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## The Faith to See: Burning in the Bosom and Translating the Book of Mormon in Doctrine and Covenants 9

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**THE FAITH TO SEE:  
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TRANSLATING THE BOOK OF MORMON IN  
DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS 9**

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**Stan Spencer**

*Abstract: Doctrine and Covenants 9:7–9 is conventionally interpreted as the Lord’s description of the method by which the Book of Mormon was translated. A close reading of the entire revelation, however, suggests that the Lord was not telling Oliver Cowdery how to translate but rather how to know whether it was right for him to translate and how to obtain the faith necessary to do so. Faith would have enabled Oliver Cowdery to overcome his fear and translate, just as it would have enabled Peter (in Matthew 14) to overcome his fear and walk on water.*

**I**n April of 1829 while acting as scribe for Joseph Smith’s translation of the Book of Mormon, Oliver Cowdery desired to be given the gift of translation. In response to Oliver Cowdery’s desire, the Lord provided a revelation through Joseph Smith.<sup>1</sup> This revelation, contained in Doctrine and Covenants (D&C) section 8, reminded Oliver Cowdery of spiritual gifts he already possessed, through which he could receive answers to his questions, and then gave him these instructions:

Remember that without faith you can do nothing; therefore ask in faith. Trifle not with these things; do not ask for that which you ought not. Ask that you may know the mysteries of God,

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<sup>1</sup> The introduction to this revelation in the earliest extant manuscript reads, “A Revelation to Oliver [Cowdery] he being desirous to know whether the Lord would grant him the gift of Revelation & Translation.” Revelation, April 1829–B [D&C 8], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed 15 May 2015, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/revelation-book-1>.

and that you may translate ... and according to your faith shall it be done unto you. (D&C 8:10–11)

The only record we have of Oliver Cowdery's response to these instructions is a second revelation received the same month.<sup>2</sup> This revelation, contained in Doctrine and Covenants section 9, observed that Oliver Cowdery "began to translate" (D&C 9:5) but was ultimately unsuccessful (vv. 10–11). It also provided him additional instructions, including the following:

7. Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give *it* unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.

8. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if *it* be right, and if *it* be right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.

9. But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong; therefore, you cannot write that which is sacred save *it* be given you from me.

The interpretation of this passage depends on what the pronoun *it* refers to in the three verses. Conventionally, this passage is interpreted as a description of the technique by which the Book of Mormon was translated. Mormon leader and historian B. H. Roberts promoted this interpretation in the *Improvement Era* in 1906:<sup>3</sup>

This is the Lord's description of how Oliver Cowdery could have translated with the aid of Urim and Thummim, and is undoubtedly the manner in which Joseph Smith did translate the Book of Mormon through the medium of Urim and Thummim. This description of the translation destroys the theory that the Urim and Thummim did everything, and the seer nothing;

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2 The introduction to this revelation in the earliest extant manuscript reads, "A Revelation to Oliver he was disrous to know the reason why he could not translate." Revelation, April 1829–D [D&C 9], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed 15 May 2015, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/revelation-book-1>. It is unclear from this statement whether Oliver Cowdery wanted to know why his attempt to translate had failed or why he was no longer permitted to translate. The general theme of this revelation suggests the latter.

3 B. H. Roberts, "Translation of the Book of Mormon," *Improvement Era* 9 (1906), 429–430.

that the work of translating was merely a mechanical process of looking at a supplied interpretation, in English, and reading it off to an amanuensis. This description in the Doctrine and Covenants implies great mental effort, of working out the translation in the mind and securing the witness of the Spirit that the translation is correct.

According to this theory, Oliver Cowdery failed in his attempt to translate because he had “not understood” (v. 7) the proper technique, which involved mentally working out a tentative translation and then asking for divine confirmation that it was correct.<sup>4</sup> The summary of section 9 in the current edition of the Doctrine and Covenants supports Roberts’s interpretation, stating, “the Book of Mormon is translated by study and by spiritual confirmation.”<sup>5</sup>

However, witness accounts suggest an alternate interpretation.<sup>6</sup> These accounts vary in amount of detail but generally describe Joseph Smith

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4 Roberts saw support for this interpretation in D&C 8:2, where the Lord describes the manifestations of the Holy Ghost: “Yea, behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart.” Roberts, “Translation,” 429. It is not certain, however, that this verse is referring to the process of translation, as it is prefaced by the promise that Oliver Cowdery would “receive a knowledge of whatsoever things” he would ask about in faith, including “a knowledge concerning the engravings of old records.” A *knowledge concerning* records is not necessarily a *translation of* those records. Rather than being specific to the gift of translation, the revelation in section 8 appears to address Oliver Cowdery’s spiritual gifts and desires more broadly, discussing both the gift of the Holy Ghost (vv. 2–5) and the “gift of Aaron” (vv. 6–9), also promising Oliver Cowdery knowledge concerning whatever he should ask (v. 9). It mentions translation only near the end (v. 11), with, “Ask ... that you may translate and receive knowledge from all these ancient records.” The “gift of Aaron” refers to the use of a divining or dowsing rod. Jeffery G. Cannon, “Oliver Cowdery’s Gift,” *Revelations in Context* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 15 December 2012). <https://history.lds.org/article/doctrine-and-covenants-oliver-cowdery>. Although the Lord expressed a willingness to provide answers (presumably as “yes” or “no”) to Cowdery’s questions through the movements of a rod (perhaps because Cowdery was accustomed to using that instrument), the instructions in D&C 9:8 (also Moroni 10:4–5) suggest that the Lord prefers to provide yes/no answers through the manifestations of the Holy Ghost.

5 This statement first appeared in the 1981 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. The prior major edition (1921) instead stated, “It is not sufficient for one merely to ask for a divine gift, without prayerful thought and study.”

6 Much of the translation was done in the Whitmer home in plain view of others, as described by Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery: “I cheerfully certify that

placing one or more seer stones (also referred to as interpreters, directors, or Urim and Thummim by early Mormons) into a hat, drawing the hat close to his face, and dictating the English translation to his scribe.<sup>7</sup> In his public statements, Joseph Smith gave very little information about how he translated, indicating only that it was “through the medium of the Urim and Thummim ... by the gift and power of God.”<sup>8</sup> He reportedly provided more information about the process to David Whitmer and others.<sup>9</sup> The following account is representative of those given by David Whitmer and other close associates of Joseph Smith:<sup>10</sup>

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I was familiar with the manner of Joseph Smith's translating the Book of Mormon. He translated the most of it at my Father's house. And I often sat by and saw and heard them translate and write for hours together. Joseph never had a curtain drawn between him and his scribe while he was translating. He would place the director in his hat, and then place his face in his hat, so as to exclude the light.” Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery, “Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery Affidavit, 15 February 1870,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2003), 5:260.

7 The interpreters were “two stones in silver bows ... and use of these stones were what constituted ‘seers’ in ancient or former times.” Joseph Smith — History 1:35. For a brief discussion of the various labels used for the interpreters and Joseph Smith’s seer stones, see Stan Spencer, “Reflections of Urim: Hebrew Poetry Sheds Light on the Directors-Interpreters Mystery,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 187–192, including notes. A single seer stone was likely used in translating the Book of Mormon after the loss of the original 116 manuscript pages. Richard Van Wagoner and Steven C. Walker, “Joseph Smith: The Gift of Seeing,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15/2 (1982): 53–54.

8 Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: *Deseret News*, 1904), 4:537. The title page of the Book of Mormon states that it was interpreted “by the gift of God.”

9 As quoted in 1885 by Zenas H. Gurley, editor of the *Saint’s Herald*, David Whitmer reported Joseph Smith “stating to me and others that the original character appeared upon parchment and under it the translation in English.” “Questions asked of David Whitmer at his home in Richmond, Ray County, MO, Jan. 14, 1885, relating to Book of Mormon and the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of LDS, by Elder Z. H. Gurley,” holograph in LDS Church Archives, cited in van Wagoner and Walker, “Gift of Seeing,” 54, emphasis added.

10 David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, MO: n.p., 1887), 12. David Whitmer’s descriptions of the translation process are corroborated by an account by Joseph Knight, Sr., a close friend of Joseph Smith: “Now the way he translated was he put the urim and thummim into his hat and Darkned his Eyes then he would take a sentance and it would apper in Brite Roman Letters. Then he would tell the writer and he would write it. Then that would go away the next sentance would Come and so on.” Dean Jesse, “Joseph Knight’s Recollection of Early Mormon History,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 17/1 (1976), 35. The

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 by 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.

David Whitmer apparently believed that the “gift and power of God” referred to Joseph Smith’s gift for seeing words illuminated in the darkness of his hat. In Doctrine and Covenants 3:12, Joseph Smith’s gift is described as the “sight and power to translate;” Brigham Young described it simply as “the gift of seeing.”<sup>11</sup> In his use of seer stones, Joseph Smith was a “seer” after the manner of old times (Mosiah 28:13-16; Isaiah 30:10), and his gift was to see what others could not (Mosiah 8:13–17).

According to a straightforward reading of the accounts by David Whitmer and others, there was no need for the translator to mentally work out an English translation, as one was provided in the writing that appeared.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the general lack of support from witness

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accounts of other witnesses are generally consistent as well. For additional accounts, see Van Wagoner and Walker, “Gift of Seeing,” 57–58.

11 In his Journal entry for May 6, 1849, Brigham Young recorded: “We spent the time in interesting conversation upon old times, Joseph, the plates, Mount Cumorah, treasures and records known to be hid in the earth, the gift of seeing, and how Joseph obtained his first seer stone.” Brigham Young, “May 6, 1849” in *Manuscript History of Brigham Young 1847–1850*, ed. William S. Harwell (Salt Lake City: Collier's Publishing, 1997), 200.

12 Roberts reconciles his interpretation of D&C 9 with the witness accounts by surmising that the translation worked out in Joseph Smith’s mind was only “reflected in the interpreters.” Roberts saw evidence for his theory in the abundance of grammatical errors in the Book of Mormon text, which he believed must have originated with Joseph Smith as he worked out a translation, the only other alternative being “to assign responsibility for ... such errors to God. But that is unthinkable, not to say blasphemous.” Roberts, “Translation,” 428–430. There are, however, other plausible origins of the offending grammar. For example, just

accounts, four additional factors give reason to question the conventional theory that the Book of Mormon was translated “by study and by spiritual confirmation” and that Oliver Cowdery failed to translate because of his ignorance of that technique.<sup>13</sup>

First, neither study nor spiritual confirmation is mentioned as a requirement for translating in the instructions to Oliver Cowdery in section 8 or anywhere else in scripture. Second, before his attempt to translate, Oliver Cowdery had been promised that he would be able to translate “according to [his] faith” (D&C 8:11). Based on this

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because Joseph Smith received a text through a seer stone doesn’t mean that the text was written by God. It could have been produced by one or more (fallible) mortals under God’s direction. Also, many of the “grammatical errors” were acceptable grammar in Early Modern English — see Stanford Carmack’s “A Look at Some ‘Nonstandard’ Book of Mormon Grammar,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 11 (2014): 209–262. For more analysis of Book of Mormon language by Carmack, see a listing of his papers at <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/author/stanfordc/>. Like Carmack, Royal Skousen (based on his monumental study of Book of Mormon manuscript evidence) concludes that, in “translating” the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith was reading a text that was already translated into English rather than working out a translation in his own mind. Royal Skousen, “The Original Text of the Book of Mormon and its Publication by Yale University Press,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 7 (2013): 95–96. Although Joseph Smith did not translate in the conventional sense, he was an instrument in the miraculous conversion of an ancient text into a modern book, and “translator” may have been the best word at his disposal to describe his role in that miracle. Finally, Joseph Smith and his scribes may have contributed some of the offending grammar to the text inadvertently during dictation. For a brief discussion of evidence for major Book of Mormon translation theories, see Don Bradley, “Written by the Finger of God?: Claims and Controversies of Book of Mormon Translation,” *Sunstone* 161 (December 2010): 20–29.

13 A role for spiritual confirmation in the translation process does find limited support in the words of Oliver Cowdery: “I ... commenced to write the Book of Mormon. These were days never to be forgotten — to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the inspiration of heaven, awakened the utmost gratitude of this bosom! Day after day I continued, uninterrupted, to write from his mouth, as he translated, with the Urim and Thummim.” Oliver Cowdery to W.W. Phelps, 7 Sep 1834, *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (Oct 1834): 14. This statement, however, is not presented as a description of the translation process but rather as a celebration of its sacred nature and of Oliver Cowdery’s privilege in participating. Oliver Cowdery’s tone suggests that he is going more for effect than precision. Also, he may be using the term *inspiration* in a broad sense of a divine influence (in this case, through the words that appeared) rather than of a direct spiritual communication to Joseph Smith’s mind.

promise, his lack of success would have been due to lack of faith, not improper technique. Third, Doctrine and Covenants 9:5 observes that Oliver Cowdery “began to translate,” which suggests that he actually did translate and must have known how to do so. Fourth, Doctrine and Covenants 9:8 indicates the need to “study *it* out” and ask “if *it* be right,” but there is no obvious antecedent for the pronoun *it* in the revelation that is consistent with the conventional theory.

### **An Alternate Interpretation**

A proper interpretation of verses 7–9 must take into account their context, specifically, the remainder of the revelation in section 9:

1. Behold, I say unto you, my son, that because you did not translate according to that which you desired of me, and did commence again to write for my servant, Joseph Smith, Jun., even so I would that ye should continue until you have finished this record, which I have entrusted unto him.
2. And then, behold, other records have I, that I will give unto you power that you may assist to translate.
3. Be patient, my son, for it is wisdom in me, and it is not expedient that you should translate at this present time.
4. Behold, the work which you are called to do is to write for my servant Joseph.
5. And, behold, it is because that you did not continue as you commenced, when you began to translate, that I have taken away this privilege from you.
6. Do not murmur, my son, for it is wisdom in me that I have dealt with you after this manner. ...
10. Now, if you had known this you could have translated; nevertheless, it is not expedient that you should translate now.
11. Behold, it was expedient when you commenced; but you feared, and the time is past, and it is not expedient now;
12. For, do you not behold that I have given unto my servant Joseph sufficient strength, whereby it is made up? And neither of you have I condemned.
13. Do this thing which I have commanded you, and you shall prosper. Be faithful, and yield to no temptation.
14. Stand fast in the work wherewith I have called you, and a hair of your head shall not be lost, and you shall be lifted up at the last day. Amen.

In this revelation, the Lord tells Oliver Cowdery that his service is presently needed as scribe, not translator, but indicates that he will be given power to translate at some future time. He notes that Oliver Cowdery “began to translate” (v. 5), but then feared and chose to go back to writing for Joseph Smith. He states that it was right for Oliver Cowdery to translate when he began, but that it is no longer expedient and the privilege has been taken away. The Lord explains why it is no longer expedient for Oliver Cowdery to translate: because he feared, because he did not continue as he commenced, and because Joseph Smith was blessed with strength to do the work. The Lord tells him to stop murmuring over the loss of the privilege and admonishes him to be content with the work he has been called to do. The theme from the beginning to the end of this revelation is whether and when it is right for Oliver Cowdery to translate. The text does not suggest that Oliver Cowdery questioned why he failed to translate initially, only why he is not permitted to translate presently. Nor does the text suggest that there was a problem with his translating technique.

Therefore, a more conservative interpretation of verses 7–9 would be in accordance with the predominant theme of the entire revelation — namely, whether and when it is right for Oliver Cowdery to translate. Perhaps, in these verses, the Lord is telling Oliver Cowdery that *before* he asks for the privilege to translate, he must find out if translating is the right thing for him to be doing at the time. Before we can accept this interpretation, however, we must see if it is consistent with the possible antecedents of the pronoun *it* in each verse.

The most obvious antecedent for *it* in verse 7 is the *privilege* to translate that has been taken away from Oliver Cowdery (v. 5). The other possibility is the *power* to translate that the Lord “will give unto” Oliver Cowdery (v. 2).<sup>14</sup> There are no other obvious candidates. As a practical matter, the *privilege* to translate and the *power* to translate are the same, and it appears that the two terms are being used interchangeably here. If we substitute *the privilege* for *it*, verse 7 reads,

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14 Even Roberts understood *it* in verse 7 to refer to the power to translate, as indicated by the bracketed comment in his quotation of the verse: “Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it [i.e., the power to translate] unto you.” Roberts, “Translation,” 429, brackets in Roberts’s original. Also, Oliver Cowdery had not been told to ask for a translation, but for the privilege of translating (D&C 8:11).

7. Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give [the privilege] unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.

If this is the correct interpretation of verse 7, then a likely antecedent for *it* in verse 8 is the phrase *that I would give it unto you* from verse 7. Integrating this phrase into verse 8 gives the following:

8. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right [that I give it unto you], and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.

In verse 9, the first *it* refers to the same antecedent as in verse 8 (*that I would give it unto you*). The next occurrence of *it*, in *it be given*, may refer to the preceding phrase *that which is sacred* (meaning the translated text). However, elsewhere in scripture, variations of *it be given* often refer to a power or privilege being granted by God.<sup>15</sup> If such is also the case here, then the antecedent of *it* is the complete phrase *write that which is sacred* (meaning the privilege of producing sacred scripture) and the verse could be written more clearly as follows:

9. But if it be not right [that I give it unto you], you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong; therefore, you cannot write that which is sacred save [*the privilege*] be given you from me.

With this alternate interpretation of verses 7–9, the theme of whether and when it is right for Oliver Cowdery to translate is consistent throughout the revelation rather than interrupted (in the conventional

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<sup>15</sup> In John 6:65, we find an example with a form similar to that of D&C 9:9: “No man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father.” Note that *it* in *it were given* refers to the entire phrase *come unto me*. The phrase *it be given* is used by Moroni in a way that appears to apply directly to Oliver Cowdery’s situation (Mormon 8:15): “For none can have power to bring it [the Book of Mormon] to light save it be given him of God; for God wills that it shall be done with an eye single to his glory.” Oliver Cowdery’s murmuring for having lost the privilege to translate suggests that his eye may not have been single to God’s glory. Alma uses similar language in a statement that could also apply to Oliver Cowdery’s desire to reveal ancient scripture (Alma 26:22): “Yea, he that repenteth and exerciseth faith, and bringeth forth good works, and prayeth continually without ceasing — unto such it shall be given to reveal things which never have been revealed.” For more instances in which variations of *it be given* refer to the granting of a power or privilege, see Job 24:23; John 6:65; Alma 26:22; Mormon 8:15; and D&C 28:1; 42:11; 45:60; 47:4; 48:5; 68:11; and 124:5.

interpretation) by instructions on translation technique. Oliver Cowdery is told to study and seek spiritual confirmation, not in order to verify that a translation is correct, but to learn whether it is expedient for him to be translating at all. If not, he is told, a spiritual silence and accompanying doubt will cause him to “forget,” or give up his intention to translate.<sup>16</sup>

After teaching Oliver Cowdery how to receive a spiritual confirmation that a decision is correct, the Lord states in verse 10, “Now, if you had known this you could have translated.” This sentence is usually understood as indicating that the Lord had just explained proper translation technique. However, if verses 7–9 are not about translation technique, there must be a different explanation. Verse 11 suggests that Oliver Cowdery abandoned his attempt to translate because of fear. Perhaps the Lord is saying in verse 10 that if Oliver Cowdery had received a spiritual confirmation that he was doing the right thing, he would have had no reason to fear and could have translated with confidence. This raises the question of what reason Oliver Cowdery might have had for fearing in the first place.

### **Reason to Fear**

Prior to Oliver Cowdery’s attempt to translate, he was told to “trifle not with these things” and to “not ask for that which [he] ought not” (D&C 8:10). Even though he was also encouraged to ask for the privilege to translate (D&C 8:11), these words of warning may have prompted some anxiety. The warning against asking for what he “ought not” would have been especially salient in light of similar wording in Mosiah 8:13, wherein Ammon describes the two Nephite seer stones initially provided to Joseph Smith for translating:

He has 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 no man can look in them except he be commanded, lest he should look for that he *ought not* and he should perish.

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<sup>16</sup> This is more or less the meaning of *forget* that LDS apostle Melvin J. Ballard uses in his interpretation of D&C 9:9 in a 1931 General Conference talk: “But if it is not right, you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought, and your heart will be turned away from that thing.” *Conference Report* (April 1931), 37–38, cited in Daniel J. Ridges, *Doctrine and Covenants Made Easier*, (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2012), 1:38.

Oliver Cowdery had likely transcribed this very passage sometime during his first few days of writing for Joseph Smith.<sup>17</sup> Joseph Smith's previous scribe, Martin Harris, had certainly feared looking into the interpreters:<sup>18</sup>

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 we could see anything we wished by looking into them; and I could not keep the desire to see God out of my mind. And beside, we had a command to let no man look into them, except by the command of God, lest he should “look aught and perish.”

Whether Oliver Cowdery shared Martin Harris's existential fear of seeing God, or merely lacked confidence that he was really doing what God wanted, is unknown. In any case, after he began to translate, he feared and discontinued the attempt (vv. 5, 11). His story is reminiscent of the apostle Peter's attempt to walk on water:<sup>19</sup>

And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water. And he said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus. But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me. And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt? (Matthew 14:28–31)

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17 Oliver Cowdery began writing for Joseph Smith's translation on April 7, 1829. They likely started near the beginning of the Book of Mosiah and progressed at a rate of about eight printed pages per day. John W. Welch, “The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch with Erik B. Carlson (Provo, UT, and Salt Lake City: Brigham Young University Press and Deseret Book), 90–91, 93–94, 100–101.

18 “Martin Harris Interview with Joel Tiffany, 1859,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 2:305.

19 Oliver Cowdery's and Peter's experiences are similar in several ways. Both Oliver Cowdery and Peter had seen a miracle and wanted to have the experience themselves. Both had some initial success — Oliver Cowdery “began to translate” and Peter “walked on the water.” Both abandoned their efforts after experiencing fear. Both were instructed on the importance of faith. The opportunity to work the miracle soon passed for both — for Oliver Cowdery because Joseph Smith had been given sufficient strength, and for Peter because he and Jesus had arrived at the boat.

Jesus's words to Peter suggest that with greater faith he could have overcome fear and completed the miraculous experience he had begun. Maybe greater faith was what Oliver Cowdery needed as well.

### **The Miraculous Power of Faith**

The translation of the Book of Mormon was a miracle. The scriptures teach that miracles are wrought by faith (e.g., Moroni 7:37; Matthew 17:19–20; Mormon 9:21; Moroni 10:12,19,23–24). When Peter walked on water, he did not focus on technique; he walked by faith, and for the lack of faith, he began to sink. To move a mountain, the brother of Jared needed only to have faith and say, “remove,” and “it was removed” (Ether 12:30). While God performed the miracle, the actuation of his divine power was dependent on the faith of his servant. The translation of the Book of Mormon was also dependent on faith, as the Lord indicated to Oliver Cowdery: “Ask that you may ... translate ... and according to your faith shall it be done unto you” (D&C 8:10–11).

A similar emphasis on faith is found in the Book of Mormon relative to the use of oracular instruments. A miraculous brass ball, the Liahona, directed Lehi's family through the wilderness by pointing the way they should go. Like the interpreters and Joseph Smith's seer stone, it also displayed writings for their instruction (1 Nephi 16:29). There was no apparent requirement for Lehi and his family to study anything out or receive a spiritual confirmation in order for the pointers to work or for the writing to appear. As Alma explains, the ball's miraculous function depended solely on faith:

And it did work for them according to their faith in God; therefore, if they had faith to believe that God could cause that those spindles should point the way they should go, behold, it was done; therefore they had this miracle. (Alma 37:40)

Faith is likewise associated with the use of the interpreters, which are described by Ammon as “a means that man, through faith, might work mighty miracles” (Mosiah 8:18). Other requirements mentioned in the Book of Mormon for translating include looking and divine authorization (Mosiah 8:13). No requirement for study or spiritual confirmation is mentioned.

If faith was what Oliver Cowdery needed to translate, how would the Lord's instructions in verses 7-9 have helped him obtain that faith?

## Faith Burning in the Bosom

Jesus's disciples received a spiritual witness of truth by a metaphorical burning in their hearts (Luke 24:32): "Did not *our hearts burn within us* while he ... opened to us the scriptures?" Using similar language, the Lord tells Oliver Cowdery, "I will cause that *your bosom shall burn within you*; therefore, you shall *feel that it is right*."<sup>20</sup> *Bosom* literally means "chest," but when used figuratively it can be more or less synonymous with *heart* as the seat of intimate feelings. The Lord previously told Oliver Cowdery that the Holy Ghost would work through his mind and his heart (D&C 8:2). Now the Lord is being a little more specific, explaining that the Holy Ghost can give him an intimate witness that his desire "is right."<sup>21</sup> Such a witness would have dispelled any fear Oliver Cowdery might have had about asking for what he "ought not" and strengthened his faith in God concerning the miracle he desired. Knowing that his desire to translate aligned with God's will, he could ask for that miracle with confidence that God would make it happen. Paul taught that faith is a gift of God given by "the manifestation of the Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3-11; also Moroni 10:8-17). A burning in the bosom may be the faith-giving manifestation to which Paul referred.

## Conclusion

Before attempting to translate, Oliver Cowdery had been told that his success would depend on his faith. Perhaps it was the importance of faith and the process through which it is obtained that Oliver Cowdery (and Peter) had "not understood." Peter impulsively demanded, "bid me come unto thee on the water." Had he first asked if the Lord wanted him to walk on the water, he might have received faith enough to walk without fear of sinking. Similarly, Oliver Cowdery "took no thought" before

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20 Given the similarity in phrasing, the Lord's reference to a burning in the bosom in D&C 9 may be an allusion to "our hearts burn within us" in Luke 24:32 (KJV), which, coincidentally, is rendered in another translation with, "our hearts keep burning in our bosoms." Charles B. Williams, *The New Testament: A Translation in the Language of the People*. Boston: Bruce Humphries Inc., 1937. Slightly revised in 1950 (Chicago: Moody Press). For a discussion of spiritual communication, including the popular notion that a burning in the bosom is a physical warmth in the chest, see Dallin H. Oaks, "Teaching and Learning by the Spirit," *Ensign* (March 1997), 6–14.

21 While it's true that the Lord had already told Oliver Cowdery he could translate (D&C 6:25; D&C 8:11), those words coming through Joseph Smith might not have provided the same faith-producing assurance as a direct spiritual witness.

asking for the privilege to translate.<sup>22</sup> If he had first asked for a spiritual confirmation that his desire to translate was right, the resultant burning in his bosom might have provided the faith he needed to look without fear and see sacred writings by “the gift and power of God.” Doctrine and Covenants 9:7–9 teaches us how to obtain a spiritual confirmation of a righteous desire. A close reading of the context suggests that such a confirmation can not only tell us that our desire is right in the sight of God but can also give us the faith we need to dispel our fear and actuate the power of God in accomplishing that desire.

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<sup>22</sup> Oliver Cowdery apparently asked twice for the privilege to translate. The first time he asked, the privilege was granted and he “began to translate,” but then the privilege was “taken away” (D&C 9:5) after he feared and chose to return to writing (D&C 9:1,11). The second time he asked, he “supposed that [the Lord] would give it unto” him (D&C 9:7), but that didn’t happen because it was “not expedient that [he] should translate” at the time (D&C 9:3). That time he reacted with impatience and murmuring (D&C 9:3,6).







