

Lost Manuscript of the Book of Mormon

In June 1828, Joseph Smith reluctantly allowed his scribe Martin Harris to borrow 116 pages of the original Book of Mormon manuscript. Harris promised to guard the pages and show them only to certain family members, but the pages soon disappeared and have never been recovered. Joseph sought divine guidance on how to proceed with the rest of the translation and learned by revelation how to complete the Book of Mormon translation without revisiting the text contained in the missing manuscript.¹

What little is known of the lost manuscript's contents comes from Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon prophet Nephi. Joseph wrote that the lost pages contained the book of Lehi. Like much of the Book of Mormon, the record of Lehi was an abridgment by the prophet Mormon of what Joseph called the plates of Lehi. Lehi's son Nephi explained that this record contained accounts of Lehi's dreams, visions, prophecies, and teachings to his children. Nephi had abridged Lehi's record before composing his own history.² According to some scholars, Nephi's abridgment comprises the early chapters of the Book of Mormon. Others speculate the lost manuscript contained not only the book of Lehi but also material written by others, perhaps Mormon or someone who lived sometime between Lehi and King Benjamin.³

At the time the manuscript disappeared, Joseph Smith and Martin Harris did not know of Nephi's abridgment. As a result, when Joseph learned that Harris had lost the manuscript, Joseph thought he had failed in his divine commission. Joseph did not resume translating for about nine months. Later, when he and his new scribe, Oliver Cowdery, had nearly reached the end of the record, Joseph asked for revelation about whether to retranslate the lost pages. The revelation (see Doctrine and Covenants 10) said the plates of Nephi contained an account similar to the book of Lehi but with a greater focus on the spiritual history of Lehi's family. Joseph learned that he should translate the plates of Nephi until he reached the place where the lost manuscript had ended.⁴ The revelation also forbade Joseph from retranslating the book of Lehi and warned him of adversaries possessing the lost manuscript who might attempt to manipulate the text and then discredit the published version of the Book of Mormon. Joseph worried so much about the possibility of an altered manuscript that in the preface of the Book of Mormon, he warned conspirators not to oppose God's work. No one ever came forward with the lost manuscript.⁵

Church Resources

Matthew McBride, "The Contributions of Martin Harris: D&C 3, 5, 10, 17, 19," in Matthew McBride and James Goldberg, eds., *Revelations in Context: The Stories behind the Sections of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 1–9.

Bibliography

The following publications provide further information about this topic. By referring or linking you to these resources, we do not endorse or guarantee the content or the views of the authors.

S. Kent Brown, "Lehi's Personal Record: Quest for a Missing Source," *BYU Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1 (Winter 1984), 19–42.

Jack M. Lyon and Kent R. Minson, "When Pages Collide: Dissecting the Words of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly*, vol. 51, no. 4 (2012), 120–36.

Related Topics: Book of Mormon Translation

Notes

1. Joseph Smith, "History, circa 1841, fair copy," 13–14, josephsmithpapers.org; Lucy Mack Smith, "Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845," book 6, page 10–book 7, page 7, josephsmithpapers.org. Joseph translated the book of Lehi from mid-April to mid-June 1828. Martin Harris served as his principal scribe and may have been assisted by Emma Smith or her brother Reuben Hale.
2. 1 Nephi 1:16–17.
3. Joseph Smith, "Preface to Book of Mormon, circa August 1829," in Book of Mormon, 1830, iii, josephsmithpapers.org; S. Kent Brown, "Lehi's Personal Record: Quest for a Missing Source," *BYU Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1 (Winter 1984), 20–21; William J. Critchlow III, "Manuscript, Lost 116 Pages," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:854–55; Jack M. Lyon and Kent R. Minson, "When Pages Collide: Dissecting the Words of Mormon," *BYU Studies*, vol. 51, no. 4 (2012), 120–36. Joseph may have used the number 116 as an estimate of the number of lost pages rather than an exact count (see "Revelation, Spring 1829 [D&C 10]," Historical Introduction, josephsmithpapers.org).

More than 50 years after Joseph Smith died, Franklin D. Richards mentioned that while the two lived in Nauvoo, Joseph talked about the contents of the lost manuscript. Richards had read in Alma 10:3 how Lehi descended from Manasseh, which confused him because the Saints so often referred to the Book of Mormon as the "stick of Ephraim." When Richards asked Joseph about this possible discrepancy, Joseph explained that Ishmael and his family descended from Ephraim and that the lost manuscript recounted Ishmael's lineage (Franklin D. Richards, "Origin of American Aborigines," *Contributor*, vol. 17, no. 7 [May 1896], 425).

4. Joseph did not learn of the plates of Nephi until the spring of 1829 (see "Revelation, Spring 1829 [D&C 10]," Historical Introduction, josephsmithpapers.org; Doctrine and Covenants 10:38–46).

5. “Revelation, Spring 1829 [D&C 10],” in Book of Commandments, 22–24, josephsmithpapers.org; Joseph Smith, “Preface to Book of Mormon,” in Book of Mormon, 1830, iii.