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The Book of Mormon Translation Process

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Joseph Smith did not offer many details about the translation process for the Book of Mormon, other than affirming that it was done through "the gift and power of God."[1] In 1831, at a Church conference where he was invited to share more information, he declined, saying that "it was not expedient for him to relate these things."[2] Along with the golden plates, he had been given a set of Nephite "interpreters" (Mosiah 8:13; Ether 4:5), which he described as "two stones in silver bows" (JS–H 1:35), apparently looking something like a pair of glasses or spectacles. According to eyewitnesses, however, after the loss of the 116 pages, he primarily used a seer stone that had been in his possession for several years, which he would place in the crown of his hat, and then, putting his face in the hat, he would dictate the text of the Book of Mormon to scribes.[3] (Somewhat confusingly, after 1833 he referred to both devices

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1. Preface and "The Testimony of Three Witnesses," in *The Book of Mormon* (Palmyra, N.Y.: Joseph Smith Jr., 1830), [iii], [589]; "Letter to Noah C. Saxton, 4 January 1833," in *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833,* ed. Matthew C. Godfrey and others, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2013), 354; Joseph Smith to John Wentworth, "Church History," *Times and Seasons,* March 1, 1842, 707.

2. "Minutes, 25–26 October 1831," in Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 2,* 84 (minutes from a Church conference in Orange, Ohio).

3. Richard S. Van Wagoner and Steven C. Walker, "Joseph Smith: The Gift of Seeing," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 2 (1982): 48–68; Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 61–140; John W. Welch, "The Miraculous Timing of the Translation of the Book of Mormon," in *Opening the Heavens:*

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by the biblical term "Urim and Thummim.") The open question in this case is what happened when Joseph looked at the seer stone.

He obviously did not know the language of the plates—reformed Egyptian (Morm. 9:32). His own education was limited, and the first rudimentary decipherment of any form of ancient Egyptian by scholars had happened just a few years earlier.[4] So when Joseph spoke of "translating," he was not using the word in its ordinary sense, whereby someone who knows the source language perceives the meaning and then formulates corresponding expressions in the target language. Some Latter-day Saints believe that the seer stone allowed Joseph to bypass the first step in such a way that the meaning of the golden plates' text was revealed to him in a nonverbal or preverbal form, which he then put into his own words. Other Latter-day Saints think that when he looked at the seer stone, he could see English letters and words, which he read aloud to his scribes. This means that there was a pre-existing translation, which he could access through the stone. (John Gilbert, the non-LDS typesetter for the first edition, put it this way: "The question might be asked here whether Jo or the spectacles was the translator?")[5]

Either way, when Joseph "translated," he was rarely looking at the characters on the plates, which were usually either on the table covered in cloth or hidden elsewhere in the house or vicinity. At the same time, however, the process was not as straightforward as ordinary reading, since David Whitmer reported that if Joseph was not spiritually in tune (as when he had some sort of argument with his wife Emma), the device did not work.[6] In addition, Oliver Cowdery once attempted to translate

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Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844, ed. John W. Welch, 2nd ed. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 79–227. Images of the seer stone can be found in Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon,* vol. 1, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2015), xx–xxi. See also the Gospel Topics Essay "Book of Mormon Translation" at https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng.

4. Lesley and Roy Adkins, *The Keys of Egypt: The Obsession to Decipher Egyptian Hieroglyphs* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000); Andrew Robinson, *Cracking the Egyptian Code: The Revolutionary Life of Jean-François Champollion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Champollion published his groundbreaking monograph on Egyptian hieroglyphics, based in part on the Rosetta Stone, in 1824 in French.

5. "John H. Gilbert Memorandum, 8 September 1892," in *Early Mormon Documents,* ed. Dan Vogel, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 2:546.

6. Welch, "Miraculous Timing," 173, 176.

and failed—though it is uncertain whether he had tried to use the seer stone (D&C 9).

Eyewitnesses to the translation process believed that Joseph was reading a pre-existing text. According to Martin Harris, "By aid of the seer stone, sentences would appear and were read by the Prophet . . . , 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," with Joseph occasionally spelling out difficult words or names.[7] Other witnesses, including Emma Smith, Joseph Knight Sr., David Whitmer, and John Whitmer, gave similar reports.[8] These witnesses did not look into the seer stone themselves, and there is no record of Joseph ever explaining the translation process, so their descriptions are presumably based on their own observations of Joseph at work. Nevertheless, an examination of the text of the Book of Mormon, particularly the original manuscript, may provide additional evidence.

In comparing these accounts to the original manuscript (of which 28 percent is extant), linguist Royal Skousen proposed three theories of translation: "loose control," in which ideas were revealed to Joseph and then put into his own language; "tight control," where he saw specific words and read them to his scribes; and "iron-clad control," in which his reading from the stone could not move forward if a scribe had made an uncorrected mistake.[9] Most of the witnesses appear to have believed the last theory, though the presence of spelling and transcription errors in the original manuscript appears to disprove it. Clearly the dictation moved forward even when a few words were missed by the transcriber or when names were misspelled. (It is important to note that the three theories refer only to the translation process, not to the translation itself. The English Book of Mormon may be a rather free translation that was nevertheless revealed word for word. In fact, the presence of so many phrases from the King James Version, particularly from biblical texts written after 600 BC, argues strongly for it being a translation characterized by functional rather than formal equivalence.)

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7. Welch, "Miraculous Timing," 149, 153.

8. Welch, "Miraculous Timing," 142, 166, 170, 173–75, 179, 189.

9. Royal Skousen, "How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1998): 22–31. Joseph Smith's oft-quoted comment that the Book of Mormon was "the most correct of any book on earth" (1981 Introduction) may have a more limited scope than some Latter-day Saints have assumed.

But the question at hand is, roughly, How much of Joseph Smith can we see in the Book of Mormon? Did he produce a translation, through miraculous means, that bears traces of his own words, concepts, and understanding? Or was a pre-existing text given to him by revelation, a text that would in turn reflect the mind of its celestial translator (or translators)? Many Church leaders and scholars have opted for the former scenario—which seems similar to how Joseph produced the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants—including Brigham Young, who asserted that "when God speaks to the people, he does it in a manner to suit their circumstances and capacities. . . . I will even venture to say that if the Book of Mormon were now to be rewritten, in many instances it would materially differ from the present translation."[10] B. H. Roberts, John Widtsoe, Richard Anderson, Blake Ostler, Stephen Ricks, Kathleen Flake, Samuel Brown, and Terryl Givens have expressed similar ideas.[11]

In general, these commentators seem to share a sense that revelation is always modulated by its human recipients. The kinds of evidence that might support viewing the English Book of Mormon as a translation jointly produced by divine revelation and Joseph's personal capacities include:

- The nonstandard grammar, repetitions, and awkwardness of the original dictation. In many ways, the Book of Mormon seems like the sort of work that a young, religiously enthusiastic but poorly educated New York farmer might produce.

- The limited vocabulary of about 5,600 words (2,225 root words in English).

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10. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses,* 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 9:311 (July 13, 1862).

11. B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God,* 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 2:110–21, 3:407–25; John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith: Seeker after Truth, Prophet of God* (1924; reprint, Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1951), 42; Richard Lloyd Anderson, "By the Gift and Power of God," *Ensign* 7, no. 9 (September 1977): 79–85; Blake T. Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source," *Dialogue* 20, no. 1 (1987): 66–123; Stephen D. Ricks, "Translation of the Book of Mormon: Interpreting the Evidence," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993): 201–6; Kathleen Flake, "Translating Time: The Nature and Function of Joseph Smith's Narrative Canon," *Journal of Religion* 87, no. 4 (2007): 497–527; Samuel Morris Brown, "The Language of Heaven: Prolegomenon to the Study of Smithian Translation," *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 3 (2012): 51–71, and "'To Read the Round of Eternity': Speech, Text, and Scripture in *The Book of Mormon,*" in *Americanist Approaches to "The Book of Mormon,*" ed. Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 159–83; Terryl Givens's general understanding of revelatory translation is spelled out in his *Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism's Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 188–202.

- Phrases and concepts, including religious concepts, that were common in early nineteenth-century America.

- Anachronisms. References to things that would have been out of place in the ancient Americas—such as horses, cattle, steel, chariots, and silk—might be attributed to a translator's inattention, misapprehension, or use of loanwords.

- Biblical phrases, from both the Old and New Testament, that are scattered throughout the text. Whoever translated the Book of Mormon was very familiar with the King James Bible.

- The entire chapters that are reproduced from Isaiah, Micah, Malachi, and Matthew with only slight variations from the KJV, even when that 1611 translation was in error. Of particular note are the changes made to the italicized words, which indicated translators' additions to the Hebrew or Greek in order to round out or clarify the English rendition. When the Book of Mormon quotes lengthy biblical passages, nearly 40 percent of the italicized words in the KJV are changed, sometimes resulting in nongrammatical sentences, though such changes account for only one-fifth of the total variations. It is easy to imagine Joseph opening a Bible when he realized he had come to a long quotation and making such changes as he went along; it is harder to understand why a heavenly translator would have cared about KJV italics.[12]

- The Lord's response in Doctrine and Covenants 9:5–10 to Oliver Cowdery's failure to translate may reflect Joseph's own practice: "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" (though it is also possible that this instruction applied only to Oliver, or that "it" referred to the gift of translation rather than the words themselves).

- Joseph's willingness to correct the style and grammar in the 1837 and 1840 editions. It does not appear that he regarded the original dictation as sacrosanct.

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12. In 1879, Emma Smith said that when translating, Joseph "had neither manuscript nor book to read from" (Welch, "Miraculous Timing," 143), but she was referring to the Book of Mormon as a whole, and perhaps had in mind accusations of plagiarizing the Spaulding manuscript. Her statement does not rule out the possibility that Joseph consulted a Bible occasionally for a few chapters of overlapping material. See also Roberts, *New Witnesses for God,* 3:425–40.

Many readers might wonder whether the Book of Mormon, as a revelation from God, should have been more eloquent, literary, and precise in its portrayal of a Christianized Israelite civilization in the ancient Americas. It can be helpful to think of Joseph Smith as the translator, transmuting distinct spiritual impressions into his own language.

Other Latter-day Saints have called attention to features of the text that would be difficult to explain if the book had been extemporaneously translated in Joseph's mind. As a result, they posit a Nephite record that was carefully composed, meticulously translated in the heavens (perhaps being updated to appeal to the sensibilities of King James Bible–reading Christians in the modern era), and then communicated to Joseph in fairly exact words, which he read from the seer stone. This second theory of translation has received significant support in recent years from Royal Skousen's work with the earliest manuscripts of the Book of Mormon, and it comports well with the detailed literary patterns explored by John Welch, Hugh Pinnock, Donald Parry, and Grant Hardy.[13] Scholars who believe that Joseph read a pre-existing translation, besides Skousen, include Daniel Peterson, Stanford Carmack, and John Welch. In addition, both Richard Bushman and Dieter Uchtdorf

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13. John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 10, no. 1 (1970): 69–84; John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1992); Hugh W. Pinnock, *Finding Biblical Hebrew and Other Ancient Literary Forms in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1999); Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007) and *Preserved in Translation: Hebrew and Other Ancient Literary Forms in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2020); Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Skousen's initial findings in "How Joseph Smith Translated" have been amply confirmed by the multiple volumes of his Book of Mormon Critical Text Project; see also his "Systematic Text of the Book of Mormon," in *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon,* ed. M. Gerald Bradford and Alison V. P. Coutts (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 45–66. Many of the essays in Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch, eds., *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), touch on the precision and consistency of the text, and its complex narrative structure can most easily be seen in Grant Hardy, ed., *The Book of Mormon: Maxwell Institute Study Edition* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship; Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018).

have suggested that in some ways Joseph's seer stone was analogous to a modern iPad or smartphone.[14]

Evidences suggesting that Joseph was reading from a pre-existing translation include the following:

- The extreme care taken in the dictation/transcription process to get the words exactly right. The original manuscript shows that Joseph dictated in blocks of twenty to thirty words, with the scribe then reading the words back to him and making immediate corrections as Joseph detected errors. There are many such corrections, often involving distinctions that are difficult to hear without close attention (plurals, verb endings, and so forth) and that make little difference to the overall meaning of a sentence.

- Joseph's spelling out difficult names at their first occurrence. Quite regularly unfamiliar names were first spelled phonetically by the scribe and then immediately corrected when Joseph apparently spelled them letter by letter.

- Emma Smith's testimony that Joseph could dictate for hours on end and would start each dictation session without reviewing where he had last left off.

- Intratextual allusions, in which distinct phrases from earlier stories are quoted in later episodes. One famous example is Alma's exact, attributed quotation of twenty-one words spoken by Lehi (Alma 36:22; 1 Ne. 1:8), which is especially interesting because Joseph dictated the quotation before the original source (after the loss of the 116 pages, Joseph continued dictating the books of Mosiah through Moroni before turning to 1 Nephi through the Words of Mormon).

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14. Daniel C. Peterson, "A Response: What the Manuscripts and the Eyewitnesses Tell Us about the Translation of the Book of Mormon," in Bradford and Coutts, *Uncovering the Original Text,* 67–71; Stanford Carmack, "Joseph Smith Read the Words," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 18 (January 1, 2016): 41–64, https://journal .interpreterfoundation.org/joseph-smith-read-the-words/; John W. Welch, "'Hours Never to Be Forgotten': Timing the Book of Mormon Translation," Laura F. Willes Book of Mormon Lecture, Maxwell Institute, Brigham Young University, November 8, 2017; Richard Bushman, "On Seerstones," *By Common Consent,* August 5, 2015, https:// bycommonconsent.com/2015/08/05/on-seerstones; Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Not long ago, the Church published photos and background information on seer stones," Facebook, June 21, 2016, https://m.facebook.com/dieterf.uchtdorf/photos/a.120510344786318/400 421293461887/?type=3.

- Intricate literary patterns or rhetorical devices such as chiasmus, poetic parallelism, inclusios, and so forth. For instance, the complex chiasmus of Alma 36 appears to have been worked out beforehand in written form, and the inclusio that frames Alma's career is characterized by the repetition of distinctive phrases: "The number of their slain/dead was not numbered, because of the greatness of their number," with bodies "cast into the waters of Sidon and . . . in the depths of the sea" (at both Alma 3:1–3 and 44:21–22).

- The presence of Early Modern English grammar and vocabulary usages that were obsolete by the early nineteenth century and did not appear in the KJV. Some of the nonstandard grammar in the Book of Mormon—much of which was updated in later editions—would have been acceptable in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, though the overall syntax of the book does not match any particular time or place in the development of the English language, including Joseph's native linguistic environment of nineteenth-century New York. Many of the particularities of Book of Mormon diction would have been foreign to Joseph.[15]

- The presumption in the 1830 preface and D&C 10:6–19 that Joseph could have retranslated the lost 116 pages and produced exactly the same words. He was forbidden to do so because those who had stolen the manuscript would have changed the words so that the original and retranslated versions did not match.

- The Book of Mormon itself suggesting that its future translator would "read the words" (2 Ne. 27:19–26).

This list does not negate the previous one, but it complicates it, and so far neither translation theory has proven entirely satisfactory—both explain some features of the text while passing over others, or introduce new conundrums. While a pre-existing translation may have been either free or literal, it is unlikely that Joseph's own improvised language would have yielded such precise literary patterns. On the other hand, if the translation came fully formed as a word-for-word revelation from God, why wasn't it lovelier, more elevated, or a better fit for modern English?

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15. For a comprehensive analysis of Book of Mormon syntax and vocabulary, see Royal Skousen, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon, Parts 1 and 2: Grammatical Variation* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 2016), and *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon, Parts 3 and 4: Nature of the Original Language* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 2018).

In conclusion, the two sides will probably remain in tension for some time. Book of Mormon researcher Brant Gardner has attempted to split the difference with a hypothesis that the text was somehow subconsciously translated by Joseph and then projected by his mind onto the stone, but such an unparalleled psychological and revelatory process does not seem to solve all the difficulties.[16] Moreover, we should be cautious about assuming that Joseph used the same process for all his "translation" projects, including the book of Abraham and the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, neither of which involved the use of a seer stone. Without being able to compare the original reformed Egyptian with the English version, it is impossible to know just what sort of translation the Book of Mormon is. And without observing a seer stone in use, we cannot know for certain what Joseph experienced. Perhaps new evidence will someday be uncovered, or further studies may refine our understanding of the data currently available, but in the meantime, we might well agree with Emma Smith, who said that, even as an eyewitness to the process, "it is marvelous to me, 'a marvel and a wonder,' as much so as to any one else."[17]

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16. Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011). Gardner helpfully analyzes many of the evidences that have been advanced to support both theories of translation (137–247). Alternatively, Roger Terry, observing the grammatical inconsistencies in the text, has suggested that the translation may not have been made by Joseph Smith but instead by an immortal being with an incomplete grasp of English grammar—perhaps someone like the post-mortal Moroni (which would still count as a pre-existing translation); see his "Archaic Pronouns and Verbs in the Book of Mormon: What Inconsistent Usage Tells Us about Translation Theories," *Dialogue* 47, no. 3 (2014): 53–80. For an attempt by a non-LDS scholar to make sense of the translation process, in naturalistic terms with comparative examples, see Ann Taves, *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016).

17. Welch, "Miraculous Timing," 144.