

The Contributions of Martin Harris

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By 1827, Martin Harris had built a comfortable life for himself in Palmyra, New York.¹ Over the previous 14 years, he had acquired 320 acres of farmland, made them profitable through his industry and progressive ideas, and built a handsome frame home.² He married Lucy Harris in 1808, and the couple had five children, three of whom lived to be adults. Martin's talent and prosperity had not gone unnoticed by his neighbors, who thought of him as "an industrious, hard-working farmer, shrewd in his business calculations, frugal in his habits, and ... a prosperous man in the world."³

Now at age 45 and enjoying the fruits of his labors and the respect of his peers, Martin even considered hiring someone to care for his farm for several months so he could do some travel. But just when he began to contemplate this excursion, he received a visit from Lucy Mack Smith, who bore some intriguing news.

Martin Harris knew most of the story: An angel had visited Joseph Smith and revealed to him the existence of a record on ancient metallic plates buried in a hill near his home. For three years, Joseph had watched and waited.

Now Lucy Smith had come to tell Martin that her son had, at length, obtained the plates from the angel and was intent on seeing them translated. Joseph and his family were not in a position to pay to publish the translation, but Martin Harris was. Lucy Mack Smith asked Martin if he would come visit Joseph. He agreed, and his wife, Lucy Harris, insisted she would come also.

Joseph Smith likely considered Martin Harris a friend. He had previously confided in Martin regarding his angelic visits and the existence of the plates. Martin apparently returned his friendship; he had hired Joseph Smith as a day laborer on his farm and found him to be a reliable hand.

But Martin probably harbored some doubts. He later told an interviewer that when he first heard the story of the plates, he assumed that Joseph and his money-digging friends had simply found an old brass kettle. Still, Martin was a religious man. Some even thought him superstitious in his views, disparagingly calling him a "visionary fanatic."⁴ Perhaps it was this openness to the presence of the supernatural in daily life that allowed him to at least consider Joseph's claims. Lucy Harris promptly kept her promise to visit Joseph, even offering to help finance the translation of the plates herself. Martin, however, remained aloof, perhaps needing some time to think it over.

During the fall and early winter, hostile neighbors made several attempts to steal the plates from Joseph. In this precarious situation, he decided to move with his wife, Emma, to her parents' home in Harmony, Pennsylvania. Whatever the cause of Martin's earlier hesitation,

he concluded that he needed to help Joseph. He met him in a tavern in Palmyra, gave him \$50 in silver, and said, “I give [this] to you to do the Lords work.”⁵ When Joseph insisted it be considered a loan, Martin reaffirmed his desire to contribute freely to the cause.

Meanwhile, Lucy Harris had begun to doubt Joseph’s story, possibly due to his insistence on keeping the plates hidden from view. This suspicion led her to resent Martin’s increased interest and involvement with Joseph. Martin’s relationship with his wife was already strained, and his support of Joseph Smith caused the rift between them to deepen.

“I Cannot Read a Sealed Book”

A short time after the Smiths arrived in Harmony, Martin paid them a visit and expressed his desire to assist Joseph. He proposed to journey east to New York City with a transcription of some of the characters on the plates to show them to scholars. Perhaps he wanted additional reassurance that the plates were authentic, or he may have thought a testimonial would help them borrow money to publish the translation. In any event, he insisted that the Lord had prompted him to make the trip.

At the time, neither Joseph nor Martin knew much about the language on the plates. They knew only as much as the angel Moroni had told Joseph: that it was an ancient American record. Thus, rather than seeking a scholar with a knowledge of Egyptian (Joseph later learned that the language on the plates was called “reformed Egyptian”), Martin visited several scholars with an interest in antiquities, especially American antiquities.⁶

He departed in February 1828, and en route to New York City, he stopped in Albany to visit Luther Bradish—a former Palmyra resident and family friend who had traveled extensively throughout the Near East and Egypt. Martin sought his opinion about whom to visit regarding the translation and then pressed on to New York to visit Samuel L. Mitchill, a linguist and one of the leading scholars on ancient American culture. After examining the characters, Mitchill evidently sent Martin to Charles Anthon, a young professor of grammar and linguistics at Columbia College. Anthon had been collecting American Indian stories and speeches for publication and was eager to inspect the document Martin brought him.

Martin claimed that Anthon declared the characters authentic until he learned how Joseph Smith had acquired them. He suggested Martin bring him the plates. Martin refused, and Anthon replied, paraphrasing a verse in Isaiah, “I cannot read a sealed book.” Though Anthon later denied the details of Martin’s account of their meeting, we do know this: Martin came away from his visits with the eastern scholars more convinced than ever that Joseph Smith was called of God and that the plates and characters were ancient. He and Joseph viewed the visit to Anthon as a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy (also mentioned in the Book of Mormon itself) of “a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed.”⁷

“To Stop the Mouths of Fools”

During the spring and early summer of 1828, Martin scribed as the young seer dictated the translation. Though the process must have seemed miraculous to him, Martin was still on guard against deception. He once replaced Joseph's seer stone with another stone to see if Joseph would notice the difference. When Joseph was unable to continue translating, Martin confessed his ruse and returned the seer stone. When Joseph asked him why he had done it, Martin explained that he wanted to "stop the mouths of fools, who had told him that the Prophet had learned those sentences and was merely repeating them."⁸

Though Martin came to believe quite sincerely, his wife had turned bitterly hostile. Lucy Harris was concerned, quite understandably, that Martin might take a large financial risk to help publish the book, that her peers would mock her husband's participation in what they viewed as a fraudulent scheme, and that Martin had simply left her feelings out of his calculations. She was also stung by the way Joseph rebuffed her every attempt to see the plates, and she beleaguered Martin incessantly to show her some evidence of Joseph's ability to translate.

To ease Lucy's disquiet, Martin asked Joseph to "enquire of the Lord through the Urim and Thummin" if he might "carry the writings home and exhibit them"⁹ to his wife and others. Joseph wanted to please Martin because he had shown him friendship "when there seemed to be no earthly friend to succor or to sympathize."¹⁰

Joseph did inquire for his friend. "The answer," Joseph said, "was that he must not. [Martin] was not satisfied with this answer and desired that I would enquire again. I did so, and the answer was as before. Still he could not be contented and insisted that I should enquire once more. After much solicitation I again enquired of the Lord and permission was granted on certain conditions."¹¹ Martin was to show the translated pages only to his wife, parents, brother, and sister-in-law.

Elated, Martin Harris returned home with the manuscript pages and showed them to his wife. He did not, however, handle the precious manuscript with the prescribed care, and it was soon lost. Precisely how it happened is a matter of speculation. One commonly repeated rumor was that Lucy removed the pages from Martin's bureau and burned them, though she denied any responsibility for their loss. Some, including Joseph Smith, suspected a conspiracy on the part of Lucy Harris or perhaps others.

Martin made every effort to find the manuscript, dreading the thought of confessing to Joseph what had happened. He even "ripped open beds and pillows" but to no avail. When Joseph came to his parents' home after several weeks, eager for news, Martin trudged reluctantly three miles to the Smiths' Manchester home. As he approached, he walked "with a slow and measured tread towards the house, his eyes fixed thoughtfully upon the ground. When he came to the gate, he did not open it but got upon the fence and sat some time with his hat drawn over his eyes."¹²

He at last entered, and having little appetite for the dinner they had prepared for him, he soon "pressed his hands upon his temples and cried out in a tone of deep anguish, 'Oh! I have lost my soul!'"¹³ Joseph understood immediately what had happened. He demanded that Martin return and look again for the manuscript, but Martin insisted that further searching

would be in vain.

Exhausted and discouraged, Joseph returned to Harmony and, walking a short distance from his home, prayed for mercy. The angel appeared and gave again to Joseph the Urim and Thummim, or interpreters, that Joseph had originally received with the plates but had lost for having “wearied the Lord in asking that Martin Harris might take the writings.”¹⁴ Using the Urim and Thummim, Joseph received the earliest of his revelations for which a text survives.

Now known as Doctrine and Covenants 3, the revelation rebuked Joseph: “How oft you have transgressed the commandments and laws of God and have gone on in the persuasions of Men for behold you should not fear men more than God.” However, it held out hope: “Remember God is merciful. Therefore repent of that which thou hast done which is contrary to the commandment which I gave and thou art still chosen and art again called to do the work.”¹⁵

“I Will Grant unto Him a View”

For months Martin Harris remained at his Palmyra home, haunted by the loss of the manuscript. He was also distressed to discover that his wife and others sought to discredit Joseph Smith and make him out to be a fraud who was simply after Martin’s money. Longing for reconciliation and bearing news of these disturbing efforts, he visited Joseph Smith in Harmony in March 1829.

To Martin’s relief, Joseph had obtained forgiveness and was preparing to resume the translation. Martin asked Joseph once again for the privilege of seeing the plates. He desired a firm witness that “Joseph hath got the things which he hath testified that he hath got,” perhaps to stifle his lingering doubts and to help him persuade Lucy. Joseph received a revelation for Martin, found today in Doctrine and Covenants 5. In it, the Lord revealed that three witnesses would be called to see and give testimony of the plates. Then, to Martin Harris’s delight, the Lord promised him that “if he will go out & bow down before me & humble himself in mighty prayer & faith in the sincerity of his heart then I will grant unto him a view of the things which he desireth to view.” The revelation also indicated that the book’s authenticity would be affirmed by its message rather than by the plates, and that many would not believe even if Joseph Smith were to “show them all things.”¹⁶

Work on the translation recommenced in earnest on April 5, 1829, when newly arrived Oliver Cowdery assumed the role of scribe. Joseph and Oliver picked up where Joseph and Martin had previously left off, near the beginning of the book of Mosiah. But in May, as they approached the end of the Book of Mormon as we now have it, they wondered whether they should retranslate the lost portion. To address this question, the Lord gave Joseph Smith another revelation, now contained in Doctrine and Covenants 10. The revelation confirmed Joseph’s fears of a conspiracy: “Behold, satan has put it into their hearts to alter the words which you have caused to be written.” However, the Lord reassured Joseph that He had a long-prepared solution. Joseph was commanded not to retranslate the lost portion but to supplant it with a translation of “the plates of Nephi,” which covered a similar time period.

Thus, the Lord would frustrate the plans of the conspirators and fulfill the prayers of the ancient Nephite record keepers, who desired these writings to “come forth unto this people.”¹⁷

“Mine Eyes Have Beheld”

As the translation neared completion, Martin, together with Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer, begged Joseph for the privilege of being the promised witnesses of the plates. Joseph again inquired and received the revelation now contained in Doctrine and Covenants 17, promising each of the men that they would witness the plates if they would “rely upon my word” with “full purpose of heart.”¹⁸

Martin Harris was no doubt euphoric that he would be allowed to see the plates, but in June 1829, when the three men attempted to pray and obtain a view of the plates from the angel, they were at first unsuccessful. Martin feared “his presence was the cause of our not obtaining what we wished.” He retired, and shortly thereafter the angel appeared and showed Whitmer and Cowdery the plates. Joseph searched for Martin and found him some distance away. He had been praying on his own, and Joseph joined him. He soon received the manifestation he had long sought. After witnessing the plates, he shouted, “Tis enough tis enough mine eyes have beheld mine eyes have beheld.”¹⁹

“Thou Shalt Not Covet Thine Own Property”

Bolstered by this miraculous and faith-affirming experience, Martin recommitted to provide financial support for the Book of Mormon publication. Joseph Smith had talked to several printers in Palmyra and Rochester, New York. He hoped to convince Egbert B. Grandin of Palmyra to print the book, and Martin took up the negotiations. Grandin’s price was \$3,000 for the unusually large printing of 5,000 copies, but he would not buy the type or begin the job until Joseph or Martin had “promised to insure the payment for the printing.”²⁰ Martin would have to impart essentially all the property to which he had a legal right.

This moment of decision would sound the depth of Martin Harris’s trust in Joseph Smith and his faith in the Book of Mormon. Seeking guidance, he spoke with Joseph, who received yet another revelation. Known today as Doctrine and Covenants 19, the revelation admonished Martin, “Thou shalt not covet thine own property, but impart it freely to the printing of the book of Mormon.”²¹ On August 25, 1829, he mortgaged his property to Grandin as payment for the publication. His neighbors were amazed that their sensible friend would “abandon the cultivation of one of the best farms in the neighborhood”²² to underwrite the publication.

Initially, Martin hoped to redeem his mortgaged farm by selling copies of the Book of Mormon. In January, Joseph Smith signed an agreement with Martin, giving him “equal privilege”²³ to sell copies of the Book of Mormon until he had fully recouped the cost of printing. He began selling the book as soon as it was available in March 1830. Unfortunately, sales did not go as well as he had hoped.

Joseph Smith reportedly spotted a distraught Martin Harris late in March 1830 near Palmyra. According to Joseph Knight, Martin was carrying several copies of the Book of Mormon. He said, “The Books will not sell for no Body wants them,” and told Joseph, “I Want a Commandment.” Joseph’s reply referred Martin to the previous revelation: “Fulfill what you have got.” “But I must have a commandment,” repeated Martin.²⁴

He received no further commandment.²⁵ However, in compliance with the earlier revelation, Martin eventually sold enough of his property to pay the debt. By so doing, he secured his place as the most significant financial supporter of the Book of Mormon and thus the early Church. None among Joseph Smith’s younger and poorer friends could have provided this critical contribution.

1. The author acknowledges Michael Hubbard MacKay of the Joseph Smith Papers team, whose research informed this telling of Martin Harris’s story.
2. See Ronald W. Walker, “Martin Harris: Mormonism’s Early Convert,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, vol. 19, no. 4 (Winter 1986), 30–33.
3. Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter, “For the Sum of Three Thousand Dollars,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2005), 7.
4. Walker, “Martin Harris: Mormonism’s Early Convert,” 34.
5. Lucy Mack Smith, “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” book 6, page 6, josephsmithpapers.org.
6. See Lucy Mack Smith, “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” books 6 and 7, josephsmithpapers.org.
7. Isaiah 29:11; see also Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith’s Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2015), 52.
8. Edward Stevenson, “One of the Three Witnesses: Incidents in the Life of Martin Harris,” in *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star*, vol. 44, no. 6 (Feb. 6, 1882), 87.
9. Joseph Smith, “History, circa 1841, fair copy,” 14, josephsmithpapers.org; spelling standardized.
10. Lucy Mack Smith, “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” book 6, pages 10–11.
11. Joseph Smith, “History, circa 1841, fair copy,” 14.
12. Lucy Mack Smith, “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” book 7, pages 5–6; punctuation standardized.
13. Lucy Mack Smith, “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” book 7, pages 5–6; punctuation standardized.
14. Joseph Smith, “History, circa 1841, fair copy,” 14.

15. Joseph Smith, “History, circa 1841, fair copy,” 15–16.
16. “Revelation, March 1829 [D&C 5],” 1–2, josephsmithpapers.org.
17. “Revelation, Spring 1829 [D&C 10],” in Book of Commandments, 22, 25, josephsmithpapers.org.
18. “Revelation, June 1829–E [D&C 17],” in Revelation Book 2, 119, josephsmithpapers.org.
19. Joseph Smith, “History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” 24–25, josephsmithpapers.org.
20. John Gilbert, as cited in “Interview with the Printer of the Bible,” *New York Herald*, June 25, 1893.
21. “Revelation, circa Summer 1829 [D&C 19],” in Book of Commandments, 41, josephsmithpapers.org.
22. Stephen S. Harding, Letter to Thomas Gregg, February 1882, in Thomas Gregg, *The Prophet of Palmyra* (New York: John Alden, 1890), 37.
23. “Agreement with Martin Harris, 16 January 1830,” 1, josephsmithpapers.org.
24. Joseph Knight reminiscences, undated, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
25. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds. *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, vol. 1 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 86, note 333.