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## The Book of Mormon: Historical Setting for Its Translation and Publication

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Larry C. Porter

In May 1829, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery found that a combination of circumstances had made continuing the translation of the Book of Mormon at Harmony, Pennsylvania, untenable. Their determination to “reason with others out of the scriptures” had brought down the ire of Nathaniel Lewis, brother-in-law to Isaac Hale and deacon in the local Methodist Church. Isaac Hale was no longer able to control things, and mobocracy renewed itself on the Susquehanna. Conditions had deteriorated to the point that Lucy Smith observed, “evil-designing people were seeking to take away his [Joseph’s] life, in order to prevent the work of God from going forth to the world” (135).

At Joseph’s request, Oliver wrote to ask his friend David Whitmer in Seneca County, New York, that they be allowed to come to the Whitmer farm, where they could renew their translation in safety. The correspondence produced the desired results, and David transported the Prophet and his scribe to the residence of his father, Peter Whitmer, Sr., in Fayette Township, arriving about 1 June 1829 (“Mormonism”; see also *History of the Church* 1:48; hereafter *HC*).

Although Oliver Cowdery continued to act as the principal scribe to Joseph in the translation of the Book of Mormon,

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others also assisted. In addition to the proffered services of David Whitmer, the Prophet affirmed that “John Whitmer, in particular, assisted us very much in writing during the remainder of the work” (*HC* 1:49). David also explained, “Emma, Joseph’s wife, came to my father’s house a short time after Joseph and Oliver came, and she wrote a little of the translation, my brother Christian wrote some, but Oliver wrote the greater portion of it” noting further that “it was a laborious work for the weather was very warm, and the days were long and they [Joseph and Oliver] worked from morning till night. But they were both young and strong and were soon able to complete the work” (Hart).<sup>1</sup> David likewise stated that the “translation at my father’s occupied about one month, that is from June 1, to July 1, 1829” (“Mormonism”).

Toward the end of June, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris, were summoned to be witnesses to the Book of Mormon. David again identified the circumstances:

I was plowing in the field one morning and Joseph and Oliver came along with a revelation stating that I was to be one of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon. I got over the fence and we went out into the woods, near by, and sat down on a log and talked awhile. We then kneeled down and prayed. Joseph prayed. We then got up and sat on the log and were talking, when all at once a light came down from above us and encircled us for quite a little distance around; and the angel stood before us. He was dressed in white, and spoke and called me by name and said “Blessed is he that keepeth His commandments.” This is all that I heard the angel say. A table was set before us and on it the records were placed. The Records of the Nephites, from which the Book of Mormon was translated, the brass plates, the Ball of Directors, the sword of Laban and other plates. While we were viewing them the voice of God spoke out of heaven saying that the Book was true and the translation correct. (“Letter From Elder W. H. Kelley”)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Emma Smith identified her brother, Reuben Hale, as a scribe, but this was undoubtedly before the removal from Harmony to Fayette (see “Last Testimony of Sister Emma”). The Prophet also said that his brother Samuel Smith had written a little in Harmony (see *Papers* 1:10).

<sup>2</sup> David Whitmer informed Edward Stevenson that when Joseph and Oliver invited him to accompany them, he tied his team to the fence and “the 3 went about 40 rods from his Fathers House [and] while sitting on a log an angel appeared in the midst of a brightness that preceded him” (see Stevenson, 2 Jan 1887).

Martin Harris, who had momentarily withdrawn from the others just before the initial appearance of the angel Moroni, was visited by the angel soon after on that same day while praying with the Prophet (*HC* 1:55). David Whitmer remembered that eight additional witnesses saw the plates “the next day” (“Mormonism”). However, Lucy Smith remembered that it was a “few days” afterward. She commented:

The following day [the latter part of June], we returned, a cheerful, happy company [to Manchester, New York]. In a few days we were followed by Joseph, Oliver, and the Whitmers, who came to make us a visit, and make some arrangements about getting the book printed. Soon after they came, all the male part of the company, with my husband, Samuel, and Hyrum, retired to a place where the family were in the habit of offering up their secret devotions to God. They went to this place, because it had been revealed to Joseph that the plates would be carried thither by one of the ancient Nephites. Here it was, that those eight witnesses, whose names are recorded in the Book of Mormon, looked upon them and handled them. (140)

The eight witnesses said they saw and “did handle with our hands” the plates as displayed by Joseph Smith, but they did not claim to see an angel, hear the voice, or see the Nephite artifacts mentioned by David (Testimony of the Eight Witnesses in the Book of Mormon).

Application for a copyright having been made on 11 June 1829 to R. R. Lansing, Clerk of the Northern District Court, Albany, New York, all things were in readiness to secure a printer to publish the translation of the Book of Mormon. Joseph and Hyrum Smith’s, Oliver Cowdery’s, and Martin Harris’ attention immediately focused on a local publishing firm in Palmyra whose advertisement read, “E. B. Grandin, Book and Job Printer, Palmyra, N.Y. Has made such additions to his assortment of Job and Fancy Type, as will enable him to execute all kinds of Book and Job Printing with equal neatness, accuracy and despatch to any printing establishment in the country” (“E. B. Grandin”). As the Smith home was approximately two miles from the Grandin press, it would be more convenient to get the work done locally. However, Grandin, who was also the editor

of the *Wayne Sentinel*, initially declined to undertake the project on religious grounds, and the announced suspicion that Martin Harris was being defrauded (P. Tucker 50–51; see also Allen).

Forced to look elsewhere, Joseph called on Thurlow Weed in Rochester, New York, former editor and publisher of the *Rochester Telegraph* and then the publisher of the *Anti-Masonic Enquirer*. Weed's own description of that meeting was candid and direct:

About 1829 a stout, round, smooth-faced young man, between twenty-five and thirty, with the air and manners of a person without occupation, came into the "Rochester Telegraph" office and said he wanted a book printed, and added that he had been directed in a vision to a place in the woods near Palmyra, where he resided, and that he found a "golden Bible," from which he was directed to copy the book which he wanted published. . . . I thought the man either crazed or a very shallow imposter, and therefore declined to become a publisher. . . . [Not] on [that] day but one following he came again, accompanied by Martin Harris, a substantial farmer residing near Palmyra, who adopted the Mormon faith, and who offered to become security for the expense of printing. But I again declined. (Weed 1:358–59)

Weed's second refusal led Joseph to the Rochester office of Elihu F. Marshall, a book publisher who "gave his terms for the printing and binding of the book, with his acceptance of the proffered mode of security for payment" (P. Tucker 52). Assured the book would be published, Joseph Smith and Martin Harris returned to Grandin and asked him to spare them the inconvenience and cost of travel of having to go to Rochester. According to Henry Allen, a grandson of Mr. Grandin, "after consulting friends who felt that it was merely a business matter and that he would be in no way related to the religion, he consented" (Allen). In a mortgage dated 25 August 1829, Martin Harris agreed to pay the sum of \$3,000 to Egbert B. Grandin within an 18-month period. If he failed to comply, then his land was to be sold at public auction to satisfy the demand (Book 3, Mortgages 325). After making arrangements for Oliver to transcribe the whole Book of Mormon and supervise the

presswork, Joseph returned to his home in Harmony, Pennsylvania (Smith 142–43).

Grandin's shop, which he rented from his brother Philip Grandin, was a self-contained unit at the west end of "Thayer and Grandin's Row," on Main Street in Palmyra. The printing was done on the third floor, the binding operation was on the second floor, and the ground floor housed the bookstore (Gilbert, "Memorandum" 3–4).

John H. Gilbert as the chief compositor for the first edition of the Book of Mormon had the primary responsibility for setting the type and doing the presswork. He also assisted Grandin in estimating the cost of printing 5,000 copies (P. Tucker 53; see also Gilbert, "Memorandum" 1). The number of copies to be printed was unusually large. Press runs were most often for 500 to 600 copies (Ord 66). A few pages of the manuscript were submitted to the printer as a specimen of the whole, and Grandin was informed that there would be about 500 pages total. The size of the page was agreed upon and the number of "ems" in a page was estimated to be 1,000 (an "em" is the unit measure of type the width of the letter "m"). It was also correctly estimated that a page of the elongated foolscap manuscript paper would make more than a page of printed matter. The contract was to print and bind 5,000 copies in leather, and Grandin even purchased a new font of small Pica type to use for the body of the work (Gilbert, "Memorandum" 2).

John H. Gilbert and J. H. Bortles did the presswork until December 1829, and it took nearly three days to print 5,000 copies of each form. That same December Grandin hired another pressman, Thomas McAuley or "Whistling Tom," who with Bortles finished the presswork (Gilbert, "Memorandum" 3). Edward R. Foreman has reported in an editor's note that Willam Van Camp was also employed as a compositor on the Book of Mormon job and that Pomeroy Tucker, former editor of the *Wayne Sentinel* and brother-in-law of Grandin, was the "foreman of the office" (47). Tucker reported that "in the

progress of the work he performed much of the reading of the proof-sheets, comparing the same with manuscript copies” (P. Tucker 4). Daniel Hendrix affirmed that he “‘helped to read proof on many pages of the book, and at odd times set some type” (Linn 48). J. N. T. Tucker claimed that he was a practical printer in the Grandin office and worked on the project (J. Tucker 74). A young man by the name of Albert Chandler worked with Luther Howard in binding the volume in leather. Chandler recalled: “‘I was an apprentice in the bookbindery connected with the *Sentinel* office. I helped to collate and stitch the Gold Bible, and soon after this was completed, I changed from book-binding to printing” (Linn 48). Chandler told E. R. Crandall that when the Book of Mormon was being published, he was the printer’s “devil” (apprentice or errand boy) in the shop, being 16 years of age at the time (“Former Palmyra Man”). Lucy Smith also identified a young man by the name of Robinson, who apparently gave some assistance during at least the early stages of the printing process (143). Some of those named above may have responded to Grandin’s 28 August 1829 *Wayne Sentinel* advertisement for an “Apprentice to the printing business,” or that of Luther Howard on 25 September 1829 stipulating that “A good boy is wanted in the Book Bindery.” There was an obvious increase in hired staff to handle the increased work load.

The Book of Mormon “was printed on a ‘Smith’ Press, single pull, and old fashioned ‘Balls’ were used” (Gilbert, “Memorandum” 3). Small printing offices generally did not have composition rollers. Using a hand press required more time. Also “the type of one form had to be distributed before another could be set up” accounting for much of the nearly eight months required for printing the volume (P. Tucker 56). Case, Abbey, & Co., of Shortsville, New York, was said to have manufactured the paper used in printing the first edition (Milliken, *A History* 1:415).

When the printer was ready to begin the typesetting, about the middle of August, Martin Harris was notified. Hyrum Smith

then brought the first installment of the “printer’s manuscript” numbering 24 pages. He had them buttoned under his vest and coat for security. The pages were closely written and legible, but Gilbert said that every chapter was virtually one solid paragraph as there was “not a punctuation mark from beginning to end” (Letter to Cobb; also see “Memorandum” 2–3).<sup>3</sup> John Gilbert described the make up of the text:

Names of persons and places were generally capitalized, but sentences had no end. The character or short & was used almost invariably where the word *and* occurred, except at the [beginning] of a chapter. I punctuated it to make it read as I supposed the Author intended, and but very little punctuation was altered in proof-reading. The Bible was printed 16 pages at a time, so that one sheet of paper made two copies of 16 pages each, requiring 2500 sheets of paper for each form of 16 pages. There were 37 forms of 16 pages each, 570 pages in all [the printed volume totaled 588 pages]. (Gilbert, “Memorandum” 3)

Gilbert requested that the manuscript be left with him so he could take it home at night and go over the sheets for punctuation. The printing process was slowed by frequently having “to stop and read half a page to find out how to punctuate it” (“Memorandum” 2). Hyrum’s reply was, “We are commanded not to leave it.” However, a few days later Hyrum handed him the copy and stated, “If you will give me your word that this manuscript shall be returned to us when you are through with it, I will leave it with you” (Ibid). Gilbert gratefully took the manuscript home and in two or three nights had punctuated it using mostly a lead pencil with only a few marks in ink. When he found that some extended portions of the manuscript appeared to have been taken verbatim from the Bible, he kept a copy of it on his typecase to help him in deciphering the handwritten text and putting in the proper

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<sup>3</sup> Professor Royal Skousen of the BYU English Department is currently doing a comparative examination of the original and printer’s manuscripts of the Book of Mormon in a critical text study. He has found “strong evidence that for 72 pages the original manuscript rather than the printer’s manuscript was used as the printer’s copy for typesetting the 1830 edition” (“Piecing Together” 23), because Gilbert’s pencil marks are on that segment of the original manuscript, and the printer’s manuscript is clean of any marks for that portion (see Skousen 65-75 below). Skousen noted in an interview on 26 October 1992 that Gilbert’s claim of no punctuation on the manuscript is not entirely true since Oliver did some punctuation.



punctuation marks (“The Book of Mormon” 4:618). Although Pomeroy Tucker recalled that Gilbert “was given limited discretion in correcting, which was exercised in the particulars of syntax, orthography, punctuation, capitalizing, paragraphing, etc.” (53), Professor Skousen noted in a 13 July 1992 interview that Gilbert was not permitted to make corrections in syntax and that any such corrections “did not occur except by accident.”

John Gilbert asserted that, “Oliver Cowdery *was not* engaged [hired] as compositor on the work—was not a printer. He was a frequent visitor to the office, and did several times take up a ‘stick’ and set a part of a page—he may have set 10 or 12 pages, all told” (Letter to Cobb). Gilbert further stated:

Cowdery held and looked over the manuscript when most of the proofs were read. Martin Harris once or twice, and Hyrum Smith once, Grandin supposing these men could read their own writing as well, if not better, than anyone else; and if there are any discrepancies between the Palmyra edition and the manuscript these men should be held responsible.

Joseph Smith, Jr. had nothing to do whatever with the printing or furnishing copy for printers, being but once in the office during the printing of the BIBLE, and then not over 15 or 20 minutes. (“Memorandum” 4)

Martin Harris was a frequent visitor at the printing office with his vested interest in the successful publication of the work. When asked by the Hon. Diedrich Willers what he knew of the Whitmer family in conjunction with the printing of the Book of Mormon, John Gilbert wrote, “The Whitmer’s from your County [Seneca], I never saw, and know nothing of them” (Letter to Willers). Behind the scenes, however, Peter Whitmer, Jr., did serve as a guard for the manuscripts of the Book of Mormon (Smith 145).

Some portions of the Book of Mormon text appeared in public print in advance of the completed volume. When Joseph Smith first asked Grandin to print the book (Pomeroy Tucker said that the first contact was made in June 1829), he gave the printer a few sheets of the manuscript and a copy of the title page from which to calculate the cost (P. Tucker 50–51). It is

most interesting to note that Mr. Grandin printed the title page of the Book of Mormon in the 26 June 1829 issue of the *Wayne Sentinel* with the comment, "It is pretended that it will be published as soon as the translation is completed." It is not certain whether printing negotiations had begun or Grandin was merely reprinting the copyright statement for his readers.

Another unauthorized printing of actual portions from the Book of Mormon occurred when Abner Cole, under the pseudonym of Obadiah Dogberry, Jun., began publishing a local Palmyra newspaper entitled *The Reflector*. From his "Bower" on Winter Green Hill (the drumblin, hill created by glacial drift, immediately north of the village of Palmyra), Cole ran a series of articles devoted to the "Gold Bible," reproducing segments from the Book of Mormon in the later articles. His running commentary on the progress of the work was part of the very first number of *The Reflector*, 2 September 1829, and was accompanied by the wry comment, "The Gold Bible, by Joseph Smith Junior, author and proprietor, is now in press and will shortly appear. Priestcraft is short lived!"

Cole used the very same press, evenings and Sundays, on which Grandin's staff was printing the Book of Mormon weekdays. And it was no idle boast when he announced in the 9 December 1829 issue:

As much curiosity has been excited in this section of the country on the subject, and as the work itself will not be ready for delivery for some months to come—at the solicitation of many of our readers we have concluded to commence publishing extracts from it on or before the commencement of the second series.

Cole either availed himself of discarded pages from the printing of the Book of Mormon or acquired printed sheets which apparently were conveniently at his fingertips in the Grandin printing shop. In his 2 January 1830 number, he printed a portion of the text of "The First Book of Nephi. His reign and Ministry, Chapter I," containing the copy found in the first eleven paragraphs of the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 1:1–2:3, in the 1981 edition). In the 13 January issue,

he printed the next four paragraphs (1 Nephi 2:4–15) from First Nephi, Chapter I, followed on 22 January by copy from the Book of Alma, Chapter XX (Alma 43:22–40).

Hyrum Smith learned of Cole's pilfering when, uneasy over the security of the work at the press, he and Oliver Cowdery went to the Grandin printing office on a Sunday afternoon and found Cole in the process of running off the latest issue of *The Reflector*. While examining some back issues of the publication, Hyrum saw the notice of Cole's promise to supply his readers with text from the Book of Mormon and also other issues containing the excerpts. He told him to stop that activity immediately, but Cole vehemently rejected the idea. However, his ardor was cooled when Joseph Smith, Sr., journeyed to Harmony, Pennsylvania, and returned with the Prophet. Confronting Cole in the Palmyra printing office on a Sunday evening, Joseph warned him that the copyright law was in effect and that he would take action against him unless he desisted. Abner Cole reluctantly relented, and Lucy Smith said "he made us no more trouble," in that regard (148–50). Cole did continue his satire on the Book of Mormon in subsequent issues of *The Reflector*, however.

The Prophet declared, "Whilst the Book of Mormon was in the hands of the printer, we still continued to bear testimony and give information, as far as we had opportunity" (*HC* 1:74–75). As soon as the first pages were off the press in the fall of 1829, numbers of these proof sheets became teaching tools in a missionary endeavor. Thomas B. Marsh of Charleston, Massachusetts, visited the Grandin printing office that fall and was given copies of the first 16 pages of the Book of Mormon ("History of Thos. Baldwin Marsh" 18). Solomon Chamberlain of Lyons, New York, was accompanied to the print shop by Hyrum Smith, who handed him 64 pages from the new volume (Chamberlain 317).

Oliver Cowdery gave proof sheets of the book to his brother Warren A. Cowdery as they came from the press. Warren then showed them to the Heman Hyde family in the town of Free-

dom, Cattaraugus County, New York (Hyde 6). He also shared the news of the new gospel with other neighbors, the Samuel Miles family (Miles 1). Pomeroy Tucker recorded that the Prophet himself took sheets for First and Second Nephi “and other portions of the forthcoming revelation” to show to his relatives in Harmony (56). David Whitmer summarized these intensive efforts: “In August, 1829, we began to preach the gospel of Christ. . . . We preached . . . from August, 1829, until April 6th, 1830, being *eight months* in which time we had proceeded rightly” (Whitmer 32).

Because of a threatened local boycott of the sale of the Book of Mormon by various citizens, Grandin refused to release the volume until he received additional assurances that he would be paid for the printing. When Joseph, with yet another trip up from Pennsylvania, satisfied Grandin that the necessary funds would be forthcoming, he released the volumes. Later, Martin Harris sold a portion of his farm to get the money to pay Grandin. Martin conveyed 151 acres of land to Thomas Lakey, of Palmyra, for the sum of \$3,000 on 7 April 1831 (Deed Book 10, 515).

The *Wayne Sentinel* of 19 March 1830 carried the following announcement: “We are requested to announce that the ‘BOOK OF MORMON’ will be ready for sale in the course of next week.” On 26 March 1830, the volumes were made available to patrons of the store. Copies sold initially for \$1.75, but this price was subsequently lowered to \$1.25 (Howe 13).

Pomeroy Tucker recalled that, “The book . . . fell dead before the public. . . . It found no buyers, or but very few” (60–61). Lucy Mack Smith gives a plausible explanation for the poor reception, noting that “The inhabitants of the surrounding country perceived that the work still progressed [and] . . . they resolved, as before, never to purchase one of our books, when they should be printed” (150). Nevertheless, both Joseph and Martin made extended efforts to promote the sale of the work. Albert Chandler recorded, “Martin Harris . . . gave up his entire time to advertising the Bible to his neighbors and the

public generally in the vicinity of Palmyra. He would call public meetings and address them himself” (Linn 48). One observer of these events said that Martin “was daily seen on the streets inviting his friends and neighbors to buy. His form was conspicuous with a grey suit of homespun, his head surmounted by a large stiff hat, while under his arm he carried several copies of the book” (“Old Newspapers”).

Local antagonism against the Book of Mormon was personalized in the case of several members of the Smith family, who for the earlier decade had been associated with the Presbyterian Church. On 10 March 1830, just 16 days before the Book of Mormon was made available, a specially appointed committee of the Western Presbyterian Church of Palmyra recorded in their session minutes that they had called upon Lucy Mack Smith, Hyrum Smith, and Samuel Harrison Smith and “received no satisfaction.” The Smiths had “acknowledged that they had entirely neglected the ordinances of the church for the last eighteen months and that they did not wish to unite with us any more.” It was resolved that they be cited to appear before the Session on the 24th day of March at 2:00 PM to answer the charge, “Neglect of public worship and the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper for the last eighteen months” (Records of the Session 2:11–12).

When the Session met on 29 March 1830, just three days after the Book of Mormon was offered for sale to the public, the above charges were sustained by the testimonies of Henry Jessup, Harvey Shel, Robert W. Smith, and Frederick U. Sheffield. It was then resolved that Lucy, Hyrum, and Samuel Harrison Smith ought to be suspended (Records of the Session 2:11–12). Although it is not specifically mentioned in the minutes, at issue was the Book of Mormon. When Deacon George Beckwith was assigned to defend the Smiths and had previously called on Lucy, he had pleaded with her, “I wish, that if you do believe those things [the Book of Mormon and the teachings of her son, Joseph], you would not say anything more upon the subject—I do wish you would not.” Lucy’s reply

did not help her defense: “Deacon Beckwith, if you should stick my flesh full of faggots, and even burn me at the stake, I would declare, as long as God should give me breath, that Joseph has got that Record, and that I know it to be true” (146).

Eight days following the expulsion of the Smiths from the Presbyterian Church, the Church of Jesus Christ was officially organized at Fayette, New York, on 6 April 1830. Commenting on the reception of the Book of Mormon among the public in April-May 1830, and its significance to the proselyting program of the new church, the Prophet Joseph Smith concluded:

The Book of Mormon (‘the stick of Joseph in the hands of Ephraim’) had now been published for some time, and as the ancient prophet had predicted of it: “It was accounted as a strange thing.” No small stir was created by its appearance; great opposition and much persecution followed the believers of its authenticity; but it had now come to pass that truth had sprung out of the earth; and righteousness had looked down from heaven—so we feared not our opponents, knowing that we had both truth and righteousness on our side; that we had both the Father and the Son, because we had the doctrines of Christ, and abided in them; and therefore we continued to preach, and to give information to all who were willing to hear. (“History of Joseph Smith” 4:22)

With five thousand copies of the Book of Mormon available to them as an immediate means of promulgating the restored gospel, missionaries of the Church taught from this ancient scripture to aid in the conversion of first hundreds, and then thousands to the message of salvation.

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