

A Multiplicity of Witnesses

WOMEN AND THE TRANSLATION PROCESS

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Four women in early Church history—Mary Musselman Whitmer, Lucy Mack Smith, Lucy Harris, and Emma Hale Smith—played significant roles in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and offered their own witnesses of the plates’ reality. While their names and narratives are well known, scholars and members of the Church have largely overlooked their powerful and important contributions to the work of translation, since they were not a part of the official three or eight witnesses. This chapter addresses this gap in scholarship and historical memory by looking at a variety of sources (both those that are frequently cited and those that have been largely neglected) that recount these women’s experiences with the plates. It considers the various ways in which they came to know of the plates’ temporality and divinity and shows the multiplicity of witnesses that emerge when we privilege ways of knowing and seeing beyond the visual. Evaluating these women’s memories of and interactions with the plates helps us to understand better the translation process and the truly communal effort it required.

Mary Musselman Whitmer

Mary Whitmer¹ has been referred to as the twelfth witness because her experience with the plates parallels most closely that of the official three and eight witnesses.² She is the only known woman to have physically seen the plates, and her experience with them and her role in the translation process aptly illustrate the familial and communal effort that enabled the translation of the Book of Mormon.

In June 1829, Mary and Peter Whitmer opened their home to Joseph Smith; his wife, Emma; and Oliver Cowdery to complete the translation when persecution in Harmony became too intense.³ Here the translation process progressed rapidly as Joseph and Oliver devoted themselves fully to the work. The Whitmers' willingness to shoulder their temporal concerns for a time enabled Joseph and Oliver's single-minded focus; as the family matriarch, Mary, in particular, bore the brunt of this burden. As her son David reports, "My father and mother had a large family of their own, the addition to it therefore of Joseph, his wife Emma and Oliver very greatly increased the toil and anxiety of my mother. And although she had never complained she had sometimes felt that her labor was too much, or at least she was perhaps beginning to feel so."⁴

Life on an early nineteenth-century New York farm was laborious for anyone, but particularly taxing demands were placed on the farmer's wife, who, according to an 1862 US Department of Agriculture study "works harder, endures more, than any other on the place."⁵ A farmer's wife oversaw the running of the household and was typically responsible for milking, butter churning, gathering eggs, and caring for livestock; planting, weeding, and harvesting the kitchen garden; shearing sheep, turning wool into yarn, and sewing garments; cooking, cleaning, laundry; and the list continues.⁶ Much of the additional work of cooking, cleaning, and caring for the visitors invariably fell upon Mary, and those burdens must have taxed an already overworked woman. Encapsulated in David's statement, then, is a reminder of the labor and goods that Mary, along with others, had provided so that Joseph, a poor farmer dependent on the work of his own hands, might give his time and energy to the translation process. If not for the generosity of such individuals as the Whitmers, Martin and Lucy Harris, and Joseph Knight and his family, Joseph would not have had the resources to translate

the plates. Consequently, their labor should be seen as crucial to the work of translation.

That God recognized and valued their sacrifice to aid the work of translation is perhaps most clearly suggested when Mary Whitmer was shown the plates. Her grandson, John C. Whitmer, summarized her experience as follows:

One evening, when (after having done her usual day's work in the house) she went to the barn to milk the cows, she met a stranger carrying something on his back that looked like a knapsack. At first she was a little afraid of him, but when he spoke to her in a kind, friendly tone, and began to explain to her the nature of the work which was going on in her house, she was filled with inexpressible joy and satisfaction. He then untied his knapsack and showed her a bundle of plates, which in size and appearance corresponded with the description subsequently given by the witnesses to the Book of Mormon. This strange person turned the leaves of the book of plates over, leaf after leaf, and also showed her the engravings upon them; after which he told her to be patient and faithful in bearing her burden a little longer, promising that if she would do so, she should be blessed; and her reward would be sure, if she proved faithful to the end. The personage then suddenly vanished with the plates, and where he went, she could not tell.⁷

Her son David additionally reports the words the angel spoke to Mary: "You have been very faithful and diligent in your labors, but you are tried because of the increase of your toil, it is proper therefore that you should receive a witness that your faith may be strengthened."⁸ In the angel's words, we seem to see God's recognition of Mary and her labor; he acknowledged what Mary was contributing to his work, he appreciated her efforts, and he blessed her for her faithfulness and bolstered her commitment. For Mary, as for the later witnesses, the witnessing experience she had was faith building. At the time, as her grandson reported, it "enabled [her] to perform her household duties with comparative ease, and she felt no more inclination to murmur because her lot was hard."⁹

When Mary was shown the plates, she became the first known individual to see them besides Joseph Smith. Within the month, all of the male members of her family, except for her husband, would join her in witnessing

the physical reality of the plates; indeed, seven of the eleven official witnesses of the Book of Mormon were Whitmers by blood or marriage.¹⁰ The entire Whitmer family enabled the translation work by providing for Joseph's, Emma's, and Oliver's temporal needs, and in turn many of them were privileged to become witnesses of the physical reality of the plates and the divinity of the translation process. Richard Lloyd Anderson has referred to the Whitmers as "a family that nourished the Church," and, as Mary's story demonstrates, this is certainly the case.¹¹ They provided the space for the organization of the Church and for the reception of many of the revelations during the New York period, they served missions, and they joined the Saints first in Kirtland and later in Missouri, where Mary's sons and sons-in-law served in many leadership positions. Sadly, in 1838, during a time of great hardship and apostasy, all of the living Whitmers left the Church following a falling out with Joseph Smith. Nevertheless, Mary, like all of her family and the other witnesses for the gold plates, never altered or denied her testimony of their reality, their divine origin, and the message contained in the book translated from them.¹² For the remainder of her life, she would continue to testify of the book—a book made possible through the collective efforts of Mary and the entire Whitmer family, as well as the Knight family, the Harris family, and the Smith family.

Lucy Mack Smith

As a memoirist and as a participant in the events surrounding the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon, Lucy Mack Smith introduces various ways of witnessing beyond the visual, including record keeping, sensory experiences, and spiritual impressions.¹³ In her account, Lucy also broadens the traditional definition of witness to include the entire community of people who contributed to the coming forth of this text. As she sees it, her family and friends—female and male—played important roles within the context of a shared story.

During the winter of 1844–45, just months following the deaths of her sons Joseph, Hyrum, and Samuel, sixty-nine-year-old Lucy dictated her memoir to Martha Jane Knowlton Coray who hoped to preserve an important story. Lucy's memoir, recorded by a woman for a woman, includes the experiences and perspectives of many female witnesses. The memoir's purpose is captured in the original copyright description, which reads as follows:

“The History of Lucy Smith, Wife of Joseph Smith, the first patriarch of [the church of] Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, who was the father of Joseph Smith, Prophet, Seer, and Revelator; containing an account of the many persecutions, trials and afflictions which I and my family have endured in bringing forth the Book of Mormon and establishing the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.”¹⁴ From Lucy’s perspective, Joseph alone did not bring forth the Book of Mormon and establish the Church; rather, it was a family affair.

Lucy’s memoir, which Leonard Arrington suggests “tells more about Mormon origins than any other single source,”¹⁵ documents events surrounding the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon from the perspective of “an observer closely connected to the primary participants” in the Church’s early history.¹⁶ However, because the narrative framework of this text is so familiar to Church members, readers often overlook the texture that Lucy’s account may add to our understanding of Church history. A closer and more careful read reveals a rich and complex narrative about dedicated, devoted, and flawed believers who willingly made sacrifices to enable the publication of this sacred text. The translation of the Book of Mormon, Lucy’s narrative indicates, both required and created a community effort.¹⁷

The need for communal effort is evidenced from the beginning of Lucy’s memoir, which recounts her family’s religious heritage. She highlights, for example, the role of spiritual seeking in the lives of her progenitors, and she describes and interprets powerful dreams—both her own and those of her husband—that seem to have foreshadowed the Restoration.¹⁸ She also discusses at length her own commitment to discovering the true gospel, and demonstrates how this quest impacted her children.¹⁹ In sharing these stories, Lucy implicitly suggests that generations of the Smith and Mack family both were preparing themselves and were prepared by the Lord for the “marvelous work” they would perform.²⁰

Although Joseph’s calling to translate the Book of Mormon and to restore the gospel of Jesus Christ plays a central role in Lucy’s memoir, she stresses her family’s involvement in these events. Lucy notes that after Joseph learned about the gold plates from the angel Moroni, he often gathered his family together and shared his experiences with them. In so doing, she implicitly suggests that he made them active participants in the Restoration. For example, she recalls, “all seated round in a circle father Mother sons and

Daughters listening in breathless anxiety to the <religious> teachings of a boy 16 <19> yars of age who had never read the Bible through by course in his life.”²¹ Nonetheless, she continues: “Joseph would give us some of the most ammusng recitals which could be im maged he would de[s]cribe the ancient inhabitants of this continent their dress thier maner of traveling the animals which they rode The cities that were built by them the structure of their buildings with eve ry particular of their mode of warfare their religi ous worship as particularly as though he had Spent his life with them.”²² Remembering these powerful moments of instruction, William Smith simply explained, “The whole family were melted to tears, and believed all he said.”²³ Although the Smiths lacked tangible evidence of the plates at this time, they experienced spiritual confirmation, and thus they anxiously awaited the day when Joseph would receive the important record he had described.²⁴ Together, the family became witnesses to the Book of Mormon, even prior to Joseph’s acquiring of the plates.

After Joseph had obtained the plates, different forms of witnessing—more sensory in nature—opened up. While they did not physically see the plates, Lucy and other family members saw their outline through the cloth that covered them and even handled them on occasion, thus enabling them to become witnesses of the tangible nature of the object they encountered.²⁵ Shortly after Joseph and Emma had attained the plates, for example, Lucy handled the Urim and Thummim “with no covering but a silk handkerchief” while advising her son about getting a chest made in order to protect them.²⁶ Later, Lucy would see the box that held the plates, as well as the outline of the plates through their covering.²⁷ Lucy’s daughter Katherine Smith also witnessed the plates’ tangibility when she had the opportunity to “heft” the “package” containing the plates that her elder brother had brought home.²⁸ She “found them very heavy like gold and also rippled her fingers up the edge of the plates and felt that they were separate metal plates and heard the tinkle of sound that they made.”²⁹ Due to her recollection of the physical and audible encounters she had with the plates, one individual referred to Katherine as “one of the choice, small circle given to bear firsthand witness to the truthfulness of the Prophet’s assertions regarding possession of the gold plates.”³⁰ Indeed, the range of experiences that individuals such as Lucy and Katherine Smith had with the plates broadens the definition of witnessing to include the senses of touch and sound as well as sight.

In addition to explaining individuals' tangible experiences with the plates, Lucy's history demonstrates that, as the family matriarch, she was involved with and aware of the various events surrounding the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. She is, for example, the only person who knew when Joseph and Emma went to receive the plates.³¹ Of this event, she recalled, "I spent the night in prayer and at reasonable time for rising I went to preparing breakfast my heart fluttering at every footfall for I now expected Joseph & Emma every moment and was in dread of a second disappointment in his obtaining the plates When the male part of the family sat down to breakfast Mr. Smith [Joseph Smith Sr.] enquired for Joseph <for no one but myself knew where he was.>"³² By preserving this story, Lucy reveals that both women and men in the family were intimately involved with the events surrounding the acquisition of the plates. As the translation process ensued, Lucy continued to be amongst the first and few to know about each aspect of the work. For instance, she, along with her husband and Mary Whitmer, were the first to learn that Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, and David Whitmer had been shown the plates by the angel Moroni.³³ And, as soon as the translation was completed, a messenger was sent from Fayette, New York, to share the good news with members of the Smith family.³⁴ In citing such stories, Lucy's memoir makes it clear that she served as a witness of an important work and recognized the value of preserving details only she knew.

Lucy also contributed to the translation process by making temporal sacrifices that enabled the important spiritual work her family had been called to do—"whilst we worked with our hands we endeavored to remmember the service of & the welfare of our souls," she recalled.³⁵ Indeed, she and her family sacrificed time, money, and goods in order to enable Joseph to work on this important project.³⁶ Like Mary Whitmer, Lucy allowed various individuals associated with the translation, including Joseph and Emma, Joseph Knight, and Lucy Harris and her daughter, to stay in her home; she, along with her daughters, inevitably had to assume additional housekeeping responsibilities on a regular basis.³⁷ Besides taking on extra household chores, Lucy helped protect the gold plates and prepare for the eventual publication of a new book of scripture. For example, she helped find hiding places for the plates' protection, remained astutely aware of their safety or lack thereof, and met with Martin and Lucy Harris to request financial

assistance for the project.³⁸ In addition to engaging in temporal labors, Lucy willingly defended the translation work and spoke of the plates' reality. On one occasion, a group of men from a local church asked Lucy if they could see the gold plates. To them she declared, "We have not <got > any <no> gold bible and neither have we ever had any thing of the kind but we have a translation of some gold plates which was sent to the world to bring the plainness of the Gospel to the children of men and also to give a history of the people that used to inhabit this country."³⁹ When the men questioned her witness, Lucy continued, "even you should stick my body full of faggots and burn me at the stake I would declare that Jose[p]h has that record and that I know it to be true as long as God gave me breath."⁴⁰

In many other cases, tangible aspects of Lucy's interaction with the Book of Mormon also took on a spiritual form. On one occasion, she agreed to help protect the manuscript pages of the Book of Mormon from the threat of a mob. After placing the manuscript in a trunk, she put it under her bed. While Peter Whitmer guarded her home, Lucy, now lying on the bed, began a reflective train of thought that captured her testimony about the work her family had engaged in. She recalled:

this identicle work had not only been the object which we as a family had pursued so eagerly but that Prophets of ancient days and angels even the Gr[e]at God had <had> his eye upon it. and said I to myself Shall I fear what man can do will not the angels watch over the precious relict of the worthy dead and the hope of the living and I am I indeed the mother of a prophet of the God of Heaven—the honored instrument in performing so great work—I felt th[at] I was in the purview of angels and my bounded at the thought of the grat condescension of the A[l]mighty—thus I spent the night surrounded by enemies and yet in an extacy of happiness and truly I can say that my soul did magnify and my spirit rejoiced in God my savior.⁴¹

Here, Lucy shows how various aspects of witnessing combine: while protecting tangible manuscript pages, she bore a powerful spiritual witness—in the context of her memoir—about a sacred and divinely inspired work that multiple individuals had sacrificed for in order to make possible. Because Lucy never saw the plates, we do not refer to her as a Book of Mormon witness;

yet, as her memoir demonstrates, she was intimately involved in every event tied to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

Lucy Harris

Within the pages of her memoir, Lucy Mack Smith introduces her readers to Lucy Harris. Although Lucy Harris is typically remembered for her antagonism toward the Book of Mormon, in part because she claimed to have never actually believed in the gold plates following the manuscript's publication, it is important to recognize that Lucy Smith's history reveals another side of this complex figure.⁴² Even though Lucy Mack Smith clearly disliked her neighbor, she still acknowledged Lucy Harris's initial interest in and support of the translation project. She also recalled that Harris had received a powerful spiritual witness of the plates, followed by an audible and tangible witness of them. As a result of these experiences, Smith intimated, Harris had willingly donated a significant amount of money in order to help enable the translation of the Book of Mormon.⁴³

Shortly after Joseph and Emma had obtained the plates from the Hill Cumorah, Joseph asked Lucy Mack Smith if she would speak with a wealthy acquaintance, Martin Harris, about financing the project. She agreed to do so, but decided to first visit with his wife, Lucy, "in order to satisfy" Lucy Harris's curiosity.⁴⁴ According to Lucy Mack Smith's account, Lucy Harris was intrigued by the story Lucy Mack Smith shared with her and expressed an immediate interest in the plates, offering to donate a considerable sum of money from her own "private purse" for Joseph's translation efforts.⁴⁵ She then informed her visitor that she would come to the Smith home one evening in the following week so she could speak with Joseph. When Lucy Harris and her daughter paid a visit to the Smith home, she understandably hoped to see the plates before committing to provide financial support for the project. Although she pled with Joseph to let her see the gold plates, he insisted that he could not show them to her, explaining that the angel who had entrusted them into his care told him that he could only show them to those called as witnesses by God. Dissatisfied with this response, Harris declared, "Now Joseph . . . I will tell [you] what I will do If I can get a witness that you do speak the truth I will beleive it."⁴⁶ Harris, who was staying at the Smith home overnight, retired to bed following her conversation with Joseph.

The following morning, Lucy Harris shared “a very remarkable dream” —a common practice in the early nineteenth century—she had had that night with the Smith family.⁴⁷ In this dream, she reported, a personage had appeared to her and chastised her for importuning “the servant of the Lord.”⁴⁸ The angel then showed her the plates. As a result of the powerful witness she received through this visionary dream, Lucy was able to describe the record in vivid detail, and she subsequently insisted on giving Joseph twenty-eight dollars (money she had received from her mother prior to her mother’s death) to help with the project.⁴⁹ Fascinated by the witness Lucy Harris had borne and appreciative of her generosity, Joseph allowed her and her daughter to handle the wooden box containing the plates. Martin Harris remembered that his “daughter said, they were about as much as she could lift. . . . My wife said they were very heavy.”⁵⁰ The experience of actually hefting the plates added a tangible and audible witness to the spiritual witness Lucy Harris had already received, according to Lucy Mack Smith’s record.

Although Lucy Harris eventually became antagonistic to the work, in part because she never had the opportunity to see the plates despite her early support for the project, Lucy Smith implies that she continued to believe in their physical reality. On one occasion, for example, Lucy Harris traveled to the Joseph Smith Jr. home in Harmony, Pennsylvania, and insisted she would not leave until she saw the plates. She then ransacked “every nook & corner of the house chest cupboard trunk &c” to no avail.⁵¹ The following day, Lucy searched the grounds surrounding the Smith home until early in the afternoon. She later reported that, upon discovering a location in which she thought the plates might be buried, a “tremendous great black snake stuck up its head before me and commenced hissing at me.”⁵² Feeling both frightened and frustrated, Lucy discontinued her search at that time. Nonetheless, she continued to believe in the plates’ existence, and longed for evidence of the work Martin and Joseph were engaged in. Lucy’s later opportunity to see the first 116 manuscript pages of the Book of Mormon appeared her for a time. Although she is often blamed for the disappearance of this manuscript, it is important to remember that she was intrigued by this visible witness and allowed Martin to protect the manuscript in her bureau.⁵³ When Martin later discovered that the translated pages were missing, Lucy “solemnly averred” that she had not taken them.⁵⁴ Even when Lucy Harris felt skeptical about the translation project, Smith’s account suggests

that she continued to believe in the plates' existence. Her early witnessing experiences seem to have convinced her that Joseph indeed had the physical object he claimed to have in his possession.

As remembered by Lucy Mack Smith, Lucy Harris's experiences demonstrate some of the varied ways in which multiple people witnessed the plates and aided Joseph throughout the translation process. Lucy Mack Smith reminds us that women and men—in this case, Lucy and Martin Harris—both offered to provide financial backing for the publication of the Book of Mormon—a manifestation, or witness, in and of itself, of their belief in and commitment to a vast and collective undertaking.⁵⁵ The fact that Lucy and Martin had doubts and struggles does not negate their early witnessing experiences, nor does it overshadow the sacrifices they made.

Emma Hale Smith

As the individual who was with Joseph from the beginning to the end of the translation process and who provided him with immeasurable assistance in various ways, Emma Smith was arguably more intimately involved in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon than any person besides Joseph. Therefore, by viewing the translation process through her own witness, we not only learn of the integral role she played in the work of translation and her own commitment to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, but we also gain new knowledge about the translation process itself and about the plates' physicality. When the experience is seen through her eyes, as well as those of the other women, the work of translation becomes a familial and communal project, with many people contributing to the success of the endeavor.

Emma's involvement with the ancient Nephite record began when she accompanied Joseph to the Hill Cumorah to receive the long-anticipated plates. Early in his communication with the angel Moroni, Joseph was commanded to bring the right person with him to the hill. He believed that person to be Emma;⁵⁶ and thus at midnight on September 22, 1827, the two of them left the Smith's home, and, with the aid of Joseph Knight's horse and wagon, went to retrieve the plates.⁵⁷ After arriving at the Hill Cumorah, Joseph left Emma in the wagon and went alone to retrieve the plates. When he returned a few hours later, he carried a bundle wrapped in his coat. Joseph then left Emma again so he could deposit the plates in a hollowed-out birch

log in the woods. For the next three years, Joseph and Emma's lives revolved around the protection and translation of the plates.

Persecution in Palmyra began immediately and required the entire Smith family to aid in the protection of the plates. Needing money to purchase a box to hold the plates, Joseph left a day or two after retrieving them for a well-digging job in Macedon, just west of Palmyra. In his absence, Joseph's father learned of a group of men who, with the aid of a conjurer, planned to find and steal the plates, which had been hidden in the woods. When Joseph Sr. reported what he had overheard to Emma, she directly mounted a horse and rode to warn Joseph. Together, they returned to Palmyra and Joseph retrieved the plates from their hiding place.⁵⁸ Three times he was assaulted on his way home. The persecution continued in the days that followed; once, mobs came to the Smith home and ransacked their cooper shop in search of the plates.⁵⁹ Joseph and Emma soon determined that they must leave Palmyra. Word was sent to Emma's brother, Alva Hale, asking him to come to Palmyra and take them back to Harmony.⁶⁰ Once settled in a home located on Emma's parents' property,⁶¹ Joseph and Emma began the work of translation. Although the Hale's were antagonistic towards the work, they—like the Smith's—were vital to the translation process because of the space and protection they provided for Joseph and Emma.

Emma served as Joseph's first scribe, and some sources suggest that her work in this capacity may have been more significant and extensive than is commonly recognized. According to Joseph Knight, Emma assisted in "[drawing] of the Caracters" that Martin took to Charles Anthon.⁶² She also possibly recorded the majority of Joseph's translation for the lost 116 pages, as Martin Harris remembered that he wrote "about one third of the first part of the translation of the plates as [Joseph] interpreted them by the Urim and Thummim."⁶³ While it is unknown precisely how long or how much Emma scribed for Joseph, Martin's statement raises the possibility that she recorded two-thirds of the lost 116 pages, which would make her Joseph's most prolific scribe besides Oliver Cowdery. Emma's own reminiscences of the translation work also indicate that her time scribing was extensive: "I frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table close by him . . . dictating hours after hour with nothing between us."⁶⁴

Emma Smith's witness of this time also provides invaluable insight into the translation process, particularly as she scribed for Joseph both before

and after the first 116 manuscript pages had been lost. From her we learn of “[Joseph] sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it. . . . He had neither manuscript nor book to read from.”⁶⁵ She also informs us that when Joseph first began translating he used the Urim and Thummim, but later “he used a small stone, not exactly, black, but was rather a dark color.”⁶⁶ Each of these details alter common perceptions of how Joseph translated. More specifically of the process, she reports:

When my husband was translating the Book of Mormon, I wrote a part of it, as he dictated each sentence, word for word, and when he came to proper names he could not pronounce, or long words, he spelled them out, and while I was writing them, if I made any mistake in spelling, he could stop me and correct my spelling, although it was impossible for him to see how I was writing them down at the time. Even the word *Sarah* he could not pronounce at first, but had to spell it, and I would pronounce it for him. When he stopped for any purpose at any time he would, when he commenced again, begin where he left off without any hesitation, and one time while he was translating he stopped suddenly, pale as a sheet, and said, “Emma, did Jerusalem have walls around it?” When I answered, “Yes,” he replied “Oh! I was afraid I had been deceived.” He had such a limited knowledge of history at that time that he did not even know that Jerusalem was surrounded by walls.⁶⁷

Scholars have used such information to argue for a tightly controlled translation process.⁶⁸ More important, though, Emma’s witness also testifies repeatedly of the divinity of the work as Joseph corrected her spelling without seeing what she wrote, commenced where he left off “without either seeing the manuscript or having any portion of it read to him,”⁶⁹ and discovered things he did not know about, such as the walls around Jerusalem, as he translated.

Emma’s experience as Joseph’s scribe contributed to her lasting spiritual witness of the plates’ divinity. Nearly fifty years later, she told her son:

My belief is that the Book of Mormon is of divine authenticity. I have not the slightest doubt of it. I am satisfied that no man could have dictated the writing of the manuscript unless he were inspired. . . . Joseph Smith could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well worded letter, let alone dictating a book like the Book of Mormon. . . . And though I was an active

participant in the scenes that transpired and was present during the translation of the plates, and had cognizance of things as they transpired, it is marvelous to me, “a marvel and a wonder,” as much so as to any body else.⁷⁰

From the individual who knew Joseph best, we learn of his capabilities at the time of translation and how far beyond those capabilities the Book of Mormon extended. The discrepancy between the two reaffirmed for Emma the divinity of the work—a spiritual witness that she would share repeatedly for the rest of her life.

Emma contributed to the work of translation not only through her scribal efforts but also through the support and care she provided Joseph as his wife. Emma was not able to be the full-time scribe that Joseph needed because, as Lucy Smith and Joseph Knight both report, most of her time was spent caring for their home and their temporal needs.⁷¹ Maintaining a home was a full-time occupation in early nineteenth-century America, and Emma, without any hired help, fulfilled this necessary role for Joseph and herself, as well as at times for Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery. Only with Emma caring for the home in Harmony, Joseph’s brother Samuel tending the farm, and Joseph Knight providing food and paper could Joseph and Oliver devote themselves exclusively to the work of translation.⁷² Notably, in her role as housekeeper Emma remained a close observer of the translation process as “Oliver Cowdery and [Joseph Smith] wrote in the room where [she] was at work.”⁷³

Emma, as an eyewitness of the translation process from the moment Joseph received the plates until the time when the Book of Mormon was published, also offered a temporal witness of the plates’ physicality. In her role as housekeeper, “she would lift and move [the plates] when she swept and dusted the room and furniture.”⁷⁴ At times the plates “lay under [their] bed for a few months.”⁷⁵ Other times they sat in a sack or “wrapped in a small linen tablecloth”⁷⁶ on a “small table in their living room in their cabin.”⁷⁷ Her witness of the plates’ physicality takes on an added dimension when she describes “tracing their outline and shape.”⁷⁸ She reports that the plates, “seemed to be pliable like thick paper, and would rustle with a metallic sound when the edges were moved by the thumb, as one does sometimes thumb the edges of a book.”⁷⁹ Here Emma offers both auditory and tactile witnessing; nevertheless, many have questioned her lack of a visual witness.

Interestingly, though, she herself did not seem to; as she told her son, “I did not attempt to handle the plates, other than I have told you, nor uncover them to look at them. I was satisfied that it was the work of God, and therefore did not feel it to be necessary to do so.”⁸⁰ Emma’s complete assurance of the reality of the plates despite her never seeing them is a powerful statement about the validity of other ways of knowing and seeing beyond the visual.

The events surrounding the lost 116 pages illustrate well how the translation process was, in many respects, a truly joint effort for Joseph and Emma and how Emma, too, was deeply invested in the project. The day after Martin left with the 116 pages, Emma gave birth to their first son, who either was stillborn or lived for only a couple of hours.⁸¹ Having undergone a long and extremely difficult labor, Emma’s life was in danger for more than a couple of weeks. As her health improved, Joseph became increasingly anxious about the manuscript, “but he did not mention the subject to Emma for fear of agitating her mind to[o] much for the health of her body.”⁸² However, as Lucy Mack Smith reports, Emma—also concerned about the manuscript—told her husband, “I feel so uneasy . . . that I cannot rest and shall not be at ease untill I know something about what Mr Harris is doing with it do you not think it would be ad visable for you to go and enquire into the reason of his not writing or sending any word back to you since he left us.”⁸³ Emma’s concern for the manuscript and insistence that Joseph leave her to inquire after it in the face of her own precarious health situation—and devastation over the loss of her first child—says much about her own commitment to the work.

Although many scholars have attributed Emma’s professed concern for the plates to worry about Joseph’s increasing despondency about the state of the manuscript,⁸⁴ consideration must also be given to Emma’s own labor in scribing part of the 116 pages and the countless sacrifices she had made to assist in the translation work, as well as Lucy’s statement about Emma’s personal agitation over the manuscript. Additionally, Joseph’s response to Martin when he learns Martin has lost the manuscript speaks to Emma’s deep involvement in the project. “Then must I . . . return to my wife with such a tale as this I dare not do it least I should kill her at once.”⁸⁵ Given Emma’s fragile health, Joseph’s words may not have been hyperbolic but rather may demonstrate his actual concern that her health may not have been able to withstand the additional loss of all that they had been working for together.

A statement that Emma made at the end of her life, that “[she] was an active participant in the scenes that transpired and was present during the translation of the plates, and had cognizance of things as they transpired” is certainly accurate.⁸⁶ And through her witness we gain new knowledge of the translation process and the power in witnesses beyond the visual.

Conclusion

Each of these women—Mary Musselman Whitmer, Lucy Mack Smith, Lucy Harris, and Emma Hale Smith—aided the work of translation and offered their own witnesses of the plates’ reality. By recognizing their contributions, we not only place women back into the narrative in which they were integral actors, but we also expand the scope of ways in which to witness and what it means to be a witness. Touch, sound, spiritual impressions, and visions may in fact produce, as these women illustrate, a more lasting and powerful experience than sight. In turn, through the witnesses of these women, we may see how the translation of the Book of Mormon both required and created community effort; males and females, people young and old, both family and friends all worked together on this important project. Almost two centuries later, the miracle of this great work may resonate more and build greater faith when we recognize how God used dedicated men and women to bring forth his great work of translation and restoration.

Notes

1. Mary Whitmer was born Mary Musselman in Germany on August 27, 1778. She immigrated to Pennsylvania and married Peter Whitmer, who was also of German descent. They moved to Fayette, New York, in 1809. Information taken from Mary Musselman Whitmer entry in the biographical directory in Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: 1832–1844*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 638 (hereafter *JSP*, H1). For more information, see Andrew Jensen, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia: A Compilation of Biographical Sketches of Prominent Men and Women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jensen History Co., 1901), 1:283.
2. Dan Peterson, “Defending the Faith: Mary Whitmer, 12th Witness to the Book of Mormon,” *Deseret News*, July 18, 2013.

3. Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845; handwriting of Martha Jane Knowlton Coray and Howard Coray; 240 pages, with miscellaneous inserted pages; Church History Library, book 8, 8–10; in citing book and page numbers, we follow the references available as part of the full text on *The Joseph Smith Papers'* website. See also interview of Joseph F. Smith and Orson Pratt with David Whitmer, as reported in *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star*, December 9, 1878, 772. For more information, see Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 67.
4. David Whitmer, *Deseret Evening News*, November 16, 1878, 1; as cited in Dan Vogel, comp., *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 5:51–52.
5. As cited in Catherine Clinton and Christine A. Lunardini, eds., *The Columbia Guide to American Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 35.
6. For more information, see Sally Ann McMurry, *Families and Farmhouses in Nineteenth-Century America: Vernacular Design and Social Change* (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 1988), 59–61; Clinton and Lunardini, 35–36; Nancy Grey Osterud, *Bonds of Community: The Lives of Farm Women in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 156–58.
7. Statement of John C. Whitmer quoted in Andrew Jenson, *The Historical Record* 7, nos. 8–10 (October 1888): 621.
8. David Whitmer, *Deseret Evening News*.
9. Statement of John C. Whitmer.
10. Mary Whitmer raised seven children to adulthood. All five of her sons became witnesses for the gold plates, along with her sons-in-law, Hiram Page, who married Katherine in 1825, and Oliver Cowdery, who married Elizabeth in 1832.
11. Richard Lloyd Anderson, “The Whitmers: A Family That Nourished the Church,” *Ensign*, August 1979, 35; Keith Perkins, “True to the Book of Mormon—The Whitmers,” *Ensign*, February 1989, 34–42.
12. For more information on the Whitmers' role in the Church, later apostasy, and continual witness of the gold plates, see Anderson, “The Whitmers,” 35; Keith Perkins, “True to the Book of Mormon,” 34–42.
13. Lucy Mack Smith, History.
14. Copyright for Lucy Mack Smith, “The History of Lucy Smith,” July 18, 1845, Robert Harris, Copyright Registry Records for Works Concerning the Mormons to 1870, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.
15. Leonard J. Arrington, letter to the advisory editor of Arno Press, Edwin S. Gaustad, February 5, 1969. Quoted in Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1987), 91.
16. Shipps, *Mormonism*, 92.
17. Lucy Mack Smith, History.
18. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 6, 5; Miscellany, 9.
19. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 2, 4–5; book 9, 5–6.
20. Asael Smith believed and declared that God intended to raise a branch of his family to be of great benefit to humankind. See Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Joseph*

Smith's New England Heritage: Influences of Grandfathers Solomon Mack and Asael Smith, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2003), 147–49, 286; and Joseph Smith, “Revelation, February 1829 [D&C 4],” in *The Joseph Smith Papers, Revelations and Translations, Manuscript Revelation Book*, ed. Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, Steven C. Harper (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian’s Press, 2009), 1, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/revelation-february-1829-dc-4?p=1>.

21. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 3, 12; and book 4, 1.
22. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 4, 1–2.
23. From William Smith, *William Smith on Mormonism* (Lamoni, IA: Herald Steam Book and Job Office, 1883), 9. Quoted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:620.
24. Smith, *William Smith on Mormonism*, 10.
25. Smith, *William Smith on Mormonism*, 11–12.
26. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 5, 7.
27. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 5, 7.
28. Quoted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:524.
29. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:525.
30. Salisbury, “Things the Prophet’s Sister Told Me,” July 30, 1944 (San Rafael, CA), original typescript signed by the author, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT. Cited in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:524; “The Prophet’s Sister Testifies She Lifted The B[ook] of M[ormon] Plates,” *The Messenger*, October 1954, 1, 6, RLDS Church Library-Archives, Independence, MO. Quoted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:649.
31. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 5, 6.
32. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 5, 6.
33. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 8, 11.
34. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 8, 10.
35. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 3, 10.
36. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 5, 6; book 5, 8; book 5, 12.
37. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 5, 6; book 5, 4.
38. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 6, 2–3; book 5, 6.
39. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 9, 7.
40. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 9, 8.
41. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 9, 7.
42. E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, OH: Printed and Published by the author, 1834), 254–57; 216–21. Lucy Harris may be disputed as a definitive witness, because she refuted the truth of Mormonism in an affidavit (see *Mormonism Unveiled*). Her behavior is not uncommon and may even be expected in one who becomes antagonistic towards the Church and suffers either indirectly or directly because of Church connections, as she attests she did via Martin. Consequently, Lucy Smith’s account of Lucy Harris should be viewed as a credible recollection of events, particularly since Lucy Smith does not appear to like Harris or have any reason for placing these experiences upon her.
43. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 6, 5–6.

44. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 6, 4. Compare with Joel Tiffany, interview with Martin Harris, in “Mormonism—No. II,” *Tiffany’s Monthly*, August 1859, 168–70.
45. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 6, 3–5.
46. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 6, 4–5.
47. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 6, 5. See also Mechal Sobel, *Teach Me Dreams: The Search for Self in the Revolutionary Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); and Phyllis Mack, “Agency and the Unconscious: The Methodist Culture of Dreaming,” in *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 219–60. Oliver Cowdery had a similar experience before becoming one of the Book of Mormon scribes. The Lord “appeared unto a young man by the name of Oliver Cowdery and showed unto him the plates in a vision, and also the truth of the work, and what the Lord was about to do through me, his unworthy servant. Therefore, he was desirous to come and write for me to translate.” Spelling and punctuation modernized. See Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 14, 20.
48. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 6, 5.
49. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 6, 5.
50. Tiffany, interview with Martin Harris, 168.
51. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 6, 9; book 6, 8–10.
52. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 6, 9.
53. As described in Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 7, 7–8.
54. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 7, 8.
55. Although Lucy Harris initially offered financial assistance, she later refused to sign the \$3,000 mortgage agreement that was to be used to satisfy the printer, E. B. Grandin.
56. According to Joseph Knight, Joseph Smith was first told by the angel Moroni that he must bring his oldest brother Alvin with him. After Alvin’s death he was subsequently shown that he was to bring Emma Hale. Joseph Knight Sr., “Joseph Knight’s Recollection of Early Mormon History,” ed. Dean C. Jessee, *BYU Studies* 17, no. 1 (Autumn 1976): 31.
57. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 5, 6. Joseph Knight refers in his recollections to a horse and carriage rather than the horse and wagon that Lucy referenced in her memoir. See “Knight’s Recollection,” 32.
58. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 5, 9–10.
59. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 5, 11–12; book 6, 1–3; Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 60–61.
60. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 6, 6.
61. Joseph had an agreement that he was to purchase the home and thirteen acres from Isaac Hale for \$200. He made the last payment in August 1830. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 63.
62. “Knight’s Recollection,” 34.

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63. Simon Smith, letters to the editor, *Saints' Herald*, April 30, 1884; May 24, 1884, 324. Sources originally cited and assertion originally made that Emma wrote the translation for the majority of the lost 116 pages in Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation & Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 90–91. Possibly contradicting this point, Anthony Metcalf claimed that Harris told him that he “wrote a great deal of the Book of Mormon . . . as Joseph Smith translated or spelled the words out in English.” See *Ten Years before the Mast* (Malad City, ID: publisher not identified, 1888), 70–71. The assertion that Emma wrote two-thirds of the lost 116 pages is also in conflict with Joseph's own statement that “he [M Harris] had written one hundred and sixteen <pages> of manuscript on foolscap paper.” (*JSP*, H1:244). However, this statement by Joseph about the 116 pages does not account for Joseph's other statement in which he wrote that “my wife had written some for me to translate and also my Brothr Samuel H. Smith” (*JSP*, H1:16).
64. Emma Smith Bidamon, interview with Joseph Smith III, February 1879, Miscellany, RLDS Church Library-Archives, Independence, MO. Reproduced in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:539.
65. Emma Smith Bidamon interview, February 1879, reproduced in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:539.
66. Emma Smith Bidamon to Emma Pilgrim, March 27, 1870, Emma Smith Papers, RLDS Church Library-Archives, Independence, MO. Also published in *The Return*, July 15, 1895, 2. Reproduced in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:532.
67. From Edmund C. Briggs, “A Visit to Nauvoo in 1856,” *Journal of History* 9 (January 1916): 454, reproduced in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:530–31.
68. Royal Skousen, “How Joseph Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1998): 24–25.
69. Emma Smith Bidamon interview, February 1879, reproduced in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:538.
70. Emma Smith Bidamon interview, February 1879, reproduced in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:538–40.
71. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, book 8, 4; “Knight's Recollection,” 35.
72. For more information on Samuel Smith's role, see Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, book 8, 1–4; Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*, 2nd ed. (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 28–29; Kyle R. Walker, *United by Faith: The Joseph Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith Family* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2005), 207–9. For more information on Joseph Knight providing food and supplies, see “Knight's Recollection,” 36.
73. Emma Smith Bidamon interview, February 1879, reproduced in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:539.
74. Joseph Smith III to Mrs. E. Horton, March 7, 1900. Miscellany, RLDS Church Library-Archives, Independence, MO. See also Emma Smith Bidamon, interview, reproduced in Vogel, 1:546–47.

75. Nels Madson, "Visit to Mrs. Emma Smith Bidamon," 1877 signed statement, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, reproduced in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:546.
76. Emma Smith Bidamon interview, February 1879, reproduced in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:539.
77. Joseph Smith III to Mrs. E. Horton, March 7, 1900; see also Emma Smith Bidamon, February 1879, reproduced in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:546.
78. Emma Smith Bidamon interview, February 1879, reproduced in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:539.
79. Emma Smith Bidamon interview, February 1879, reproduced in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:539.
80. Emma Smith Bidamon interview, February 1879, reproduced in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:540.
81. For more information, see Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippets Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*, 2nd ed. (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 27.
82. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 7, 2.
83. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 7, 2.
84. See Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 28; Gracia N. Jones, *Emma and Joseph: Their Divine Mission* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 1999), 27; Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 67.
85. Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 7, 6.
86. Emma Smith Bidamon interview, February 1879, reproduced in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:540.