8 August 2006

Letter: Sanford, Colorado, to Martha Jane Lewis [daughter] [handwriting?] [4 pages]

Sanford, Congas Co. Col.
August 2, 1889

Dear daughter Martha.

... 

[p. 3:]

I soon went to Nauvoo — became acquainted with the Prophet — heard him preach and saw him conduct the April Conference of 1840. [mentioned healings]

[p. 4:]

I sat and listened to his preaching at the stand in Nauvoo a great many times when I have been completely carried away with his indescribable eloquence — power of expression — speaking as I have never heard any other man speak — I have heard him prophecy many things that have already come to pass, I have seen him translate by the Seers stones I have been <was> present when he received a revelation on priesthood; he blessed me and proph[e]sied that on my head, which has been litterally fulfilled . . .

Well, as for 91, I see no failure in it at present. The Savior might come and manifest Himself to but few. — In the Kirtland endowment He manifested Himself only to Joseph & Oliver, & it might be sim[i]lar to that again. . . .
"The History of a Nephite Coin"
A Personal Experience of
Elder Richard M. Robinson of Grantsville, Utah.
[typed copy signed December 30, 1934]

p. 3:
In the office of the First Presidency there were resident Lorenzo Snow, President Joseph
F. Smith, President Lyman M. Lyman and ____________.

p. 4:
[President Snow]
He then went and got the money purse or leather bag that President Brigham
Young had brought to the Rocky Mountains with him, also the Seer Stone and said, "This
is the Seer Stone that the Prophet Joseph Smith used. There are very few worthy to view
this, but you are." He handed the Seer Stone to me and I couldn't express the joy that
came to me as I took that stone in my hands. Words are not equal to the task of
expressing such a sublime joy." He then told me to hand the Seer Stone to my wife and I
handed it to her. He then blessed us with the greatest blessing I have

p. 5:
ever heard fall from the mouth of man."

Description of the Seer Stone
"The Seer Stone was the shape of an egg though not quite so large, of a gray cast
something like granite but with white stripes running around it. It was transparent but had
no holes, neither in the end or in the sides. I looked into the stone, but could see nothing,
as I had not the gift and power of Gd that must accompany such a manifestation."

President Snow blessed us that day [handwritten in a space underlined: the first week in
January, 1900] and to this day, his promise that we should never suffer for bread has been
valid.

Signed: [handwritten in a space underlined: R M Robinson]
December 30, 1934.
The following paper was presented as part of a panel discussion entitled "Revisionary History—Three Pioneers," held at the 2004 annual meeting of the John Whitmer Historical Association in Omaha-Council Bluffs. A pioneer is an innovator. He makes new things, and puts forth new ideas. In the military, a pioneer is one sent out in advance to new areas. He marks the mine fields and cuts the barbed wire, often under hostile fire, to clear the way for his comrades to follow.

The papers discussed in this session are pioneering in the sense that they were the first to go into new areas, they invoked new ideas, and they helped lead the church in a new direction. And some hostile fire was encountered.

Apparently I am listed first on the program because the paper I wrote appeared prior to either Bob Flanders' book on Nauvoo or Dick Howard's book on RLDS Scriptures. My study concerned the method of translation of the Book of Mormon and appeared in the Saints' Herald, November 15, 1962. That was more than forty years ago. Since then many books and papers by LDS, RLDS and "Gentile" scholars have been written and have appeared in journals such as JWHA Journal, Dialogue and Sunstone. Almost all of that research, I believe, has affirmed the direction first set forth in the 1962 Herald article.

In these past forty years the RLDS church has changed quite a bit, even its name. These changes began in the 1950s and 60s. Then the church practiced closed communion, Graceland was a two-year college, and women were not ordained to the priesthood. But most importantly, members believed in the literal inerrancy of the three books of scripture, particularly since the Book of Mormon had been "translated" from the golden plates, and the Bible had been "corrected" by the founding prophet himself.

In the 1950s the church began to change with the publication in 1954 of Clifford Cole's landmark book The Prophets Speak. As a young priest I read the book and thought, "This is sure not the way Daniel McGregor interpreted the prophets." This old approach to scripture was to pick a verse here and a verse there and put them together "correctly," to not only reveal, but prove, that the RLDS church, with headquarters in Independence, Missouri, was the one and only true church. Cole raised pertinent questions about the proof text use of scripture and indirectly appealed for a more critical (and I use that term in its literary sense) approach to the Old Testament prophets and the nature of prophecy itself. Since this touched on the bedrock doctrine of the church, I believe that Cole's book can be said to mark the point where the church began the process of significant change.
I accepted church appointment in September, 1958. I held the position of World Church Statistician. This was a time of leadership change in the church. W. Wallace Smith had become church president, Israel Smith having died in an automobile accident in June of that year.

Roy Cheville, long-time Graceland religion professor, was called to the office of church patriarch. Charles Neff and Clifford Cole were made members of the Council of Twelve. There were changes at Herald House. Roger Yarrington was made editor and two other young men, Bill Russell and Roy Muir, also joined Herald House. Graceland had younger seminary trained men teaching religion, Bob Speaks and Leland Negaard. Lloyd Young was head of Graceland’s new 4-year religion program. In 1960 Charles Davies became church historian and later Dick Howard became his assistant. At the Religious Education Department were Clifford Buck, Athol Packer, Richard Lancaster and later Howard Booth, Dick Hughes and Hazel Imrie. These personnel changes were to have a profound effect on the church.

Collegiality flourished among these people. There was no JWHA so we had to create opportunities to discuss concerns and exchange ideas. Sometimes the younger men from the Auditorium would meet with some like-minded Graceland colleagues to discuss matters. I remember meeting with the Graceland group in Cameron, Missouri, the halfway point between Independence and Lamoni. We talked about some of the current ideas in the church, but it was moral support as well. A half dozen or so members of the Auditorium staff were attending classes at St. Paul School of Theology.

Charles Neff, Clifford Cole, Wayne Updike, Walter Johnson and others had quietly organized a breakfast club that met once a month at Kelsey’s Restaurant to discuss church history and other problems that the church was facing. They were serious and confidential discussions. A topic was chosen each month and some member gave a short ten minute talk followed by discussion. I remember one time when we talked about “the plain and precious truths” Joseph Smith said were taken from the Bible. We decided that because many of the New Testament fragments went back to the Second Century, whoever was taking the plain and precious truths from the Bible must be the same group that was being fed to the lions.

In all of our discussions we were aware of historical problems in the church. For example, the date of Joseph Smith’s first vision hinged on the date of his brother Alvin’s death and Rev. Lane’s sermon. We knew Bishop Tuttle’s account was too close to W.D. Purple’s in the Chenango Union to be fiction. So the trial in Bainbridge had to be looked at seriously, etc. Jerald and Sandra Tanner in Salt Lake City were reprinting old anti-Mormon materials that we collected and read. Amazingly, on many occasions we openly discussed these questions at the old fashioned employee coffee break in the Auditorium.

In the late 1960s, two letters came from Apostle Paul. In one letter, he asked if I would have an opportunity to go to Europe and China with a group of United States Congressmen. I declined and let him know that I had other engagements. In the other letter, he asked me to consider running for a seat in the United States Congress. I declined and let him know that I had other engagements.

In 1962 the leadership of the Graceland Religion Department was taken by Ora Williams, John Seely, and Joseph R. Law. I was asked to consider being a member of the Graceland Religion Department. I declined and let them know that I had other engagements.

At some point in the church history, Joseph W. Smith Jr. was asked to give his early revelations to the church. He said, “Yes, if you need such information.”

Why did I not see a need for translation? Why did I not see a need to consider the history of the church? Why did I not see a need to consider the history of the church? Why did I not see a need to consider the history of the church? Why did I not see a need to consider the history of the church?
In the late 1950s I recall Bishop Walter Johnson being asked about the Virgin Birth. He shrewdly replied that he accepted the testimony of Mark, John and the Apostle Paul on that subject. Most of the conservative employees were satisfied with that answer.

There was much intellectual activity at this time. The Meridian Priesthood lectures held every January in the Stone Church beginning with F. Henry Edwards in January, 1955 and ending with Clifford Buck in January, 1964. Herald House published these lectures in book form each year, save one.

In 1962 Garland Tickemeyer wrote a series of youth Church School quarterly’s on the Old Testament for the Department of Religious Education. I had taken courses in Old Testament and Hebrew at St. Paul School of Theology and was asked to write one of the teacher’s manuals. Religious Education selected a committee to plan and then edit Garland’s materials. Church Historian Charles Davies and I were included on the committee.

At some point in committee discussions the subject of the Inspired Version of the Bible was raised. Someone said it was “translated” just like the Book of Mormon in which Joseph Smith looked through the Urim & Thummim at the King James Version and the corrections appeared. Charles Davies, to the contrary, pointed out the Inspired Version was made by Joseph, Sidney Rigdon and others meeting and reading a portion of the Bible, then offering prayer, after which Joseph would by “inspiration” provide the additions or changes that should be made. At that point I added that even the Book of Mormon was not written by Joseph looking through the Urim and Thummim at the plates and translating “Reformed Egyptian” into English; rather he used a seer stone and the plates were not in sight. Further, I stated that Joseph also used the seer stone to give his early revelations which appear in the Doctrine and Covenants. After a moment of stunned silence Brother Davies was then asked if all of that were true. He said, “Yes, it is.” Later, after the meeting when we were alone, he said “Jim, you need to send me all the evidence you have collected about the method of translation. We are certain to be asked to verify it.” Shortly after, I gave Charles a folder full of quotations from the witnesses to the translation that I had collected.

Why did I have such a collection? I had read my father’s copy of the Compendium of Faith and Doctrine printed by the church in 1888. In it I first saw mention of the Book of Abraham but I could find no further information about it. Neither Inez Smith Davis in Story of the Church nor Vida Smith in Young People’s History of the Church mentioned the Book of Abraham or its source with the mummys in Kirtland. The four (now eight) volume RLDS history mentions the Book of Abraham in one sentence. For those unfamiliar with our church books at the time, these were the RLDS “faithful” histories. In fact they were the only histories.

Curiosity aroused, I went to the local ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to borrow a copy of the Book of Abraham. The elder there was
generous and gave me a copy of the Pearl of Great Price containing the Book of Abraham. The Book of Abraham is a loose thread: if pulled, it unravels the whole thing. At least it was for me. It reveals what Joseph Smith must have regarded as "translation." This of course inevitably leads to many questions about the translation of the Book of Mormon. To help answer these questions I had collected all the accounts I could find about the process of translation, especially eye-witness accounts. Interestingly, many of these accounts had been published in the The Latter Day Saints' Herald or other church publications at an earlier time, but now were mostly forgotten and unknown.

In the September 1, 1962, issue of the Saints' Herald an article appeared by Clair Weldon about prophecy and the Urim and Thummin in ancient America, Nephite America. Clair and I were friends because as Church Statistician I had problems translating the church baptismal, ordination, death and blessing report forms into Spanish for the Latin American congregations. Clair was in charge of the Latin American mission and helped correct our record forms. As a missionary to Latin America, Clair had an interest in Nephite America. His Herald article was well written, but unfortunately, it perpetuated the "magic glasses" idea of Book of Mormon translation.

Charles Davies was upset with Clair's article. It was not good history. Charles and I met and discussed this and agreed that the church needed a more accurate account of the origin of the Book of Mormon. I told Charles that as Church Historian he should write an article on the method of translation for the Herald. Charles, however, had a better and wiser idea. He said "Jim, you have to write it. If I write it, you as Church Statistician cannot back me up. But if you write it, I, as Church Historian can back you up." So I agreed to write the article.

Charles Davies was respected by many of the young men at church headquarters. He was willing to discuss with them in confidence the questions they had about church history, doctrine, and so forth. Brother Davies was also respected by top leaders of the church for his broad experience and mature advice. Because he had friends and confidants both high and low, it was said around the Auditorium that "he could run with the hares and hunt with the hounds." So I am sure that the support he gave me and the Herald article was tempered by the politics of the situation.

We grow up with traditions. The history of the church has a whole set of such traditions. One is about the translation of the Book of Mormon. Reorganized Latter Day Saints of my age took their church history from Inez Smith Davis' Story of the Church. One gets the impression from her book that Joseph used the stone tablets found with the plates to look at the plates and translate them into English. However, when you examine the testimony of all the witnesses to the process, they tell a different story.

The witnesses can be grouped as those friendly to Joseph Smith and those unfriendly. They can also be grouped as early and late witnesses. The unfriendly witnesses tend to be such as Howe, Tur and the translation, at exception of Martin Isham's story. He was always thought to be polygamous, only living longer than his mother, Emma, because he had children which she helped them. In any event, the early and the late were actually two interpreters found Hebrew Urim and Thummin in the 1 second method does not exist. Joseph had found the hat and used the stone with the hat.

Emma Smith an interpreter was used as a means of translation. Witnesses say that the plates were read by Josiah Stowell on the 15th of the 15th Commandments. This mention is in the year 1835. The book was written in Latin for some of the early Commandments. Apparently the church and the One in the 15th Commandments for the stone is "Ephraim stone."

When the church Oliver Cowdery and Comforter or Holy Spirit the stone was used by Hira
witnesses tend to be the same as the early ones, e.g. early anti-Mormon writers such as Howe, Turner and reports in the surrounding town newspapers. The late witnesses such as Emma Smith, Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer are the friendly ones. It seems that they are silent in the early days about the translation, possibly due to Joseph’s admonition. They all, with the possible exception of Martin Harris, give testimony about the translation late in their lives. I have always thought it strange that Joseph Smith III took formal testimony from his mother, Emma Smith Bidamon, about the translation and other issues such as polygamy, only late in her life. Surely he must have talked about these things with her before then.

In any event, when we compare the testimony of the friendly and unfriendly, the early and the late, we find that they say pretty much the same thing. There were actually two methods of translation described. One with the Nephite interpreters found with the plates, later erroneously identified with the Old Hebrew Urim and Thummim used in the time of Solomon and his successors. The second method described by the witnesses was the use of the seer stone that Joseph had. In using the stone Joseph would place the stone in his hat, then cover his face with the hat and dictate in this manner to his scribe.

Emma Smith and David Whitmer state that the first method with the Nephite interpreters was used for the first 116 pages that were translated. Martin Harris was allowed to take the 116 pages home to show his family and lost them. The witnesses say that the plates and the interpreters were taken from Joseph at that time. The plates were returned, but not the interpreters. When translation recommenced Joseph used the seer stone in the hat. This is the stone that was found while Joseph and his brother Alvin were digging a well for Willard Chase. Joseph later used the stone in attempting to locate buried treasure. He was hired by Josiah Stowell for just this purpose. Stowell’s sons became agitated about the treasure search and took Joseph to court, hence the Bainbridge trial.

The first 15 or so revelations given to Joseph printed in the 1832 Book of Commandments were apparently given with the stone in the hat, though no mention of the stone is made in the book. When the revised revelations were printed in 1835 the Urim and Thummim was given as the instrument of revelation for some of the early sections. It is an interesting exercise to compare the Book of Commandments with the revised passages of the Doctrine and Covenants. Apparently the church between 1832 and 1835 adopted the “official” term Urim and Thummim for the interpreters. Joseph used the same term later when he wrote his history to euphemistically cover both the Nephite interpreters and the seer stone.

When the church was organized in April, 1830, Joseph gave the stone to Oliver Cowdery and said that in the future the church would depend on the Comforter or Holy Spirit and not the stone for inspiration. It appears to me that the stone used by Hiram Page to give revelations that Joseph denounced must be
the same stone that Joseph himself had used. In a revelation Joseph tells Oliver to get the stone away from Page and stop the bogus revelations. At his death Oliver had the stone and gave it to his wife, Elizabeth. She later gave it to Phineas Young, brother of Brigham Young, who took it to Utah where it remains to this day. (The RLDS has a similar stone from David Whitmer in the historian's vault.)

All this business about the seer stone and its prior use in treasure hunting was upsetting to early church members. David Whitmer believed that all revelations given after the seer stone was discarded by the prophet were not from God.

Later in Kirtland in 1837 and 1838 questions arose as to the reality of the plates used in translation. Martin Harris said publicly that he "never saw the plates with his natural eyes, only in vision or imagination." This understandably caused tension within the church, which ultimately led to Martin Harris, David and John Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery and others being excommunicated. Soon after, four of the first twelve Apostles named by the prophet left the church. One declared Mormonism to be all humbug.

Because of this history of turmoil which arose from a too close and critical investigation of the plates, the translation, and the interpreters, the church (beginning with Joseph Smith himself), avoided the subject. Joseph Smith would merely say it was done "by the gift and power of God." Considering the potential impact of my research, I felt that any article I might write about the subject probably would never appear in the Herald. But it did get published there.

I think the publication came about as a result of three things that formed a fortuitous window of opportunity:

- First, was a church historian who, though he was of an older generation, was willing to consider newer modes of historical interpretation. That was Charles Davies.
- Second, was a young man who as editor of the Herald was willing to print something that might be controversial. That was Roger Arrington.
- Third, the watchdog, the guardian (and I state this appreciatively), who protected the principles, policies, heritage, and history of the church was out of the Auditorium on the reunion circuit. Thus the article did not cross the desk of President F. Henry Edwards and was published in the pages of the Herald.

As would be expected there was quite a bit of reaction to the publication of the article. Many of my church friends telephoned to ask about it. The common theme of their phone calls was how far removed the article's conclusions were from the church's traditional teachings. I know the Church Historian and the First Presidency also got phone calls and letters. From a letter I got from Graceland, I believed the article was generally accepted by those on the religion staff. I received many letters both defending and attacking the article. One that I appreciated was the Herald's response: "Twelve, who l of the old soul article and the

The Presiding

Mormon. (I still think this of my buddy. Lancaster was, the man was se the olive oil the way Joseph Sm that enabled him

Another tin Herald article was a child he was the Whitmer ch stone in a hat a man was telling and had taken witnesses.

In summary, person has to re history of people this continent. It through whatever an imaginative struggling to unc its pages we see

Those days were high calling and difference.
appreciated was from Paul Hanson, distinguished former President of the Twelve, who long had been aware of the seer stone controversy, and in fact many of the old sources of the story were in his personal library. He welcomed the article and the scholarship it represented.

The Presidency received several articles that conservatives wanted printed in the *Herald* refuting the seer-stone-in-the-hat version of the origins of the Book of Mormon. (I still have a copy of one of them.) Significantly, none of the articles were published. I had the feeling that the facts and interpretation were being accepted by the leading quorums. Roy Cheville in his book *Scriptures from Ancient America*, published shortly after my article, accepted its viewpoint and used its conclusions.

Once, a couple of months after the article appeared, an older gentleman came into my office in the Auditorium. He took something from his pocket wrapped in a handkerchief. It was a rock. He looked at me and said “Brother Lancaster, do you think this would make a good seer stone?” I looked at him and thought one of my buddies, Gordon Mesley, Dick Howard, Don Benton or even Dick Lancaster, was playing a joke on me. But I looked more closely and concluded the man was serious. So I said “Well, Brother, we must remember that it is not the olive oil that heals the sick, it is the spirit of God that heals. And in that same way Joseph Smith emphasized it was the gift and power of God and not the stone that enabled him to translate.”

Another time an elderly man came into my office and said he had read my *Herald* article and wanted me to know he personally knew it to be true. He said as a child he was a neighbor of the Whitmers in Richmond, Missouri, and he and the Whitmer children played “Prophet” which consisted of one child putting a stone in a hat and running around giving “prophesies” to the others. I think the man was telling the truth and I wish now I had written down his name and story and had taken him to the historian’s office where he could have signed it with witnesses.

In summary, I believed forty years ago and I believe today that a thinking person has to realize the Book of Mormon is not a translation at all, neither a history of peoples that migrated to America nor of a visit of Jesus of Nazareth to this continent. But the Book of Mormon came from the mind of Joseph Smith through whatever inspiration he might have had. To me the Book of Mormon is an imaginative and creative story by a young man in New York and Pennsylvania struggling to understand God and the religious questions of that day and time. In its pages we see the insights and answers that burned within him.

Those days in the Auditorium were interesting—challenging and fulfilling. We felt deeply that we had an obligation to truth. To champion the truth was our high calling and the response we made, at that hour, now seems to have made a difference.
STONE IN A HAT

"By the Gift and Power of God"

By Richard Lloyd Anderson  Ensign, Sept. 1977, p. 79

What do we know about how Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon?

The Three Witnesses proclaimed that the ancient plates were "translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice hath declared it unto us." Since we know the Book of Mormon is correctly translated, why review how it was done? Because such a study can add further testimony of Joseph Smith's great work. It can also help expand the concepts of those who tend to oversimplify the work of translation. For the Book of Mormon came into English through considerable spiritual, intellectual, and physical labor, and it takes similarly dedicated efforts on the part of its readers to fully receive the book's benefits.

The spirit of the translation is captured in a letter written by the secretary Oliver Cowdery during the month that it was completed. He addressed Hyrum Smith in common faith "in the great cause of which you have been called to advocate," quoting from the new manuscript of the Lord's American ministry. He also quoted from the new revelation on the worth of souls to the Lord, who "suffered death upon the cross" for them. Here is a man moved by Christian love and sincerely committed to his calling of divine translation. Five years later he wrote about assisting Joseph Smith: "These were days never to be forgotten—to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the inspiration of heaven, awakened the utmost gratitude of this bosom."

Similar feelings remained with the Prophet's wife near her death, as she retold the experience of the translation period to her son: "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 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. This was a usual thing for him to do. It would have been improbable that a learned man could do this, and for one so ignorant and unlearned as he was, it was simply impossible."

The above memories of both his wife and Oliver Cowdery are impressive because they had more experience with the production of the English manuscript than anyone else. Searching for others with similar knowledge, one finds that only the other two of the Three Witnesses really qualify: Martin Harris and David Whitmer. Others on the
periphery of translation either said little about it or (as in the case of William Smith and Joseph Knight) cannot be proved to have observed the process.

As Joseph Smith's first scribe (during the summer of 1828), Martin Harris spoke with authority of that phase of the translation. But quoting him raises a key issue: everything attributed to him does not necessarily represent his exact words. This caution is necessary because his statements on translation details are filtered through reporters, some with only casual contact, some claiming to remember exact words years later.

The person who best reflects Martin Harris is probably Edward Stevenson, since he spent nearly two months with the Witness after going to Ohio to escort him back to Utah in 1870. On the means of translation Stevenson reported, "He 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." 4

After Martin Harris lost the part of the translation done in 1828, Oliver Cowdery became chief scribe for the entire Book of Mormon as it is now printed. Toward the end of this new work of 1829, David Whitmer on occasion watched and afterwards spoke of the seer stone. 5 Yet as an intimate assistant, Oliver Cowdery stressed the Urim and Thummim in his statements. While editor of the Church newspaper in 1834, he made the comment already quoted on the inspiration of writing for Joseph Smith. Then the Prophet's escribe added:

"Day after day I continued uninterruptcd to write from his mouth as he translated, with the Urim and Thummim, or as the Nephites would have said, 'interpreters,' the history, or record called 'The Book of Mormon.' " 6 (A fraudulent pamphlet published in Cowdery's name later attempted to throw doubt on his testimony of translation, but no serious student now accepts the document.) 7

When Cowdery returned to Church membership in 1848 he spoke to an Iowa conference. His words there were recorded by Reuben Miller: "I wrote with my own pen the entire Book of Mormon (save a few pages) as it fell from the lips of the Prophet as he translated it by the gift and power of God by means of the Urim and Thummim, or as it is called by that book, holy interpreters. I beheld with my eyes and handled with my hands the gold plates from which it was translated. I also beheld the Interpreters. That book is true. ... I wrote it myself as it fell from the lips of the Prophet." 8

The Miller journal can be tested by comparing it with official records of the Cowdery speeches, and it is clearly accurate. Thus the above words are likely to be Cowdery verbatim. This judgment is essential because in the report Oliver Cowdery says, "I ... handled with my hands the gold plates." Yet another Witness, David Whitmer, insisted that he had never handled the plates; he only watched as the angel in the vision displayed the plates and other sacred objects. 9 Since Whitmer and Cowdery were together at this impressive vision, one must infer that Cowdery did not handle the plates at that time. Thus a distinction emerges between the key secretary and his witness brother-in-law: at some time during the translation process Oliver Cowdery evidently handled the plates.
This conclusion fits in with the two revelations inviting Oliver to interpret “the engravings of old records” (D&C 8:1) and then commenting on his failure: “You did not translate according to that which you desired of me, and did commence again to write for my servant, Joseph.” (D&C 9:1) Thus he was admonished to continue in this relationship “until you have finished this record,” an instruction given during April 1829, at least a month before David Whitmer appeared on the scene. Oliver Cowdery might well have handled the plates during his translation attempt.

One document explicitly says that the translator placed the Urim and Thummim over the characters on the plates, though it must be judged with great caution. It comes from a late but good source, Samuel W. Richards, a seasoned missionary and administrator in the Church. In returning from Britain in 1848 he lived temporarily in the area below Council Bluffs, and by coincidence Oliver Cowdery and his family asked for hospitality with him on their way from the Bluffs to visit Elizabeth Cowdery’s brother, David Whitmer, at Richmond, Missouri. This much is clearly factual. Later Brother Richards told of his extended visit with Oliver Cowdery, who freely talked of the spectacular events in the founding of the Church. When Brother Richards was eighty-two, he dictated a statement reporting Oliver Cowdery’s recollections of Book of Mormon translation:

“He represented Joseph as sitting at a table with the plates before him, translating them by means of the Urim and Thummim, while he (Oliver) sat beside him writing every word as Joseph spoke them to him. This was done by holding the ‘translators’ over the hieroglyphics, the translation appearing distinctly on the instrument, which had been touched by the finger of God and dedicated and consecrated for the express purpose of translating languages. Every word was distinctly visible even to every letter; and if Oliver omitted a word or failed to spell a word correctly, the translation remained on the ‘interpreter’ until it was copied correctly.” 10

Yet it is doubtful whether Samuel Richards could quote Oliver accurately in 1907, fifty-nine years after their intimate visit. In fact, he continued the above statement by picturing Oliver Cowdery as successfully translating himself, thus learning how Joseph Smith performed that work. But the contemporary revelation to Oliver Cowdery says the opposite (D&C 9), which means that no one besides Joseph Smith knew personally the exact means of translation. As we shall soon see, the literalism of having Joseph dictate each word in correct spelling is also suspect. Yet there may be an authentic shadow of Oliver Cowdery’s and Joseph Smith’s experience in the physical art of placing the translating instruments directly over the plates.

David Whitmer’s idea of translation is similar to Samuel Richards’s. Yet this view does not appear until 1875, nearly a half-century after Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery worked in David Whitmer’s home. His many statements on translation harmonize with his Address to All Believers In Christ, published in 1887 to supersede second-hand reports. There he gave his most detailed view of “the manner in which the Book of Mormon was translated”: 
“Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light. And in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe. And when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear. Thus the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God and not by any power of man. The characters I speak of are the engravings on the golden plates from which the book was translated.” 11

It is tempting to accept the above statement at face value. However, since David Whitmer had not personally translated, his accuracy on details depends on whether he correctly understood what Joseph Smith told him in the first place, and whether he correctly remembered such details after that. This explanation has Joseph Smith simply read off the entire translation rather than formulate it. In one David Whitmer interview, however, such a procedure is limited to proper names. At that time David Whitmer said that Joseph “was utterly unable to pronounce many of the names which the magic power of the Urim and Thummim revealed and therefore spelled them out in syllables, and the more erudite scribe put them together.” 12 This much is likely, for proper names are not a subject for translation, but for transliteration; that is, their sounds and not their meanings carry over into the second language. So Joseph’s dictation of these names fits any informed concept of translation.

But many anti-Mormons have seized on the implications of going further: that is, if Joseph Smith only dictated divinely given English from his viewing instrument, then God is the author of some bad grammar in the original.

Some critics have also felt that misspellings in the Book of Mormon “prove” it is false. The latter cannot be blamed on the printer, for we possess parts of the original unpunctuated Cowdery manuscript from Joseph’s dictation in 1829. The scribe on occasion wrote “hart” for “heart”; “desirus” for “desirous”; and “futer” for “future.” 13 These spelling errors were corrected in the recopied printer’s manuscript and thus appeared in correct form in the first printing. 14 They were probably mistakes of the secretary in the rapidly moving dictation process, and had nothing to do with Joseph Smith. Thus there is no logical problem with scribal misspellings, even under David Whitmer’s explanation of Joseph simply reading “the interpretation in English.” This much refutes the extreme claim that the Prophet’s use of divine aid in translation rules out “all changes, regardless of how minor.” There have been notable misspellings in the printing process of Bible editions that have nothing to do with the question of the inspired nature of the original writings!

Yet David Whitmer’s explanation clearly goes too far in respect to sentence structure and grammar. The first edition of the Book of Mormon carried numerous sentences with a plural subject and singular verb, and vice versa; it sometimes placed an idiomatic “a” before a participle (“a marching”) or an idiomatic “for” before an infinitive (“for to
destroy them”); it regularly used “which” for the personal “who.” Such language clearly originated with the Prophet as he dictated, not with the secretary.

Accuracy is not the issue, since ungrammatical language can still communicate clearly the meaning of the original. Perhaps David Whitmer unconsciously added his own ideas as he spoke on the translation method. He could legitimately speak on the physical appearance of translation but had no personal knowledge of the translation itself. Watching a scientist at work with a delicate instrument gives an untrained observer no insight into the inner workings of either the apparatus or the mind of the scientist. In the case of Book of Mormon translation, the only one that fully understood the procedure was Joseph Smith.

Thus a close look at the Prophet’s comments is probably the most reliable method of understanding how he produced the Book of Mormon. As is generally known, Joseph Smith chose to speak in summary terms, though there are interesting reiterations in early but little-known sources. For instance, the Prophet gave a private account of his early visions in 1832, speaking of the Urim and Thummim in simple terms: “The Lord had prepared spectacles for to read the book; therefore I commenced translating the characters.” 15

Again in 1835 he went over the same ground with the colorful “Joshua, the Jewish Minister,” and Warren Cowdery wrote Joseph’s comments about the plates: “I obtained them and translated them into the English language by the gift and power of God and have been preaching it ever since.” 16

Joseph Smith used practically the same words in responding to a standard question on the ancient records in 1838: “I obtained them and the Urim and Thummim with them, by the means of which I translated the plates, and thus came the Book of Mormon.” 17

The earliest statements of Joseph Smith thus stress two elements, the instrument of translation and also the inspiration to use it. The latter point was emphasized in January 1833, when the Prophet referred to the Book of Mormon as “translated into our own language by the gift and power of God.” 18 Both elements appear in balanced summary in the Wentworth letter, approved for publication in 1842: “Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record by the gift and power of God.” 19

The above statements are concise, but bear eloquent testimony to divine aid. Joseph Smith evidently did not try to explain the complex process of inspired translation. At one point he felt that it was not wise “to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth Of the Book of Mormon.” 20 Yet some details and outlines emerge in his writings, one of which suggests his direct use of the plates. On occasion the Prophet spoke of the ancient script: “I translated the Book of Mormon from hieroglyphics, the knowledge of which was lost to the world.” 21 Or he would comment that the plates “were filled with engravings in Egyptian characters.” 22 But the most detailed glimpse of the original is Joseph Smith’s report of the title page, which was translated from the “very last leaf, on the left hand side of the collection or book of plates ... the language of the whole running
the same as all Hebrew writing in general." 23 Referring to a particular page while mentioning the right-left script throughout "the whole" shows that the Prophet claimed knowledge of the plates themselves, not merely a vision of individual characters in the stone interpreters.

Another glimpse of the process of translation comes from the Lord's invitation to Oliver Cowdery to translate: "I will tell you in your mind and in your heart by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart." (D&C 8:2) And this was followed by the revelation explaining how Oliver might have succeeded: "You must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right, I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you." (D&C 9:8)

This seems to indicate that Joseph Smith's assignment was to understand the ideas of the ancient language and place them, with all their nuances, in coherent English. Obviously the first step, understanding completely the meaning of an unknown language, was more difficult than transferring those ideas, once grasped, into English. Assistance from the Spirit was vital in the understanding stage, or the Prophet would have had no idea where to begin! And that initial step is where direct revelation would operate, according to the Doctrine and Covenants.

Nothing in Doctrine and Covenants 8 or 9 suggests that Oliver Cowdery (and thus Joseph Smith) was to be given perfect final language—rather he was to be inspired in the fundamental thought to be translated. This first, conceptual stage has parallels to the experience of all good translators. They must resist the temptation to open a dictionary with its mechanical answers; they must reach mentally for clues to the meaning of a word in its setting.

Oliver Cowdery was told that he would have the burning witness of the Spirit after mental and spiritual outreach, evidently a glimpse into the Prophet's own procedures. Yet at the point that ideas in the original language are correctly grasped, translation continues as a highly creative activity. Speaking from experience with several languages, Elder John A. Widtsoe stressed that the translator must first perceive the thought and "then attempt to reproduce the thought correctly, with every inflection of meaning, in the best words at his command. ... This makes it unavoidable that much of the translator, himself, remains in his translation." 24

But how far does this axiom of communication apply to an inspired translation? One traditional view was published in 1883 and portrayed Joseph Smith as rather automatically directed by revelation: "It was done by divine aid. There were no delays over obscure passages, no difficulties over the choice of words, no stoppages from the ignorance of the translator; no time was wasted in investigation or argument over the value, intent, or meaning of certain characters, and there were no references to authorities. These difficulties to human work were removed. All was as simple as when a clerk writes from dictation." 25
But this 1883 interpretation hardly fits the “study it out” commandment to Oliver Cowdery in D&C 9. Quoting that revelation, Elder Joseph Fielding Smith generalized: “All knowledge and skill are obtained by consistent and determined study and practice, and so the Prophet found it to be the case in the translating of the Book of Mormon.” 26

The 1883 interpretation is also contradicted by the optional “choice of words” that Joseph Smith himself displayed when he corrected hundreds of grammatical errors in the second edition of the Book of Mormon in 1837. In thus upgrading the correctness of Book of Mormon English, Joseph Smith proved that he operated from the premise that all the concepts in the book were accurate but that some could be more effectively expressed by slight modifications in language. This no more proves the Book of Mormon to be man-made than the constant new translations of the Bible disprove the inspiration of that book. There is a difference between word changes and idea changes.

The Church unofficially faced this problem at the turn of the century when a letter came to President Joseph F. Smith asking how the Church could justify grammatical corrections if the Book of Mormon were truly inspired. President Smith directed Elder B. H. Roberts to reply to the question, and his answers appeared in Church publications after discussion and basic concord was reached with Church leaders. Elder Roberts acknowledged that this was less than an official statement, but it involved General Authorities in thinking through the implications of the evidence. 27

As explained by Elder Roberts, the Prophet grasped “every detail and shade of thought” of the original by revelation, but expressed himself “in such language as he could command.” 28 On occasion that was “faulty English, which the Prophet himself and those who have succeeded him as the custodians of the word of God have had and now have a perfect right to correct.” 29

On this issue David Whitmer’s general philosophy of revelation may have influenced his view of the translation. Joseph Smith updated some revelations and made many grammatical changes for better communication in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. David Whitmer went along at the time, as he said, but, after decades of reflection outside of the Church, concluded that no modification could possibly be made in any revelation. This highly rigid view of these revelations matched his highly rigid view of the origin of the Book of Mormon. But the Lord had earlier allowed for a process of better expressing the revelations in the preface given for them, indicating that their divine commands were expressed by “my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language.” (D&C 1:24.)

This phrase applies specifically to Joseph Smith’s revelations, but probably cannot be isolated from the process by which he translated. For one thing, many of the 1829 revelations came through the Urim and Thummim, during the very time that the Book of Mormon was being dictated. 30 Since the “manner of their language” concept applies specifically to these divine commands through the Urim and Thummim, there is little reason to suppose that translation was received differently, particularly when one of these revelations (D&C 7) was itself a translation.
In fact, the language in the sections of the Book of Mormon that correspond to parts of the Bible is quite regularly selected by Joseph Smith, rather than obtained through independent translation. For instance, there are over 400 verses in which the Nephite prophets quote from Isaiah, and half of these appear precisely as the King James version renders them. Summarizing the view taken by Latter-day Saint scholars on this point, Daniel H. Ludlow emphasizes the inherent variety of independent translation and concludes: “There appears to be only one answer to explain the word-for-word similarities between the verses of Isaiah in the Bible and the same verses in the Book of Mormon.” That is simply that Joseph Smith must have opened Isaiah and tested each mentioned verse by the Spirit: “If his translation was essentially the same as that of the King James version, he apparently quoted the verse from the Bible.” Thus the Old Testament passages from Isaiah display a particular choice of phraseology that suggests Joseph Smith’s general freedom throughout the Book of Mormon for optional wording.

Good translations typically strike a balance between the literalism of the first language and the idiom of the new one. Here the Book of Mormon measures up well. Some of the grammatical patterns changed after the first edition definitely match known Joseph Smith expressions of his early period. On the other hand, there seems to be a good deal of Semitic literalness in the translation as a whole, with a number of striking ancient patterns, emphasized in the research of Hugh Nibley. Emma Smith was impressed during the work that her husband exceeded his abilities in dictation, but nowhere says that he acquired a temporary perfection of grammar!

One of the Prophet’s essential methods was constant prayerfulness, as David Whitmer stressed, for when out of harmony Joseph “would go out and pray, and when he became sufficiently humble before God, he could then proceed with the translation.” Thus one who has faith in sincere prayer can have faith that Joseph Smith’s petitions were answered in that work.

The translation of the Book of Mormon was not unlike the gift of the “interpretation of tongues” mentioned by Paul (1 Cor. 12), a phrase that also can be rendered “translation of languages.” In his first calling as translator, Joseph Smith used his best efforts, which were divinely supplemented, as the Book of Mormon preface says, while the “interpretation” came through “the gift of God.”

There are many questions that we cannot answer from the evidence we have at this time: Exactly how, for example, does the Urim and Thummim work? Was there a basis of truth behind David Whitmer’s viewpoint that writing appeared on the Interpreters? Or did the stones somehow focus the thought of the translator? Or did the stones serve to confirm translation? These things the Lord has not revealed to the Church at large, and the answer must remain, “We don’t know.”

But we will know, for the Lord has promised that all who enter the celestial kingdom will dwell on this earth, which “in its sanctified and immortal state, will be made like unto crystal and will be a Urim and Thummim to the inhabitants who dwell thereon. ...
“Then the white stone mentioned in Revelation 2:17, will become a Urim and Thummim to each individual who receives one; ...

“And a white stone is given to each of those who come into the celestial kingdom.”
(D&C 130:9–11.)

Though at this time we do not comprehend the exact way in which the Urim and Thummim were used in the translation of the Book of Mormon, we are promised that the miraculous gift given to the Prophet Joseph Smith in order to receive revelation and translate scripture will be given to all who live worthy to enter into exaltation; and then “things pertaining to a higher order of kingdoms will be made known.” (D&C 130:10.)

Notes

1. Oliver Cowdery to Hyrum Smith, 14 June 1829.


5. Some report that David Whitmer also spoke of the Urim and Thummim; compare the letter of J. L. Traughber, Jr., Saints’ Herald 26(1879):341 with the letter of Eri B. Mullin, Saints’ Herald 27(1880): 76.


11. David Whitmer, Address to All Believers In Christ (Richmond, Mo., 1887), p. 11.


14. For transcriptions of the printer’s copy (held by the RLDS Archives) and the 1830 Book of Mormon on these points, see Richard P. Howard, *Restoration Scriptures* (Independence, 1969), pp. 29–32.

15. “A History of the Life of Joseph Smith, Jr.,” manuscript, Church Historical Department.


27. For the informal consensus of Church authorities see B. H. Roberts, *Defense of the Faith and the Saints* (Salt Lake City, 1907), 1:299. For the original correspondence assigned to Roberts by President Joseph F. Smith, see *Improvement Era* 7(1904): 179–96.


29. Ibid.

30. For revelations through this means see *History of the Church*, 1:22, 33, 36, 45, 49, 52; see also prefaces to D&C 3, 6, 7, 11, 14, 17.

32. As an example see Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City, 1967), ch. 6.


**A Treasured Testament**

Speaking Today

A Treasured Testament

By Elder Russell M. Nelson
Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

Adapted from an address given 25 June 1992 at a seminar for new mission presidents, Missionary Training Center, Provo, Utah.

The Book of Mormon stands as another testament of Jesus Christ. The power of its message will transform the lives of all who earnestly study its precious pages. Its very reality is an inspiring fact.

Many of you are experienced in the difficult task of translating written text from one language to another. I am intrigued, as you are, with the process Joseph Smith used to translate the Book of Mormon, which he said was done through “the gift and power of God.” (Book of Mormon, title page.) The Prophet learned the nature of that gift the night the angel Moroni first visited him. Moroni told him that “there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of [the American] continent, and the source from whence they sprang. He also said that the fulness of the
everlasting Gospel was contained in it, as delivered by the Savior to the ancient inhabitants;

"Also, that there were two stones in silver bows—and these stones, fastened to a breastplate, constituted what is called the Urim and Thummim—deposited with the plates; and the possession and use of these stones were what constituted 'seers' in ancient or former times; and that God had prepared them for the purpose of translating the book." (JS—H 1:34–35.)

The inscriptions on the plates were written in a Semitic language, using a modified Egyptian type of script. Some critics have scoffed at such a linguistic mix. May I tell you of Doctor Moses Maimonides, one of the greatest rabbis and Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages. He died in A.D. 1204. He served as a court physician in Cairo and is one of the most famous figures in the early history of medicine. Hospitals are named after him today. In Cairo he read and pondered the words of earlier Muslim thinkers and wrote his philosophical books in Arabic using the Hebrew alphabet. This is but one of many instances from ancient and medieval periods in which the script of one language has been used to write in another language. (See Daniel C. Peterson, Abraham Divided: An LDS Perspective on the Middle East, Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1992, p. 205.) Indeed, history confirms that such a linguistic mix was not unusual at all.

I am intrigued that Joseph Smith—an unschooled young man in rural America—could have translated this Semitic language mix into the English language. That unlikely scenario relates to Isaiah’s remarkable prophecy:

"I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people, even a marvellous work and a wonder." (Isa. 29:14.)

The Hebrew text of the Old Testament from which that phrase was translated uses the word pele, meaning “miracle.” Thus one could also accurately interpret “a marvellous work and a wonder” as a “miraculous miracle.”

Truly, this latter-day work is precisely that. Think of the short time Joseph took to translate the Book of Mormon. Working from April to June of 1828, Joseph translated the 116 pages that Martin Harris later lost. Joseph began translating again on Tuesday, April 7, 1829, with Oliver Cowdery as scribe. The manuscript was completed eighty-five days later, on June 30 of that year. Of course, not all of that time was spent working on the translation. The Prophet and his scribes also took time to eat, to sleep, to seek employment, to receive the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods, to make at least one (and possibly two) trips to Colesville thirty miles away, to receive and record thirteen revelations that are now sections of the Doctrine and Covenants, to move from Harmony to Fayette, to acquire the Book of Mormon copyright, and to begin making arrangements for the publication of the Book of Mormon. Conservatively estimated, this left sixty-five or fewer working days on which the prophet and his scribes translated this book, which contains 531 pages in its current edition. (See John W. Welch, Ensign, Jan. 1988, pp. 46–
47.) That calculates to an average of eight pages per day. Consider this when you translate a book, or as you schedule your own reading of the Book of Mormon.

As Oliver Cowdery testified a few years later: “These were days never to be forgotten—to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the inspiration of heaven, awakened the utmost gratitude of this bosom! Day after day I continued, uninterrupted, to write from his mouth, as he translated ... the history or record called ‘The Book of Mormon.’” (JS—H 1:71n.)

The details of this miraculous method of translation are still not fully known. Yet we do have a few precious insights. David Whitmer wrote:

“Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear. Thus the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God, and not by any power of man.” (David Whitmer, An Address to All Believers in Christ, Richmond, Mo.: n.p., 1887, p. 12.)

Emma Smith, who acted as an earlier scribe for Joseph, gave this account in 1856:

“When my husband was translating the Book of Mormon, I wrote a part of it, as he dictated each sentence, word for word, and when he came to proper names he could not pronounce, or long words, he spelled them out, and while I was writing them, if I made any mistake in spelling, he would stop me and correct my spelling although it was impossible for him to see how I was writing them down at the time. Even the word Sarah he could not pronounce at first, but had to spell it, and I would pronounce it for him.

“When he stopped for any purpose at any time he would, when he commenced again, begin where he left off without any hesitation, and one time while he was translating he stopped suddenly, pale as a sheet, and said, ‘Emma, did Jerusalem have walls around it?’ When I answered, ‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘Oh! [I didn’t know.] I was afraid I had been deceived.’ He had such a limited knowledge of history at that time that he did not even know that Jerusalem was surrounded by walls.” (Edmund C. Briggs, “A Visit to Nauvoo in 1856,” Journal of History, Jan. 1916, p. 454.)

On another occasion, Emma Smith recorded:

“The plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen tablecloth, 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.” (“Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” Saints’ Herald, 1 Oct. 1879, p. 290; spelling modernized.)

Although the Prophet would polish his skills over the years, Emma acknowledged that Joseph possessed only rudimentary literacy at the time he translated the gold plates:

“Joseph Smith ... could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter; let alone dictating a book like the Book of Mormon. And, though I was an active participant in the scenes that transpired, it is marvelous to me, ‘a marvel and a wonder,’ as much so as to any one else.” (Ibid.)

Because the Book of Mormon is a translation of a modified Hebrew language, it contains many Hebraisms. We might list a few examples because they are so unlike the language that would have been familiar to a young man in rural New York at that time:

- Nouns followed by descriptive phrases—such as “altar of stones,” “plates of brass,” “mist of darkness.”

- Prepositional phrases used instead of adverbs—such as “with harshness,” “with joy,” “with gladness,” “in diligence.”

- Cognate accusative constructions—“dreamed a dream,” “cursed with sore cursing,” “work all manner of fine work.”

- Hebrew words with double meaning—such as Nahum, meaning “mourning,” and Jershon, meaning “inheritance.” Events involving those specific actions took place at locations bearing those meaningful names.

- Chiasms. This term is derived from the Greek letter Chi (or the English x), which describes text written in an inverted parallel structure. As a young LDS missionary, John Welch discovered that many chiasms exist in the Book of Mormon as well as in the Bible. I am told that emphasis in these ancient languages was not provided by punctuation. Therefore, other devices, such as chiasm, were used occasionally to stress important thoughts.

Sister Nelson and I have a close friend and former neighbor, Sami Hanna, who was born in Egypt. He is a scholar with special expertise in Semitic languages. As a linguistic exercise, he translated the Book of Mormon from English into Arabic. The exercise converted him to the divinity of the Book of Mormon. Among the many linguistic features that convinced him of the book’s divinity was this unusual sentence in Helaman, chapter 3, verse 14. [Hel. 3:14] This would hardly be an expression of a 24-year-old man from the New York frontier:

“But behold, a hundredth part of the proceedings of this people, yea, the account of the Lamanites and of the Nephites, and their wars, and contentions, and dissensions, and their preaching, and their prophecies, and their shipping and their building of ships, and their
building of temples, and of synagogues and their sanctuaries, and their righteousness, and their wickedness, and their murders, and their robberies, and their plundering, and all manner of abominations and whoredoms, cannot be contained in this work."

That single sentence has eighteen ands. Now, if you were a teacher of English you might tend to downgrade the composition of that sentence. Yet my scholarly Egyptian friend said that every one of those ands was an important element in the construction of that sentence, allowing his translation to flow smoothly back to a Semitic language.

Of course the great worth of the Book of Mormon lies not in its miraculous translation, wondrous as it was, nor in its stories that we read to our children. The great worth of the Book of Mormon is that it is another testament of Jesus Christ. All four of its major authors—Nephi, Jacob, Mormon, and Moroni—were eyewitnesses of the Lord, as was His inspired translator of that book. The Book of Mormon is the great clarifier of doctrine. It refutes many myths, and at the same time affirms truths previously obscured. And it reveals many glorious doctrines lost or previously unknown.

First let us examine a few myths the book refutes or denies. The Book of Mormon refutes the doctrine of predestination. It refutes the ex nihilo ("out of nothing") idea of creation. It refutes the false but pervasive notion of original sin. It refutes the fable of faith without works. It refutes the adequacy of goodness alone without exalting ordinances. It refutes the practice of infant baptism. It refutes methods of baptism other than that of immersion by one bearing proper authority. It refutes the arbitrary restriction that revelation from God ended with the Bible.

There are some things that the Book of Mormon is not. It is not a text of history, although some history is found within its pages. It is not a definitive work on ancient American agriculture or politics. It is not a record of all former inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere, but only of particular groups of people.

Resoundingly, the Book of Mormon affirms, among many eternal truths, the existence of a living and loving Father in Heaven. It affirms the nature of our Heavenly Father's plan of salvation, happiness, and mercy. It declares, as another testament, the generation and divinity of Jesus the Christ. It teaches of His ministry, and of His atonement. While doubts about Jesus exist among today's ministers and scholars, the Book of Mormon stands as an international beacon of divine truth. The Lord said:

"The testimony of two nations is a witness unto you that I am God, that I remember one nation like unto another. ... And when the two nations shall run together the testimony of the two nations shall run together also." (2 Ne. 29:8.)

The Book of Mormon affirms the sublime status of man's moral agency and sets forth stern standards of accountability and responsibility for our choices. It affirms the reality and inevitability of our impending judgment, which will be done with a perfect blending of the justice and mercy of God. (See Alma 12:15.) It deepens our understanding of the Master's statement once made near Galilee's shore:
“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” (Matt. 5:48.)

To the Nephites Jesus reaffirmed that commandment, but then as the resurrected Lord, He listed Himself as having recently achieved that state of perfection. (See 3 Ne. 12:48.)

The Book of Mormon affirms that the people in the Western Hemisphere were among the “other sheep” to whom Jesus had earlier referred. (See John 10:16; 3 Ne. 15:17, 21.) And it affirms the existence of another society to whom Jesus would minister—those we know as the lost tribes of Israel.

It affirms the reality of premortal life.

It reaffirms the sanctity of and the necessity for the sacrament, as taught in the Bible.

In addition to the refutation of myths and the clarification of concepts previously unclear, the Book of Mormon reveals glorious truths heretofore lost or unknown to the mind of man:

It reveals the state of the soul between death and resurrection.

It reveals the endless nature of the priesthood of God and the foreordination of choice spirits called and prepared from the foundation of the world for leadership in the latter days. From the Book of Mormon we know that each of you has been foreordained, foredetermined, and reserved to come forth at this particular time to accomplish the mighty work you have been called to do.

The Book of Mormon reveals what the term gospel truly means. The Lord declared, “This is the gospel which I have given unto you—that I came into the world to do the will of my Father, because my Father sent me.” (3 Ne. 27:13.) That sentence is as sparkingly clear as it is brief. The Savior then explained in fuller detail His mission and His atonement (see 3 Ne. 27:13–21), concluding His definitions by again saying, “This is my gospel” (3 Ne. 27:21).

The Book of Mormon reveals the important interrelationships between the Creation, the Fall, and the Atonement. One cannot fully comprehend the Atonement without first understanding the Fall; and the fall of Adam cannot be fully understood without first understanding the Creation. These three great doctrinal pillars sustain each other in God’s eternal plan.

The Book of Mormon reveals that Joseph, the son of Jacob who was once sold into Egypt, foresaw the Prophet Joseph Smith and his day (see 2 Ne. 3:6–21) and noted that there would be many similarities in their lives. Centuries later, the Prophet Joseph stated, “I feel like Joseph in Egypt.” (The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1984, p. 409; spelling modernized.)
The Book of Mormon reveals that the inheritance of Joseph, son of Israel, was not forgotten when, as promised in the Abrahamic covenant, land was distributed to the tribes of Israel. Joseph’s inheritance was to be a land choice above all others. (See Ether 13:2–8.) It was choice not because of beauty or wealth of natural resources, but choice because it was chosen. It was to be the repository of sacred writing on plates of gold from which the Book of Mormon would one day come, choice because it would eventually host world headquarters of the restored church of Jesus Christ in the latter days.

The Book of Mormon reveals that Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary, is literally the Son of God. No book of scripture bears more solemnly the weighty burden of that testimony than does the Book of Mormon. Its pages contain nearly four thousand references to Christ, using more than one hundred different titles for Him. His holy name is mentioned on the average of once per every 2.8 verses. No wonder this book has been designated “Another Testament of Jesus Christ.”

The Book of Mormon reveals that the keeper of the gate at Judgment will be Jesus, the holy one of Israel. There each one of us will stand before Him to be judged.

The Book of Mormon contains many insightful and stunning gems. The late Elder Robert E. Sackley of the Seventy attributed his conversion to this brilliant passage of scripture, which he memorized while hospitalized as a young military commando—even prior to his baptism:

“The natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.” (Mosiah 3:19.)

Elder Sackley’s life was never to be the same after his decision to live in accord with that remarkable single sentence of scripture.

To me, the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon is most evident in the mighty change that comes into the lives of those who read it “with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ.” (Moro. 10:4.) Many of them forsake much that they held dear to be true to their new commitment to abide by the precepts of that book.

The Book of Mormon truly is a treasured testament. There is no other book quite like it. Can you find any other book delivered by an angel? Can you think of any other book prepared for people to read centuries later? Its writers did not write it for readers of their day. No royalties accrued to its authors from sales to contemporary consumers. In fact, its authors paid dearly for their privilege of authorship, as did its translator.

It is a book that the Lord Jesus Christ has personally testified to be true. In the form of an oath, the Lord said—referring to the Prophet Joseph Smith’s work:
“He has translated the book, even that part which I have commanded him, and as your Lord and your God liveth it is true.” (D&C 17:6.)

You know well this promise that the Lord offers to readers of the Book of Mormon:

“If you do these last commandments of mine, which I have given you, the gates of hell shall not prevail against you; for my grace is sufficient for you, and you shall be lifted up at the last day.” (D&C 17:8.)

The Prophet Joseph Smith declared—and his successor, President Ezra Taft Benson, has reaffirmed—that the Book of Mormon is the keystone of our religion. It is a treasured testament of truth. It is the prophesied sign that “the Lord has commenced to gather Israel and fulfill his covenants.” (3 Ne. 29, chapter heading.)

Solemnly, I add my witness to that of my Brethren. It is true! In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Subject: More information...
Date: Sep 25 17:53
Author: Randy J.

"Now the way he translated was he put the urim and thummim into his hat and Darkened his Eyes than he would take a sentence and it would apper in Brite Roman Letters. Then he would tell the writer and he would write it. Then that would go away the next sentence would Come and so on. But if it was not Spelt rite it would not go away till it was rite, so we see it was marvelous. Thus was the hol [whole] translated."---Joseph Knight's journal.

"In writing for your father I frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table close by him, he sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us." (History of the RLDS Church, 8 vols. (Independence, Missouri: Herald House, 1951), "Last Testimony of Sister Emma [Smith Bidamon]," 3:356.

"I, as well as all of my father's family, Smith's wife, Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris, were present during the translation. . . . He [Joseph Smith] did not use the plates in translation." (David Whitmer, as published in the "Kansas City Journal," June 5, 1881, and reprinted in the RLDS "Journal of History", vol. 8, (1910), pp. 299-300.

In an 1885 interview, Zenas H. Gurley, then the editor of the RLDS Saints Herald, asked Whitmer if Joseph had used his "Peep stone" to do the translation. Whitmer replied:
"... he used a stone called a "Seers stone," the "Interpreters" having been taken away from him because of transgression. The "Interpreters" were taken from Joseph after he allowed Martin Harris to carry away the 116 pages of Ms [manuscript] of the Book of Mormon as a punishment, but he was allowed to go on and translate by use of a "Seers stone" which he had, and which he placed in a hat into which he buried his face, stating to me and others that the original character appeared upon parchment and under it the translation in English."

"Martin Harris related an incident that occurred during the time that he wrote that portion of the translation of the Book of Mormon which he was favored to write direct from the mouth of the Prophet Joseph Smith. He 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, Martin explained the translation as follows: 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 engraved on the plates, precisely in the language then used."
(Edward Stevenson, "One of the Three Witnesses," reprinted from Deseret News, 30 Nov. 1881 in Millennial Star, 44 (6 Feb. 1882): 86-87.)

In 1879, Michael Morse, Emma Smith's brother-in-law, stated: "When Joseph was translating the Book of Mormon [1] had occasion more than once to go into his immediate presence, and saw him engaged at his work of translation. The mode of procedure consisted in Joseph's placing the Seer Stone in the crown of a hat, then putting his face into the hat, so as to entirely cover his face, resting his elbows upon his knees, and then dictating word after word, while the scribes Emma, John Whitney, O. Cowdery, or some other wrote it down."
(W.W. Blair interview with Michael Morse, Saints Herald, vol. 26, no. 12 (June 15, 1879), pp. 190-91.)

Joseph Smith's brother William also testified to the "face in the hat" version: "The manner in which this was done was by looking into the Urim and Thummim, which was placed in a hat to exclude the light, (the plates lying near by covered up), and reading off the translation, which appeared in the stone by the power of God" ("A New Witness for Christ in America," Francis W. Kirkham, 2:417.)

"The manner in which he pretended to read and interpret was the same manner as when he looked for the money-diggers, with the stone in his hat, while the book of plates were at the same time hid in the woods."---Isaac Hale (Emma Smith's father's) affidavit, 1834.
Apparently, Russell Nelson didn't think to consult Joseph Fielding Smith's "Doctrines of Salvation", volume III, pp. 225-6, before he opined that Whitmer's version of events was authentic. JF Smith wrote:

"While the statement has been made by some writers that the Prophet Joseph Smith used a 'seer stone' part of the time in his translating of the record, and information points to the fact that he did have in his possession such a stone, yet there is no authentic statement in the history of the Church which states that the use of such a stone was made in that translation. The information is all HEARSAY, and personally, I do not believe that this stone was used for this purpose."

My comments: Note Smith's qualifier "no authentic statement IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH." What the deceitful Smith did not say is that shortly after Joseph Smith founded his church, he began working to eliminate all mention of his 1820's occultic "glass-looking" practice from his personal history, because he didn't want his new disciples to learn those facts about his past. And after Smith's 1844 murder, his followers such as Brigham Young and Willard Richards further "revised" Smith's history to eliminate as many references to folk-magic as possible.

1830 Trial:
"During the trial it was shown that the Book of Mormon was brought to light by the same magic power by which he pretended to tell fortunes, discover hidden treasures, &c. Oliver Cowdery, one of the three witnesses to the book, testified under oath, that said 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."

(Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate 2 [9 April 1831])
TESTIMONY OF DAVID WHITMER.

Or, between that date and 1835; for it is not found in any printed document of the Church of Christ up to the latter part of the year 1833, or the year 1834. The term was revelation in the book of Mormon.

The story is correct, still true, and the facts are confirmed by other witnesses.

HUMANA.

Guidance when you need it most

Michael Morse
Emma B. Damon
March 1870

David Whittier
[c. 1879]

www.humana.com

TELESTIAL WORLD

Much has been said by our opponents against the word "telestial," and much wonder is expressed as to its meaning. It is used by the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants; some declaring that it is not an English word, and that there is no word in any language from which it could have been derived. I have heard one of our elders say that he believed "telestial" would be the more appropriate word to express the same intended. I have concluded to offer a few thoughts on the subject, and I hope that if "telestial" is pronounced, some one more competent than myself may give us the true meaning and derivation of the word "telestial," that we may be able to give a certain, sensible, and satisfactory answer to any who may ask us to define the word.

I believe that telestial is derived from the Greek word tele, the end; as, the end, and hence, a word or discourse; from which comes the word teleology, discoursing upon, or forming an account of, the science which deals with the purposes of things. The word telestial was created. Tele, derived from tele, means relating to the end. The word is derived from the Greek word tele, the end, and tele, to appy, and literally signifies to look to the end. From "telestis" the end, and "skul," suffixed, pertaining to; hence telestial, pertaining to the end, the last, or most distant of the places from the central, celestial or heavenly glory world. As the celestial is the first, or central sphere or world, whose inhabitants enjoy the presence, brightness and glory of the Father and Son; and the terrestrial world is the habitations of Stone; not two clear stones set in the rim of a bow. Thus we see that Mr. Morse and Mrs. Biddison both agree that Joseph Smith used it and done and not Uriah and Thummim, nor Interpreter either. Will those who hold the Uriah and Thummim story to be correct, still continue to give the facts, from which I have briefly alluded; because he translated with a stone, a Stone.