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Stephen D. Ricks
Brigham Young University

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Title Notes and Communications: Translation of the Book of Mormon: Interpreting the Evidence

Author(s) Stephen D. Ricks

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Abstract The process used by Joseph Smith to translate the Book of Mormon from the plates involved both human effort and divine assistance through the seer-stone and interpreters.

Translation of the Book of Mormon: Interpreting the Evidence

Stephen D. Ricks

Concerning the manner in which the seerstone or the "interpreters" functioned, Joseph Smith reported only that they operated "by the gift and power of God."¹ This is particularly unfortunate, since only he was in a position to describe from personal experience how these instruments enhanced his power to translate. However, each of the Three Witnesses related, directly or indirectly, their ideas concerning the process of translation. These statements, with a few other contemporary or near-contemporary accounts, as well as some of my own reflections on translating, may provide some additional insight into the process by which Joseph translated the plates.²

According to Samuel W. Richards, Oliver Cowdery gave him the following description of the translation of the Book of Mormon:

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.

¹ *Times and Seasons* 2/9 (1 March 1842): 707 (HC 4:537); Warren Cowdery, "Manuscript History of the Church," Bk A-1, pp. 121-22. Joseph also uses the phrase "by the gift and power of God" in an 1833 letter to N. E. Seaton, in *DHC* 1:315; cf. his 13 November 1843 letter to James Arlington Bennett in *Times and Seasons* 4/24 (1 November 1843): 373, where he states: "By the power of God I translated the Book of Mormon from hieroglyphics."

² Other studies that have treated this topic include Richard Anderson, "By the Gift and Power of God," *Ensign* 7 (September 1977): 79-85; *HC* 1:127-33; B. H. Roberts, *Defense of the Faith and the Saints*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1907), 275-311; an excellent unpublished study by Robert F. Smith, "'Translation of Languages' (Hermeneia Glosson I Cor. 12:10)," June 1980.

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.³

Martin Harris explained the translation to Edward Stevenson in this manner:

By the 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.⁴

In his *Address to All Believers in Christ*, David Whitmer wrote:

I will now give you a description of the manner in which the Book of Mormon was translated. Joseph would put the seer stone into a 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

³ Personal statement of Samuel W. Richards, 25 May 1907, in Harold B. Lee Library, BYU, Special Collections, cited in Anderson, "By the Gift and Power of God," 85.

⁴ Edward Stevenson's account of Harris's Sunday morning lecture in Salt Lake City, 4 September 1870, published in the *Deseret Evening News*, 5 September 1870, and reprinted in the *Deseret News*, 30 November 1881, and in the *Millennial Star* 44 (6 February 1882): 86-87. Joseph's brother William made a statement to similar effect in *William Smith on Mormonism* (Lamoni, IO: Herald Steam Book and Job Office, 1883), 12.

when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another 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.⁵

The evidentiary value of these statements is, of course, lessened somewhat since (1) they derive from individuals who themselves were not actively involved in translating, (2) they were made many years after the fact, and (3) in the case of two of them (Harris and Cowdery) they come at second hand. However, they may still provide us some guidance in understanding Joseph Smith's method of translating.

What elements are common to each of these statements? At least two, both of which I think may be relied upon: (1) some instrument consecrated for the purpose of translation—a “seerstone,” “translators,” or “Urim and Thummim”—that was used by Joseph Smith is mentioned in each account; and (2) words or sentences in English would appear on that instrument and would then be read off to the scribe. David Whitmer, in his account, also claims that “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.” This statement is somewhat problematical from a linguistic point of view. It suggests a simple one-for-one equivalency of words in the original language of the Book of Mormon and in English. This is scarcely likely in two closely related modern languages, much less in an ancient and modern language from two different language families. An examination of any page of an interlinear text (a text with a source language, such as Greek, Latin, or Hebrew, with a translation into a target language such as English below the line) will reveal a multitude of divergences from a word-for-word translation: some words are left untranslated, some are translated with more than one word, and often the order of words in the source language does not parallel (sometimes not even closely) the word order of the target language. A word-for-word rendering, as David Whitmer's statement seems to imply, would have resulted in a syntactic and semantic puree. On the other hand, the statement given on the authority of Oliver Cowdery, “this was done by

⁵ David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, MO: n.p., 1887), 12.

holding the 'translators' over the hieroglyphics, the translation appearing distinctly on the instrument," need not imply a word-for-word rendering, but simply a close link between the words of the original and those of the translation.

The Reverend Diedrich Willers, a minister of German Reformed Church congregations in Bearytown and Fayette, New York, at the time of the Church's restoration and a celebrated opponent of the Church, wrote in 1830 to two colleagues in York, Pennsylvania, concerning the rise of the Church. In the letter he included the following account concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon: "The Angel indicated that . . . under these plates were hidden spectacles, without which he could not translate these plates, that by using these spectacles, he (Smith) would be in a position to read these ancient languages, which he had never studied and that the Holy Ghost would reveal to him the translation in the English language."⁶ "With all its awkwardness and grammatical chaos," the translation was thus, "according to contemporary reports, a product of spiritual impressions to Joseph Smith rather than an automatic appearance of the English words. This would make Joseph Smith, despite his grammatical limitations, a translator in fact rather than a mere transcriber of the handwriting of God."⁷

If the translation took place through a process of spiritual impressions, it was still not without effort on the part of Joseph Smith, as a revelation given to Oliver Cowdery in 1829, now in the Doctrine and Covenants, suggests. In D&C 9:7-8, Oliver, who had desired the gift of translation, was told: "Behold you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But behold, I say unto you, that 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; therefore, you shall feel that it is right." Had Oliver presumed an effortless, automatic translation? These verses strongly suggest that effort was required by the translator to search for and find the appropriate expression, something which would not have been the case if the words for the English translation had automatically appeared on the seerstone or interpreters.

⁶ D. Michael Quinn, "The First Months of Mormonism: A Contemporary View by Reverend Diederich Willers," *New York History* 54 (1973): 326.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 321.

But what kind of effort was involved? It must have been in rendering the ideas on the plates into English. But how would Joseph Smith have known those ideas? Part of the divine process by which Joseph worked may have allowed him to think, as it were, in that language, to understand, by inspiration, the ideas of the language. The effort in translating may have taken the form of expressing the ideas on the plates in felicitous English. Such effort can sometimes be daunting. I am currently engaged in the translation of two books, one in German and one in Hebrew, the former rather longer than the Book of Mormon, the latter somewhat shorter. I have found that it is one thing to grasp in my mind the ideas of the original without translating those ideas into English but that it is quite a different matter to find the most felicitous expression for those ideas in English. There is also very considerable effort involved in continuing the process of translation hour after hour. I would consider my day an unalloyed success if I were to complete a translation of five to seven pages. This is roughly the rate at which Joseph Smith labored on the translation of the Book of Mormon.

The accounts of the Three Witnesses speak of words appearing on the seerstone or "translators." But at what point in the translation process did they appear? I believe that it was after Joseph had formulated in his mind a translation that represented with sufficient accuracy the ideas found on the original. Was there only one correct translation for the ideas found on the plates? I do not believe so. Could a "correct" translation be improved upon in word choice or in some other manner, or could these ideas have been rendered into different words? Yes. I regularly teach a graduate course in ancient Hebrew, where we read parts of the Old Testament or the Dead Sea Scrolls in Hebrew. Were I to give my students a translation examination from Hebrew into English, it is possible—indeed, likely—that I would receive from them several different renderings of the same verse in English but still consider them all essentially "correct," since each reflected with acceptable accuracy the ideas found on the original. Joseph himself seems to have felt no particular compunctions about revising the Book of Mormon, as witness the numerous changes (mostly of a grammatical nature) made by him in 1837 in the second edition of the Book of Mormon. If he had considered only one rendering acceptable, then he would certainly have refrained from making any changes in it (unless the changes resulted from errors in transcription or printing).

A reasonable scenario for the method of translating the Book of Mormon, in my estimation, would be one in which the means at Joseph's disposal (the seerstone and the interpreters) enhanced his capacity to understand (as one who knows a second language well enough to be able to think in it understands) the sense of the words and phrases on the plates as well as to grasp the relation of these words to each other.⁸ However, the actual translation was Joseph's alone and the opportunity to improve it in grammar and word choice still remained open. Thus, while it would be incorrect to minimize the divine element in the process of translation of the Book of Mormon, it would also be misleading and potentially hazardous to deny the human factor.

⁸ Similarly, John A. Widtsoe, in *Gospel Interpretations* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1947), stated 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. Cf. also B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake: Deseret News, 1909), 2:121.