

The Lost 116 Pages Story

WHAT WE DO KNOW, WHAT WE DON'T
KNOW, AND WHAT WE MIGHT KNOW

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From the outset, one thing we can say that we *do* know about the story of the lost 116 pages is that from the summer of 1828 until now, this episode has loomed large in the narrative history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹

It would be difficult to imagine a more agonizing string of events in the life of Joseph Smith than what he experienced in June and July of 1828. Under pressure, he let Martin Harris take the hundred-plus manuscript pages of the Book of Mormon translation that Martin had scribed while Joseph had dictated.² The pages represented two months of work. The day after Joseph and his wife Emma bid farewell to Martin, Emma gave birth to their first child. The child was either stillborn or died soon after birth. Emma almost died in childbirth. After two weeks, and although Emma was still very much convalescing, Joseph and Emma's mutual anxiety about those manuscript pages prompted him to leave his wife in the care of her parents and make the long trip to Palmyra to find out why he had not heard anything yet from Martin.

Joseph had good reason to be uneasy as he made the trip. He reported that an angel had taken the interpreters from him even *before* he had discovered that the pages had been lost, taken “in consequence of [his] having wearied the Lord in asking for the privilege of letting Martin Harris take the writings.”³ This nagging anxiety so visibly affected Joseph that a fellow stagecoach passenger insisted that he accompany Joseph on the last leg of the trip to Joseph’s parents’ home in order to ensure that Joseph did not collapse under the weight of his worries.⁴

The sheer frequency with which the story of the pages’ loss was retold in interviews and publications has something to say about the impact it made on all involved. So too does the emotion with which Martin Harris recounted this story to interviewers, by their account.⁵ And as difficult as later setbacks and persecutions would undoubtedly be in the life of Joseph Smith, there is something uniquely piercing in the pain of self-recrimination. “It is I who have tempted the wrath of God. I should have been satisfied with the first answer which I received from the Lord,” Lucy Mack Smith recalled her son crying out when he learned the pages were gone.⁶

This story has also been marked as a definitive moment in the prophetic career of Joseph Smith by two biographers who come at that career from completely different angles.⁷ Such was the import of the events of the summer of 1828. This we do know.

What we do *not* know, of course, is what happened to those pages—or even if they are still extant.

Other than that, it seems that the most reasonable approach to be taken here is to discuss things that we *might* know, with varying degrees of substantiation and probability. Therefore, this chapter aims to survey current scholarship related to this formative moment in Mormon history, to draw on research from the Joseph Smith Papers Project and other documentary evidence to give a sense of the “state of the story,” and to consider possible readings of early texts of revelations that grew out of what was both a pivotal point in Joseph Smith’s life and ministry and a pivotal point in the development and makeup of the Book of Mormon.

Probabilities: Pages and Plots

The consensus of Joseph Smith’s early critics and supporters alike seems to be that the 116 manuscript pages did, at one time, exist. That may seem

like stating the obvious, but it is nevertheless worth stating. Even those who thought of Joseph Smith as a charlatan took it as a given that Martin Harris really did have a sheaf of handwritten pages from which he read to friends and family—and then subsequently lost. Joseph Smith and Martin Harris, over the course of the spring of 1828, really had produced *something*—and that something was apparently substantial enough, in Martin Harris’s eyes, that he felt sure it would quell his family’s doubts about the veracity of the work he was supporting. If anything, it was Martin’s enthusiasm for the content of the pages that proved to be his undoing in this case. He had solemnly covenanted to show the pages to only a handful of family members; it was his disregard of this oath that was the transgression that precipitated the devastating loss. Later recollections had Martin not only breaking his promise, but also breaking the lock on his wife’s bureau to do so, when the pages were apparently locked in that bureau for safekeeping and Martin wanted to get at them to show them to a visitor.⁸

The corroborating evidence of the pages’ existence, then, even if that evidence is all in the form of human testimony, is strong on this point. Martin Harris, throughout his life, affirmed the basic details of the story; Joseph Smith recounted the story in the preface of the first edition of the Book of Mormon—and that preface was written just a year after the pages were lost. The fact that Joseph Smith made this story so public so early speaks to the common-knowledge status of the manuscript’s disappearance.⁹

Just as telling, perhaps, is the absence of controverting testimony—the absence of claims, for example, that there never *was* a lost manuscript, or the absence of claims that the losing of the pages was a fabricated tale. This is especially significant when considering the principal actor in this drama—Lucy Harris—who had the most to gain, with regards to reputation, by disputing the *existence* of the pages if such were an open question. Lucy Harris was almost immediately implicated as the thief in question—and arguing that the pages never *existed* would have been a ready alibi to clear her name. But nothing in the historical record suggests that Lucy Harris (or anyone else, for that matter) attempted to dispute the pages’ existence. It simply seems that such was not an open question.¹⁰ Instead, as shall be seen, some acquaintances remembered her tacit corroboration of the pages’ reality.

A more contested question is whether or not there was a plot to manipulate those pages. Joseph Smith said that he did not retranslate the lost

manuscript because he had learned by revelation that a scheme existed to discredit him—and his detractors’ manipulation of the 116 pages was central to that scheme. A tradition that has emerged in reminiscences, though, is that Lucy Harris burned the 116 pages immediately; one writer has recently concluded that this is “probably” what happened.¹¹ Hence, in that view, if Lucy Harris really burned the pages immediately, then Joseph Smith’s fears (as outlined in the Book of Mormon preface) reflected a simple paranoia rather than well-founded (or divinely revealed) apprehensions about an actual conspiracy. But challenging Joseph Smith’s credibility on that point seems much too hasty a conclusion, one that privileges some sources while downplaying others. This is because other early retellings of the 116 pages story suggest that a different report about the fate of the pages was still in circulation within only a few years of the pages’ disappearance. For example, E. D. Howe, in his 1834 *Mormonism Unveiled*—a book that draws on affidavits collected by Doctor Philastus Hurlbut—wrote, “The facts respecting the lost manuscript, we have not been able to ascertain. They sometimes charge the wife of Harris with having burnt it; but this is denied by her.”¹² In addition, John Clark, a former Palmyra pastor who had personal interactions with Martin Harris in 1827 and 1828, also assumed (in an 1840 publication) that Lucy did not immediately destroy the manuscript but instead planned to use the pages against Joseph Smith. Clark said that Lucy Harris “took the opportunity, when [Martin Harris] was out, to seize the manuscript and put it into the hands of one of her neighbors for safe keeping. When the manuscript was discovered to be missing,” Clark continued, “suspicion immediately fastened upon Mrs. Harris, she however refused to give any information in relation to the matter, but she simply replied: ‘If this be a divine communication, the same being who revealed it to you can easily replace it.’” The crux of the “plan” that “she had formed . . . to expose the deception,” according to Clark, was to “keep the manuscript until the book [of Mormon] was published, and then put these one hundred and sixteen pages into the hands of some one who would publish them, and show how they varied from those published in the Book of Mormon”—because she “[took] it for granted” that the retranslated/reproduced portion “could not possibly” be “verbatim.”¹³

John Clark may have, as one historian has read him, inferred the idea of a plot to sabotage Joseph Smith from the preface to the first edition of

the Book of Mormon.¹⁴ Yet not to be missed is the fact that the Lucy Harris plan that Clark describes is substantially different from the one that the preface describes, raising the possibility at least that Clark may have had other sources of information. It is difficult to ascertain precisely what Clark claimed as the basis of his familiarity with the story of the 116 pages. Clark said that he moved from Palmyra “very soon” after his 1828 conversation with Martin Harris but before the Book of Mormon was published in 1830. He also stated that he had “Harris’ own account . . . to me” of the Book of Mormon translation process, including the use of a “thick curtain or blanket suspended between” Joseph Smith and Martin Harris during the translation. If what Clark was describing as “Harris’ own account” referred to writing the Book of Mormon translation rather than just the so-called “Anthon transcript” of characters from the plates, then this suggests that at least one of Clark’s 1828 interviews with Martin Harris might have come after Martin Harris had returned to Palmyra from Harmony after transcribing the 116 pages. If so, it is possible that Clark was still living in Palmyra when news about the loss of the 116 pages might have initially circulated. At the same time, Clark noted in 1840 that he was familiar with both the Book of Mormon preface and the revelation (now Doctrine and Covenants 10) to which the preface referred. In any case, that preface described the conspirators’ plan to *alter* the text of the 116 pages so that this altered “original” would read differently than Joseph Smith’s second attempt. However, Clark understood Lucy Harris’s strategy to be simply holding onto the original and waiting to expose Joseph Smith when he published a second attempt that “could not possibly [be] verbatim.” While it is true that Clark’s proposal may have been his inference of the likeliest plot, based on his skepticism of Joseph Smith’s work, it is also plausible that he remembered a Palmyra tradition that he picked up from conversations with his former neighbors.¹⁵

Regardless, there are enough examples of individuals who claimed knowledge about the pages’ survival to complicate any easy conclusions about the fate of the pages. John Clark wrote in 1840 that Martin Harris “was indignant at his wife beyond measure—he raved most violently, and it is said [he] actually beat Mrs. H[arris] with a rod—but she remained firm, and would not give up the manuscript.” William Hine of Colesville, New York, stated in 1885 that Lucy Harris gave the manuscript to one of his neighbors, a Dr. Seymour. Hine then remembered that Dr. Seymour “read

most of it [the lost manuscript] to me when my daughter Irene was born; he read them to his patients about the country. It was a description of the mounds about the country and similar to the ‘Book of Mormon.’” There are problems with the dates and places in Hine’s record, but his principal assertion was that Lucy Harris had stolen the manuscript and “refused” to return it; “after I came to Kirtland,” Hine asserted, “in conversation with Martin Harris, he has many times admitted to me that this statement about his wife and the one hundred sixteen pages as above stated, is true.” Charles Comstock Richards remembered that he and his father, LDS Apostle Franklin D. Richards, met a man in 1880, Dr. J. R. Pratt, who “told my father that he could put his hand on the manuscript which Martin Harris lost, in an hour, if it was needed.”¹⁶

Hine’s and Richards’s accounts are late reminiscences that should be treated critically as such, yet so are the recollections of those who claimed that Lucy burned the pages. In 1884, Lorenzo Saunders reported that Lucy Harris herself had told him that she had burned the pages. In fact, Saunders also claimed that Lucy Harris “never denied of burning the papers.” As mentioned earlier, though, E. D. Howe reported in 1834 that Lucy Harris *did* deny burning the pages, and it is very conceivable that Howe based this denial on information he received from Philastus Hurlbut, who interviewed Lucy Harris in 1833.¹⁷ Importantly, Howe’s publication predated Saunders’s reminiscence by fifty years. Of course, Lucy Harris’s stealing the manuscript—with conspiratorial aims—on one hand, and Lucy Harris’s burning of the manuscript on the other, are not mutually exclusive traditions; it is possible that both traditions reflect actual events. That is, it is possible that she (or others) *did* burn the pages *after* the preface of the Book of Mormon disclosed that Joseph Smith would not retranslate the Book of Lehi, thus thwarting any conspiracy.¹⁸

In the end, it seems that this question of the fate of the pages, and precisely what motivated their disappearance, cannot be answered with enough certainty to make definitive conclusions. But at the very least, it should be said that an attempt to use these reminiscences to dismiss Joseph Smith’s fears or associated revelations as baseless does not do justice to the complexity of the evidence, especially the earliest evidence. To believers *and* to skeptics, Joseph Smith’s claim that there existed a plan to discredit him did not seem either unreasonable or implausible.

Rather, there are a number of elements in this narrative that suggest the believability of the story that Joseph Smith and his associates repeatedly told. For example, two Latter-day Saint historians have described what they see as an independent “prophetic voice” evident in Doctrine and Covenants 3, the revelation that came right after the loss of the pages—and likely the first revelation that Joseph Smith committed to paper. Importantly, they see an authenticity in the independence of that voice—and almost surprisingly so, in the way that Joseph Smith is chastised. Richard Bushman wrote, “The speaker stands above and outside Joseph, sharply separated emotionally and intellectually. The rebuke of Joseph is as forthright as the denunciation of Martin Harris. There is no effort to conceal or rationalize, no sign of Joseph justifying himself to prospective followers. The words flow directly from the messenger to Joseph and have the single purpose of setting Joseph straight. . . . At twenty-two, Joseph was speaking prophetically.”¹⁹

Also, in this authenticity vein, Jeffrey R. Holland asked some penetrating questions worth reconsidering: “If the loss of those 116 pages . . . was simply the disappearance of some thoughtful, wisdom literature and a few chapters of remarkably deft fiction, as opponents of the Book of Mormon would say, what’s the big deal? Why then all that business about Joseph going through the depths of hell, worrying about whether he was going to get the manuscript back and fearing the rebuke of God. He’s a quick study; he’s a frontier talent. He can just write some more!” Then, after quoting Lucy Mack Smith’s account of Joseph’s despair and Martin’s hopelessness when the pages were lost, Elder Holland said this:

Well, my goodness, that’s an elaborate little side story—which makes absolutely no sense at all unless, of course, there really were plates, and there really was a translation process going on, and there really had been a solemn covenant made with the Lord, and there really was an enemy who did not want that book to “come forth in this generation” (D&C 10:33). . . . Which is only to say what so many have said before: that if Joseph Smith—or anyone else, for that matter—created the Book of Mormon out of whole cloth, that, to me, is a *far* greater miracle than the proposition that he translated it from an ancient record by an endowment of divine power.²⁰