

Hard Questions in Church History

Lynne Hilton Wilson

Questions to Consider

- Why do the witnesses describe the translation differently?
- Why did the translation process change?
- Why did Joseph look in a hat?
- Why even have the plates?
- Did Joseph copy from the Bible?

1829—Translation Resumes with Oliver Cowdery

Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon

1829 Timeline of Translating

Winter	Lord appears to and directs Oliver Cowdery; Oliver asks to translate
February	Joseph, Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith arrive in Harmony, PA; Joseph receives a revelation for Joseph, Sr. (D&C 4)
March	Joseph translates a few pages of the Book of Mormon; Emma is scribe.
Apr 5, Sun	Samuel Smith and Oliver Cowdery arrive in Harmony that evening.
Apr 6, Mon	Joseph arranges to purchase a small farm and home from Isaac Hale. Oliver and Samuel were among those who attested this transaction.
Apr 7, Tues	Oliver Cowdery becomes a scribe for the Book of Mormon translation.
Mid-April	Oliver's questions are answered by the Lord as four revelations published as D&C 6, 7, 8, and 9.
Later-April	Oliver Cowdery writes to David Whitmer that "he was convinced that Smith had the records."
May 15	The Aaronic Priesthood is restored near the Susquehanna River by John the Baptist. Joseph and Oliver baptize each other.
June 1	Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery move from Harmony to the Peter Whitmer Sr. home in Fayette, New York; Emma Smith follows shortly thereafter.
June 4-29	Whitmer brothers act as scribes (Christian, John, and David) for the Book of Mormon translation; Joseph and Emma Smith have a disagreement which stops the work of translation until prayer and apologies take place.
June 11	Joseph Smith files copyright application for the Book of Mormon.
June 30	Book of Mormon translation is finished.

Oliver Cowdery Becomes the Scribe (1829)

The Book of Mormon translation, as we know it, began in earnest under a turkey quill of Oliver Cowdery. The new scribe's arrival was nothing short of a miracle. Oliver's brother, Lyman Cowdery, had been hired to teach school in Manchester, NY for the winter months of 1828–29 but the next day a conflict arose, and he asked Oliver to take his place. Hyrum Smith was involved as one of the principal trustees of the school board. Before the new school term began, in December 1828, Oliver met David Whitmer near Palmyra. David told Oliver about the "Golden Bible." Lucy Mack Smith recorded,

Oliver requested my husband to take him as a boarder . . . He had not been in the place long till he began to hear about the plates from all quarters and immediately he commenced importuning Mr. Smith upon the subject but he did not succeed (Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 431-432).

One evening, Oliver told Joseph Sr. “that he had been in deep study all day and it had been put into his heart that he would have the privilege of writing for Joseph when the term of school . . . closed” (Anderson, *Lucy’s Book*, 432). As soon as he was able, he did just that.

Samuel Smith and Oliver left Palmyra in late March and arrived in Harmony, Pennsylvania Sunday night, April 5, 1829. Oliver may have asked for a revelation that very night or sometime the next few days. The Lord’s answer became known as D&C 6. The revelation called Oliver to

Cast your mind upon the night that you cried unto me in your heart, that you might know concerning the truth of these things. Did I not speak peace to your mind . . .?” (D&C 6:22-23).

Oliver confessed that he had kept the experience entirely secret. One-night weeks earlier, he earnestly prayed to know if what he heard about the plates were true, and “the Lord manifested to him that they were true” (Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:35). The revelation then acted as a second witness for Oliver to become Joseph’s scribe. In Joseph’s 1832 history, he also mentions this visitation by the Lord to Oliver.

Joseph later looked back on Oliver and Samuel’s arrival and recorded:

On the 5th day of April, 1829, Oliver Cowdery came to my house, until which time I had never seen him. . . Two days after the arrival of Mr. Cowdery (being the 7th of April) I commenced to translate (Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:32-33).

Oliver was prepared to start immediately. On Monday, Joseph and Oliver took care of business for the translation. One of things they did is now available for all to see on the Joseph Smith Papers website.

Joseph’s deed to purchase a small, 8-acre farm from his father-in-law, is dated April 6, 1829. In addition to the deed having Joseph’s and Isaac Hale’s signatures, the witnesses are Samuel Smith and Oliver Cowdery. With housing and supplies secured, they were ready to start the blitzkrieg translation the next day. The Lord’s timing was amazing. We do not know if Samuel or Oliver or another brought money with them for the down payment, or if Joseph had earned it.

Oliver described his experience as the scribe for most of the Book of Mormon translation:

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” (josephsmithpapers.org, History, 1834-1836, p. 47).

Three months later, on June 30, 1829, the translation of the Book of Mormon was finished.

Oliver Cowdery’s Young Life (1806-1850)

Just nine months younger than Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery was born in Vermont and moved to upstate New York’s Burned-over District. His mother died when he was three, but he was taken care of by his seven siblings and father. He was sensitive to the Spirit and sought answers to his prayers. By age twenty-three, he met Joseph Smith. He had previously worked as a farmer, blacksmith, store clerk, and schoolteacher. Later he worked as a printer, lawyer, and newspaper editor. After a ten-year hiatus, he died in the faith.

D&C 6, 8, 9: A Handbook on How to Receive Revelation

One of the first things the Lord taught Joseph and Oliver was how to recognize the Spirit. Before the Book of Mormon was translated, before the priesthood was restored, before the ordinance of baptism, and a full year before the organization of the church—the Lord taught the young prophet and his associates how to receive personal revelation. The religious revival culture of the American Second Great Awakening debated the topic of revelation more than any other (Wilson, *Dissertation*, Introduction). To correct centuries of misunderstanding, the Lord tutored Joseph and Oliver in how to recognize the Spirit’s inspiration.

Over the course of the month of April 1829, Oliver and Joseph received a mini-handbook of instructions on how to discern the Holy Spirit. These instructions are tucked into three revelations—D&C 6, 8, and 9. Throughout the Prophet Joseph’s life, the Lord expanded his understanding of the Spirit, but within a few weeks of asking questions, the Lord tutored Joseph in how to feel inspiration, direction, peace, and love. God’s instructions bridge two categories: how to prepare for revelation and how to recognize it.

1) According to **D&C 6:14-15**, every time one seeks divine guidance, the Spirit answers—whether a recipient hears an answer or realizes the Spirit’s intervention. Oliver learned that the Spirit will “enlighten thy mind” and bring truth.

“Blessed art thou for what thou hast done; for thou hast **inquired** of me, and behold, as often as thou hast inquired thou hast **received instruction of my Spirit**. . . . Behold, thou knowest that thou hast **inquired** of me and I did **enlighten thy mind**; and now I tell thee these things that thou mayest know that thou hast been **enlightened by the Spirit of truth**.”

2) **D&C 6:22** reminds the sincere seeker humbly to recall previous inspiration. Those who seek and receive answers are responsible to cherish them and hold them in their memory for future situations.

“If you **desire** a further witness, **cast your mind** upon the night that you cried unto me in your heart.”

3) **D&C 6:23**, Consistent with the New Testament, this section identifies peace as a witness of God’s Spirit (Romans 14:17; 15:13).

“Did I not speak **peace** to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God?”

4) In **D&C 8:1**, the Lord explains that revelation is not a passive act, but requires personal preparation:

“Whatsoever things you shall **ask in faith**, with an honest heart, believing that **you shall receive**.”

5) **D&C 8:2-3** teaches Joseph, Oliver, and us, that the Spirit by which Moses brought the children of Israel through the Red Sea was an example of God communicating revelation through His Spirit. Embedded in the Lord’s answer to Oliver was a definition of the “spirit of revelation.” When the Spirit speaks to one’s mind and heart, it is revelation.

“Behold, I will tell you in your **mind** and in your **heart**, by the Holy Ghost . . . this is the **spirit of revelation**; behold, this is the spirit by which Moses brought the children of Israel through the Red Sea.”

6) **D&C 9:7-8** comes as a gentle rebuke to Oliver Cowdery for not taking more personal initiative in seeking divine help. The Lord requires his servants to seek humbly in order to receive answers. This view contradicted those of several Christian theologies of the era who believed revelation came only to biblical prophets and apostles. Oblivious to the controversy, the Prophet Joseph charted his own path: he claimed to receive direction that he called revelation from the Spirit.

“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**”

7) **D&C 9:9** adds another key to discerning answers from the Lord. God empowers prayerful seekers to find the best potential solution after studying out options. God’s positive confirmation is given through warm feelings of inspiration, while His negative feedback comes as a “stupor of thought.”

“But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a **stupor of thought** that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong.”

The Lord’s answers to Oliver’s questions have become a blessing to all of us who also seek to prepare for and recognize personal revelation. Nearly half of Joseph’s canonized revelations came as a result of Joseph seeking answers to questions. This pattern permeated the revelatory process: thirty-six family members and friends sought to know their standing and calling before God. They trusted the young prophet as God’s mouthpiece.

Throughout Joseph’s sixteen years as “a translator, a revelator, a seer, and prophet” (D&C 124, 125), his dependence on and fascination with the Holy Spirit did not wane (Wilson, Dissertation, 2010). The majority of revelations—whether to Joseph or his adherents—included something about the Holy Spirit (seventy-seven of Smith’s 134 canonized revelations or 58%). Rather than develop over time, the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants are consistent from the start and expanded over time. Joseph Smith’s initial interest in spirituality may have developed from his environment—yet interest is different than having a command of the subject. His earliest revelations already appear replete with an understanding of the Spirit.

Translation Process

Many have wondered what the translation process was like. The Prophet Joseph said it unfolded “by the gift and power of God.” Witnesses and scribes shared their perception of the translation process. The earliest witnesses (late 1827 to early 1828) describe Joseph Smith using the Urim and Thummim and the plates with a blanket or fabric hung so that the scribe could not see the plates. Later witnesses describe an “*open-view translation*.” (See “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” *The Saints’ Herald* 20, no 19 [October 1, 1879]).

We have many historical statements about the translation process from eyewitnesses—but not from Joseph (see Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 78-198).

- Joseph Smith placed the interpreters (either the Urim and Thummim or the seer stone) in a hat and put his face in the hat [probably to block out extra light, in order to see the words in the stones better].
- Joseph dictated for long periods of time without reference to any books, papers, manuscripts, or the plates.
- Joseph spelled out unfamiliar Book of Mormon names and words that he could not pronounce.
- After each dictated sequence, the scribe read back to Joseph what was written so the scribe and Joseph could check for correctness.
- Joseph started each dictation where he left off previously without prompting from the scribe about where the previous session had ended.

Facts of the Translation in 1829

Translating a complex book of 264,000 words is unheard of with a quill. Even with modern technology and lexicons, a modern professional translator is happy to finish a page or two a day. John W. Welch has looked at Joseph's calendar during those three months. In addition to translating and transcribing with a quill, Joseph also took time away from translating to:

- 1) Receive thirteen revelations
- 2) Receive a visit from John the Baptist
- 3) Perform Oliver and Joseph's baptisms and a few others
- 4) Show the plates to the Three and Eight Witnesses
- 5) Move over 100 miles from Harmony to Fayette
- 6) Preach a few days
- 7) Acquire the Book of Mormon copyright
- 8) Travel twice to Colesville (36 miles round trip)
- 9) Take care of meals and family needs on the frontier

In addition to the timing, here are other facts about the translation (John W. Welch, *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 2).

- Translation of the text (500+ pages) took between sixty-three and seventy-five days.
- Scribes wrote between seven and eleven pages a day.
- 1 Nephi was translated in only a week; King Benjamin's sermon was translated and scribed in a day and half.
- The basic vocabulary in the Book of Mormon (excluding names and places) is Joseph Smith's. This is evidence that he was the translator, and is consistent with all single-person translations.
- The tense used (or word suffixes) follow early English from 1550 to 1600 (predating the King James Version of the Bible).

After years of studying the first manuscripts written by Oliver and other scribes, Royal Skousen summarized three significant observations about how the translation occurred:

1. (a) The text was orally dictated, word for word; (b) Book of Mormon names were frequently spelled out the first time they occurred in the text, thus indicating that Joseph Smith could see

the spelling of the names; and (c) during dictation, there was no rewriting of the text except to correct errors in taking down the dictation.

(<https://www.fairmormon.org/testimonies/scholars/royal-skousen>).

2. This evidence does not support theories that Joseph Smith composed the text himself or that he took the text from some other source. Instead, it indicates that the Lord exercised what Skousen refers to as “tight control” over the word-by-word translation of the Book of Mormon. In particular, the evidence suggests that Joseph Smith saw specific words written out in English and read them to the scribe, and that the accuracy of the resulting text depended on the carefulness of Joseph and his scribe.
3. The process was not 100% infallible. There are a few errors from both hearing and seeing—meaning:
 - a. Errors occurred by virtue of the scribe hearing incorrectly as Joseph originally dictated, and
 - b. Errors from seeing as the scribe rewrote the original manuscript for a second copy (referred to as the printer’s manuscript).

Evidence from the original and printer’s manuscripts suggests that the only divinely-revealed stage in the translation process was what Joseph Smith himself saw by means of the interpreters. Witnesses seem to have believed that Joseph actually saw an English text in the interpreters, but it is possible that Joseph saw the text in his “mind’s eye,” so to speak,

Whether Joseph Smith was reading text aloud or the scribe was writing it down, any stage of the process held potential for human error and needed careful monitoring (Noel B. Reynolds, *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence of Ancient Origins* [Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1997]).

202 Documents Witness the Translation

John W. Welch has gathered and systematized over 200 documents that witness to the translation (Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 79, also 78-198). The documents come from the following sources:

- #1-9) Recorded in the D&C
- #10-37) Joseph Smith, Jr.
- #38-43) Emma Smith
- #44-68) Martin Harris
- #69-77) Oliver Cowdery; Three Witnesses
- #78-98) David Whitmer
- #99-101) John Whitmer
- #102-110) Joseph’s family—Joseph Sr., Lucy, William, and Katherine Smith
- # 111-116) Those with knowledge of the translation—Sarah Conrad, Elizabeth Ann Whitmer, Alva Hale, Isaac Hale, Joseph Knight Sr., and Joseph Knight Jr.
- #117-202) Second-hand accounts from reports or rumors.

A few examples follow:

1) *Joseph Knight (autograph [between 1833 and 1847])*: “Now the way he translated was he put the urim [sic] and Thummim into his hat and darkned [sic] his Eyes then he would take a sentence and it would

apper [sic] in Brite [sic] Roman Letters. Then he would tell the writer and he would write it. Then that would go away the next sentence would Come [sic] and so on. But if it was not Spelt rite [sic] it would not go away till it was rite [sic], so we see it was marvelous” (Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 168).

2) *Joseph Smith (as recorded by Truman Coe, 1836)*: “The manner of translation was as wonderful as the discovery. Putting his finger on one of the characters and imploring divine aid, then looking through the Urim and Thummin [sic], he would see the import written in plain English on a screen placed before him. After delivering this to his emanuensis [sic], he would again proceed in the same manner and obtain the meaning of the next character, and so on till he came to the part of the plates which were sealed up, and there was commanded to desist” (ibid., 124).

3) *Lucy Mack Smith (Henry Caswall interview, 1842)*: “. . . I have myself seen and handled the golden plates; they are about eight inches long, and six wide; some of them are sealed together and are not to be opened, and some of them are loose. They are all connected by a ring which passes through a hole at the end of each plate, and are covered with letters beautifully engraved. I have seen and felt also the Urim and Thummim. They resemble two large bright diamonds set in a bow like a pair of spectacles. My son puts those over his eyes when he reads unknown languages, and they enable him to interpret them in English. I have likewise carried in my hands the sacred breastplate. It is composed of pure gold, and is made to fit the breast very exactly” (ibid., 162).

4) *Emma Smith (interview, 1856)*: “When my husband was translating the Book of Mormon, I wrote a part of it, as he dictated each sentence, word for word, and when he came to proper names he could not pronounce, or long words, he spelled them out, and while I was writing them, if I made a mistake in spelling, he would stop me and correct my spelling, although it was impossible for him to see how I was writing them down at the time. Even the word ‘Sariah’ he could not pronounce at first, but had to spell it, and I would pronounce it for him.

When he stopped for any purpose at any time he would, when he commenced again, begin where he left off without any hesitation, and one time while he was translating he stopped suddenly, pale as a sheet, and said, ‘Emma, did Jerusalem have walls around it?’ When I answered, ‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘Oh! I was afraid I had been deceived.’ He had such a limited knowledge of history at the time that he did not even know that Jerusalem was surrounded by walls” (ibid., 129).

5) *Emma Smith (to Emma Pilgrim, 1870)*: “Now, the first part my husband translated, was translated by the use of the 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” (ibid., 129).

6) *Martin Harris (Edward Stevenson’s 1881 account)*: “By 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” (ibid., 135).

7) *David Whitmer (Eri B. Mullin interview, 1880)*: “. . . I asked him [David Whitmer] how they looked. He said they looked like spectacles, and he (Joseph) would put them on and look in a hat, or put his face in the hat and read. Says I, ‘Did he have the plates in there[?]’ “No, the words would appear, and

if he failed to spell the word right, it would stay till it was spelled right, then pass away; another come, and so on” (ibid., 147).

8) *William Smith (Joseph’s brother, 1883)*: “In consequence of his vision, and his having the golden plates and refusing to show them, a great persecution arose against the whole family, and he was compelled to remove into Pennsylvania with the plates, where he translated them by means of the Urim and Thummim, (which he obtained with the plates), and the power of God. The manner in which this was done was by looking into the Urim and Thummim, which was placed in a hat to exclude the light, (the plates lying near by covered up), and reading off the translation, which appeared in the stone by the power of God. He was engaged in this business as he had opportunity for about two years and a half. In the winter of 1829 and thirty, the Book of Mormon, which is the translation of part of the plates he obtained, was published. He then showed the plates to my father and my brothers Hyrum and Samuel, who were witnesses to the truth of the book which was translated from them. I was permitted to lift them as they laid in a pillow-case; but not to see them, as it was contrary to the commands he had received. They weighed about sixty pounds according to the best of my judgment” (ibid., 164).

9) *Alva Hale (son of Isaac Hale, 1834)*: Joseph Smith, Jr. told him that “his (Smith’s) gift in seeing with a stone and hat, was a gift from God,” but also states “that Smith told him at another time that this ‘peeping’ was all d—d nonsense. He (Smith) was deceived himself but did not intend to deceive others;—that he intended to quit the business, (of peeping) and labor for his livelihood” (ibid., 79).

10) *David Whitmer*: “I will now give you a description 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” (*Improvement Era*, 1939).

Sources

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