

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MORMONISM



Edited by
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**BOOK OF MORMON TRANSLATION
BY JOSEPH SMITH**

By its own terms, the Book of Mormon is a translation of an ancient book; yet Joseph SMITH knew no ancient languages at the time he dictated this text to his scribes. He and several of his close associates testified that the translation was accomplished “by the gift and power of God” (*HC* 1:315; see also *D&C* 1:29; 20:8).

Little is known about the translation process itself. Few details can be gleaned from comments made by Joseph’s scribes and close associates. Only Joseph Smith knew the actual process, and he declined to describe it in public. At a Church conference in 1831, Hyrum Smith invited the Prophet to explain more fully how the Book of Mormon came forth. Joseph Smith responded that “it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon; and . . . it was not expedient for him to relate these things” (*HC* 1:220).

Much is known, however, about when and where the work of translation occurred. The events are documented by several independent firsthand witnesses. Joseph Smith first obtained the GOLD PLATES at the hill CUMORAH in New York, in the early morning hours of September 22, 1827. To avoid local harassment and mobs, he moved to HARMONY, PENNSYLVANIA, in December 1827. There he copied and translated some of the characters from the plates, with his wife Emma and her brother Reuben Hale acting as scribes. In 1856, Emma recalled that Joseph dictated the translation to her word for word, spelled out the proper names, and would correct her scribal errors even though he could not see what she had written. At one point while translating, Joseph was surprised to learn that Jerusalem had walls around it (E. C. Briggs, “Interview with David Whitmer,” *Saints’ Herald* 31 [June 21, 1884]:396–97). Emma was once asked in a later interview if Joseph had read from any books or notes while dictating. She answered, “He had neither,” and when pressed, added: “If he had anything of the kind he could not have concealed it from me” (*Saints’ Herald* 26 [Oct. 1, 1879]:290).

Martin HARRIS came to Harmony in February 1828, and shortly afterward took a transcript and translation of some of the characters to New York City, where he showed them to Professor Charles

Anthon at Columbia College (see ANTHON TRANSCRIPT). He returned fully satisfied that Joseph was telling the truth, and from April 12 to June 14, 1828, Harris acted as scribe while Joseph Smith translated the book of Lehi.

On June 15, 1828, Joseph and Emma’s first son was born but died a few hours later. About July 15, Joseph learned that Martin Harris had lost the 116 pages they had translated (see MANUSCRIPT, LOST 116 PAGES), and subsequently the angel MORONI took the plates and the interpreters temporarily from Joseph, who was chastened but reassured by the Lord that the work would go forth (*D&C* 3:15–16).

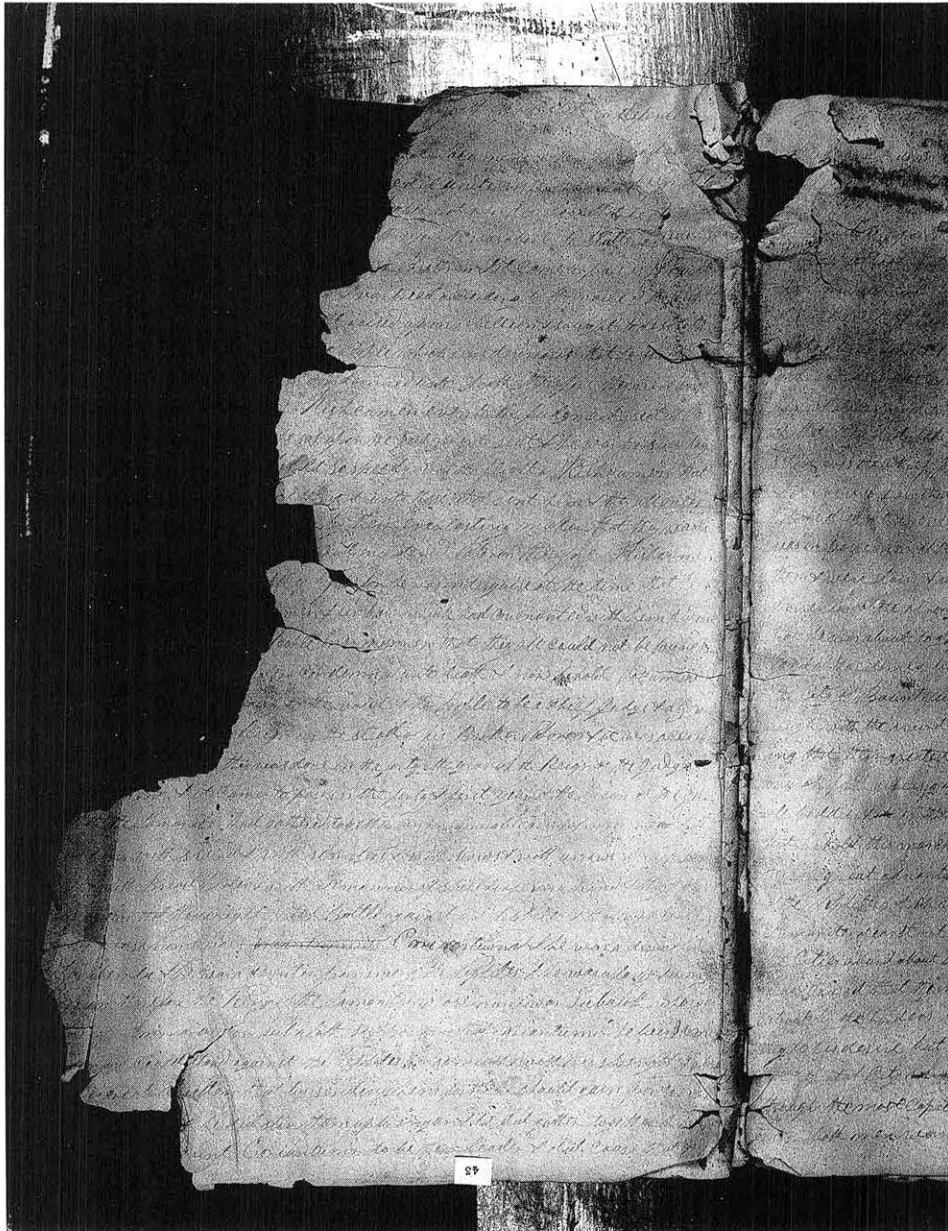
On September 22, 1828, the plates and translation tools were returned to Joseph Smith, and during that winter he translated “a few more pages” (*D&C* 5:30). The work progressed slowly until April 5, 1829, when Oliver COWDERY, a school teacher who had seen the Lord and the plates in a vision (*PWJS*, p. 8), arrived in Harmony and offered his scribal services to Joseph. Virtually all of the English text of the Book of Mormon was then translated between April 7 and the last week of June, less than sixty working days.

The dictation flowed smoothly. From the surviving portions of the Original Manuscript it appears that Joseph dictated about a dozen words at a time. Oliver would read those words back for verification, and then they would go on. Emma later added that after a meal or a night’s rest, Joseph would begin, without prompting, where he had previously left off (*The Saints’ Herald* 26 [Oct. 1, 1879]:290). No time was taken for research, internal cross-checking, or editorial rewriting. In 1834 Oliver wrote: “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” (*Messenger and Advocate* 1 [Oct. 1834]:14).

During April, May, and June 1829, many events occurred in concert with the translation of the Book of Mormon. By May 15, the account of Christ’s ministry in 3 Nephi had been translated. That text explicitly mentions the necessity of being baptized by proper authority, and this injunction inspired Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery to pray, leading to the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood on May 15 (*JS—H* 1:68–74) and of the Melchizedek Priesthood soon afterward (see AARONIC PRIESTHOOD: RESTORATION OF;

MELCHIZEDEK PRIESTHOOD: RESTORATION OF). Time was also required for trips to Colesville, New York, for supplies (thirty miles away); to earn money to purchase paper; to obtain a federal copyright on June 11, 1829; to baptize Samuel and Hyrum Smith; to preach to several interested people; and, during the first week of June, to move by

buckboard over 100 miles to the Peter Whitmer farm in Fayette, New York, where about 150 final pages were translated, with some of the Whitmers also acting as scribes. The work was completed before the end of June, at which time the Three and the Eight Witnesses were allowed to see the plates (see BOOK OF MORMON WITNESSES).



The original manuscript for Helaman 1:15–16 shows how the name “Coriantumr” was first written by Oliver Cowdery phonetically but was then crossed out and spelled correctly on the same line as the translation progressed. Witnesses stated that Joseph Smith spelled the proper names that he translated.

Most evidence supports the idea that Joseph and Oliver began their work in April 1829 with the speech of BENJAMIN (Mosiah 1–6), translated to the end of the book of Moroni in May, then translated the Title Page, and finally translated the small plates of Nephi (1 Nephi–Omni) and the Words of Mormon before the end of June (Welch and Rathbone). The text of the Title Page, “the last leaf” of the plates of Mormon (*HC* 1:71), was used as the book’s description on the copyright form filed on June 11, 1829.

Many factors, including divine sources of knowledge and Joseph’s own spiritual efforts and personal vocabulary, apparently played their roles in producing the English text of the Book of Mormon. Some accounts emphasize the divine factor. Years later, David WHITMER indicated that words would appear to Joseph on something resembling a piece of parchment and that he would read the words off to his scribe (*An Address to All Believers in Christ*, 1887, p. 12). Other accounts indicate that human effort was also involved. When Oliver Cowdery attempted to translate in April 1829, he was told by the Lord: “You must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right” (*D&C* 9:8). According to David Whitmer, Joseph could only translate when he was humble and faithful. One morning something had gone wrong about the house; Joseph could not translate a single syllable until he went into an orchard, prayed, and then he and Emma made amends (*CHC* 1:131). Joseph’s ability to translate apparently increased as the work progressed.

Most reports state that throughout the project Joseph used the “Nephite interpreters” or, for convenience, he would use a SEER STONE (see *CHC* 1:128–30). Both instruments were sometimes called by others the URIM AND THUMMIM. In 1830, Oliver Cowdery is reported to have testified in court that these tools enabled Joseph “to read in English, the reformed Egyptian characters, which were engraved on the plates” (Benton, *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* 2 [Apr. 9, 1831]:15). In an 1891 interview, William Smith indicated that when his brother Joseph used the “interpreters” (which were like a silver bow twisted into the shape of a figure eight with two stones between the rims of the bow connected by a rod to a breastplate), his hands were left free to hold the plates. Other late reports mention a variety of further details, but they cannot be historically confirmed or denied.

Regarding the nature of the English translation, its language is unambiguous and straightforward. Joseph once commented that the book was “translated into our own language” (*TPJS*, p. 17; cf. *D&C* 1:24). In several chapters, for good and useful reasons, this meant that the language would follow the King James idiom of the day (see *CWHN* 8:212–16; Welch, 1990, pp. 134–63). It also assured that the manuscript would contain human misspellings and grammatical oddities, implying that if it had been translated in another decade its phraseology and vocabulary might have been slightly different.

At the same time, circumstantial evidence in the English text suggests that the translation was quite precise. For example, the independent and identical translations of 1 Nephi 1:8 and of Alma 36:22 (precisely quoting twenty-one of Lehi’s words in 1 Nephi 1:8) typify the internal accuracy manifested in this long and complex record. Moreover, several formulaic terms, Hebraisms, stylistic indications of multiple authorship, varieties of parallelism and extended chiasmus (see *BOOK OF MORMON AUTHORSHIP; BOOK OF MORMON LITERATURE*), as well as certain Semitic proper names and some textual variants, not at all evident from the King James Bible, corroborate the claim that the translation was faithful to a consistent underlying text.

Naturally, it is rarely possible to translate exactly the same range of meanings, word for word, from one language into another, and thus opinions have varied about the nature of the correspondence of the ancient text to the English translation. David Whitmer is quoted as saying that “frequently one character would make two lines of manuscript while others made but a word or two words” (*Deseret News*, Nov. 10, 1881). Nevertheless, the linguistic relationship between the English translation and the characters on the plates cannot be determined without consulting the Nephite original, which was returned to the angel Moroni in 1829 (see *MORONI, VISITATIONS OF*).

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BOOK OF MORMON TRANSLATIONS

After the Prophet Joseph SMITH’s original translation of the Book of Mormon from the gold plates into English in 1829 and the return of those plates to the angel Moroni, no translations from English into other languages appeared until the 1850s. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Church produced translations of the Book of Mormon irregularly, often in groups of languages, and at widely separated intervals. However, in the 1970s and later, translations from the English text of the Book of Mormon became systematic and frequent.

Making the Book of Mormon and other STANDARD WORKS available in many languages is foreshadowed by the divine injunction “that every man shall hear the fulness of the gospel in his own tongue, and in his own language” (D&C 90:11). As missions were opened on the continent of Europe in 1850 and 1851, Church leaders in many of the newly opened missions mounted simultaneous translation efforts. The Danish edition (1851), produced by Erastus Snow for the Scandinavian Mission from a Danish translation by Peter Olsen Hansen, was the first printed (see SCANDINAVIA, THE CHURCH IN). At the same time, John TAYLOR supervised translations into French by Curtis E. Bolton and German by George P. Dykes, while Lorenzo SNOW was working on the Italian edition and John Davis on a Welsh one. All of these appeared in 1852, and culminated with George Q. Cannon’s translation of the Book of Mormon into Hawaiian in 1855. No further translations were published for twenty years.

In 1875 Meliton G. Trejo and Daniel W. Jones produced the first translation of selections from the Book of Mormon into Spanish. This ninety-six-page document, comprising only the books of 1 and 2 Nephi, Omni, 3 Nephi, and Mormon, was the first partial translation and one of only two par-

tial printings of the Book of Mormon in book form at the time. (The other was the publication of 1 Nephi—Words of Mormon in the DESERET ALPHABET.) Trejo and James Z. Stewart completed a translation of the entire book into Spanish in 1886. The remainder of the nineteenth century produced three further translations: Swedish (1878), Maori (1889), and Dutch (1890). Sixteen more, including the first in Asian languages and several in South Pacific tongues, appeared between 1903 and 1977.

In 1971, in support of an expanding missionary program, the Church organized a Translation Services Department (see ORGANIZATION) to direct a systematic program of scripture translation. They began with the production of a large number of translations of *Selections from the Book of Mormon*, designed to place selected chapters in the hands of missionaries, general readers, and members as quickly as possible and to train translators. The *Selections*, chosen and approved by the FIRST PRESIDENCY and the QUORUM OF THE TWELVE APOSTLES, were the same in all languages, and consisted of the following:

<i>Book</i>	<i>Chapters</i>
1 Nephi	1–7, 16–18
2 Nephi	1–4; 5:1–20; 9, 29, 31–33
Enos	all
Mosiah	2–5, 17, 18
Alma	5, 11, 12, 32, 34, 39–42
Helaman	13–16
3 Nephi	1, 8, 11–30
4 Nephi	all
Mormon	1, 4, 6–9
Moroni	all

This *Selections* volume is being progressively replaced by full translations. As of 1990, the entire Book of Mormon was available in 36 languages (including English), while *Selections* was available in 44 additional languages.

Retranslations of early editions began in 1952 with the second translation into Spanish. Subsequently, the Japanese, Italian, and German editions were retranslated; other retranslations appeared as *Selections* from 1980 on. With the issuance of the 1981 English edition of the Book of Mormon (see BOOK OF MORMON EDITIONS), the Church Translation Department began systematically reviewing all existing translations, setting pri-