

Sources: Royal Skousen, *The Book of Mormon Earliest Text* (Yale, 2009); John Welch, *Opening the Heavens* (SLC, 2005); Lavina F. Anderson, *Lucy's Book* (SLC: Signature Book, 2001); *Joseph SmithPapers.org*; *BookofMormonCentral.org*.

1829 Translation Time Line (adapted from Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 91-92)

- Lord directs / appears to Oliver Cowdery
- Feb Joseph's parents arrive in Harmony for a visit. Doctrine and Covenants (D&C) 4 received
- Mar Martin Harris visits Joseph in Harmony, Joseph translates a few pages with Emma as scribe
- April 5 Samuel brings Oliver Cowdery to Harmony PA, arriving Sunday night to meet his brother, Joseph
- April 6 Joseph & Oliver buy supplies, "arranging some business of a temporal nature" (documents to buy 13 acres)
- April 7 Oliver begins acting as scribe for the Book of Mormon (Mosiah 1 or 1 Nephi). D&C 6-9 received
- April-late Oliver writes to David Whitmer telling him that "he was convinced that Smith had the records"
- May 10 38th day of translation, Joseph and Oliver go to Colesville, NY, for provisions (i.e. a grant)
- May 15 Aaronic Priesthood received from John the Baptist near the Susquehanna River
- May 25 Oliver baptized Samuel Smith
D&C 11 received; possible second trip to Colesville
David Whitmer meets Joseph and remained in Harmony
- June 1 Joseph&Oliver move 100 miles from Harmony to the Whitmer home in Fayette, NY. Emma followed shortly.
Hyrum arrived in early June and was baptized in Seneca Lake, NY
- June 4-29 Translating upstairs of Peter Whitmer's home—Whitmer brothers acting as scribes (Christian, John, David)
(This month is probably when Joseph and Emma had a disagreement, stopping the work of translation until an hour of prayer and apologizes occurred)
A guest saw them coming down from translation and recorded seeing "exceedingly white" faces.
- June 11 Copyright application filed for the Book of Mormon. D&C 14, 15, 16, and 18 received
- June 15 Hyrum Smith, David Whitmer, and Peter Whitmer, Jr., baptized around this date
- June ~20 Mother Mary Whitmer saw Angel Moroni and the golden plates before the Three Witnesses (2 Nephi 27)
- June 25 Eight Witnesses handle the plates around this date (10 days)
- June 26 The newspaper, *Wayne Sentinel*, published Book of Mormon title page
- June 30 Translation of the Book of Mormon finished

1827-1829 Translation History

Translation on the Book of Mormon began slowly from Sep 22, 1827-29. We see God tutoring Joseph in the process between persecution, moving from Palmyra to Harmony, learning more about revelation, difficulty in finding scribes, losing the 116 pages, and the divinely guided arrival of Oliver Cowdery. During the two years, we know of eight scribes recorded Joseph's translation—Emma (9-22-1828, to 3-1829), her brother Reuben Hale, Martin Harris (4-12 to 6-14-28), Samuel Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and during the last month (6-4 to 6-31-29) Christian, John, and David Whitmer.

For the Book of Mormon as we know it, the work began in earnest under the help of a new scribe, Oliver Cowdery. Joseph Smith Jr. recorded in the *History of the Church*, 1.32-33:

On the 5th day of April, 1829, Oliver Cowdery came to my house, until which time I had never seen him. He stated to me that having been teaching school in the neighborhood where my father resided, and my father being one of those who sent to the school, he went to board for a season at his house, and while there the family related to him the circumstance of my having received the plates, and accordingly he had come to make inquiries of me. Two days after the arrival of Mr.

Cowdery (being the 7th of April) I commenced to translate. Oliver remembered, "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 record called 'The Book of Mormon'" (JS-H 1:71).

Oliver Cowdery (1806-1850)

Oliver Cowdery shared many similarities to Joseph. Just nine months younger, he too was born in VT and moved to New York's Burned-over-District. He was sensitive to the Spirit and had sought answers to his prayers. By age 23 he had worked as a farmer, blacksmith, and store clerk. His brother couldn't fulfill an assignment as a school teacher in the winter of 1829 and asked Oliver to take his place. Lucy Mack Smith remembered: Lyman Cowdray . . . went to Hyrum (as he was one of the principle trustees [of the school board]) and applied for the school. It was settled that he should [teach] . . . But the next day he brought his bother Oliver and requested them to receive him in the place of himself . . . Oliver requested my husband to take him as a boarder . . . He had not been in the place long till he began to hear about the plates from all quarters and immediately he commenced importuning Mr. Smith upon the subject but he did not succeed (*Lucy's Book*, 431-432). In Dec 1828, Oliver met David Whitmer who was on a business trip near Palmyra. David told Oliver about the "Golden Bible." Lucy recorded that Oliver told her husband "that he had been in deep study all day and it had been put into his heart that he would have the privilege of writing for Joseph when the term of school . . . closed" (ibid., 432).

Facts of the Translation in 1829

- Translation of the text (500+ pages) took between 63-75 days (John Welch, *ReExploring the BoM*, 6-7)
- Between 7 ½ to 11 ½ pages a day
- 1 Nephi in only a week, King Benjamin's sermon in a day and half, and only hours for radical changes to Christianity
- Consistent with all single-person-translations, the basic vocabulary in the Book of Mormon is Joseph Jr's vocabulary
- The tense used (or word suffixes) follow very early English from 1550 to 1600 (predating the KJV).

Translation Process

The Prophet Joseph said that he translated the Book of Mormon “by the gift and power of God.” We also have witnesses who shared their perspective on the translation, and by studying the original scribe’s manuscript of the Book of Mormon we learn more about the translation process. The earliest witnesses of the process (late 1827 to early 1828), describe Joseph using the Urim and Thummim and the plates with a blanket or fabric hung so that the scribe would not see the plates. But later, Emma, Martin Harris, and Whitmer Family members described an *open-view translation* process to directly see Joseph (*Last Testimony of Sister Emma*). The scribes and other witnesses all claimed that Joseph actually saw words in English, there is evidence in the original manuscript to support this idea.

Evidence from Original Text (see Royal Skousen, *Evidence from the Original Manuscript*). The original text itself provides evidence on how spelling corrections were made and textual insertions (i.e. Zenoch changed to Zenock, Coriantummer changed to Coriantumr, etc.). After three decades of research on the manuscripts, Skousen found:

This evidence does not support theories that Joseph Smith composed the text himself or that he took the text from some other source. Instead, it indicates that the Lord exercised what I refer to as “tight control” over the word-by-word translation of the Book of Mormon. In particular, the evidence suggests that Joseph Smith saw specific words written out in English and read them off to the scribe, and that the accuracy of the resulting text depended on the carefulness of Joseph and his scribe (<http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/jbms/?vol=7&num=1&id=167>)

Rather than an infallible 100% exact process, we see a few errors in hearing (from the original-dictated manuscript) and seeing (from the printer’s manuscript). Royal Skousen continued:

Evidence from the original and printer's manuscripts suggests that the only revealed stage in the translation process was what Joseph Smith himself saw by means of the interpreters. Witnesses seemed to have believed that Joseph actually saw an English text in the interpreters, but it is possible that Joseph saw the text, so to speak, in his “mind's eye.” In any event, all other stages—from Joseph Smith reading off that text to the scribe writing it down—potentially introduced human error and had to be carefully monitored (Reynolds, ed. *BoM Authorship Revisited*).

Skousen summarized his findings: “(a) the text was orally dictated, word for word; (b) Book of Mormon names were frequently spelled out the first time they occurred in the text, thus indicating that Joseph Smith could see the spelling of the names; and (c) during dictation there was no rewriting of the text except to correct errors in taking down the dictation” (<https://www.fairmormon.org/testimonies/scholars/royal-skousen>). Also see BookofMormonCentral.org:

- Why Was a Stone Used as an Aid in Translating the Book of Mormon?
- Were Joseph Smith’s Translation Instruments Like the Israelite Urim and Thummim?
- Which Nephite King Had the Gift of Interpretation?
- Why Did the Book of Mormon Come Forth as a Miracle?

Statements from Witnesses

- Joseph Smith placed the interpreters (either the Urim and Thummim or the seer stone) in a hat and place his face into the hat [probably to block out extra light to see the words in the stones better]
- Joseph dictated for long periods of time without reference to any books, papers, manuscripts, or the plates
- Joseph spelled out unfamiliar Book of Mormon names, or words he could not pronounce
- After each dictated sequence, the scribe read back to Joseph what was written so they could check the correctness
- Joseph started each dictation where he left off the previously, without prompting from the scribe about where the previous session had ended

202 Documents that Witness of the Translation

“The historical records corroborating the translation of the Book of Mormon are indeed copious and quite detailed” (Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 79, also see 78-198). The documents come mainly from the following sources:

#1-9) Recorded in the D&C

#10-37) Joseph Smith Jr.

#38-43) Emma Smith

#44-68) Martin Harris

#69-77) Oliver Cowdery

#78-98) David Whitmer

99-101) John Whitmer

102-110) Joseph’s family—Joseph Sr., Lucy, William, and Katharine Smith

111-116) Those involved with the translation—Sarah Conrad, Elizabeth Ann Whitmer, Alva Hale, Isaac Hale, Joseph Knight Sr., and Joseph Knight Jr.

#117-202) Second hand accounts from reports or rumors.

- 1) *Joseph Knight (autograph [between 1833 and 1847])*: “Now the way he translated was he put the urim and Thummim into his hat and darkened his Eyes then he would take a sentence and it would appear in Brite Roman Letters. They 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” (Ibid., 168).
- 2) *Joseph Smith (as recorded by Truman Coe, 1836)*: “The manner of translation was as wonderful as the discovery. Putting his finger on one of the characters and imploring divine aid, then looking through the Urim and Thummim, he would see the import written in plain English on a screen placed before him. After delivering this to his amanuensis, he would again proceed in the same manner and obtain the meaning of the next character, and so on till he came the part of the plates which were sealed up, and there was commanded to desist” (Ibid., 124).
- 3) *Lucy Mack Smith (Henry Caswall interview, 1842)*: “. . . I have myself seen and handled the golden plates; they are about eight inches long, and six wide; some of them are sealed together and are not to be opened, and some of them are loose. They are all connected by a ring which passes through a hole at the end of each plate, and are covered with letters beautifully engraved. I have seen and felt also the Urim and Thummim. They resemble two large bright diamonds set in a bow like a pair of spectacles. My son puts those over his eyes when he reads unknown languages, and they enable him to interpret them in English. I have likewise carried in my hands the sacred breastplate. It is composed of pure gold, and is made to fit the breast very exactly” (Ibid., 162).
- 4) *Emma Smith (interview 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 a 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 was afraid I had been deceived.’ He had such a limited knowledge of history at the time that he did not even know that Jerusalem was surrounded by walls” (Ibid., 129).
- 5) *Emma Smith (to Emma Pilgrim 1870)*: “Now, the first part of my husband translated, was translated by the use of the Urim and Thummim, and that was the part that Martin Harris lost *After that he used a small stone, not exactly black, but was rather a dark color*” (Ibid., 129).
- 6) *Martin Harris (Edward Stevenson’s 1881 account)*: “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” (Welch, 135).
- 7) *David Whitmer (Eri Mullin interview, 1880)*: “. . . I asked him [David Whitmer] how they looked. He said they looked like spectacles, and he (Joseph) would put them on and look in a hat, or put his face in the hat and read. Says I, ‘Did he have the plates in there.’ ‘No, the words would appear, and if he failed to spell the word right, it would stay till it was spelled right, then pass away; another come, and so on” (Ibid., 147).
- 8) *William Smith (Joseph’s brother, 1883)*: In consequence of his vision, and his having the golden plates and refusing to show them, a great persecution arose against the whole family, and he was compelled to remove into Pennsylvania with the plates, where he translated them by means of the Urim and Thummim, (which he obtained with the plates), and the power of God. 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. He was engaged in this business (end of page II) as he had opportunity for about two years and a half. In the winter of 1829 and thirty, the Book of Mormon, which is the translation of part of the plates he obtained, was published. He then showed the plates to my father and my brothers Hyrum and Samuel, who were witnesses to the truth of the book which was translated from them. I was permitted to lift them as they laid in a pillow-case; but not to see them, as it was contrary to the commands he had received. They weighed about sixty pounds according to the best of my judgment” (Ibid. 164).
- 9) *Alva Hale (son of Isaac Hale, 1834)*: Joseph Smith Jr. told him that “his (Smith’s) gift in seeing with a stone and hat, was a gift from God,” but also states “that Smith told him at another time that this ‘peeping’ was all d—d nonsense. He (Smith) was deceived himself but did not intend to deceive others;—that he intended to quit the business, (of peeping) and labor for his livelihood” (Ibid., 79)