

## Hard Questions in Church History

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### Questions to Consider

- Why did Joseph wait so long to begin the translation?
- Was Joseph a money digger and magician?
- Why so secretive about the plates?
- Why did Moroni ask Joseph to bring the “right” person?

### 1827-1828—Joseph Marries, Receives the Golden Plates, and Moves to Harmony, PA

#### Timeline

#### 1823

September 21-22	Angel Moroni appears to seventeen-year-old Joseph Smith and delivers a message four times.
November 19	Alvin Smith dies.

#### 1827

January 18	Marriage of Joseph Smith and Emma Hale; they move in with the Smiths in the new frame home.
September 22	Joseph and Emma ride together to the Hill Cumorah; Joseph obtains the golden plates and interpreters from angel Moroni.
December	Joseph and Emma move to Harmony, Pennsylvania.

#### 1828

January	Joseph translates the “Egyptian Characters [sic]” from the plates.
February	Martin Harris visits Professors Anthon and Mitchell in New York City for verification.

### American Religious Historical Background

Mark Noll published a list of churches in the 18th and 19th centuries that spells out their growth over the new countries first century (America’s God, 166).

Church Growth in Early America				
Number of Churches				Multiple of Growth
Denomination	1770	1790	1860	1770 to 1860
Methodist	20	712	19,883	994.1
Baptist	150	858	12,150	81.0
Presbyterian	500	725	6,406	12.8
Roman Catholic	50	65	2,550	51.0
Congregational	625	750	2,234	3.6
Anglican/Episcopal	356	170	2,145	6.0
Lutheran	125	249	2,128	17.0
Christian/Disciples	0	0	2,128	—
Quakers	228	375	676	3.2
Dutch Reformed	100	115	440	4.7
Total other churches	2,481	4,696	~52,500	21.2
US Population (1,000s)	2,148	3,920	31,513	14.7

The rapid growth of the Methodists' and Baptists' was stimulated from their emotional and heartfelt message that led to conversions. It struck a chord especially on the frontier and with African-Americans. Following the promises of freedom of religion in the Constitution, Roman Catholic immigration also increased (Wacker, *Religion in the Nineteenth Century*, 86, 88).

### Joseph Smith, Sr. and Jr. Hired by Money Diggers for One Month

During the four years between the time that Joseph learned about the new sacred record and finally acquired it, the young prophet received spiritual tutoring from angel Moroni, his own scripture study, and personal revelation. Joseph had been called of God and tried to live accordingly, even while he continued to work as a day laborer. To help the family earn cash to pay their mortgage, the Smith men were eager to work as hired hands for their neighbors, and once, even worked in a neighboring state.

Word traveled to Pennsylvania of a young man who found golden items in a hillside. Josiah Stowell and Jason Tidwell came up to Palmyra from northern Pennsylvania to hire members of the Smith family to help them find silver in the Susquehanna Valley. Their brief attempt at “money digging” was fruitless. Joseph’s mother, Lucy recorded:

[Mr. Stowell] was inflexible, and offered high wages to such as would dig for him; ~~in search of the mine~~; and was ~~[2 words illegible]~~ still very anxious ~~[4 words illegible]~~ to have Joseph work for him; consequently, he returned with the old gentleman; besides several others that who were picked up in the neighborhood, and commenced digging. After laboring about a month without success, Joseph prevailed on his employer to cease his operations ("Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845," p. 95, *josephsmithpapers.org*).

After Joseph persuaded them to stop digging for money, two of the local farmers asked him to stay and work for them— Josiah Stowell and Joseph Knight. They had observed that Joseph was strong, healthy, hardworking, and motivated the other hired hands to work, so they paid him to help with their farms and mills.

It was while Joseph was employed by Mr. Stowell in 1825, that Joseph first met a bright, beautiful, calm, tall, and dark-haired woman named Emma (Emmy) Hale. While working for Mr. Stowell, Joseph boarded at Emma’s father’s lodge. She may have worked in the kitchen preparing meals. Isaac Hale reported that he met Joseph in November 1825.

### Joseph Smith Marries Emma (Emmy) Hale—January 18, 1827

According to Mother Smith’s memory, it was December 1825 when Joseph returned the 140 miles to see his family in Palmyra. While at home, he told his mother that he wished to marry Emma. Lucy recorded:

Joseph called my husband and myself aside, and said: “I have been very lonely ever since Alvin— died, and I have concluded to get married; and, if you have no objections, Miss Emma Hale would be my choice before any other woman I have ever seen.” We were pleased with his selection; and not only gave our consent to his marrying her, but requested, that he <should> bring her home, with <him> and live with us: accordingly he set off with his father for Pennsylvania (ibid., 96)

Joseph then returned to work for Joseph Knight and to court Emma.

Emma's father, Isaac Hale, later wrote, "Young Smith made several visits at my house, and at length asked my consent to his marrying my daughter Emma. This I refused, and gave him my reasons for so doing; some of which were, that he was a stranger, and followed a business that I could not approve; he then left the place" (Blackman, *History of Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania*, 578).

In January 1827, at the age of twenty-two, Emma journeyed a few miles north to visit her sister Elizabeth and to see Joseph. Of her marriage, Emma later told to her son Joseph Smith III,

I had no intention of marrying when I left home; but during my visit to Mr. Stowell's, your father visited me there. My folks were bitterly opposed to him; and, being importuned by your father, aided by Mr. Stowell, who urged me to marry, and preferring to marry him to any other man I knew, I consented (Joseph Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *The Saints' Herald* 26, no. 19 [October 1, 1879]: 101, 289).

Joseph and Emma were married on January 18, 1827 at the home of Zachariah Tarbell in South Bainbridge, New York by Squire Tarbell. Tarbell was the judge who had acquitted Joseph in the 1826 case in which he was accused of being a "disorderly person" under New York law.

### **The Smith's Frame House and Farm in Palmyra/Manchester, NY**

In addition to mourning the death of their son and brother Alvin, the Smiths had reason to mourn the loss of their frame house and farm. It appears they fell short on payments as the land agent or collector was not available. Rather than saving the cash, they spent it on supplies to build their new frame house. But Lucy blamed fraudulent circumstances that led to their loss of property:

~~A little previous to the completion of the house~~ <at this time> we received intelligence of the arrival of a new agent for the Everson Land of which our farm was a portion this caused us to bethink ourselves of the remmaining [*sic*] payment which was still due and which we would be under the necessity of making ~~previous~~<prior>to obtaining the deed" (*ibid.*, p. [9], bk. 4).

Hyrum Smith asked Dr. Gain Robinson to help in the property fiasco. According to Lucy Mack Smith, Dr. Robinson "wrote the charecter [*sic*] of <my [Lucy's]> family our industry and faithful exertion's to obtain a home in <the> forest . . . to beget confidence in us as to business [*sic*] transactions" (*ibid.*, p. [12], bk. 4). Dr. Robinson solicited sixty neighbors within the Palmyra village to sign the document in hopes of helping the Smiths keep their land. Without checking earlier references, lies confused the land agent.

With the help of friends, Hyrum and Joseph, Sr. arranged to sell the Smith property to a third party—Quaker landholder Lemuel Durfee, Sr. Durfee allowed the Smiths to rent back their frame house and farm for a few seasons. In 1829, Lemuel Durfee's daughter Mary and her husband Roswell Nichols moved into the frame house. Joseph Smith, Sr. and their younger children plus Oliver Cowdery moved back into their old log home which was owned by Hyrum and Jerusha Smith and their children (*ibid.*, p. [8], bk. 4).

### **September 22, 1827**

Angel Moroni's September 22, 1827 meeting with Joseph Smith at the Hill Cumorah was anticipated by others besides young Joseph. People who knew of Moroni's visits—after four years of expectancy—were very curious. Lucy Mack Smith recalled:

On the 20th of Sept Mr Knight came with his friend to see how we were managing matters with Mr Stodard and company[;] they remained with us untill [*sic*] the 22 On the night of the 21<sup>st</sup>[.] I sat up very late as my buisness [*sic*] pressed upon my hands & I did not retire untill past 12[.] about 12[.] Joseph came to me and asked me if I had a chest with a lock and key[.] I knew in a moment what it was wanted for and <not having a lock but what was broken I was alarmed fearing that this might be a matter of great importance to him at that time> I told him this but he replied never mind . . . be Calm all ~~was~~ <is> right” (*ibid.*, page [6], bk. 5).

Emma came downstairs in her riding clothes. Shortly before midnight on September 22, 1827, she and Joseph left in Joseph Knight’s wagon to make the 3.5-mile ride to Cumorah. As for Mother Smith, she “spent the night in prayer.”

Emma waited in the wagon while Joseph ascended Hill Cumorah. She was the first to know he had the plates and the Urim and Thummim. Joseph had carved out a cavity in a birch log and hid the plates inside before meeting up with Emma and returning to his parent’s home. When Joseph came in without the plates, his mother Lucy was distraught. He consoled her by saying,

“Mother, said he do not be uneasy all is right see here Said he I have got the key I knew not what he meant but took the article in my hands and ~~upon~~ upon after examing [*sic*] it (\*with no covering but a silk handkerchief) <found> that it consisted of 2 smooth <3 cornered diamonds set in glass and the glass was set in silver bows> ~~stones~~ con[n]ected with each other in the same way that old fashioned spectacles are made (*ibid.*, p. [7], bk. 5).

Others also questioned Joseph about the plates. Joseph Knight recorded that Joseph teased him when he was already upset about his horse and wagon having gone missing.

### The Idea of a “Gold Bible” Enraged Many in the Community

Proclaiming to see in vision God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ was not well received by traditional Christians. But it was Joseph Smith’s claim of adding new scripture the canon by modern revelation and that unleashed a higher level of religious persecution upon Joseph and his family. The additions threatened their belief in the inerrancy of the Bible and tampered with the source of Protestant authority. Voices ranged from sarcastic to hostile as news of “golden plates” spread across Western New York and beyond. Newspaper editors attacked “Joe’s Golden Bible” (Wilson, *Dissertation*, 2010; Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 93; Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ*, 2. 39).

Joseph had been warned that such persecution was coming. For some reason, the Lord allowed the persecution—and Joseph learned to take his calling very seriously. Attempts were made to take the plates by local mobs repeatedly. Once, a young girl named Miss Sally Chase claimed to look through a green piece and “found out the exact place where Joe smith kept his gold bible hid.” A group of fifty men tore up the floorboards of a cooper’s shop but were very disappointed to find only an empty box. ([josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/48](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/48), p. [2-3], bk. 6).

Joseph and his family worked hard to keep the plates safe. We know they were hidden in at least four places.

1. In a cavity of a birch log (three miles from their home)

2. Under stones in the family hearth
3. In cooper's loft under flax, with the box under the floorboards
4. In barrel of beans

Once when Joseph was away having been hired to dig a well, Emma heard of a mob gathering to find the plates. Lucy Mack Smith recalled that Emma hurried to find Joseph, but he was not fearful.

“Joseph kept the urim and thumim constantly about his person an[d] he could by this means ascertain at any moment ~~whether~~ <if> the plates were in danger or having just looked into them before Emma got there he perceived her coming and came up out of the well and met her. When she informed him of ~~the situ~~ what had occurred he told her that the record was perfectly safe for the pre[s]ent. ~~but~~ he <however> concluded to go home with her and told Wells that his business [sic] at home made it necessary for him to return” (ibid., p. [1], bk. 4).

The Smiths learned why angel Moroni warned Joseph with “strict charges to keep them safe” (JS-H 1:60). While safeguarding the plates required constant vigilance and many divine blessings, Joseph learned through the process to value the plates and to obey with exactness.

### **Martin and Lucy (Dolly) Harris**

At age twenty-five, Martin Harris married his sixteen-year-old cousin, Lucy. He inherited his father's 250-acre farm in Palmyra, and was known as a “gentleman and a farmer of respectability” (Black, Who's Who, 124). Lucy was “hard of hearing” which led to her becoming “suspicious of some secret being in agitation that was designedly kept from her hearing” (ibid., p. [3], bk. 6). Lucy Mack Smith wrote of Lucy Harris having had a dream about a personage and the gold plates:

She said that a personage had appeared to her the night before and said to her that inasmuch as she had disputed the servant of the Lord and said that his word was not to be believed and asked him many improper questions that she had done that which was not right in the sight of God[.] Now said behold here are the plates look upon them and believe she then described them record minutely and again said that She had made up her mind as to what she would do that She had in her possession 28 dollars . . . Joseph should take that and if he would he might give his note but he should certainly accept of it on some [sic] terms this last proposition he acceded [*sic*] to in order (ibid., p. [5], bk. 6).

Lucy Harris was the first to donate to the Book of Mormon's translation. Joseph insisted on paying her back, but the debt became a hinderance and her husband, Martin Harris gave Joseph \$50.00 to pay back the \$28.00 from his wife. Sadly, her motivation changed and she added to the mounting persecution that caused Joseph and Emma Smith to move to Harmony, Pennsylvania.

### **October-November 1827—Alva Hale Transports Emma and Joseph to Harmony**

As soon as it was known that Joseph had the plates, persecution soared. Martin suggested that Joseph and Emma leave town. Joseph had already written to Emma's brother Alva Hale to ask him to come with a wagon to help transport them from Palmyra to Harmony—approximately 280 miles roundtrip. Emma was expecting their first child and hoped to return to Harmony that fall. Alva arrived in late

October 1827 and stayed at the Smith's family home for a few nights while Joseph and Emma prepared to leave.

Lucy Mack Smith recalled an interaction between Joseph Smith, Jr. and Martin Harris that was witnessed by several, including Alva Hale.

Mr. Haris [*sic*] entered the room there was many strangers present when he came in he walked up to My Son giving his said how do you do Mr Smith then taking a bag of silver from his pocket Said: “[]here Mr Smith is \$50 I give it to you to do the Lords work with.[]” . . . It was for the purpose of helping Mr Smith to do the Lord's work It was soon arranged so that Joseph was ready to set out for Penn. (*ibid.*, p. [6], bk. 6).

Thanks to Martin's funds, Joseph and Emma were able to leave two days early and thus avoided those who planned on disrupting their departure. In his wagon, Alva transported the Smiths and the gold plates the 140 miles back to Harmony. They hid the plates in a barrel that was about a third full of dried beans.

The trip took nearly a month. Due to Emma's pregnancy, Joseph had her stay in taverns at night. Alva stayed in the covered wagon to protect the plates. They arrived on or near December 3, 1827, according to a tax record. Over the next months, Alva's kindness and support did not last and he joined those who persecuted Emma and Joseph (Mark L. Staker, Robin S. Jensen, “David Hale's Store Ledger: New Details about Joseph and Emma Smith, the Hale Family, and the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 53.3).

For the first five months after having received the golden plates—September 22, 1827 to February 1828—Joseph had not been able to translate. When Joseph and Emma arrived in Harmony, they lived with her parents, waiting to buy a small frame home that belonged in her family. Joseph remembered that while staying with Isaac and Elizabeth Hale:

Immediately after my arrival there [in Pennsylvania] I commenced copying the characters of the plates. I copied a considerable number of them and by means of the Urim and Thummin [*sic*] I translated some of them which I did between the time I arrived at the house of my wife's father in the month of December and the February following” (*ibid.*).

Joseph prioritized studying the engraved characters and sought diving guidance through the interpreters.

### **Martin Harris and Professor Charles Anthon**

In addition to having donated money, Martin Harris also gave Joseph his time. In February 1828, Martin journeyed from Palmyra to Harmony to ask Joseph if he could take a transcription of the Egyptian characters and Joseph's translation to New York City. Joseph agreed, and Martin left to visit two experts and a wealthy friend: Charles Anthon at Columbia College, Professor Samuel Mitchell, a linguist, and Luther Bradish, a wealthy politician. At Columbia College, Martin showed the characters to Charles Anthon, one of the five most preeminent professors of classics in the nation. (In 1828, no one in the United States could read Egyptian. The Rosetta Stone had been discovered but was being studied in Europe.) At some point, Anthon encouraged Martin to visit his emeritus colleague, the esteemed linguist, Samuel Mitchell.

The action of Martin Harris showing the characters to professors from Columbia College resonates with the prophecy found in Isaiah 29:11-14 and suggests that the Lord has intimate knowledge of the life's details and has respect for ancient covenants.

Charles Anthon certified in writing that the characters were “Egyptian, Chaldaic, Assyriac, and Arabic” (JS-H 1:63-65). Yet, upon learning that an angel had given Joseph Smith the gold plates from which the characters were transcribed, Anthon tore up the certificate. Nevertheless, the initial action of Anthon was enough to convince Martin Harris of the veracity of the plates and to act as scribe for the Book of Lehi translation and to put 150 acres of his farm up as collateral for the publication of the Book of Mormon.

### Sources

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