

Book of Mormon Translation

Overview

Joseph Smith said that the Book of Mormon was “the most correct of any Book on earth & the keystone of our religion & a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts than by any other Book.”¹ The Book of Mormon came into the world through a series of miraculous events. Much can be known about the coming forth of the English text of the Book of Mormon through a careful study of statements made by Joseph Smith, his scribes, and others closely associated with the translation of the Book of Mormon.

“By the Gift and Power of God”

Joseph Smith reported that on the evening of September 21, 1823, while he prayed in the upper room of his parents’ small log home in Palmyra, New York, an angel who called himself Moroni appeared and told Joseph that “God had a work for [you] to do.”² He informed Joseph that “there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence they sprang.” The book could be found in a hill not far from the Smith family farm. This was no ordinary history, for it contained “the fullness of the everlasting Gospel as delivered by the Savior.”³

The angel charged Joseph Smith to translate the book from the ancient language in which it was written. The young man, however, had very little formal education and was incapable of writing a book on his own, let alone translating an ancient book written from an unknown language, known in the Book of Mormon as “reformed Egyptian.”⁴ Joseph’s wife Emma insisted that, at the time of translation, Joseph “could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter, let alone dictat[e] a book like the Book of Mormon.”⁵

Joseph received the plates in September 1827 and the following spring, in Harmony, Pennsylvania, began translating them in earnest, with Emma and his friend Martin Harris serving as his main scribes. The resulting English transcription, known as the Book of Lehi and referred to by Joseph Smith as written on 116 pages, was subsequently lost or stolen. As a result, Joseph Smith was rebuked by the Lord and lost the ability to translate for a short time.⁶

Joseph began translating again in 1829, and almost all of the present Book of Mormon text was translated during a three-month period between April and June of that year. His chief scribe during these months was Oliver Cowdery, a schoolteacher from Vermont who learned about the Book of Mormon while boarding with Joseph’s parents in Palmyra. Called by God in a vision, Cowdery traveled to Harmony to meet Joseph Smith and investigate further. Of his experience as scribe, Cowdery wrote, “These were days never to be forgotten—to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the *inspiration* of heaven.”⁷

The manuscript that Joseph Smith dictated to Oliver Cowdery and others is known today as the original manuscript, about 28 percent of which still survives.⁸ This manuscript corroborates Joseph Smith’s statements that the manuscript was

written within a short time frame and that it was dictated from another language. For example, it includes errors that suggest the scribe heard words incorrectly rather than misread words copied from another manuscript.⁹ In addition, some grammatical constructions that are more characteristic of Near Eastern languages than English appear in the original manuscript, suggesting that the base language of the translation was not English.¹⁰

Unlike most dictated drafts, the original manuscript was considered by Joseph Smith to be, in substance, a final product. To assist in the publication of the book, Oliver Cowdery made a handwritten copy of the original manuscript. This copy is known today as the printer's manuscript. Because Joseph Smith did not call for punctuation, such as periods, commas, or question marks, as he dictated, such marks are not in the original manuscript. The typesetter later inserted punctuation marks when he prepared the text for the printer.¹¹ With the exceptions of punctuation, formatting, other elements of typesetting, and minor adjustments required to correct copying and scribal errors, the dictation copy became the text of the first printed edition of the book.¹²

Translation Instruments

Many accounts in the Bible show that God transmitted revelations to His prophets in a variety of ways. Elijah learned that God spoke not to him through the wind or fire or earthquake but through a "still small voice."¹³ Paul and other early Apostles sometimes communicated with angels and, on occasion, with the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁴ At other times, revelation came in the form of dreams or visions, such as the revelation to Peter to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, or through sacred objects like the Urim and Thummim.¹⁵

Joseph Smith stands out among God's prophets, because he was called to render into his own language an entire volume of scripture amounting to more than 500 printed pages, containing doctrine that would deepen and expand the theological understanding of millions of people. For this monumental task, God prepared additional, practical help in the form of physical instruments.

Joseph Smith and his scribes wrote of two instruments used in translating the Book of Mormon. According to witnesses of the translation, when Joseph looked into the instruments, the words of scripture appeared in English. One instrument, called in the Book of Mormon the "interpreters," is better known to Latter-day Saints today as the "Urim and Thummim." Joseph found the interpreters buried in the hill with the plates.¹⁶ Those who saw the interpreters described them as a clear pair of stones bound together with a metal rim. The Book of Mormon referred to this instrument, together with its breastplate, as a device "kept and preserved by the hand of the Lord" and "handed down from generation to generation, for the purpose of interpreting languages."¹⁷

The other instrument, which Joseph Smith discovered in the ground years before he retrieved the gold plates, was a small oval stone, or "seer stone."¹⁸ As a young man during the 1820s, Joseph Smith, like others in his day, used a seer stone to look for lost objects and buried treasure.¹⁹ As Joseph grew to understand his prophetic calling, he learned that he could use this stone for the higher purpose of translating scripture.²⁰

Apparently for convenience, Joseph often translated with the single seer stone rather than the two stones bound together to form the interpreters. These two instruments—the interpreters and the seer stone—were apparently interchangeable and worked in much the same way such that, in the course of time, Joseph Smith and his associates often used the term “Urim and Thummim” to refer to the single stone as well as the interpreters.²¹ In ancient times, Israelite priests used the Urim and Thummim to assist in receiving divine communications. Although commentators differ on the nature of the instrument, several ancient sources state that the instrument involved stones that lit up or were divinely illuminated.²² Latter-day Saints later understood the term “Urim and Thummim” to refer exclusively to the interpreters. Joseph Smith and others, however, seem to have understood the term more as a descriptive category of instruments for obtaining divine revelations and less as the name of a specific instrument.

Some people have balked at this claim of physical instruments used in the divine translation process, but such aids to facilitate the communication of God’s power and inspiration are consistent with accounts in scripture. In addition to the Urim and Thummim, the Bible mentions other physical instruments used to access God’s power: the rod of Aaron, a brass serpent, holy anointing oils, the Ark of the Covenant, and even dirt from the ground mixed with saliva to heal the eyes of a blind man.²³

The Mechanics of Translation

In the preface to the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith wrote: “I would inform you that I translated [the book], by the gift and power of God.” When pressed for specifics about the process of translation, Joseph repeated on several occasions that it had been done “by the gift and power of God”²⁴ and once added, “It was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the book of Mormon.”²⁵

Nevertheless, the scribes and others who observed the translation left numerous accounts that give insight into the process. Some accounts indicate that Joseph studied the characters on the plates. Most of the accounts speak of Joseph’s use of the Urim and Thummim (either the interpreters or the seer stone), and many accounts refer to his use of a single stone. According to these accounts, Joseph placed either the interpreters or the seer stone in a hat, pressed his face into the hat to block out extraneous light, and read aloud the English words that appeared on the instrument.²⁶ The process as described brings to mind a passage from the Book of Mormon that speaks of God preparing “a stone, which shall shine forth in darkness unto light.”²⁷

The scribes who assisted with the translation unquestionably believed that Joseph translated by divine power. Joseph’s wife Emma explained that she “frequently wrote day after day” at a small table in their house in Harmony, Pennsylvania. She described Joseph “sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us.”²⁸ According to Emma, the plates “often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen table cloth.” When asked if Joseph had dictated from the Bible or from a manuscript he had prepared earlier, Emma flatly denied those possibilities: “He had neither manuscript nor book to read from.” Emma told her son Joseph Smith

III, “The Book of Mormon is of divine authenticity—I have not the slightest doubt of it. I am satisfied that no man could have dictated the writing of the manuscripts unless he was inspired; for, when acting as his scribe, your father would dictate to me for hour after hour; and when returning after meals, or after interruptions, he would at once begin where he had left off, without either seeing the manuscript or having any portion of it read to him.”²⁹

Another scribe, Martin Harris sat across the table from Joseph Smith and wrote down the words Joseph dictated. Harris later related that as Joseph used the seer stone to translate, sentences appeared. Joseph read those sentences aloud, and after penning the words, Harris would say, “Written.” An associate who interviewed Harris recorded him saying that Joseph “possessed a seer stone, by which he was enabled to translate as well as from the Urim and Thummim, and for convenience he then used the seer stone.”³⁰

The principal scribe, Oliver Cowdery, testified under oath in 1831 that Joseph Smith “found with the plates, from which he translated his book, two transparent stones, resembling glass, set in silver bows. That by looking through these, he was able to read in English, the reformed Egyptian characters, which were engraved on the plates.”³¹ In the fall of 1830, Cowdery visited Union Village, Ohio, and spoke about the translation of the Book of Mormon. Soon thereafter, a village resident reported that the translation was accomplished by means of “two transparent stones in the form of spectacles thro which the translator looked on the engraving.”³²

Conclusion

Joseph Smith consistently testified that he translated the Book of Mormon by the “gift and power of God.” His scribes shared that testimony. The angel who brought news of an ancient record on metal plates buried in a hillside and the divine instruments prepared especially for Joseph Smith to translate were all part of what Joseph and his scribes viewed as the miracle of translation. When he sat down in 1832 to write his own history for the first time, he began by promising to include “an account of his marvelous experience.”³³ The translation of the Book of Mormon was truly marvelous.

The truth of the Book of Mormon and its divine source can be known today. God invites each of us to read the book, remember the mercies of the Lord and ponder them in our hearts, “and ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true.” God promises that “if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.”³⁴

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