

## Hard Questions in Church History

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### Questions to Consider

- What did Joseph see?
- Why was the initial curtain between the translator & scribe removed?
- Why did Joseph sometimes use the seer stone and other times the Urim and Thummim?

### 1828-1829: The 116 Manuscript Pages—Book of Lehi

#### Timeline

#### 1828 (Joseph is 22)

February	Martin Harris takes “Egyptian characters [sic]” and shows them to Classics professors in New York City: Charles Anthon, and Dr. Samuel Mitchell.
March	Martin journeys with his wife Lucy Harris to Harmony, Pennsylvania.
April 12-June 14	Martin acts as scribe for Joseph Smith as he translates the Book of Lehi.
June	Martin finishes scribing 116 manuscript pages containing the Book of Lehi and the first section of the Book of Mosiah.
June 14	Martin begins journey to Palmyra; takes 116 manuscript pages with him.
June 15	Alvin Smith, son of Joseph and Emma Smith, is born and dies.
July	Angel Moroni takes the gold plates and the Urim and Thummim.
Abt. July 7	Joseph realizes that Martin lost the 116 manuscript pages of Lehi and beginning of Mosiah
Summer	The Lord chastens Martin for being a wicked man (D&C 3, 10).
September 22	Lucy Mack Smith writes of angel Moroni returns the gold plates and the Urim and Thummim to Joseph Smith.
December	David Whitmer meets Oliver Cowdery

#### 1829

March	D&C 5 given to Martin Harris. Lucy Harris enters a complaint against Joseph Smith before a magistrate in Lyons, New York; Martin testifies before the magistrate in behalf of Joseph Smith.
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#### Emma Smith as Scribe

Emma may have been the first scribe for the Book of Mormon, or least one of the earliest. She was also an eyewitness to much of the translation process of the Book of Mormon. Near the end of her life, Joseph Smith III asked Emma questions about the translation. He recorded her answer:

I am satisfied that no man could have dictated the writing of the manuscript unless he was inspired; for, when acting as his scribe, your father would dictate to me hour after hour; and when returning after meals, or after interruptions, he would at once begin where he had left off, without either seeing the manuscript or having any portion of it read to him. There were no delays over obscure passages, no difficulties over the choice of words, no stoppages from the ignorance of the translator; no time was wasted in investigations or argument over the value, intent, or meaning of certain characters, and there were no references to authorities. . . . All was as simple as when a clerk writes from dictation. The translation of the characters appeared on the Urim and Thummim, sentence by sentence, and as soon as one was correctly transcribed the next would appear” (Joseph Smith III, “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” *Saints’ Herald* 26, no. 19 [October 1, 1879], 290).

The fact that Emma's son Joseph asked these questions shortly before her death, brings up the question of timing. Why did he wait until so late in her life to ask and record this? It was years after the reorganization of the church which he then led. This adds to other evidence that Emma had not talked much about this before. It appears that she kept these things to herself.

### **Martin Harris—A Supportive Scribe and Unsatisfied Witness**

After returning from New York City where Martin sought out Professors Anthon and Mitchell to validate the characters and translation from the golden plates, he felt assured enough to proceed with helping Joseph on the translation. In March, Martin and his wife Lucy visited Joseph and Emma in Harmony. Lucy Harris tried in vain to see the plates. She tore through the house in search of them but she did not find them and became angry. Mother Smith remembered: "Mrs. H went from place telling her grievances to everyone she met but particularly bewailing that the deception which Joes Smith was practicing" (Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844-1845, p. [10], bk. 6; [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org)). Mrs. Harris finally returned home very disappointed. In spite of the marital strife on the matter, Martin chose to return to Harmony to assist Joseph as a scribe.

On April 12, 1828 "[Martin] commenced writing" as Joseph translated the Book of Lehi, the first abridged book in a series of books inscribed on "gold plates" (Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:20). The writing and translation process took place in the east end of an upstairs room of the Joseph Smith farmhouse in Harmony, Pennsylvania. According to Martin, "a thick curtain or blanket was suspended" from the ceiling in the room. Once Joseph "concealed [himself] behind the blanket," he looked "through his spectacles, or transparent stones" to read the inscriptions. Joseph described the process:

With the records was found a curious instrument which the ancients called "Urim and Thummim," which consisted of two transparent stones set in the rim of a bow fastened to a breastplate. Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record by the gift, and power of God (*Times and Seasons*, March 1, 1842, "Wentworth Letter").

By this process Joseph and Martin finished the first 116 pages of the Book of Lehi on June 14th, 1828.

We have several non-eyewitness accounts of what happened. A hostile report explained Joseph's translation process:

Seating himself in a private room, behind a curtain or blanket, he placed the wonder-working stone in his hat, and put the hat over his face. He declared himself to be thus enabled to see in plain English, the characters inscribed on the golden plates.

Another claimed that Martin "would then write down or repeat, what he saw." When his words were "repeated aloud," each word was "written down by [Martin], who sat on the other side of the suspended blanket" (Rev. John A. Clark, *Gleanings by the Way*, 230). Positive and negative reports share similarities. Thus, we do not know exactly the mechanics of how the translating and scribing commenced with Martin as the scribe. (For more examples see: [https://www.fairmormon.org/answers/Book\\_of\\_Mormon/Translation/Method/1841-1845#cite\\_note-7](https://www.fairmormon.org/answers/Book_of_Mormon/Translation/Method/1841-1845#cite_note-7)).

The translation process evolved the next year, as Joseph and his later scribes became more familiar with the process of revelation. The blanket came down; the cumbersome breastplate and the rim for the Urim and Thummim were set aside. Although historical records are not clear, it appears that the seer stone may not have been used in the translation process after 1828, but the Urim and Thummim stones were placed in the hat to block out light. The basis for the claim came from the court recordings from July 1830. Joseph Smith Jr. had been accused of using the seer stone for treasure seeking. In court, Joseph and others testified under oath that he had not used the seer stone for two years. The judge accepted that testimony and it was the basis for his ruling that dismiss the claim of fraud. However, there is still the possibility that Joseph testified the seer stones were not used for treasure seeking only. The plates themselves were never part of this translation process; Joseph “looked directly at the interpreters or seer stone while he dictated, reading words directly from whichever instrument he was using” (Dennis Largey, *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon*, 65–67).

### 116 Pages of Manuscript Finished

Martin Harris asked Joseph if he could see the plates, hoping to free himself of doubts and to help heal the rift in his marriage. Martin suggested a witness of their actual existence would give him reason for the hope within. His request was denied. Joseph’s published an account of what happened next in the *Times and Seasons* May 16, 1842:

Some time after Mr. Harris had begun to write for me he began to teaze [sic] me to give him liberty to carry the writings home and shew them, and desired of me that I would enquire of the Lord through the Urim and Thummim if he might not do so. I did enquire, and the answer was that he must not ([josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org))

The denial did not stop Martin from importuning Joseph again for “liberty to carry the writings home and show them.” Joseph inquired of the Lord a second time and the answer was as before.

Although disappointed, Martin continued to scribe as Joseph dictated during the months of April and May, but was not placated. Martin asked a third time for permission to take the manuscript to Palmyra—and Joseph likewise conceded to ask again:

Permission was granted [for Martin] to have the writings on certain conditions; which were, that he show them only to his brother, Preserved Harris, his own wife, his father and his mother [Nathan and Rhoda Harris], and a Mrs. Cobb [Polly Harris Cobb], a sister to his wife (Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:21).

Martin agreed to the specified conditions. He entered into a written covenant with Joseph “in a most solemn manner that he would not do otherwise than had been directed.” He then “took the writings, and went his way” on June 14, 1828 (*ibid.*).

In addition to Moroni’s direction to Martin, Moroni also required that Joseph return the plates and interpreters. Joseph understood that they “had been taken from me in consequence of my having wearied the Lord in asking for the privilege of letting Martin Harris take the writings” (*Times and Seasons*, 16 May 1842, p. 786; [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org)). Joseph hoped that the plates would be returned, but at that time he did not know that the product of two months’ translation work—the Book of Lehi and first two chapters of the Book of Mosiah—would not be retrieved. Recent studies have identified scores of places in the present text of the Book of Mormon where Mormon or the

underlying authors presume that readers are aware of certain details contained in the lost 116 pages, which allows us to reconstruct, to an extent, the content included in the Book of Lehi (see J.B. Haws, [“The Lost 116 Pages Story: What We Do Know, What We Don’t Know, and What We Might Know”](#) in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon*; Don Bradley, [The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon’s Stories](#)).

Martin had the manuscript in his possession for about three weeks. Initially, he was circumspect in showing the manuscript only to the prescribed family members. That changed.

A very particular friend of his made [Martin] a visit, to whom he related all that he knew concerning the record. The man’s curiosity was much excited, and, as might be expected, he earnestly desired to see the manuscript. Martin was so anxious to gratify his friend, that, although it was contrary to his obligation, he went to the drawer to get the manuscript, but the key was gone. He sought for it some time, but could not find it. Resolved, however, to carry his purpose into execution, he picked the lock (Anderson, *Lucy’s Book*, 421).

Joseph Smith reflected, “Notwithstanding . . . the great restrictions which he had been laid under, and the solemnity of the covenant which he had made with me, he did show them to others” (Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:21; for more information see Black and Porter, *Martin Harris*, 102-122).

### **Joseph and Emma’s First Child Dies**

June 15, the day after Martin left Harmony, Emma went into a very difficult labor. Some reports suggest the baby—a boy that some report was named Alvin—had medical complications or birth defects; others that he was stillborn (which, at that time, meant that the baby did not cry, and died soon after birth). Whatever the case, the baby did not live long. Emma, too, almost died from complications of the delivery. Joseph attended to her night and day for over two weeks. When Emma improved, she encouraged Joseph to go to Palmyra to check on the manuscript. He did not want to leave her side, but when she asked if her mother could nurse her back to health, he agreed to go.

### **Joseph Learns of the Loss of the Manuscript, July 1828**

As if the loss of his firstborn son were not enough, Joseph learned of another massive setback when he returned to Palmyra two weeks later. When he left to retrieve the manuscript in Palmyra he was already worn out—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. He took a stagecoach to New York, where a fellow passenger noticed that he had neither slept nor eaten. The man became even more concerned when he learned that Joseph needed to walk through the night to get to Palmyra. The passenger felt empathy for Joseph and offered to walk with him:

I will go with you for I fear . . . you will be in danger of falling asleep in the forrest [sic] and some accident befall you— Joseph thanked him and they proceeded together—. . . it was nearly daylight 4 miles of distance the stranger was under the necessity of leading Joseph by his arm for [his] nature was too much exhausted to suport [sic] him any longer and he would fall asleep on as he stood upon his feet as often as once in a few minutes— When they came in the stranger said I have brought your son through the forrest [sic] because he insisted on coming but he is sick and wants rest and refresh- ment he ought to have some pepper immediately to warm his stomach— After you have prepared that I will thank you for a little breakfast as I am in haste to be on my journey again

<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/85>).

As soon as the stranger left, Joseph requested that Martin be summoned. Anticipating his quick response, at 8 a.m. victuals were set on the table. The Smiths “waited till nine, and he came not—till ten, and he was not there—till eleven, still he did not make his appearance.” It was not until “half past twelve” that Martin was seen “walking with a slow and measured tread towards the house, his eyes fixed thoughtfully upon the ground.” When he reached the gate in the yard, “he stopped, instead of passing through, and got upon the fence, and sat there some time with his hat drawn over his eyes” (Anderson, *Lucy’s Book*, 417).

When he entered the house, he sat down at the table next to those who were already seated. “He took up his knife and fork as if he were going to use them, but immediately dropped them.” Seeing this, Hyrum Smith asked, “Martin, why do you not eat? are you sick?” He pressed “his hands upon his temples” and cried with “a tone of deep anguish, ‘Oh, I have lost my soul! I have lost my soul!’” Joseph, who was seated at the table, jumped to his feet and asked, “Martin, have you lost that manuscript? Have you broken your oath, and brought down condemnation upon my head, as well as your own?”

“Yes, it is gone,” replied Martin, “and I know not where.”

“Oh, my God!” said Joseph, clinching his hands. “All is lost! all is lost! What shall I do? I have sinned—it is I who tempted the wrath of God. I should have been satisfied with the first answer which I received from the Lord; for he told me that it was not safe to let the writing go out of my possession.” He wept and groaned, and walked the floor continually.

At length he told Martin to go back and search again.

“No,” said Martin, “it is all in vain; for I have ripped open beds and pillows, and I know it is not there.”

“Then must I,” said Joseph, “return to my wife with such a tale as this? I dare not do it lest it should kill her at once. And how shall I appear before the Lord? Of what rebuke am I not worthy from the angel of the Most High?” (Anderson, *Lucy’s Book*, 418-419).

The Lord’s rebuke to Joseph was swift; he lost the right to translate the plates, the Urim and Thummim was taken from him, and he was given a severe chastisement. This was the context for the revelation recorded as D&C 3.

Thou deliveredst up that which . . . was sacred into the hands of a wicked man, who has set at naught the counsels of God, and has broken the most sacred promises . . . and has depended upon his own judgment and boasted (D&C 3:12-13).

Because you have delivered the writings into [Martin’s] hands, behold, wicked men have taken them from you. And, behold, Satan hath put it into their hearts to alter the words which you have caused to be written, or which you have translated, which have gone out of your hands. And behold, I say unto you, that because they have altered the words, they read contrary from that which you translated and caused to be written; And, on this wise, the devil has sought to lay a cunning plan, that he may destroy this work: For he hath put it into their hearts to do

this, that by lying they may say they have caught you in the words which you have pretended to translate (D&C 10:6, 10-13).

We learn from the lost manuscript that when one ignores the Spirit, temptations take over and Satan moves in to take control of his victims as one “acted upon” (2 Nephi 2:26)—like a marionette. For more information, see Black and Porter, *Martin Harris*, 102-122.

### Joseph, Sr. and Lucy’s visit in Harmony, Pennsylvania

In February 1829, after seven months of no word from their son, Joseph, Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith traveled the same 140 miles to Harmony to see Joseph. Lucy recorded that Joseph told her:

After I arrived here [Harmony, PA] I commenced humbling myself in mighty prayer before the Lord and <as> I poured out my soul in supplication to him that if possible I might obtain mercy at hands and be forgiven of all that I had done which was contrary to his will. As I was doing this an Angel stood before me and answered me saying that I had sinned in that he had delivered the manuscript into the hands of a wicked man and as he had ventured to become responsible for this man’s faithfulness he would of necessity suffer the consequence’s [sic] of his indiscretion that he must now give back the plates into the hands of the angel from [whom] he had received them but said he it may be if you are sufficiently humble and penitent that you will receive them again on the 22 of September (*josephsmithpapers.org*).

That is exactly what happened. Wiser and repentant, Joseph received God’s instruction as Moroni returned the interpreters long enough for him to receive a revelation: “The works and the designs, and the purposes of God cannot be frustrated, neither can they come to naught” (D&C 3:1). According to Lucy Mack Smith, angel Moroni returned the plates and interpreters on September 22, 1827 (Lucy Mack Smith History 1844-1845; p. [9], bk. 7). In February 1829, Joseph gave the revelation found in D&C 4 for the benefit of his father, calling him to the work; and in March 1829, he gave the revelation found in D&C 5 for the benefit of Martin Harris, allowing him to repent and to become one of the Three Witnesses in June.

In the early spring of 1829 when Joseph returned to translating, he began with Mosiah 3 (which we refer now to as Mosiah 1). He did not realize that the storyline lost in the Book of Lehi would be covered by some degree later on. Since the first five books known as the “small plates” were the last translated—in June 1829—Joseph learned that the Lord had prepared a way to pass on that important information until after he had finished translating the book of Moroni at the end of May.

### Sources

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