

“By the Gift and Power of God”

By Richard Lloyd Anderson

What do we know about how Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon?

The Three Witnesses proclaimed that the ancient plates were “translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice hath declared it unto us.” Since we know the Book of Mormon is correctly translated, why review how it was done? Because such a study can add further testimony of Joseph Smith’s great work. It can also help expand the concepts of those who tend to oversimplify the work of translation. For the Book of Mormon came into English through considerable spiritual, intellectual, and physical labor, and it takes similarly dedicated efforts on the part of its readers to fully receive the book’s benefits.

The spirit of the translation is captured in a letter written by the secretary Oliver Cowdery during the month that it was completed. He addressed Hyrum Smith in common faith “in the great cause of which you have been called to advocate,” quoting from the new manuscript of the Lord’s American ministry. He also quoted from the new revelation on the worth of souls to the Lord, who “suffered death upon the cross” for them.¹ Here is a man moved by Christian love and sincerely committed to his calling of divine translation. Five years later he wrote about assisting Joseph Smith: “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.”²

Similar feelings remained with the Prophet’s wife near her death, as she retold the experience of the translation period to her son: “I am satisfied that no man could have dictated the writing of the manuscripts 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. This was a usual thing for him to do. It would have been improbable that a learned man could do this, and for one so ignorant and unlearned as he was, it was simply impossible.”³

The above memories of both his wife and Oliver Cowdery are impressive because they had more experience with the production of the English manuscript than anyone else. Searching for others with similar knowledge, one finds that only the other two of the Three Witnesses really qualify: Martin Harris and David Whitmer. Others on the periphery of translation either said little about it or (as in the case of William Smith and Joseph Knight) cannot be proved to have observed the process.

As Joseph Smith’s first scribe (during the summer of 1828), Martin Harris spoke with authority of that phase of the translation. But quoting him raises a key issue: everything attributed to him does not necessarily represent his exact words. This

caution is necessary because his statements on translation details are filtered through reporters, some with only casual contact, some claiming to remember exact words years later.

The person who best reflects Martin Harris is probably Edward Stevenson, since he spent nearly two months with the Witness after going to Ohio to escort him back to Utah in 1870. On the means of translation Stevenson reported, “He said that the Prophet possessed a seer stone, by which he was enabled to translate as well as from the Urim and Thummim, and for convenience he then used the seer stone.”⁴

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stressed the Urim and Thummim in his statements. While editor of the Church newspaper in 1834, he made the comment already quoted on the inspiration of writing for Joseph Smith. Then the Prophet’s exscribe added:

“Day after day I continued uninterrupted to write from his mouth as he translated, with the *Urim* and *Thummim*, or as the Nephites would have said, ‘interpreters,’ the history, or record called “The Book of Mormon.”⁶ (A fraudulent pamphlet published in Cowdery’s name later attempted to throw doubt on his testimony of translation, but no serious student now accepts the document.)⁷

When Cowdery returned to Church membership in 1848 he spoke to an Iowa conference. His words there were recorded by Reuben Miller: “I wrote with my own pen the entire Book of Mormon (save a few pages) as it fell from the lips of the Prophet as he translated it by the gift and power of God by means of the Urim and Thummim, or as it is called by that book, holy interpreters. I beheld with my eyes and handled with my hands the gold plates from which it was translated. I also beheld the Interpreters. That book is true. ... I wrote it myself as it fell from the lips of the Prophet.”⁸

The Miller journal can be tested by comparing it with official records of the Cowdery speeches, and it is clearly accurate. Thus the above words are likely to be Cowdery *verbatim*. This judgment is essential because in the report Oliver Cowdery says, “I ... handled with my hands the gold plates.” Yet another Witness, David Whitmer, insisted that he had never handled the plates; he only watched as the angel in the vision displayed the plates and other sacred objects.⁹ Since Whitmer and Cowdery were together at this impressive vision, one must infer that Cowdery did not handle the plates at that time. Thus a distinction emerges between the key secretary and his witness brother-in-law: at some time during the translation process Oliver Cowdery evidently handled the plates.

This conclusion fits in with the two revelations inviting Oliver to interpret “the engravings of old records” (D&C 8:1) and then commenting on his failure: “You did not translate according to that which you desired of me, and did commence again to write for my servant, Joseph.” (D&C 9:1.) Thus he was admonished to continue in this relationship “until you have finished this record,” an instruction given during April 1829, at least a month before David Whitmer appeared on the scene. Oliver Cowdery might well have handled the plates during his translation attempt.

One document explicitly says that the translator placed the Urim and Thummim over the characters on the plates, though it must be judged with great caution. It comes from a late but good source, Samuel W. Richards, a seasoned missionary and administrator in the Church. In returning from Britain in 1848 he lived temporarily in the area below Council Bluffs, and by coincidence Oliver Cowdery and his family asked for hospitality with him on their way from the Bluffs to visit Elizabeth Cowdery's brother, David Whitmer, at Richmond, Missouri. This much is clearly factual. Later Brother Richards told of his extended visit with Oliver Cowdery, who freely talked of the spectacular events in the founding of the Church. When Brother Richards was eighty-two, he dictated a statement reporting Oliver Cowdery's recollections of Book of Mormon translation:

“He represented Joseph as sitting at a table with the plates before him, translating them by means of the Urim and Thummim, while he (Oliver) sat beside him writing every word as Joseph spoke them to him. This was done by holding the ‘translators’ over the hieroglyphics, the translation appearing distinctly on the instrument, which had been touched by the finger of God and dedicated and consecrated for the express purpose of translating languages. Every word was distinctly visible even to every letter; and if Oliver omitted a word or failed to spell a word correctly, the translation remained on the ‘interpreter’ until it was copied correctly.”¹⁰

Yet it is doubtful whether Samuel Richards could quote Oliver accurately in 1907, fifty-nine years after their intimate visit. In fact, he continued the above statement by picturing Oliver Cowdery as successfully translating himself, thus learning how Joseph Smith performed that work. But the contemporary revelation to Oliver Cowdery says the opposite (D&C 9), which means that no one besides Joseph Smith knew personally the exact means of translation. As we shall soon see, the literalism of having Joseph dictate each word in correct spelling is also suspect. Yet there may be an authentic shadow of Oliver Cowdery's and Joseph Smith's experience in the physical art of placing the translating instruments directly over the plates.

David Whitmer's idea of translation is similar to Samuel Richards's. Yet this view does not appear until 1875, nearly a half-century after Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery worked in David Whitmer's home. His many statements on translation harmonize with his *Address to All Believers In Christ*, published in 1887 to supersede second-hand reports. There he gave his most detailed view 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 to 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. The characters I speak of are the engravings on the golden plates from which the book was translated.”¹¹

It is tempting to accept the above statement at face value. However, since David Whitmer had not personally translated, his accuracy on details depends on whether he correctly understood what Joseph Smith told him in the first place, and whether he correctly remembered such details after that. This explanation has Joseph Smith simply read off the entire translation rather than formulate it. In one David Whitmer interview, however, such a procedure is limited to proper names. At that time David Whitmer said that Joseph “was utterly unable to pronounce many of the names which the magic power of the Urim and Thummim revealed and therefore spelled them out in syllables, and the more erudite scribe put them together.”¹² This much is likely, for proper names are not a subject for translation, but for transliteration; that is, their sounds and not their meanings carry over into the second language. So Joseph’s dictation of these names fits any informed concept of translation.

But many anti-Mormons have seized on the implications of going further: that is, if Joseph Smith only dictated divinely given English from his viewing instrument, then God is the author of some bad grammar in the original.

Some critics have also felt that misspellings in the Book of Mormon “prove” it is false. The latter cannot be blamed on the printer, for we possess parts of the original unpunctuated Cowdery manuscript from Joseph’s dictation in 1829. The scribe on occasion wrote “hart” for “heart”; “desirus” for “desirous”; and “futer” for “future.”¹³ These spelling errors were corrected in the recopied printer’s manuscript and thus appeared in correct form in the first printing.¹⁴ They were probably mistakes of the secretary in the rapidly moving dictation process, and had nothing to do with Joseph Smith. Thus there is no logical problem with scribal misspellings, even under David Whitmer’s explanation of Joseph simply reading “the interpretation in English.” This much refutes the extreme claim that the Prophet’s use of divine aid in translation rules out “all changes, regardless of how minor.” There have been notable misspellings in the printing process of Bible editions that have nothing to do with the question of the inspired nature of the original writings!

Yet David Whitmer’s explanation clearly goes too far in respect to sentence structure and grammar. The first edition of the Book of Mormon carried numerous sentences with a plural subject and singular verb, and vice versa; it sometimes placed an idiomatic “a” before a participle (“a marching”) or an idiomatic “for” before an infinitive (“for to destroy them”); it regularly used “which” for the personal “who.” Such language clearly originated with the Prophet as he dictated, not with the secretary.

Accuracy is not the issue, since ungrammatical language can still communicate clearly the meaning of the original. Perhaps David Whitmer unconsciously added his own ideas as he spoke on the translation method. He could legitimately speak on the physical appearance of translation but had no personal knowledge of the translation itself. Watching a scientist at work with a delicate instrument gives an untrained observer no insight into the inner workings of either the apparatus or the mind of the scientist. In the case of Book of Mormon translation, the only one that fully understood the procedure was Joseph Smith.

Thus a close look at the Prophet's comments is probably the most reliable method of understanding how he produced the Book of Mormon. As is generally known, Joseph Smith chose to speak in summary terms, though there are interesting reiterations in early but little-known sources. For instance, the Prophet gave a private account of his early visions in 1832, speaking of the Urim and Thummim in simple terms: "The Lord had prepared spectacles for to read the book; therefore I commenced translating the characters."¹⁵

Again in 1835 he went over the same ground with the colorful "Joshua, the Jewish Minister," and Warren Cowdery wrote Joseph's comments about the plates: "I obtained them and translated them into the English language by the gift and power of God and have been preaching it ever since."¹⁶

Joseph Smith used practically the same words in responding to a standard question on the ancient records in 1838: "I obtained them and the Urim and Thummim with them, by the means of which I translated the plates, and thus came the Book of Mormon."¹⁷

The earliest statements of Joseph Smith thus stress two elements, the instrument of translation and also the inspiration to use it. The latter point was emphasized in January 1833, when the Prophet referred to the Book of Mormon as "translated into our own language by the gift and power of God."¹⁸ Both elements appear in balanced summary in the Wentworth letter, approved for publication in 1842: "Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record by the gift and power of God."¹⁹

The above statements are concise, but bear eloquent testimony to divine aid. Joseph Smith evidently did not try to explain the complex process of inspired translation. At one point he felt that it was not wise "to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth Of the Book of Mormon."²⁰ Yet some details and outlines emerge in his writings, one of which suggests his direct use of the plates. On occasion the Prophet spoke of the ancient script: "I translated the Book of Mormon from hieroglyphics, the knowledge of which was lost to the world."²¹ Or he would comment that the plates "were filled with engravings in Egyptian characters."²² But the most detailed glimpse of the original is Joseph Smith's report of the title page, which was translated from the "very last leaf, on the left hand side of the collection or book of plates ... the language of the whole running the same as all Hebrew writing in general."²³ Referring to a particular page while mentioning the right-left script throughout "the whole" shows that the Prophet claimed knowledge of the plates themselves, not merely a vision of individual characters in the stone interpreters.

Another glimpse of the process of translation comes from the Lord's invitation to Oliver Cowdery to translate: "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." (D&C 8:2.) And this was followed by the revelation explaining how Oliver might have succeeded: "You must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right, I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you." (D&C 9:8.)

This seems to indicate that Joseph Smith's assignment was to understand the ideas of the ancient language and place them, with all their nuances, in coherent English.

Obviously the first step, understanding completely the meaning of an unknown language, was more difficult than transferring those ideas, once grasped, into English. Assistance from the Spirit was vital in the understanding stage, or the Prophet would have had no idea where to begin! And that initial step is where direct revelation would operate, according to the Doctrine and Covenants.

Nothing in Doctrine and Covenants 8 or 9 suggests that Oliver Cowdery (and thus Joseph Smith) was to be given perfect final language—rather he was to be inspired in the fundamental thought to be translated. This first, conceptual stage has parallels to the experience of all good translators. They must resist the temptation to open a dictionary with its mechanical answers; they must reach mentally for clues to the meaning of a word in its setting.

Oliver Cowdery was told that he would have the burning witness of the Spirit after mental and spiritual outreach, evidently a glimpse into the Prophet's own procedures. Yet at the point that ideas in the original language are correctly grasped, translation continues as a highly creative activity. Speaking from experience with several languages, Elder John A. Widtsoe stressed that the translator must first perceive the thought and “then attempt to reproduce the thought correctly, with every inflection of meaning, in the best words at his command. ... This makes it unavoidable that much of the translator, himself, remains in his translation.”²⁴

But how far does this axiom of communication apply to an inspired translation? One traditional view was published in 1883 and portrayed Joseph Smith as rather automatically directed by revelation: “It was done by divine aid. 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 investigation or argument over the value, intent, or meaning of certain characters, and there were no references to authorities. These difficulties to human work were removed. All was as simple as when a clerk writes from dictation.”²⁵

But this 1883 interpretation hardly fits the “study it out” commandment to Oliver Cowdery in D&C 9. Quoting that revelation, Elder Joseph Fielding Smith generalized: “All knowledge and skill are obtained by consistent and determined study and practice, and so the Prophet found it to be the case in the translating of the Book of Mormon.”²⁶

The 1883 interpretation is also contradicted by the optional “choice of words” that Joseph Smith himself displayed when he corrected hundreds of grammatical errors in the second edition of the Book of Mormon in 1837. In thus upgrading the correctness of Book of Mormon English, Joseph Smith proved that he operated from the premise that all the concepts in the book were accurate but that some could be more effectively expressed by slight modifications in language. This no more proves the Book of Mormon to be man-made than the constant new translations of the Bible disprove the inspiration of that book. There is a difference between word changes and idea changes.

The Church unofficially faced this problem at the turn of the century when a letter came to President Joseph F. Smith asking how the Church could justify grammatical corrections if the Book of Mormon were truly inspired. President Smith directed Elder B. H. Roberts to reply to the question, and his answers

appeared in Church publications after discussion and basic concord was reached with Church leaders. Elder Roberts acknowledged that this was less than an official statement, but it involved General Authorities in thinking through the implications of the evidence.²⁷

As explained by Elder Roberts, the Prophet grasped “every detail and shade of thought” of the original by revelation, but expressed himself “in such language as he could command.”²⁸ On occasion that was “faulty English, which the Prophet himself and those who have succeeded him as the custodians of the word of God have had and now have a perfect right to correct.”²⁹

On this issue David Whitmer’s general philosophy of revelation may have influenced his view of the translation. Joseph Smith updated some revelations and made many grammatical changes for better communication in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. David Whitmer went along at the time, as he said, but, after decades of reflection outside of the Church, concluded that no modification could possibly be made in any revelation. This highly rigid view of these revelations matched his highly rigid view of the origin of the Book of Mormon. But the Lord had earlier allowed for a process of better expressing the revelations in the preface given for them, indicating that their divine commands were expressed by “my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language.” (D&C 1:24.)

This phrase applies specifically to Joseph Smith’s revelations, but probably cannot be isolated from the process by which he translated. For one thing, many of the 1829 revelations came through the Urim and Thummim, during the very time that the Book of Mormon was being dictated.³⁰ Since the “manner of their language” concept applies specifically to these divine commands through the Urim and Thummim, there is little reason to suppose that translation was received differently, particularly when one of these revelations (D&C 7) was itself a translation.

In fact, the language in the sections of the Book of Mormon that correspond to parts of the Bible is quite regularly *selected* by Joseph Smith, rather than obtained through independent translation. For instance, there are over 400 verses in which the Nephite prophets quote from Isaiah, and half of these appear precisely as the King James version renders them. Summarizing the view taken by Latter-day Saint scholars on this point, Daniel H. Ludlow emphasizes the inherent variety of independent translation and concludes: “There appears to be only one answer to explain the word-for-word similarities between the verses of Isaiah in the Bible and the same verses in the Book of Mormon.” That is simply that Joseph Smith must have opened Isaiah and tested each mentioned verse by the Spirit: “If his translation was essentially the same as that of the King James version, he apparently quoted the verse from the Bible.”³¹ Thus the Old Testament passages from Isaiah display a particular choice of phraseology that suggests Joseph Smith’s general freedom throughout the Book of Mormon for optional wording.

Good translations typically strike a balance between the literalism of the first language and the idiom of the new one. Here the Book of Mormon measures up well. Some of the grammatical patterns changed after the first edition definitely match known Joseph Smith expressions of his early period. On the other hand, there seems to be a good deal of Semitic literalness in the translation as a whole,

with a number of striking ancient patterns, emphasized in the research of Hugh Nibley.³² Emma Smith was impressed during the work that her husband exceeded his abilities in dictation, but nowhere says that he acquired a temporary perfection of grammar!

One of the Prophet's essential methods was constant prayerfulness, as David Whitmer stressed, for when out of harmony Joseph "would go out and pray, and when he became sufficiently humble before God, he could then proceed with the translation."³³ Thus one who has faith in sincere prayer can have faith that Joseph Smith's petitions were answered in that work.

The translation of the Book of Mormon was not unlike the gift of the "interpretation of tongues" mentioned by Paul (1 Cor. 12), a phrase that also can be rendered "translation of languages." In his first calling as translator, Joseph Smith used his best efforts, which were divinely supplemented, as the Book of Mormon preface says, while the "interpretation" came through "the gift of God."

There are many questions that we cannot answer from the evidence we have at this time: Exactly how, for example, does the Urim and Thummim work? Was there a basis of truth behind David Whitmer's viewpoint that writing appeared on the Interpreters? Or did the stones somehow focus the thought of the translator? Or did the stones serve to confirm translation? These things the Lord has not revealed to the Church at large, and the answer must remain, "We don't know."

But we *will* know, for the Lord has promised that all who enter the celestial kingdom will dwell on this earth, which "in its sanctified and immortal state, will be made like unto crystal and will be a Urim and Thummim to the inhabitants who dwell thereon. ...

"Then the white stone mentioned in Revelation 2:17, will become a Urim and Thummim to each individual who receives one; ...

"And a white stone is given to each of those who come into the celestial kingdom." (D&C 130:9-11.)

Though at this time we do not comprehend the exact way in which the Urim and Thummim were used in the translation of the Book of Mormon, we are promised that the miraculous gift given to the Prophet Joseph Smith in order to receive revelation and translate scripture will be given to all who live worthy to enter into exaltation; and then "things pertaining to a higher order of kingdoms will be made known." (D&C 130:10.)