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Joseph Smith's Translation of the Book of Mormon

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The Translation of the Book of Mormon: Basic Historical Information

John W. Welch and Tim Rathbone

Joseph Knight's Recollection of Early Mormon History

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Summary:

In the first two papers Stephen Ricks, John Welch, and Tim Rathbone discuss what Joseph Smith and his companions said about translating the Book of Mormon. They document the intense period of activity from April to June 1829, during which nearly all the translation took place. In the third paper, Dean Jessee presents and supplements Joseph Knight's firsthand account of early church history events involving Joseph Smith and others.

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Joseph Smith's Translation of the Book of Mormon

When Joseph Smith wrote the now-famous letter to John Wentworth outlining the rise and progress of the Church, he described the translation of the Book of Mormon as proceeding "through the medium of the Urim and Thummim . . . by the gift and power of God."¹ On the other occasions when the Prophet made mention of the translation, he used similar language. In his account of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon for the colorful "Joshua the Jewish Minister," Joseph says that the translation occurred "by the gift and power of God."² Elsewhere he speaks of the "Urim and Thummim"³ and "spectacles"⁴ in connection with the translation, but in no extant statement does he provide details of the translation. Joseph's hesitation to speak in detail about the translation process is reflected in his response to his brother Hyrum's request at a conference held in Orange, Ohio in October 1831 that he provide a first-hand account concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. The Prophet replied that "it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the book of Mormon and . . . it was not expedient for him to relate these things."⁵ His reticence was probably well justified and may have been due to the inordinate interest which some of the early Saints had shown in the seer stone or to the negative and sometimes bitter reactions he encountered when he had reported some of his sacred experiences to others.⁶ Other witnesses to the translation of the Book of Mormon were more explicit and detailed in their description of the process, providing us with considerable additional insight into the means which the Prophet used in completing the translation of the Book of Mormon as well as the method he employed.

The Means of Translation of the Book of Mormon

During the process of translation of the Book of Mormon, two different instruments were employed: the "seerstone" and the "spectacles" or "Nephite interpreters." Good descriptions exist for both. The seer stone, which was found when Joseph and his brother Alvin were digging a well on the Mason Chase property in 1822,⁷ was "about the size of a small hen's egg, in the shape of a high insteped shoe. It was composed of layers of different colors passing diagonally through it. It was very hard and smooth, perhaps from being carried in the pocket."⁸ Other descriptions of the seer stone corroborate the details of this account.⁹ Interestingly, the seer stone came (through a series of events detailed by Richard van Wagoner and Steven Walker¹⁰) into the hands of Brigham Young and has remained--with only a brief lacuna¹¹--in the possession of the First Presidency since that time. There are also several accounts containing descriptions of the Nephite interpreters. J.W. Peterson and W. S. Pender interviewed Joseph's brother William in 1891 and reported:

Among other things we inquired minutely about the Urim and Thummim and the breastplate. We asked him what was meant by the expression "two rims of a bow," which held the former. He said a double silver bow was twisted into the shape of the figure eight, and the two stones were placed literally between the two rims of a bow. At one end was attached a rod which was connected with the outer edge of the right shoulder of the breast-plate. By pressing the head a little forward, the rod held the Urim and Thummim before the eyes much like a pair of spectacles. A pocket was prepared

in the breastplate on the left side, immediately over the heart. When not in use the Urim and Thummim was placed in this pocket, the rod being of just the right length to allow it to be so deposited. This instrument could, however, be detached from the breastplate and his brother said Joseph often wore it detached when away from home, but always used it in connection with the breastplate when receiving official communications, and usually so when translating, as it permitted him to have both hands free to hold the plates.¹²

According to most accounts, the seer stone was used during all stages of the translation of the Book of Mormon, both before and after the loss of the first 116 manuscript pages. Edward Stevenson reported that Martin Harris (who served as Joseph's scribe between April and June of 1828) testified to him 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 used the seer stone."¹³

Following the restoration of Joseph's gift, the seer stone continued to be used, by some accounts exclusively. In 1870 Emma Smith Bidamon, in response to a query by Mrs. George W. (Emma) Pilgrim, wrote: "Now the first that my husband translated was translated by the use of Urim and Thummim, and that was the part that Martin Harris lost. After that he used a small stone, not exactly black, but was rather a dark color . . ."¹⁴ Similarly, in a letter to Joseph Smith III, William E. McLellan wrote that Joseph translated the "entire Book of Mormon by means of a small stone. I have certificates to that effect from E. A. Cowdery (Oliver's widow), Martin Harris, and Emma Bidamon."¹⁵ Further, in the Historical Record of the Church is recorded: "As a chastisement for this carelessness, the Urim and Thummim was taken from Smith. But by humbling himself, he again found favor with the Lord and was presented a strange ovalshaped, chocolate colored stone, about the size of an egg, but more flat which it was promised should answer the same purpose. With this stone all the present book was translated."¹⁶ In addition, the term "Urim and Thummim," (first used by W. W. Phelps in 1833¹⁷) which is generally associated with the Nephite interpreters, is frequently used in a rather undifferentiated manner to indicate either the seer stone or the interpreters.¹⁸ As a consequence, mention of the "Urim and Thummim" cannot be allowed as undisputed evidence for the use of the Nephite interpreters after the loss of the 116 pages. On the other hand, the statements of Oliver Cowdery, the principal scribe of what constitutes the printed version of the Book of Mormon, leave open the possibility that the Nephite interpreters continued to be used even after the loss of the 116 pages of manuscript. His declarations deserve particular attention since he was, next to Joseph himself, the one most intimately involved in the translation process, and since his statements were made nearest in time to that of the translation. During an 1830 trial of Joseph on the "charge of misdemeanor" Oliver Cowdery "testified under oath, that said Smith found with the plates, from which he translated his book, two transparent stones, resembling glass, set in silver bows. That by looking through these, he was able to read in English, the reformed Egyptian characters, which were engraved

on the plates."¹⁹ Since Oliver's only experience in translating the Book of Mormon came after the loss of the 116 manuscript pages, his testimony at this trial clearly suggests that he was acquainted with the Nephite interpreters from personal observation. Similarly, in an early number of the Latter-day Saints Messenger and Advocate, he wrote: "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."²⁰ The clear qualification of the term "Urim and Thummim" with "Interpreters" lends further weight to the presumption that even while Oliver Cowdery was acting as scribe the "spectacles" were still being used. A similarly nuanced statement by Oliver Cowdery was recorded by Reuben Miller in 1848: "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 . . ."²¹ It seems most likely, then, that both instruments were used during the entire translation process, but whether this is so or whether Joseph restricted himself to the use of the seer stone following the loss of the 116 manuscript pages, no witness disputes that superhuman means were used to enhance the Prophet's ability to translate.

A question which naturally suggests itself is why supernatural instruments were used in the translation process at all. Orson Pratt, who had himself pondered this very matter, reported that the Prophet told him that the Lord gave him the Urim and Thummim "when he was inexperienced in the spirit of inspiration. But now he had advanced so far that he understood the operation of that spirit and did not need the assistance of that instrument."²² Similarly, Zebedee Coltrin, an early acquaintance of Joseph Smith, related in 1880 that he had once asked Joseph what he had done with the Urim and Thummim and that "Joseph said that he had no further need of it and he had given it to the angel Moroni. He had the Melchizedek Priesthood and with that Priesthood he had the key to all knowledge and intelligence."²³

The Method of Translating the Book of Mormon

The Prophet left no more explicit details concerning the manner in which the seerstone or the interpreters functioned than to say that they operated "by the gift and power of God." This is particularly unfortunate, since only he was in a position to describe how these instruments enhanced his power to translate, whereas others were at least able to see and describe them. However, several witnesses related their ideas concerning the process. In his Address to All Believers in Christ, David Whitmer wrote:

I will now give you a description of the manner in which the Book of Mormon was translated. Joseph would put the seer stone into a 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 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.²⁴

According to Edward Stevenson, Martin Harris explained the translation as follows:

By the aid of the seer stone, sentences would appear and were read by the Prophet and written by Martin, and when finished he would say, 'Written,' and if correctly written that sentence would disappear and another appear in its place, but if not written correctly it remained until corrected, so that the translation was just as it was engraven on the plates, precisely in the language then used.²⁵

However, several things argue against their explanation of the translation process:

1) Neither David Whitmer nor Martin Harris had knowledge of the method of translation of the Book of Mormon from personal experience while Joseph himself seems to have given only the most general outline of the process. Thus, their notions concerning the translation probably derive as much from the inerrantist preconceptions concerning Holy Writ which were common at the time and in which they doubtless shared as from and primary experience which they may have had with the translation.

2) In D & C 9:7-8 Oliver Cowdery, who had desired the gift of translation was told: "Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right." Had Oliver presumed an effortless automatic translation? These verses suggest that effort was required on the part of the translator to search for and find the appropriate expression, something which would not have been the case if the Book of Mormon had been translated by plenary dictation.

3) The numerous changes made in 1837 by Joseph Smith in the second edition of the Book of Mormon (mostly of a grammatical nature) also argue strongly against the idea that he rendered it into English by automatic translation. If he had, then he would certainly have considered the text inviolate and refrained from making any changes.

4) A contemporary account provides an additional indication that the process of translation was not mere plenary dictation. The Reverend Diedrich Willers, a minister of German Reformed Church congregations in Bearytown and Fayette, New York at the time of the Church's restoration and a celebrated opponent of the Church, wrote in 1830 to two colleagues in York, Pennsylvania concerning the rise of the Church. In the letter

he included the following concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon: "The Angel indicated that . . . under these plates were hidden spectacles, without which he could not translate these plates, that by using these spectacles, he (Smith) would be in a position to read these ancient languages, which he had never studied and that the Holy Ghost would reveal to him the translation in the English language."²⁶ On this, D. Michael Quinn comments: "Thus, the English translation with all its awkwardness and grammatical chaos, was according to contemporary reports, a product of spiritual impressions to Joseph Smith rather than an automatic appearance of the English words. This would make Joseph Smith, despite his grammatical limitations, a translator in fact rather than a mere transcriber of the handwriting of God."²⁷

A more reasonable scenario, in my estimation, would be one in which the means at Joseph's disposal (the seerstone and the interpreters) enhanced his capacity to understand the basic meanings of the words and phrases of the book as well as to grasp the relation of these words to each other. However, the actual translation was Joseph's alone and the opportunity to improve it in grammar and word choice still remained open. All who have had experience in translating are aware of the often considerable cleavage between being able to construe a sentence and actually rendering it in a felicitous translation. All who have translated are also keenly aware that it is a rare translation which cannot be improved. Thus, while it would be incorrect to minimize the divine element in the process of translation of the Book of Mormon, it would also be misleading and potentially hazardous to deny the human factor.

FOOTNOTES

1. Times and Seasons III:9(March 1, 1842), 707 = Joseph Smith, History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, B. H. Roberts, ed., 7 volumes (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1960), IV:537.
2. Warren Cowdery, MS History of the Church, Bk A-1, pp. 121-22. Joseph also uses the phrase "by the gift and power of God" in an 1833 letter to N. E. Seaton in Joseph Smith, op. cit., I:315; cf. his November 13, 1843 letter to James Arlington Bennett in Times and Seasons IV:24(November 1, 1843), 373, where he states: "By the power of God I translated the Book of Mormon from hieroglyphics."
3. The term "Urim and Thummim" is employed in Elders' Journal I:3(July 1838), 43, and Joseph Smith, "Church History," Times and Seasons III:13 (May 2, 1842), 772; cf. also 1838 official history account in Times and Seasons III:12(April 15, 1842), 753 = Joseph Smith, op. cit., I:12.
4. The term "spectacles" is found in Joseph Smith Letterbook, Kirtland, pp. 5-6.
5. "Minutes of a General Conference held at the dwelling of br. Serenes Burnet in the Town of Orange, Cuyahoga County, Ohio, October 25, 1836," Far West Record, p. 13 = Joseph Smith, op. cit. I:220, note.
6. Richard van Wagoner and Steven Walker, "Joseph Smith: 'The Gift of Seeing'," Dialogue 15:2(1982), 57.
7. Eber D. Howe, Mormonism Unveiled (Painesville, OH: Eber D. Howe, 1834), 241-42; cf. Martin Harris' account in Tiffany's Monthly (June 1859), 163.
8. W. D. Purple's account in The Chenango Union, 3 May 1877, cited in Francis W. Kirkham, A New Witness for Christ in America, 2 vols. (Independence, MO: Zion's Printing and Publishing Company, 1951), 2:365.
9. Cf. David Whitmer in an interview in the Kansas City Journal 5 June 1881; Omaha Herald, reprinted in the Chicago Inter-Ocean October 17, 1886 and in the Saints' Herald 33(November 13, 1886), 706; "The Book of Mormon" in The Chicago Tribune 17 December 1885, p. 3; Saints' Herald 26(November 15, 1879), 341; "Journey About Ended," The Chicago Times January 24, 1888, p. 8; Emma Smith Bidamon describes it briefly in an unpublished letter to Mrs. George W. (Emma) Pilgrim, March 27, 1870, RLDS Archives P 4 F 20.
10. van Wagoner and Walker, op. cit., 58.
11. The seerstone seems to have been put up for sale with other items from Brigham Young's estate, but was acquired by his daughter, Zina Young Card, that its "sacredness might not be sullied," ibid., 66, fn. 53.

12. J. W. Peterson in The Rod of Iron 1:3(February 1924), 6-7.
13. Edward Stevenson's account of Harris' Sunday Morning Lecture in Salt Lake City, September 4, 1870, published in the Deseret Evening News September 5, 1870, and reprinted in the Deseret News November 30, 1881 and in the Millennial Star 44(February 6, 1882), 86-7.
14. Unpublished letter of Emma Smith Bidamon to Mrs. George W. Pilgrim, March 27, 1870, RLDS Archives P 4 F 20. The background of this letter is given in The Return 4:12(July 15, 1895), where in a letter to the editor John T. Clark writes that "about the year 1868 or 1869 William E. McClellan made the statement that 'after the 116 pages were lost Joseph translated the rest of the Book of Mormon with a stone;' which statement Granville Hedrick nor none of the church here credited, and Sister Pilgrim being somewhat acquainted with Emma wrote her a letter, asking if the statement by Dr. McClellan was true."
15. William E. McLellan letter to Joseph Smith III dated July 1872, RLDS Archives P 13 F 213. William McLellan provides a transcript of Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery's certificate in a February 1870 letter in RLDS Archives P 13 F 191.
16. The Historical Record. Devoted Exclusively to Historical, Biographical, Chronological and Statistical Matters, p. 632, LDS Archives, cited in van Wagoner and Walker, ibid., p. 54.
17. Evening and Morning Star 1st ed. 1:8(January 1833), 58b = 2nd ed., 116b.
18. See van Wagoner and Walker, ibid., 59-63, for a detailed discussion of this issue.
19. A. W. Benton, "Mormonites," Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate n.s. 2:15(April 9, 1831).
20. Latter-day Saint Messenger and Advocate 1(October 1834), 14 = Times and Seasons II(November 1, 1840), 201.
21. Journal of Reuben Miller 21 October 1848, in Richard Anderson, "'By the Gift and Power of God'," Ensign 7:9(1977), 80.
22. (Report of) "Two Days' Meeting at Brigham City June 27 and 28, 1874," Millennial Star 36:32(August 11, 1874), 499.
23. High Priests Record, Spanish Fork, Utah, September 1880, p. 128, LDS Archives, cited in van Wagoner and Walker, op. cit., p. 59.
24. David Whitmer, An Address to All Believers in Christ (Richmond, MO: n.p., 1887), 12.
25. See footnote 13. Joseph's brother William made a statement to similar effect in William Smith on Mormonism (Lamoni, Iowa: Herald Steam Book and Job Office, 1883), 12.

26. D. Michael Quinn, "The First Months of Mormonism: A Contemporary View by Reverend Diedrich Willers," New York History 54(1973) 326.

27. Ibid., p. 321.