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Stephen D. Ricks

The Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon

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Summary:

Stephen Ricks discusses and gives sources for what Joseph Smith himself thought and said about the translation of the Book of Mormon. Further understanding comes from what was said by colleagues and co-workers who knew him at that period of time.

Transcript
Church History
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The Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon

Stephen Ricks

I am pleased to be able to spend some time with you today talking about the translation of the Book of Mormon. I am hopeful that at the end of the lecture today we can know just a little bit more about what Joseph Smith himself thought and said about the translation of the Book of Mormon.

1. What does Joseph Smith say?
2. What did others—associates, colleagues, and co-workers, who knew him at that period of time—say about the translation process?
3. And beyond that, ask the questions specifically concerning the means and the method that was used in the translation process. By means I mean the instruments, the objects that were used. And discover what we can learn about that.
4. In addition to that, finally, what method was used in the translation process? How was it that Joseph actually engaged these instruments, the objects that were given to him, in order to be able to translate? These four questions I hope we can discuss.

We are all acquainted, I believe, with the now famous Wentworth letter, the letter which contains the Thirteen Articles of Faith, in which Joseph describes the rise and progress of the Church. In this letter he also described just a little bit about the translation of the Book of Mormon. He said that the Book of Mormon was translated through the medium of the Urim and Thummin, through the gift and power of God. On other occasions he used similar language concerning the translation process.

In one letter that he wrote to a very colorful person, that he referred to as "Joshua the Jewish minister," he says that the translation occurred by the gift and power of God. And elsewhere, where he speaks about the use of the Urim and Thummin, or the spectacles, or the Nephite interpreters, as they are called in the Book of Mormon (and here I might add parenthetically that the term *Urim and Thummin* that we normally use to describe the objects or the instruments that were used for the translation is actually never to be found in the Book of Mormon itself), he always, again, simply uses the phrase that they were used by the gift and power of God.

We might ask ourselves, why was it that Joseph was so hesitant to answer the question in greater detail? And we know that he was, because in 1831, in October Conference in Orange, Ohio, his brother Hyrum, whom he so dearly loved, and for whom he did so much, and who did so much for him, asked him, in front of the conference, if he would please get up and tell the conference members in greater detail than he had before, just exactly how the Book of Mormon was translated. And in answer to that request, Joseph said that it was not expedient for him to tell more than had already been told about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and it was not well that any greater details be provided.

That reticence, I suspect, is the result of some bad experiences that Joseph might have already had when he made known very sacred things to individuals. We recall, of course, from the very beginning where he let people know about the experiences of the first vision; the result was greater persecution than he could conceivably have imagined.

There was another problem. Early on in the Church, many of the earliest members of the Church began to believe that it was only by and through the use of the seer stone that it was possible to receive revelation. Thus, any time they felt a legitimate revelation was to be given, the seer stone had to be there. Joseph, as we will see, soon abandoned the seer stone because he felt as though he no longer had need to use it. These people continued to believe that the seer stone was essential. Thus, I believe because of this attitude among certain members within the Church, as well as the attitude that he might have suspected among those who were outside the Church, he decided to say no more than he said there in these statements, that "it was by the gift and power of God" that he translated the Book of Mormon.

However, fortunately, some other witnesses have said more about it. They have spoken both in terms of the instruments or objects that were used in order to translate the Book of Mormon and, in addition to that, they also speak at some length about the method that was used as well. And I would like to consider both of those.

During the process of translation the witnesses note that two different instruments were employed. One was the seer stone. We are all, I think, acquainted with the word, but we will want to bear that in mind, because it comes up in context of other words as well. And, in addition to that, another word, the *interpreters*, sometimes called the *Nephite interpreters*, or the *spectacles*. These two objects seem to have been used from the beginning of the process of the translation of the Book of Mormon.

The seer stone, first off, we can talk about. It seems to have been originally found by Joseph, and his brother Alvin, when they were working on Mason Chase's property in 1822 and is described, by one of the witnesses, as about the size of a small hen's egg, in the shape of a high instepped 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. Most of the other descriptions that we have of it say much the same thing concerning it as well.

It is an interesting thing to note that the seer stone that Joseph had was passed on, following the translation of the Book of Mormon, to Oliver. Oliver maintained it in his possession until his death. It then passed to his wife, Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery, who gave it to Phineas Young, who was the brother of Brigham Young, who came out to Missouri where Elizabeth was at that time. Phineas took it back to Utah with him and gave it to his brother, Brigham, who then maintained it, retained it for the First Presidency; and, with the exception of a brief hiatus when it was purchased by someone else, it has remained in the possession of the First Presidency since that time and is still a part of the First Presidency's possessions.

There are also several accounts, besides the account that we have just talked about, concerning the spectacles or the Nephite interpreters. Perhaps the best and the longest description that we have of the Nephite interpreters we get from Joseph's youngest brother, William. Joseph's brother William, as you may recall, was a member of the first Quorum of the Twelve. He later became disaffected from the Church and left it. He did not gather with the Saints in Utah, but he always remained true to his testimony of the Book of Mormon. He was the most long-lived of the original Quorum of the Twelve.

He died in 1893, and in 1891, two years before his death, two gentlemen, Mr. Peterson and Mr. Pender, came to interview him concerning his recollections of the translation process of the Book of Mormon. In the course of this, they learned, among other things, about the Urim and Thummin, the breast plate. They said they asked him what was meant by the expression, "two rims of a bow, which held the former"? He said that a double silver bow was twisted into the shape of a figure 8, so we get the idea this "two rims of a bow" looks a little bit like a pair of glasses, but a pair of glasses that look much like a figure 8. And the two stones were placed, literally, between the two rims—that is, within the rims, so as to provide the means whereby the individual, who was the seer, could look and see.

At one end, he goes on to say, was attached a rod which was connected with the outer edge of the right shoulder of the breastplate. By pressing the head a little forward the rod held the Urim and Thummin before the eyes, much like a pair of spectacles. A pocket was prepared in the breastplate, in the left side, immediately over the heart. When not in use, the Urim and Thummin 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 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.

Can we then see the picture that is being created by William here? The breastplate covered the upper part of the body. Into the breastplate is a hole that the

two rims of a bow, the interpreters, could be fit so as to keep the hands free at the time of the actual translation or receipt of a revelation. He goes on to say a couple of very interesting things, though, with regard to it. Apparently, he says, this was made originally for men of much larger size than either Joseph or himself, and was too wide for either William's eyes or Joseph's eyes. And, as a result, it caused some eyestrain, because the spectacles, or the interpreters, were set a little further apart than individuals of William's or Joseph's size would have normally been used to; it caused a certain amount of eyestrain, as a result of which William said they or he would also use the seer stone.

Now, we might ask ourselves, "Well, what do we know about when the seer stone was used as opposed to when the Nephite interpreters were used?" The accounts vary just a little bit here, but it seems reasonably clear that the seer stone was used at all stages of the process of translation. There is at least some likelihood, in addition to that, that the Nephite interpreters were used during all stages of the translation process as well, though there is some question about that.

I might add, here, a very interesting story that is told concerning the seer stone by Martin Harris, who, of course, was involved in the translation process early on. He knew Joseph when he used both the seer stone as well as the Nephite interpreters. He said, though, one time when Joseph was using the seer stone for the purpose of translating, he became weary of translation; one can imagine after two or three hours of sitting and working like that, that they would want to go and take a rest, and they did. They went down to the river side, he said, and they picked up stones and starting throwing them across the water. As Joseph was doing that, Martin, unbeknownst to Joseph, picked up a stone that was roughly the same size and shape and color as the seer stone that he was using, and put it in his pocket. Then he was able to exchange the seer stone for the stone that he had found, so that when Joseph began the translation again, instead of having the seer stone he had the stone that had been picked up by Martin.

Martin, in describing this experience, says that Joseph looked intently in the hat that was used to cover, to keep the light out, and was absolutely silent for several moments—something that did not normally happen in the translation process, where Joseph could simply pick up where he had stopped off and continue, more or less continuously translating. And then he said to Martin, "Martin, what has happened? It is as dark as Egypt." And when he looked at Martin's face, Martin said that his countenance fell and then Joseph asked him, "What happened?" Martin explained, and then Joseph asked him, "Why did you exchange the one stone for the other?" And Martin said, "To prove that those that were claiming that Joseph was simply making up the words were wrong about it." He said he did it to shut the mouths of fools for making such claims.

Emma, who was of course also there during the whole process of translation, states that in the early stages of translation Joseph used primarily the Nephite interpreters. Later he used the Nephite interpreters only to a somewhat more

limited extent, and used primarily the seer stone. A similar statement we find from William McLellin.

On the other hand, and I think that this is very important, we have the statement from Oliver Cowdery—whom we all remember didn't even get involved in the process of translation of the Book of Mormon until after the loss of the 116 manuscript pages—after Joseph had had the plates and everything else taken away from him, and then restored to him. Oliver now was called to testify on Joseph's behalf in a trial that took place in 1830, it's called "on the charge of misdemeanor," which basically means somebody didn't like Joseph and so decided to bring charges against him. Under oath then, testifying concerning the translation, he said that he "used two transparent stones resembling glass, set in silver bows." And he goes on to say, "By looking through these stones, Joseph was able to read, in English, the reformed Egyptian characters which were engraved on the plates." Since Oliver's only experience, I just mentioned, was with Joseph after the loss and recovery of the plates, and the other things that went with it, his testimony at this trial surely suggests that Joseph is continuing to use the Nephite interpreters, even in this latter part of the translation process.

Similarly, we find in a very early number of the *Latter-day Saint Messenger* and *Advocate* Oliver writing this: "Day after day I continue to write uninterrupted from his mouth as he translates with the Urim and Thummin, or, as the Nephites would have said, interpreters, the history, a record called the Book of Mormon." Here again we note that the term *Urim and Thummin* is not one to be found in the Book of Mormon; it is something that comes from a later, a post-1830 account. Probably 1831 or so, we have the first mention of that, not apparently from Joseph, but from either W.W. Phelps or from Oliver Cowdery. They term it the Urim and Thummin because they saw that as the best way of helping to describe to people, using biblical terminology, what was available to Joseph in order to translate.

We get a similar kind of statement by Oliver from Rueben Miller in 1848, and this is very close to the end of his life: "I wrote with my own pen the entire Book of Mormon, except for 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 Thummin, or as it is called by that book, holy interpreters." It seems, I think then, most likely that during the whole period of translation, even during that period of early translation up to the time that the 116 manuscript pages were lost, that Joseph used both the Nephite interpreters, the two stones set in rims of a bow, in addition to the seer stone, which had been found by him some years earlier. And that after, both were also used. But, in a sense, the really important thing is that during the whole process of translation, Joseph used some supernatural means to enable him to be able to translate the Book of Mormon properly.

Now, there is another question that we might ask ourselves, I think a very legitimate one. Why should Joseph use any kind of means whatsoever, be it the Nephite interpreters, or a seer stone, or anything else? A question that some of the

early Saints ask themselves as well. Orson Pratt, for instance, asked the question and reported that, when asked this question, the prophet told him that the Lord had given him the Urim and Thummin when he was inexperienced in the spirit of inspiration. But now, he, that is Joseph, had advanced so far that he understood the operation of the Spirit and did not need the assistance of that instrument. In fact, you recall that I mentioned that after he had completed the translation of the Book of Mormon, he gave the seer stone to Oliver, saying, "I have no longer any use of this."

Then we get another very interesting comment made, used later by Zebedee Coltrin who had also known him in those early years. In 1880 Zebedee Coltrin says this: "Joseph said, concerning the Urim and Thummin or Nephite interpreters and the seer stone, that he no longer had need of it and he had given it to the angel Moroni." That is interesting because here we are talking, of course, about the interpreters and not the seer stone. The interpreters go back to Moroni, the seer stone goes to Oliver. But he had the Melchizedek priesthood and that priesthood allowed him to have the keys to *all knowledge and intelligence*, as a result of which it was not necessary for him to use such an instrument as either the interpreters or the seer stone.

Now let me note one other thing. Here, we have noted the terms *seer stone* or *interpreters* or *spectacles*. In the literature, in general, it appears that *interpreters* and *Urim and Thummin* are used more or less interchangeably. But, there also appeared to be some instances in which Joseph, and others, will use *Urim and Thummin* to refer to the seer stone as well. Thus, I think we need to understand that *Urim and Thummin*, though usually to be associated with spectacles or interpreters, might also be used to refer to the seer stone. Most important again is that it is used to refer to whatever supernatural means the Lord had made available to Joseph during that period, in order to enable him to translate the Book of Mormon.

The next question that we might wish to ask then is, what about this method of translating the Book of Mormon? The means we have some discussion of: seer stone, interpreters, or spectacles. What about the method? Does Joseph tell us *how* he translated the Book of Mormon? Unfortunately, he provides here again no more information about how the Book of Mormon was translated than he did in the instance where the issue of the means came up. He says merely that they operated by the gift and power of God. This is particularly unfortunate since only Joseph, in this particular instance, was in a position to describe how the instruments actually operated, where others might at least be able to describe for us, in some detail and with real accuracy, how Joseph or what the instruments looked like. Nevertheless, at least two co-workers of Joseph, people who were witnesses to the translation process, have made statements concerning how Joseph actually translated the Book of Mormon as well.

One of them is David Whitmer. At the end of his life, in response to some

statements that were being made concerning him and concerning the early rise of the Church, David Whitmer wrote an address to "All Believers in Christ." He writes about a number of different subjects that impinge on that early history of the Church, but he also talks a bit about the translation process. And this is what he says about it there:

"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 lights." Now that is just the way someone might do if he were looking through a microscope, or sometimes even binoculars. You need to have light excluded in order to be able to see.

So he says, "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." This is an interesting statement. We will want to come back to it because there is so much in it that bears scrutiny.

Now you recall Martin Harris spent many years of his life outside of the Church, never varying far in his testimony of the Church, *never at all* in his testimony of the Book of Mormon. Toward the end of his life he was met by Edward Stevenson, who was a member of the First Quorum of Seventy, who reconverted him to the gospel and brought him out to Utah, where he spent the remainder of his days. Edward Stevenson had numerous interviews with Martin Harris about those great events that took place in the early days of the restoration and wrote them down. He asked many questions about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon as well and received a statement from Martin concerning how the Book of Mormon was translated by Joseph that I think is also extremely interesting and worth considering for a moment.

This is what Edward Stevenson says concerning Martin's description: "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 would 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."

Well, this is a very interesting statement. Let's consider this last part of the statement first off. He notes here that Joseph would read off what was written on the seer stone, or on the Nephite interpreters. If it was correctly written down by the scribe, whose writing he could not see directly, but only, again, through inspiration,

then they would go on. But, if it was not written correctly he would correct it. We can see in the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon, about a quarter of which is still in existence (which has been in recent years very thoroughly studied by Royal Skousen), that there are instances in which a word, especially a name, is written down one way and then is crossed out and is written a slightly different way.

I can well imagine in those instances Joseph is reading out the word as he would envision it to be properly pronounced. The person who is acting as scribe would write it down as he imagines it ought to be written down. But, in a few instances, he wrote it down in a way that was not quite correct, as a result of which, Joseph, who could see what was being written down, would correct the spelling and then after the spelling was corrected would continue on. In some instances this is especially interesting, because the corrections make sense only in light of these names as coming from the ancient Near East, and would not make any particularly strong sense as a name that would have come solely out of the experience of these people as English speakers.

In one particular instance, I might note, a name was originally written with a *ck* at the end of it. Joseph, though, wants the name corrected so that the last letters are not *ck* but *ch*. And so we see on that original manuscript the name with the *ck* scratched out and the name with the *ch* written in its place. Now possibly, for us, the way in which we might pronounce a *ch* or a *ck* at the end of a word could be roughly the same, like a *k* sound. But in Hebrew, and in many other languages that are related to it, there is a very great difference between the one and the other. They represent two totally separate letters or sounds.

He says something else here that I think is very interesting too. The translation was just as it was engraved on the plates, precisely in the language then used. He says that was because the sentences would appear, and they were read by the prophet and then written by Martin, in this particular instance, or by Oliver at a latter period of time, and then they would disappear after they were properly written. I think that this may provide us a key to how the translation took place but does not tell us necessarily the whole story. There may be involved in both the thinking of David as well as of Martin certain "inerrantous" presuppositions concerning how scripture is revealed that might not have been correct. I mean by "inerrantous" the idea that whatever Joseph received was directly from the mind of God to Joseph's hand.

Now, I want to make very clear that it is my firm belief that the Book of Mormon is of divine origin. On the other hand, it seems to me that Joseph is deeply involved in the translation process himself, in a number of important ways. One of them is, I believe, that Joseph has to make choices as to the particular words that are used in the English translation. I think that that is probably the case because, as you probably recall, in the 1837 second edition of the Book of Mormon, numerous changes are made in the text of the Book of Mormon in English. And they are made by Joseph or under his direction. Now, if Joseph had imagined that everything in

the Book of Mormon was directly as God had revealed it to him with no changes possible, because, after all, this is utterly and absolutely *the* word of God, then I am not certain that he would have been willing to enter in any changes whatsoever.

Further, I think the involvement of Joseph in this whole process of translation is suggested by what we find in the ninth section of the Doctrine and Covenants. You recall there, Oliver had a great desire also to be involved, not merely as a scribe, but also as the translator, and so asked for the gift of translation to be given to him as well. Oliver, though, is told by the Lord, "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."

So Oliver is imagining: "All I have to do is say I want to translate," and the words are going to be given to him. Now the Lord says, no, that is not the way it works; he goes on to say, "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." Again, I rather suspect that Oliver had the idea—if I ask, the gift will be given to me, and, being given the gift, there is not particular effort involved on my part; I simply use the interpreters, or the seer stone, and I will be enabled to translate. Now he learns it is a much more complicated and involved process than that.

These verses, I think, suggest that effort was required on the part of the translator; real genuine effort. To search for, to find the appropriate expression, something that would not have been the case if it is simply directly revealed from God to the mind and the pen of the translator.

There is some further evidence, I think, for the idea that I am proposing here, that there is real effort involved on Joseph's part, that he is not simply, now, writing what is given into his mind directly, but is being required to work out ideas that are given to him into an English that is felicitous and acceptable in expressing those notions from the original text.

We have a contemporary account from a minister, who was quite well known, both for his activities in the German Reform Church as well as a devoted enemy of the restoration. His name was Deitrich Villers. He was writing to two of his colleagues in York, Pennsylvania. He writes in German. He writes concerning the rise of the Church, and he includes two or three statements that are most interesting. We assume here, of course, that he is not writing as a believer, but as simply one who is reporting what people are, at that time, saying.

He says, "The angel indicated that under these plates were hidden spectacles, without which he could not translate the plates; and, that by using these spectacles, 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." Let's read that last bit again, because I think that this is very interesting.

He says that with the Urim and Thummin (the spectacles) he "would be in a position to read these ancient languages, which [Joseph] had never studied, [but] that the Holy Ghost would reveal to him the translation in the English language."

According to one scholar writing about this: "Thus, the English translation was, according to contemporary reports, a product of spiritual impressions to Joseph, 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."

This is the scenario that I would like to suggest. Joseph is given, through inspiration (through the Urim and Thummin, that is the seer stone or the Nephite interpreters), the means whereby he can understand words, and ideas, and the relationship among these words and ideas, from the original language such as it is found on the plates. But, that it is Joseph's responsibility to now set those words that he has understood in his mind into language that is felicitous in English.

Those of us who have had experience learning a second language may know that it is possible to get to the point where one no longer needs to translate from that second language into one's native language, in order to be able to understand it. It is possible simply to read a document and to understand it without translating it word for word into English.

But it is also a fact that that same translation process is, when it requires actually expressing those ideas which one can understand in the original language without actually translating into English, much more complicated when it has to be expressed in felicitous English. One might be able to read a French document and be able to understand it just fine; but if one were asked, then, to translate it into English, it might require some real effort. The same would hold true if it were a Spanish document, a German document, and certainly a Hebrew document, or whatever language one has to select.

It might be easy enough to understand in the original language—the ideas could be reflected. And if one were simply asked to provide some kind of precis, that is, a brief summary of what it says, it would be simple. But if one were to then try to provide a very felicitous and reasonably literal translation of the material, there is real difficulty. It takes effort, sometimes a great deal of effort.

That is the effort, I think, that is being referred to by the Lord in the ninth section of the Doctrine and Covenants. Oliver needs to understand that he has to study it out in his own mind in order to be able to successfully translate. What words are used by Joseph are words that are his own, though the ideas are provided by inspiration from the Lord, because, of course, he had no opportunity to actually learn the language well enough that he would have been able to translate it on his own.

Well, I think, if we allow that the translation process goes along in that way, that Joseph has to use his own effort to be able to render the words into acceptable English that renders the sense of the original in an acceptable and proper fashion, then, I think we can understand the further step in the process, which is mentioned both by Martin Harris as well as David Whitmer; that is, when an acceptable translation has been worked out by Joseph, in his mind, then it can appear on the Urim and Thummin and it can be read out.

Now we might ask the question, well, wouldn't it be possible for someone else to have come up with a different translation? And the answer to that is absolutely yes. In fact, George Albert Smith, who was the seventh President of the Church, and a member of an early Quorum of the Twelve, who knew Joseph well, says that it would have been possible to translate the Book of Mormon in very different language, possibly with numerous felicities in language, and still have the sense of the original properly expressed. I know in language classes that I teach, if I were to ask a group of half a dozen students to take the same text and to translate it for me into English, it is well conceivable that I could get six different translations, each of which I might allow to be acceptably accurate in rendering the sense of the original.

That is to say that a single way of translating one text is probably, by the nature of language, going to be excluded. Numerous ways are often going to be available, each of which will, acceptably and with acceptable accuracy, express the ideas in the original. If somebody else had translated the Book of Mormon, I rather suspect that some of the words might have been different, that sometimes the syntax would have been a little bit different, but that the sense would not have been changed to the extent that that person was also translating through the inspiration of the Lord.

Now I would like to read a few comments that were made by Emma concerning the translation process that go beyond the question of either the instrument, the means, or the method, but provide us some very interesting insights into the wider context of Joseph's translating. We've already mentioned one in which she is responding to the question of how Joseph translated.

Now I would like to note something else that she tells us from her own experience where she acted as scribe. She says, to a person that is asking a question concerning the translation, "When my husband was translating the Book of Mormon, I wrote a part of it," (and we should bear in mind that there were many people that wrote translation, or that wrote as scribes for the Book of Mormon, though the one who wrote almost all of what we now have as the Book of Mormon was Oliver Cowdery).

She says, "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 a mistake in spelling, he would stop me and correct my spelling" (the very thing that we saw mentioned by Martin

Harris concerning the translation process), "although it was impossible," she said, "for him to see how I was writing them down at the time."

"Some words he did not know how to pronounce, even words," she said, "like Sarah or Sariah, and he had to spell it out," and she would pronounce it for him. "When he stopped for any purpose, 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 he says, 'Emma, did Jerusalem of old have walls?' When I answered yes, he replied, 'Oh, I was afraid I had been deceived.' " She writes, "He had such a limited knowledge of history at the time, that he did not even know that Jerusalem was surrounded by walls."

Well, David Whitmer says very much the same thing about this same event. "When, in translating, he first came to where Jerusalem was spoken of as a walled city, he stopped until they got a Bible and showed him where the fact was recorded, Smith not believing that it was a walled city."

Well, Emma says some other marvelous things, I think, in the course of a lengthy interview that she had with her son, Joseph Smith III, with her second husband, Major Bidemon, and several others. This interview, which appeared in the *Saints Herald* in 1879, just shortly before her death, is composed of questions and answers. I would like to read it for you because, again, it provides us such an important and beautiful insight into the Book of Mormon and a great testimony about the person who knew Joseph better than anyone else, and who was closer to him at the time that he was translating the Book of Mormon than anyone else had been.

The first question is: "What of the truth of Mormonism?"

And her answer: "I know Mormonism to be the truth and I believe the Church to have been established by divine direction. I have complete faith in it. In writing for your father, I frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table close by him, he dictating, hour after hour, with nothing between us."

Next question: "Had he not a book or manuscript from which he read or dictated to you?"

Her answer: "He had neither manuscript nor book to read from."

Question: "Could he not have had and you not know it?"

Answer: "If he had anything of the kind he could not have concealed it from me."

Question: "Are you sure that he had the plates at the time you were writing for him?"

Answer: "The plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen tablecloth which I had given him to fold them in. I once felt of the plates, as they thus lay on the table, tracing their outline and shape. They 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."

Question: "Where did father and Oliver write?"

Answer: "Oliver Cowdery and your father wrote in the room where I was at work."

Question: "Could not father have dictated the Book of Mormon to you, Oliver Cowdery, and the others who wrote for him after first having written it or having first read it out of some book?"

Her answer here is fairly strong, but I think that it makes a very important point. She says: "Joseph Smith could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter, let alone dictating a book like the Book of Mormon. And although 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 a marvelous thing to me, a marvel and a wonder as much as to anyone else."

Question: "I should suppose that you could have uncovered the plates and examined them."

Her answer (this I think reflects on her own faith in an interesting way): "I did not attempt to handle the plates other than I have told you, nor uncovered them to look at them. I was satisfied that it was the work of God and, therefore, did not feel it was necessary to do so."

At which point her husband, Major Bidemon, asked, "Did Mr. Smith forbid your examining the plates?"

And her answer is: "I do not think so. I knew that he had them and was not specially curious about them. [And I love this part of the answer.] I moved them from place to place on the table as it was necessary on doing my housework."

Well, another part of the same interview I think also reflects a bit on her testimony, as well providing us some insight into these momentous events.

This now is from her son Joseph III: "Mother, what is your belief about the authenticity or origin of the Book of Mormon?"

And her answer: "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 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 as unlearned as he was it was simply impossible."

Well, there are other great testimonies of Joseph's work of translation, too. Another one I would like to read here from David Whitmer that tells us the spirit in which Joseph had to do this. We shouldn't imagine that Joseph could do it automatically. We have already seen from the story of Martin Harris that it was a very particular stone that was designated as the seer stone, so he had to be in the proper spirit to be able to use the seer stone or the Nephite interpreters.

David tells this story: "One morning when Joseph was getting ready to continue the translation, something went wrong about the house, and Joseph was put out about it. Something that Emma, his wife, had done. Oliver and I went upstairs and Joseph came up soon after to continue the translation, but he couldn't do anything. He could not translate a single syllable. He went downstairs, out into the orchard, and made supplication to the Lord. He was gone about an hour, came back to the house, asked Emma's forgiveness, and then came upstairs where we were, and the translation went on alright. He could do nothing save he were humble and faithful."

Too many other things could be said about the translation. Just a couple, though, that I would like to end with. First, lest we imagine that this translation process was a simple thing, something that anyone would be able to do, I would like to suggest the test that Brother Hugh Nibley has suggested for anyone wishing to undertake this. So far, by the way, I know of no takers, though the Book of Mormon has had many who have questioned its divine authenticity.

This is what he suggests for some of his Book of Mormon classes:

Since Joseph Smith was younger than most of you [now of course he is talking to a group of BYU students], and not nearly so experienced or well educated as any of you at the time that he copyrighted the Book of Mormon, it shouldn't be too much to ask you to hand in by the end of the semester (which actually gives you more time than he had, since almost all the Book of Mormon was done within a space of about 84 days or so), a paper of say 500-600 pages in length.

Call it a sacred book if you will, and give it the form of a history. Tell of a community of wandering Jews in ancient times. Have all sorts of characters in your story, and involve them in all sorts of public and private vicissitudes. Give them names, hundreds of them, pretending that they are real Hebrew

and Egyptian names of around 600 B.C. Be lavish with cultural and technical details, manners and customs, arts and industries, political and religious institutions, rites and traditions. Include long and complicated military and economic histories. Have your narrative cover a thousand years without any large gaps. Keep a number of interrelated local histories going at once. Feel free to introduce religious controversy and philosophical discussion, always in a plausible setting.

Observe the appropriate literary conventions and explain the derivation and transmission of your varied historical materials. Above all, do not ever contradict yourself. For, now we come to the really hard part of this assignment. You and I know that you are making this all up. We have our little joke. But just the same, you are going to be required to have your paper published when you finish it, not as fiction or romance, but as a true history.

After you have handed it in you may make no changes in it. In this class we always use the first edition of the Book of Mormon. What is more you are to invite any and all scholars to read and criticize your work freely, explaining to them that it is a sacred book on a par with the Bible. If they seem overly skeptical, you might tell them that you translated the book from original records by the aid of the Urim and Thummin. They will love that! Further, to allay their misgivings, you might tell them that the original manuscript was on golden plates and that you got the plates from an angel!

Now, go to work and good luck!

Consider that as Joseph's assignment—and yet that is precisely what it was.

Sidney Rigdon, reflecting on his experiences in the very early days of the Church, recalled in April of 1844 something that I think is most interesting and telling. He says, "I recollect in the year 1830, I'm at the whole Church of Christ in a little, old log house about twenty feet square, in Waterloo, New York, and we began to talk about the kingdom of God as if we had the world at our command. We talked with great confidence. We talked big things. Although we were not many people we had great feelings. We knew fourteen years ago that the Church would become as large as it is today. We were as big then as we shall ever be. If we did not see this people, we saw in vision the Church of God as a thousand times larger, although we were not enough to well man a farm, or to meet a woman with a milk pail. All the elders, all the members, met in conference in a room twenty feet square."

I rather imagine that Sidney and other early members of the Church also had a vision, not merely of the years of the Church in the 1840s but in our own day, and could have anticipated the kind of growth that we have had. But it is not merely the growth that comes through numbers that we are looking for, but it is the strength of individual members that comes through testimony. I feel certain that one of the reasons that the presidents of the Church, most recently President Benson, have so stressed the importance of reading and studying the Book of

Mormon is because there is no better way whereby we can become strong in the Church, and gain those testimonies that will enable *us* to act *our* part in fulfilling its destiny than through the Book of Mormon.

I see the Book of Mormon as one of the great gifts that has been given by God to this dispensation. Just as the restoration is a grand part of the bringing forth of the "marvelous work and a wonder" that was prophesied to Nephi, a very important part of that "marvelous work and a wonder" was the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. I trust that we will take seriously our obligation to read and study it, that we will begin to appreciate just how great a marvel it is, both in the way in which it came forth, and in what it says to us. I pray that we will read it, that we will study it, that we will take it seriously in our lives, and that we will grow through it, in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.