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Title A Response: “What the Manuscripts and the Eyewitnesses Tell Us about the Translation of the Book of Mormon”

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Abstract According to the traditional account, when Joseph Smith translated the gold plates into what is now known as the Book of Mormon, he did not create the text himself or copy the text from another existing manuscript. Rather, he translated the text through an interpreting device, which only worked when Joseph was spiritually and emotionally prepared. The article supports this claim by including several stories of the translation process as told by eyewitnesses.

A Response: “What the Manuscripts and the Eyewitnesses Tell Us about the Translation of the Book of Mormon”

DANIEL C. PETERSON

ROYAL SKOUSEN has devoted a decade and a half to intensive study of the text of the Book of Mormon, and most especially to the original and printer’s manuscripts of the book.¹ It is his strongly considered opinion that the manuscript evidence supports the traditional account of the origin of the Book of Mormon, and that it doesn’t support the notion that Joseph Smith composed the text himself or took it from any other existing manuscript. Yet all the witnesses thought that Joseph Smith somehow saw words and read them off to his scribes.² Taken together, these two facts are highly significant. Let us briefly examine some of the relevant data.

First of all, the evidence strongly supports the traditional account in saying that the original manuscript was orally dictated. The kinds of errors that occur in the manuscript are clearly those that occur from a scribe mishearing, rather than from visually misreading while copying from another manuscript. (The printer’s manuscript, by contrast, shows precisely the types of anomalies that one would expect from a copyist’s errors.) Royal’s meticulous analysis even suggests that Joseph was working with up to twenty to thirty words at a time.³

It is apparent that Joseph could see the spelling of names on whatever it was that he was reading from.⁴

When the scribe had written the text, he (or she in the case of Emma Smith) would evidently read it back to Joseph Smith for correction.⁵ So the Prophet evidently had something with him from which he was dictating, and against which he could check what his scribes had written. But what was it? The witnesses are unanimous that he did not have any books or manuscripts or papers with him during the translation process, which involved lengthy periods of dictation.⁶

In an interview with her son, Joseph Smith III, not long before she died, Emma Smith insisted that Joseph had no text with him during the work of translation:

Q. Had he not a book or manuscript from which he read, or dictated to you?

A. He had neither manuscript nor book to read from.

Q. Could he not have had, and you not know it?

A. If he had had anything of the kind he could not have concealed it from me.

Emma Smith could speak authoritatively regarding the period during which she herself served as scribe. But what about the much longer period when Oliver Cowdery was taking the dictation? In fact, Emma could speak from personal experience with respect

to that time, as well. While they were in Harmony, Pennsylvania—where most of the Book of Mormon text was committed to writing—Emma says that Joseph and Oliver were not far away from her:

Q. Where did father and Oliver Cowdery write?

A. Oliver Cowdery and your father wrote in the room where I was at work.

“The plates,” she said, “often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen table cloth, which I had given him to fold them in. I once felt of the plates as they thus lay on the table, tracing their outline and shape. They seemed to be pliable like thick paper, and would rustle with a metallic sound when the edges were moved by the thumb, as one does sometimes thumb the edges of a book.”⁷

Not long after speaking with her, Joseph III wrote a letter in which he summarized some of her responses to his questions. “She wrote for Joseph Smith during the work of translation, as did also Reuben Hale, her brother, and O. Cowdery; that the larger part of this labor was done in her presence, and where she could see and know what was being done; that during no part of it did Joseph Smith have any mss. [manuscripts] or book of any kind from which to read, or dictate, except the metallic plates, which she knew he had.”⁸

A correspondent from the *Chicago Times* interviewed David Whitmer on 14 October 1881, and got the same story: “Mr. Whitmer emphatically asserts as did Harris and Cowdery, that while Smith was dictating the translation he had no manuscript notes or other means of knowledge save the seer stone and the characters as shown on the plates, he [i.e., David Whitmer] being present and cognizant how it was done.”⁹

Similarly, the *St. Louis Republican*, based upon an interview in mid-July of 1884, reported that “Father Whitmer, who was present very frequently during the writing of this manuscript [i.e., of the Book of Mormon] affirms that Joseph Smith had no book or manuscript, before him from which he could have read as is asserted by some that he did, he (Whitmer) having every opportunity to know whether Smith had Solomon Spaulding’s or any other person’s romance [i.e., a novel] to read from.”¹⁰

David Whitmer repeatedly insisted that the translation process occurred in full view of Joseph

Smith’s family and associates. (The common image of a curtain hanging between the Prophet and his scribes, sometimes seen in illustrations of the story of the Book of Mormon, is based on a misunderstanding. There was indeed a curtain, at least in the latter stages of the translation process. However, that curtain was suspended not between the translator and his scribe but near the front door of the Peter Whitmer home, in order to prevent idle passersby and gawkers from interfering with the work.¹¹)

Further evidence that, whatever else was happening, Joseph Smith was not simply reading from a manuscript, comes from an episode recounted by David Whitmer to William H. Kelley and G. A. Blakeslee in January 1882:

He could not translate unless he was humble and possessed the right feelings towards every one. To illustrate, so you can see. One morning when he was getting ready to continue the translation, something went wrong about the house and he was put out about it. Something that Emma, his wife, had done. Oliver and I went up stairs, and Joseph came up soon after to continue the translation, but he could not do anything. He could not translate a single syllable. He went down stairs, out into the orchard and made supplication to the Lord; was gone about an hour—came back to the house, asked Emma’s forgiveness and then came up stairs where we were and the translation went on all right. He could do nothing save he was humble and faithful.¹²

Whitmer told the same story to a correspondent for the *Omaha Herald* during an interview on 10 October 1886. In perhaps somewhat overwrought language, the Herald’s reporter summarized the account as follows:

He [Joseph Smith] went into the woods again to pray, and this time was gone fully an hour. His friends became positively concerned, and were about to institute a search, when Joseph entered the room, pale and haggard, having suffered a vigorous chastisement at the hands of the Lord. He went straight in humiliation to his wife, entreated and received her forgiveness, returned to his work, and, much to the joy of himself and his anxious friends surrounding him, the stone again glared forth its letters of fire.¹³

It would seem from this anecdote that Joseph Smith needed to be spiritually or emotionally ready for the translation process to proceed—something that

would have been wholly unnecessary if he had simply been reading from a prepared manuscript. At this point, a skeptic might perhaps suggest that emotional distractions interfered with Joseph Smith's ability to remember a text that he had memorized the night before for dictation to his naive secretaries, or that personal upheavals distracted him from improvising an original text for them to write down as it occurred to him. But such potential counter-explanations run into their own very serious difficulties: Whether it is even remotely plausible to imagine Joseph Smith or anyone else memorizing or composing nearly 5000 words daily, day after day, week after week, in the production of a lengthy and complex book is a question that readers can ponder for themselves. One might also ask the same skeptic why Joseph would not just have written out the text himself if he were indeed faking reception of the text by revelation.

An anecdote recounted by Martin Harris to Edward Stevenson seems to argue against the translation process being either the simple dictation of a memorized text or the mechanical reading of an ordinary manuscript surreptitiously smuggled into the room. Harris is speaking about the earliest days of the work, before the arrival of Oliver Cowdery, when he was serving as scribe. Harris "said that the Prophet 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."¹⁴ The seer stone was placed in a hat in order to obscure the surrounding light and make the deliverances from the stone easier to see. By contrast, of course, the scribes needed light in order to be able to write down the text. This situation, coupled with the lack of a dividing curtain, would have made it very difficult, if not impossible, for Joseph to have concealed a manuscript, or books, or the plates themselves. Stevenson's account continues:

By aid of the seer stone, sentences would appear and were read by the Prophet and written by Martin, 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, so that the translation was just as it was engraven on the plates, precisely in the language then used. Martin said, after continued translation they would become weary, and would go

down to the river and exercise by throwing stones out on the river, etc. While so doing on one occasion, Martin found a stone very much resembling the one used for translating, and on resuming their labor of translation, Martin put in place the stone that he had found. He said that the Prophet remained silent, unusually and intently gazing in darkness, no traces of the usual sentences appearing. Much surprised, Joseph exclaimed, "Martin! What is the matter? All is as dark as Egypt!" Martin's countenance betrayed him, and the Prophet asked Martin why he had done so. Martin said, to stop the mouths of fools, who had told him that the Prophet had learned those sentences and was merely repeating them, etc.¹⁵

Furthermore, it is clear from careful analysis of the original manuscript that Joseph did not know in advance what the text was going to say. Chapter breaks and book divisions apparently surprised him. He would see some indication, evidently, of a break in the text, and, in each case, would tell his scribe to write "Chapter." The numbers were then added later. For instance, at what we now recognize as the end of 1 Nephi, the original manuscript first indicates merely that a new chapter is about to begin. (In the original chapter divisions, that upcoming text was marked as "Chapter VIII.") When Joseph and Oliver subsequently discovered that they were instead at the opening of a wholly distinct book, 2 Nephi, the original chapter specification was crossed out and placed after the title of the new book. This is quite instructive. It indicates that Joseph could only see the end of a section but did not know whether the next section would be another portion of the same book or, rather, the commencement of an entirely new book.¹⁶

Moreover, there were parts of the text that he did not understand. "When he came to proper names he could not pronounce, or long words," his wife Emma recalled of the earliest part of the translation, "he spelled them out."¹⁷ And she evidently mentioned her experience to David Whitmer or else he knew of this phenomenon by other, independent, means. "When Joseph could not pronounce the words," Whitmer told E. C. Briggs and Rudolph Etzenhouser in 1884, "he spelled them out letter by letter."¹⁸ Briggs also recalled an 1856 interview with Emma Smith in which "she remarked of her husband Joseph's limited education while he was translating the Book of Mormon, and she was scribe at the time, 'He could not

pronounce the word Sariah.' And one time while translating, where it speaks of the walls of Jerusalem, he stopped and said, 'Emma, did Jerusalem have walls surrounding it?' When I informed him it had, he replied, 'O, I thought I was deceived.'"¹⁹ As the *Chicago Tribune* summarized David Whitmer's testimony in 1885, he confirmed Emma's experience: "In translating the characters Smith, who was *illiterate* and but little versed in Biblical lore, was oftentimes compelled to spell the words out, not knowing the correct pronunciation, and Mr. Whitmer recalls the fact that at that time Smith did not even know that Jerusalem was a walled city."²⁰ (The use of the term *illiterate* is potentially misleading here since Joseph Smith was literate, given the now-current meaning of the word. He could read and he could write. But Joseph was not a learned person; he was not a man of letters. Accordingly, in one sense of the word, he was illiterate.²¹)

In its notice of the death of David Whitmer, and undoubtedly based upon its prior interviews with

him, the 24 January 1888 issue of the *Chicago Times* again alluded to the difficulties Joseph Smith had with the text he was dictating: "Smith being an illiterate, would often stumble over big words, which the village schoolmaster [Oliver Cowdery] would pronounce for him, and so the work proceeded."²²

Thus we see that Joseph Smith seems to have been reading from something, but that he had no book or manuscript or paper with him. It seems to have been a text that was new and strange to him, and one that required a certain emotional or mental focus before it could be read. All of this is entirely consistent with Joseph Smith's claim that he was deriving the text by revelation through an interpreting device, but it does not seem reconcilable with claims that he had created the text himself earlier, or even that he was reading from a purloined copy of someone else's manuscript. In order to make the latter theory plausible, it is necessary to reject the unanimous testimony of the eyewitnesses to the process and to ignore the evidence of the original manuscript itself. ■

NOTES

1. For the results of his labors thus far, see Royal Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001); Royal Skousen, ed., *The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001).
2. See Royal Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed., Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 61–93. A revised and shorter version of the same article has been published as Royal Skousen, "How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 22–31. Lyndon W. Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book Company, 1991), is replete with testimony to this effect.
3. Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon," 67–75; Skousen, "How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon," 25.
4. Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon," 75–82; Skousen, "How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon," 27.
5. Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon," 82–84; Skousen, "How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon," 27.
6. See Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon," 62; Skousen, "How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon," 24.
7. Joseph Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saints' Advocate* 2/4 (October 1879): 50–52; *Saints' Herald* 26/19 (1 October 1879): 289–90.
8. Letter of Joseph Smith III to James T. Cobb, dated 14 February 1879, Letterbook 2, pp. 85–88, RLDS Archives. Cited in Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 29.
9. *Chicago Times* (17 October 1881), as given in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 76. Compare Whitmer's reply to J. W. Chatburn, as reported in *Saints' Herald* 29 (15 June 1882), and reproduced in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 92.
10. *St. Louis Republican* (16 July 1884), as given in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 139–40.
11. See his comments to the *Chicago Tribune* (17 December 1885), as also the summary of an interview with him given in a February 1870 letter from William E. McLellan to some unidentified "dear friends" and the report published in the *Chicago Times* (24 January 1888). The relevant passages are conveniently available in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 173, 233–34, 249; for early use of a curtain, see Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon," 63–64.
12. Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 86.
13. *Omaha Herald* (17 October 1886), as reprinted in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 199.
14. Edward Stevenson, "One of the Three Witnesses: Incidents in the Life of Martin Harris," *Millennial Star* 44 (6 February 1882): 86.
15. Stevenson, "One of the Three Witnesses," 86–87.
16. See Skousen, *Original Manuscript*, 164; also Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon," 85–86; Skousen, "How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon," 27–28.
17. Edmund C. Briggs, "A Visit to Nauvoo in 1856," *Journal of History* 9 (January 1916): 454.
18. Said in a 25 April 1884 interview with E. C. Briggs and Rudolph Etzenhouser, published in *Saints' Herald* 31 (21 June 1884), as given in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 128. By the time Joseph reached the portion of the Book of Mormon translation that is still extant in the original manuscript, there seems to be little if any evidence of such spelling out; see Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon," 76–78.
19. Cited in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 126–27. In a personal communication dated 18 August 2001, Royal Skousen suggests, plausibly enough, that Joseph probably kept pronouncing *Sariah* as *Sarah*.
20. *Chicago Tribune* (17 December 1885), as given in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 174. Emphasis in the original. Whitmer also mentioned the walls-of-Jerusalem incident in a conversation with M. J. Hubble, on 13 November 1886. See Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 211.
21. The use of *literate* in the sense of *learned* is found in the Oxford English Dictionary, under *literate*. But it is not found under *illiterate*; there we basically have only the meaning of "not able to read or write."
22. *Chicago Times* (24 January 1888), as reproduced in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 249.