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How Long Did It Take to Translate the Book of Mormon?

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Chapter 1

HOW LONG DID IT TAKE TO TRANSLATE THE BOOK OF MORMON?

Title Page "Translated by Joseph Smith"

Long ago the Lord declared: "I will proceed to do a marvelous work among this people, yea, a marvelous work and a wonder" (2 Nephi 27:26; see Isaiah 29:14). In Hebrew, this emphatic text repeats the word *miracle* three times: "a miraculous miracle and a miracle." In this context, Isaiah prophesies of a book that will come forth in an extraordinary manner. That book is the Book of Mormon.

The Title Page of the Book of Mormon declares that the book is a translation of an ancient set of records, "sealed up, and hid up unto the Lord . . . – To come forth by the gift and power of God." On many counts, it is no ordinary book. The mere existence of the Book of Mormon is one of the greatest miracles in history.

Among the many amazing facts about the Book of Mormon is how little time it took for Joseph Smith to translate it. Recent research has shown more clearly than ever before that the Book of Mormon as we now have it was translated in a stunningly short amount of time. There was no time for outside research, rewriting, or polishing. Many contemporaneous historical documents sustain and validate the accuracy of Joseph Smith's account of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

The following historical details are well worth noting:

1. In the two months from April 12 to June 14, 1828, Martin Harris assisted Joseph Smith in the translation of what is referred

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to in the 1830 preface to the Book of Mormon as “The Book of Lehi.”¹ During that time, 116 pages of manuscript translation were written. But when those 116 pages, which Martin had borrowed to show members of his family, were lost, the “interpreters” were taken away from Joseph Smith and translation temporarily ceased (July 1828; see D&C 3).

2. Following the return of the “interpreters” on September 22, 1828,² the translation was resumed and proceeded sporadically, with Emma acting as Joseph’s scribe. In Doctrine and Covenants 5:30, which was given in March 1829, Joseph was commanded to translate “a few more pages” and then to “stop for a season.” An examination of the fragmentary original manuscript shows no evidence of Emma’s handwriting, which indicates that very little translation work was actually accomplished during this time.

3. The process of translating the Book of Mormon as we know it began in full earnest with the arrival of Oliver Cowdery on April 5, 1829.³ Two days later, Joseph and Oliver began translating and continued the process “uninterrupted” and “with little cessation” during the rest of April and May of that year.⁴ By May 15 (see D&C 13), they must have reached 3 Nephi 11 since, according to Oliver’s own account, “after writing the account given of the Savior’s ministry to the remnant of the seed of Jacob, upon this continent, it was easily to be seen . . . that . . . none had authority from God to administer the ordinances of the Gospel.”⁵ It was this awareness that led to the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood on May 15, 1829.

If their work began with 1 Nephi, this would mean that 430 pages (of the current edition) would have been written in thirty-eight days, or an amazing average of not less than eleven-and-a-half pages per day! If, on the other hand, Joseph’s and Oliver’s work together began with Mosiah 1, this would still represent 285 pages, an average of seven-and-a-half pages per day!

4. By about the middle of June, the Three Witnesses were shown the plates. According to the manuscripts of the *History of the Church*, a scripture found on page 110 (2 Nephi 27) of the

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original edition of the Book of Mormon may have sparked this experience. Although this recently noticed detail in the manuscript of the *History of the Church* was not supplied until after 1852 (the 1842 publication of the *History of the Church* in the *Times and Seasons* left out the reference to page 110), it may well reflect an oral recollection concerning the immediate scriptural cause of the experience of the Three Witnesses.

This would mean that only 2 Nephi 28 to Words of Mormon remained, or about thirty-eight pages of text, to translate in late June. The manuscripts of the *History of the Church* confirm that the translation continued following that manifestation⁶ and that the work was completed before the end of June. Another possibility is that the scripture in Ether 5 sparked the experience of the Three Witnesses, as later editions of the *History of the Church* indicate. If that were the case, there likewise remained thirty-seven pages to the end of Moroni to complete in late June.

5. If Oliver began transcribing in April with Mosiah 1, then 212 pages would have been translated from the time of the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood on May 15 (3 Nephi 11) until the manifestation to the Three Witnesses in late June (2 Nephi 27). This is a period of approximately thirty days (including the four days spent in transit from Harmony to the Whitmer farm in Fayette), or an average of about ten pages per working day.

If Joseph and Oliver began their work in April at 1 Nephi, which assumes that Ether 5 sparked the experience of the Three Witnesses, there would have been only sixty-five pages (3 Nephi 11 to Ether 5) translated during the same thirty-day period of time, or an average of about two pages per day.

In our view, the “Mosiah First” theory seems more likely.⁷ This supposition is strengthened by the fact that the Title Page, which stood at the end of the Plates of Mormon, was already translated before June 11, 1829. That is the date Joseph Smith applied for the copyright on the Book of Mormon and used the Title Page as the book’s description on the application.

6. Under either theory, a span of no more than sixty-five to seventy-five total days was likely involved in translating the Book

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of Mormon as we now have it, for an overall average of about seven to eight pages per day, conservatively estimated. At such a pace, only about a week could have been taken to translate all of 1 Nephi; a day and half for King Benjamin's speech.

Moreover, Joseph and Oliver could not spend all of that time concentrating on the translation. They also took time to eat, to sleep, to seek employment (once, to work for money when supplies ran out), to receive the Aaronic and Melchizedek priest-hoods, to make at least one (and possibly two) trips to Colesville thirty miles away, to convert and baptize Hyrum and Samuel Smith (who came to Harmony at that time), to receive and record thirteen revelations that are now sections of the Doctrine and Covenants, to move on buckboard from Harmony to Fayette, to acquire the Book of Mormon copyright, to preach a few days and baptize several people near Fayette, to experience manifestations with the Three and Eight Witnesses, and to begin making arrangements for the Book of Mormon's publication.

As Oliver Cowdery a few years afterward testified, "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! Day after day I continued, uninterrupted, to write from his mouth, as he translated . . . the record called 'The Book of Mormon.'"⁸ Considering the Book of Mormon's theological depth, historical complexity, consistency, clarity, artistry, accuracy, and profundity, the Prophet Joseph's translation is a phenomenal achievement—even a miraculous feat.

Based on research by John W. Welch and Tim Rathbone, February 1986. This Update was followed by the publication of an extensive day-by-day chronological study: John W. Welch and Tim Rathbone, "The Translation of the Book of Mormon: Basic Historical Information" (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1986). A concise statement of that research appeared in the Church magazines: John W. Welch, "How long did it take Joseph Smith to translate the Book of Mormon?" Ensign 18 (January 1988): 46–47.

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Notes

1. *History of the Church*, 1:20–21.
2. Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 134–35; compare D&C 10:1–3.
3. *History of the Church*, 1:32–33.
4. *History of the Church*, 1:35; Oliver Cowdery, “Letter 1,” *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834): 14.
5. Cowdery, “Letter 1,” 15.
6. *History of the Church*, 1:26.
7. See Stan Larson, “A Most Sacred Possession,” *Ensign* 7 (September 1977): 87.
8. Joseph Smith—History 1:71 note; italics added. See Cowdery, “Letter 1.”

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Events Surrounding the Translation of the Book of Mormon

Date	Events
1827 Sep	Joseph obtains the plates from the angel Moroni
Oct	
Nov	
Dec	Joseph and Emma move to Harmony, Pennsylvania
1828 Jan	Joseph translates some of the characters
Feb	Martin Harris visits Professor Charles Anthon in New York City
Mar	
Apr 12	
↓	Book of Lehi is translated
June 14	
June 15	Joseph and Emma's first child is born and dies Martin Harris loses 116 pages
July	Joseph travels to Manchester, New York
Aug	
Sep 22	Interpreters and plates reobtained
Oct	
Nov	
Dec	David Whitmer makes a business trip to Palmyra, where he meets Oliver Cowdery

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1829	Jan	
	Feb	Joseph's parents come from New York to Harmony Joseph receives Doctrine and Covenants 4 Lord appears to Oliver Cowdery
	Mar	A few pages translated Martin Harris visits Joseph from Palmyra
	Apr 5	Oliver Cowdery arrives in Harmony
	Apr 7	
	↓	Book of Mormon translated
	Late June	
	July	E. B. Grandin and T. Weed decline to print
	Aug	E. B. Grandin agrees to print Martin Harris mortgages his farm Typesetting commences
	Sep	
	Oct	
	Nov	Oliver Cowdery's preparation of the Printer's Manuscript reaches Alma 36
	Dec	
1830	Jan	
	Feb	
	Mar 26	Printing finished

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The Translation of the Book of Mormon, April to June 1829

Date	Events	Where they were in the translation if they began with	
		Mosiah 1	1 Nephi 1
Apr 5	Oliver Cowdery arrives in Harmony, Pennsylvania		
7	Joseph and Oliver begin work Doctrine and Covenants 6, 7, 8, and 9 received	Mosiah 1	1 Nephi
		↓	↓
May 10	Joseph and Oliver go to Colesville, New York Aaronic Priesthood restored		38 days
15	Doctrine and Covenants 10 received About this time Joseph and Oliver may have gone again to Colesville	3 Nephi 11	3 Nephi 11
		↓	↓
25	Samuel Smith baptized Doctrine and Covenants 11 received		16 days
June 1	Joseph and Oliver move from Harmony, Pennsylvania, to Fayette, New York	Moroni 1 Nephi	◇
		↓	↓
11	Copyright application filed Doctrine and Covenants 14, 15, 16, and 18 received		20 days
15	Hyrum Smith, David Whitmer, and Peter Whitmer, Jr., are baptized around this date		↓
20	Three Witnesses see the plates around this date	2 Nephi 27	Ether 5
		↓	↓
25	Eight Witnesses handle the plates around this date		10 days
30	Translation finished by this date	Words of Mormon	Moroni