth president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: history of his life and labors as recorded in his daily journals* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 68.
20. See Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:317.
21. Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 368.
22. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 395.
23. *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 27.