



Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel

Volume 11 | Number 2

Article 4

7-1-2010

Joseph Smith and the First Principles of the Gospel

Richard E. Bennett richard_bennett@byu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Bennett, Richard E. richard_bennett@byu.edu "Joseph Smith and the First Principles of the Gospel." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 11, no. 2 (2010). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol11/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



The life of the Prophet Joseph Smith was one of dedication and service to the Lord. In preparation for his discipleship, Joseph received divine instruction from God which centered on living the first principles of the gospel.

Joseph Smith and the First Principles of the Gospel

RICHARD E. BENNETT

Richard E. Bennett (richard_bennett@byu.edu) is a professor of Church history and doctrine at BYU. Recently published in *Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010).

So much of a biographical nature has been written lately on the life of the Prophet Joseph Smith that one may well wonder if there is anything new or important left to say about him. Dan Vogel and Richard Bushman, in their dramatically counterpoint interpretations of the Prophet—the former contending he was a “pious fraud” and the latter asserting he was a legitimate American prophet—have forced us to reconsider the earlier arguments and interpretations of Donna and Marvin Hill, Fawn Brodie, John Henry Evans, and George Q. Cannon. Yet the contrasting contributions of these latest two scholars, and the fervent, sometimes deeply emotional responses to them, have reinforced in my mind the conviction that the study of Joseph Smith’s life and religious contributions is a fruitful field, a field white already to harvest which continually beckons new generations to careful study and reflection. Too many devotional defenders in the past have denied the value of historical documentation, while too many critics have derided the place of scriptural authority. Both are necessary for the believing Latter-day Saint.

I wish to explore Joseph Smith’s life, specifically the years 1820–29, from a somewhat different perspective than some of my colleagues by suggesting

a different paradigm of thought, one deeply rooted in my conviction that Joseph Smith was a man called of God. My thesis may be summarized as follows: if Joseph Smith was called to be a prophet, then God assumed the responsibility of teaching and training him in that role. Put another way, the message of the gospel would have to be lived by the messenger of the gospel. The integrity of the Restoration would require nothing less.

Our particular purpose is to explore from the pages of both Church history and holy writ how Joseph Smith was carefully and thoroughly taught the first principles of the gospel, specifically repentance, during that formative, foundational decade of the 1820s. I propose to show that during this ten-year journey of preparation from Palmyra to Fayette, Joseph Smith was taught repentance and forgiveness in a profoundly personal and convincing fashion that molded his character. Elsewhere, and in book-length form, I am addressing how he was similarly instructed in those other principles of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, baptism for the remission of the sins, and the gift of the Holy Ghost, but in this article we have barely enough room to cover the second principle of the gospel. I do so not to impugn the character of the Prophet Joseph but to improve upon our understanding of his life, of Church history, and of the Restoration.

Specifically we will approach the topic of divine instruction over three different periods of time: (1) from 1820, following the First Vision, until the time Joseph Smith received the plates in September 1827 or what we might call early preparation; (2) from September 22, 1827, until early April 1829, or the Martin Harris school of hard knocks; (3) and finally, the period of translation from April 5 until July 1, 1829, during which time Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were translating the Book of Mormon.

“That His Sins Were Forgiven”: A Period of Preparation

If faith in the Lord Jesus Christ was the operative first principle of the First Vision, the kind of mighty faith Joseph Smith exerted to deliver him from a force that was set upon his destruction, then what was it that opened the heavens the second time? The Prophet provides us with an answer in his own account: “When, on the evening of the above-mentioned twenty-first of September, after I had retired to my bed for the night, I betook myself to prayer and supplication to Almighty God for forgiveness of all my sins and follies” (Joseph Smith—History 1:29). If the message of the gospel was to be lived by the one entrusted and foreordained to bring it forth, it only

stands to reason that he would be inspired to seek help to overcome his weaknesses and have purged out of him the imperfections in his own life.

“During the space of time” between his First Vision in the spring of 1820 and September 1823, three and a half years of youthful adolescence, Joseph confesses that he mingled “with all kinds of society” and “frequently fell into many foolish errors, and displayed the weaknesses of youth” (Joseph Smith—History 1:28). He does not go into detail as to what all those problems were, but most readers will readily identify with him. It is not only our sins that condemn us but likewise our foolishness, our rash judgments, those unkind and hasty words that may cut others deeply, our irrational behaviors, and wasting of time and talent. As Nephi warned, “they sell themselves for naught; . . . for the reward of their pride and foolishness they shall reap destruction” (2 Nephi 26:10). Although Joseph asserts that he was not “guilty of any great or malignant sins” (Joseph Smith—History 1:28), it appears evident that he had a magnified sense of his sins, for he “often felt condemned” for his imperfections and earnestly sought “forgiveness of all [his] sins and follies” (Joseph Smith—History 1:29).

It is a true principle that the closer one comes to God in prayer and in daily behavior, the more he will show us our weaknesses and stumbling blocks. “And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness,” wrote the Book of Mormon prophet Moroni. “I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them” (Ether 12:27). As is often the case, while we pray for answers to what we consider to be our major



The First Vision was Joseph Smith's first direct communication with Deity. In the years that followed, he was given extensive instruction and training from numerous angelic messengers.

Mineeva K. Teichert, *The First Vision*, 1934, oil on canvas, 102 x 78 inches, Brigham Young University Museum of Art, gift of Mineeva K. Teichert, all rights reserved.

problems, God in his wisdom first shows us the beam that is in our own eye. Although sin is ever destructive, the consciousness of sin can activate the conscience, which, as part of the Light of Christ, can prompt us to turn away and cause us to “forget the thing which is wrong” (D&C 9:9).

So it was with young Joseph Smith. He may have had perfect faith but he was not a perfect man. Thus, what drove him to prayer that night in September 1823 in the family log cabin near Palmyra was, as Joseph later recorded, a strong desire “for forgiveness of all my sins and follies, and also for a manifestation to me, that I might know of my state and standing before him; for I had full confidence in obtaining a divine manifestation, as I previously had one” (Joseph Smith—History 1:29).

According to the account written by the “second elder” of this dispensation, Oliver Cowdery, one of the first things Joseph remembered the angel Moroni telling him that night was “that his sins were forgiven, and that his prayers were heard.”¹ Before the mission of translating the Book of Mormon could begin, the message of forgiveness first had to be communicated. Thus if faith in God opened the heavens the first time, repentance opened them the second time. This pattern of sacred instruction would be repeated in different times and places throughout the pages of early Church history.²

The prophet Mormon, Moroni’s father, who had seen so much of sin and corruption in his life, had well taught the principle of repentance and may have even foreshadowed his own son’s ongoing mission.

Neither have angels ceased to minister unto the children of men.

For behold, they are subject unto him, according to the word of his command, showing themselves unto them of strong faith and a firm mind in every form of godliness.

And the office of their ministry is to call men unto repentance, and to fulfil and to do the work of the covenants of the Father, which he hath made unto the children of men, to prepare the way among the children of men, by declaring the word of Christ unto the chosen vessels of the Lord, that they may bear testimony of him. (Moroni 7:29–31)

Angels therefore come not to satisfy idle curiosity but to “call men unto repentance.” And so it was that September night in 1823.

While it is entirely appropriate to study Moroni’s message in the light of preparing Joseph Smith for his upcoming mission to translate “a book deposited, written upon gold plates” that contained “the fulness of the everlasting Gospel” (Joseph Smith—History 1:34), my purpose is to show how the unfolding scenes and heavenly manifestations of the Restoration taught

the prophet of the Restoration the first principles of the gospel, specifically repentance. Seen from this perspective, some of what Moroni, the master prophet, began to teach his apprenticed prophet may take on new meaning.

The very first scripture Moroni quoted—and is there not abundant irony that Moroni, a Book of Mormon prophet, was shown here to be a seasoned scholar of the Holy Bible?—was from Malachi, a warning against sinning: “For behold, the day cometh that shall burn as an oven, and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly shall burn as stubble” (Joseph Smith—History 1:37). Then, quoting the third chapter of Acts, Moroni spoke once again of Christ’s warning that “they who would not hear his voice should be cut off from among the people” (Joseph Smith—History 1:40). He went on to quote from Joel chapter 2, verses 28 to the last, including the promise “that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord,” as Joseph himself had done, “shall be delivered,” for surely “your young men shall see visions” (Joel 2:32, 28). Moroni quoted “many other passages of scripture, and offered many explanations” that are not recorded (Joseph Smith—History 1:41).



Tom Lovell, *The Angel Moroni Appears to Joseph Smith*, © 2003 Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

What drove young Joseph to prayer that night in September 1823 was a strong desire to be forgiven and to know his standing before God. When Moroni appeared, he quoted a warning from Malachi against sinning.

In each one of his ensuing visits, Moroni repeated everything he had said the first time, because repetition does indeed bring conviction, not only recollection. Little wonder Joseph Smith later recalled that the biblical passages he cited were either “with a little variation from the way it reads in our Bibles” (Joseph Smith—History 1:36), as was the case with the fourth chapter of Malachi, or “precisely as they stand in our New Testament” (Joseph Smith—History 1:40), as was the case of Moroni’s quoting from the book of Acts. One might see here not only Joseph Smith’s commission to translate the Book of Mormon but later, upon completing that work, the invitation to revise the sacred Holy Bible, not to condemn

it but to raise and reclaim it. Moroni, in citing the Bible, was proclaiming and redeeming it. Just as the Bible had brought Joseph to the Sacred Grove, it was here again being used to instruct him in his new mission.

In those first twenty-four hours of angelic instruction, Moroni visited Joseph five times, three presentations that took up virtually the entire night, the next morning while Joseph attempted to climb the fence out of his father's field, and then again at the Hill Cumorah. Warned the night before against viewing the gold plates for their fiscal value, especially considering the indigent circumstances in which the Smith family was living, when Joseph "made an attempt to take them out," he was reprimanded and forbidden by Moroni from so doing. The angel told him that "the time for bringing them forth had not yet arrived, neither would it, until four years from that time" (Joseph Smith—History 1:53).

We see in this the beginning of a course of training and careful instruction that had everything to do with the preparation of a prophet. As a seventeen-year-old in the fall of 1823, Joseph was clearly not ready to receive the plates and with them the mission of translation, nor would he be for some time to come. Moroni informed him that on the anniversary of his first visit, he desired to meet with Joseph Smith once every year in the very same place.

The mental, emotional, and spiritual significance of an annual visit with a heavenly being can hardly be overestimated. Latter-day Saints can identify with the current practice of an annual tithing settlement with their bishop or branch president or with regular worthiness interviews for temple recommends. There is a wonderful element of covenant accountability in such interviews. They serve as an opportunity for confessing sins, for repledging souls, and for reestablishing priorities so as to conform with the better good within us. And confession is good for the soul, not the casual mental exercise of pretending over our sins but the courageous act of admitting them to a real, listening, and sympathetic servant of God who, though not the source of forgiveness, can be the listening ear, the agent of divine reconstitution. The scripture says, "By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them" (D&C 58:43).

We begin to see in Moroni's curriculum of instruction not only his role of mentor and tutor but also that of prophet and bishop. Having been told to join no existing church, where was this young man to turn for religious training and edification? His mother, Lucy Mack Smith, and some other members of the family continued to attend the Presbyterian Church, and it

is likely Joseph attended with them on occasions. He obviously held several conversations with ministers during these years and may have told more than discretion called for. His father, who had been uniquely prepared to believe in his son's spiritual development through several visions and dreams of his own, believed in Moroni's visit and had replied "that it was of God" (Joseph Smith—History 1:50) and encouraged him onward. Thus young Joseph likely looked forward to this annual interview as a sacred time to commune, to confess, to explore, and to inquire. The very knowledge that such interviews were pending may have wrought enormous impact on his faith, personal behavior, and developing sense of accountability and mission.

There is ample scriptural precedent and pattern for such training. Even though Christ at the tender age of twelve confounded the master teachers of his time, his own mission would not formally begin until he too was much older. In the meantime he continued to receive instruction and preparation, "grace for grace" from his parents and from his Father in Heaven "until he received a fulness" (see D&C 93:12–13). During this time, he "increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man" (Luke 2:52). The ancient Israelite prophet Samuel was similarly so instructed. The Lord had appeared to him as a trusting, believing young boy and likewise commissioned him, saying, "Behold, I will do a thing in Israel, at which both the ears of everyone that heareth shall tingle" (1 Samuel 3:11). Yet the Lord took him under his wing, for "Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him, and did let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Daniel even to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was established to be a prophet of the Lord" (1 Samuel 3:19–20). Nor did the Lord appear only once to Samuel, for he appeared unto him again in Shiloh, teaching and revealing much to his young prophet (see 1 Samuel 3:21). Nephi was similarly prepared by the Lord and by angels of God in his missions of obtaining the plates of Laban and of seeking a new promised land, a course of tutoring that his older, rebellious brothers refused to accept. Even Paul the Apostle, after his glorious vision of Christ while on the road to Damascus, went to be healed, anointed, baptized, and taught by the human agent of God's miracle, a man named Ananias. Though filled with his commission, Saul tarried "certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus" (Acts 10:19; see also Galatians 1:15–18), presumably not only bearing testimony and confounding the unbelieving Jews but also being instructed and guided by his fellow Christians.

Joseph Smith does not explain the confidences and confessions he may have expressed during his annual visits with Moroni. During the intervening years between 1823 and 1827, when Joseph advanced from age seventeen to twenty-one, he became involved in treasure digging with Josiah Stowell of Bainesbridge, New York. Much has been made of Joseph Smith's silver-mine diggings as a way to supplement his family's meager existence. Though treasure seeking had been a common endeavor in New England and New York for decades and involved the energies of many, he grew increasingly uncomfortable with the whole process and sought to distance himself from the magic culture and folklore associated with it and the money-seeking nature of those involved, having said, at indelicate moments, more about angels and gold plates than he should have. Joseph came to regret his involvement in such activities and, as the time neared to receive the plates, tried to move on. But if he chose not share with us the private matters covered in his interviews with Moroni, he does give us surprising clues and insights into what they discussed: "Accordingly, as I had been commanded, I went at the end of each year, and at each time I found the same messenger there, and received instruction and intelligence from him at each of our interviews, respecting what the Lord was going to do, and how and in what manner his kingdom was to be conducted in the last days" (Joseph Smith—History 1:54).

One wonders at the deliberate choice of the words "instruction" and "intelligence." The former we can all comprehend; the latter may have reference to "light and truth" that only revelation can impart, the kind of heavenly instruction, education, and refinement that sanctifies the spirit while it instructs the soul.

There was also more in Moroni's training sessions than the plates and how to obtain them. He clearly foretold impending events "respecting what the Lord was going to do," events that may have included the process of translation, the restoration of requisite authority, and further angelic instruction. Beyond the near future, Moroni also taught him "how and in what manner his kingdom was to be conducted in the last days." In these annual personal priesthood interviews, is it possible the Prophet Joseph learned how and when to organize and establish the Church of Jesus Christ, about priesthood offices, temples, and much more?

"At length," Joseph Smith received the plates, the Urim and Thummim, and the breastplate on the September 22, 1827, from "the same heavenly messenger"—with this one final charge: "that I should be responsible for

them; that if I should let them go carelessly, or through any neglect of mine, I should be cut off” (Joseph Smith—History 1:59), but that, if faithful, he would be protected in his work. After four years of prophetic training in the principles of truth and righteousness, he was deemed ready and worthy for the next level of instruction. Yet even after all this, he had much to learn about repentance.

Martin Harris and Preparations for Translation, 1827–29

To what extent Joseph had confided in others about his visits with the angel Moroni is unknown; however, even before he received the plates, Martin Harris, a well-known farmer and respected citizen of Palmyra, had taken an interest in the young boy’s emerging mission. Joseph’s senior by twenty-two years, Martin Harris had served as a road commissioner and on several local juries. A committed churchgoer, he had earned a reputation as a student of the Bible.

Much of what is known of Harris in these early years we owe to Joseph Smith’s own account and to Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph’s mother, whose *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother* still stands as an indispensable read, particularly for these formative years. According to her, Martin’s marriage to his cousin Lucy Harris was less than ideal. Short-tempered and hard of hearing, Lucy Harris strenuously objected to her husband’s interest in the budding Palmyra Prophet. She believed it would all lead to no good financially and insisted that she be involved in any of Martin’s dealings with the Smith family.³ Martin’s anxiety to substantiate the plausibility, if not the authenticity, of Joseph Smith’s work may be perfectly understandable, considering his difficult home situation. After all, it was their money that was on the line.⁴

Well before the Prophet received the plates, “rumor with her thousand tongues” was circulating all about Palmyra, tending to discredit the reputation of the Smith family (Joseph Smith—History 1:61). Resultant persecution became so intolerable that Joseph and Emma wanted to move away to her home in Harmony, Pennsylvania, some one hundred miles to the south. “In the midst of our afflictions we found a friend in a gentlemen by the name of Martin Harris,” Joseph recorded, “who came to us and gave me fifty dollars to assist us on our journey” (Joseph Smith—History 1:61). By means of such timely assistance—equal to \$2,500 of today’s standard of exchange—the pair were enabled to leave Palmyra and immediately reach Harmony in the month of December of 1827.

Over the next few months, Joseph continued working on the translation from the large plates of Nephi, completing 116 pages of foolscap-length pages of transcription with Martin Harris apparently working as his scribe. Beset by continuing criticism at home and perhaps bothered by lingering doubts of his own, Martin pleaded for Joseph to let him take the completed pages to show his insistent wife and her doubtful family. Disregarding the Lord's warnings not to do so and his own better judgment, Joseph reluctantly agreed and surrendered the manuscript to his friend and benefactor. Regrettably, he did not make a second copy.

Martin abruptly returned to Palmyra where the worst of his intentions got the best of him. Carelessly breaking his promise to show them only to his wife and a selected few family members, he proved an unfaithful guardian of the sacred text and before long had lost them, no doubt lending them to others.

Meanwhile, hearing no news from Martin, which, as Lucy Smith recalls, "was altogether aside of the arrangement when they separated,"⁵ Joseph's worries intensified that same spring of 1828 while facing another crisis at home. Emma had given birth to their first child, a son, who died in infancy. Remaining at his wife's bedside day and night for two weeks during her difficult recovery, Joseph worried not only about her health but also about the state and condition of the manuscript. Finally, at Emma's urging, Joseph returned to Palmyra for the purpose of learning the cause of Martin's absence as well as his silence.

The morning of the intended rendezvous, Martin Harris was late for breakfast at the Smith home by some six hours, evidently stalling and searching, while Joseph and the rest of the family fretted within impatiently. Finally they saw him coming. With a slow, measured tread, his eyes fixed upon the ground, he reached the fence, then got upon it and drew his hat over his eyes. At length he entered the house. Lucy records what happened next:

Martin took up his knife and fork as if to use them but dropped them from his hands. Hyrum said, "Martin, why do you not eat? Are you sick?" Martin pressed his hands upon his temples and cried out in a tone of deep anguish, "Oh! I have lost my soul. I have lost my soul."

Joseph, who had smothered his fears till now, sprang from the table, exclaiming, "Oh! Martin, have you lost that manuscript? Have you broken your oath and brought down condemnation upon my head as well as your own?"

"Yes," replied Martin, "it is gone, and I know not where."

"Oh, my God, my God," said Joseph, clinching his hands together. "All is lost, is lost! What shall I do? I have sinned. It is I who tempted the wrath of God asking

him for that which I had no right to ask, as I was differently instructed by the angel. . . . Then must I," said Joseph, "return to my wife with such a tale as this? I dare not do it lest I should kill her at once. And how shall I appear before the Lord? Of what rebuke am I not worthy from the angel of the Most High?"⁶

In this dramatic moment, we glimpse something of the character of Joseph Smith and the extent to which he had been taught. A lesser man would likely have turned on Martin Harris and soundly berated him for his mistaken judgment. Human nature being what it is, we will often blame someone else for causing our problems, especially when they share so much of the fault. But in that heated moment of despair, Joseph Smith rose to his calling, taking full and complete responsibility for the entire matter: "I have sinned. It is I who tempted the wrath of God." If the first step of repentance is accepting one's own accountability, Joseph was here the teacher and Martin Harris his tormented student.

Lucy goes on to show the depths of remorse her son then showed. "I besought him not to mourn so," she wrote, hoping to offer some sort of consolation.

For it might be that the Lord would forgive him, after a short season of humiliation and repentance. But what could I say to comfort him when he saw all the family in the same situation of mind that he was? Our sobs and groans and the most bitter lamentations filled the house. Joseph, in particular, was more distressed than the rest, for he knew definitely and by sorrowful experience the consequence of what would seem to others to be a very trifling neglect of duty. He continued walking backwards and forwards, weeping and grieving like a tender infant until about sunset, when we persuaded him to take a little nourishment.⁷

Returning home to Harmony immediately afterward, Joseph Smith continued prayerful, sensing a pending day of reckoning. Subsequently, Moroni once again appeared to him, censuring him for having delivered the manuscript into Harris's hands. The Prophet said, "As I had ventured to become responsible for this man's faithfulness, I would of necessity suffer the consequences of his indiscretion, and I must now give back the Urim and Thummim into his (the angel's) hands."⁸

Joseph then received a revelation that summer of 1828, soon after the angel had visited him, in which the young prophet was chastised in no uncertain terms:

Behold, how oft you have transgressed the commandments and the laws of God, and have gone on in the persuasions of men.

For, behold, you should not have feared man more than God. Although men set at naught the counsels of God, and despise his words—

Yet you should have been faithful; and he would have extended his arm and supported you against all the fiery darts of the adversary; and he would have been with you in every time of trouble. . . . For thou hast suffered the counsel of thy director to be trampled upon from the beginning. (D&C 3:6–8, 15)

Consequently, Joseph lost his privileges of translation for a season, a time of probation during which he continued to learn humility and penitence, more aware than ever before that the Restoration of the gospel and the translation of the Book of Mormon would come to pass with or without him.

Happily, some two months later, on September 22, 1828, the fifth anniversary of Moroni's first appearance, Joseph Smith experienced the fruits of his penitence, saying, "I had the joy and satisfaction of again receiving the Urim and Thummim." His mentor, too, "was rejoiced" at the lessons Joseph had learned in repentance and "told me that the Lord was pleased with my faithfulness and humility, and loved me for my penitence and diligence in prayer."⁹

The story of Joseph Smith, Moroni, Martin Harris, and the lost manuscript has one concluding episode. Nine months later, near the end of June 1829, at the Peter Whitmer Jr. farm in Fayette, New York, the angel Moroni appeared to the Three Witnesses: Martin Harris, David Whitmer, and Oliver Cowdery. Just as Moroni had come to Joseph Smith in September 1823 to declare forgiveness and to teach Joseph repentance, so also this visit of Moroni to Harris was predicated upon that same saving principle. Said Joseph Smith beforehand when indicating to Harris the possibility of his being one of the Three Witnesses, "Martin Harris, . . . you have got to humble yourself before God this day and obtain, if possible, a forgiveness of your sins. If you will do this, it is God's will that you . . . should look upon the plates."¹⁰ Well known in Church history is the fact that after David, Oliver, Martin, and Joseph had retired to the woods near the Whitmer house, nothing happened until Martin excused himself, believing, "as he expressed himself, that his presence was the cause of our not obtaining what we wished for. He accordingly withdrew" and the angel appeared to the other three men. Only after Joseph rejoined Martin and accompanied him in fervent prayer, was the same vision opened to their view. "'Tis enough; 'tis enough," he said; "mine eyes have beheld; mine eyes have beheld." Then, "jumping up, he shouted, 'Hosanna,' blessing God, and otherwise rejoiced exceedingly."¹¹

Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and the Process of Translation, 1829

We now come to our third and final episode, that period of translation in which Joseph Smith and his new scribe, Oliver Cowdery, completed the Book of Mormon as we now know it. Virtually the same age as Joseph, Oliver (1806–50) was also from Vermont, had been a store clerk and taught in country schools. While boarding with Joseph Smith's parents, he learned of the ancient record and the lost 116 pages. What piqued his interest in the work was the fact that he had "inquired of the Lord" on the matter. As recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants, "as often as thou hast inquired thou hast received instruction of my Spirit. If it had not been so, thou wouldst not have come to the place where thou art at this time" (D&C 6:14). Joseph Smith said, "The Lord appeared unto . . . Oliver Cowdery and shewed unto him the plates in a vision and . . . what the Lord was about to do through me, his unworthy servant. Therefore he was desirous to come and write for me to translate."¹²

The two men met each other for the first time on April 5, 1829, arranged some temporal business together the following day, and began the work of translation on April 7. Partners in the translating process, the great difference between the two men was in their spiritual preparation and academic approach to the task at hand. A teacher by profession who knew well how to read and write and do numbers far better than his partner, Oliver was nevertheless Joseph's pupil in the first principles.

The profound intellectual difficulties Joseph Smith faced in translating an ancient unknown language even with the aid of the Urim and Thummim are hinted at in Oliver's parallel failed experience as a translator and afford us yet another view of how repentance was once more taught during the translation process. It is noteworthy that the second elder of the Restoration began his mission by seeking the gift to translate. "Ask that you may know the mysteries of God, and that you may translate and receive knowledge from all those ancient records which have been hid up, that are sacred; and according to your faith shall it be done unto you" (D&C 8:11). However, as Elder Dallin H. Oaks has indicated, Oliver soon "failed in his efforts to translate."¹³ Why? "Behold, it is because that you did not continue as you commenced. . . . 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" (D&C 9:5, 7–8).

At issue here was more than Oliver's attitude of teachability and humility; it was also an aptitude of intellectual application not so well developed in him as to bear results, at least not in the timely way now required. Oliver failed in the intellectually demanding work of translating because he had not thoroughly applied himself mentally to the task. As the Lord indicated, "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, ye shall feel that it is right" (D&C 9:7–8). Joseph Smith had learned both lessons—spiritual and mental—from his previous experiences. He had been schooled in matters of character and spirit for the past nine years and from his past experience with Martin Harris and the translation of the 116 pages, clearly, in hindsight, a preparatory school of remarkable learning. Can we really expect Oliver to have learned them as well after but a few days at the task? We may wish to revise our thinking on who was the student and who was the teacher.

The intellectual demands of translating were rigorous and extremely challenging. If the experiences and testimony of the Three Witnesses are to be taken at face value, the successful translation of the Book of Mormon was neither magical nor mythical but measured and marvelous, a careful confluence of obedience, recurring repentance, and consequent revelation on the one side, and a rigorous mental exercise of intense study, recall and recognition, and trial and error on the other. The specifics of translation remain a mystery, but it may be instructive to compare the work of Joseph Smith to that of his magnificent contemporary, the superlative translator of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, the brilliant French linguist Jean-François Champollion. Just five years before, Champollion had finally decoded the mysterious hieroglyphs of the famed Rosetta Stone found near Alexandria by Napoleon's army in 1799. After a lifetime of studying Coptic, Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, Egyptian, and a dozen other languages, Champollion, in his famous "Lettre à Monsieur Dacier" of September 22, 1822, exactly one year before Moroni's initial visit, convinced the waiting world that he could read the ancient hieroglyphic writings of Egypt. As a result, Champollion, the man from Grenoble, is still rightfully revered as the father of modern Egyptology.

Whereas Champollion first naively believed that a thorough knowledge of Coptic would allow him to directly decipher ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs,

he gradually came to the realization that such was quite dauntingly not the case. Hieroglyphic writings were not a single alphabet; they had a wide variety of spellings for the same person or place, and they had no vowels but plenty of shorthand contractions, such as in English one might write “pkg” for “parking” or “unvsty” for “university.” Furthermore, the ancient Egyptian scribes assumed the reader was conversant with their combinations of right vowels and contractions, “but this knowledge had been lost, although Coptic gives clues to it.”¹⁴

After long and painstaking effort, Champollion concluded that hieroglyphs could not be read alone but in groups or clusters. Intently comparing the Greek to the Coptic, the Coptic to the demotic (a later simplified form of ancient Egyptian writing) and, by extension, the demotic to the hieroglyphic, Champollion noted that there were three times as many hieroglyphic signs as there were Greek words. Therefore, there had to be a combination or grouping of signs to convey a single meaning—in other words, consonants and syllables, essential components to phonetic expressions. Though the hieroglyphs employed no vowels, they were a combination of phonetics and pictures. Unlike others of his scientific contemporaries, such as Thomas Young of England, Champollion was now looking not just for more clues between the hieroglyphic and the demotic, but for the ability to read the maze of what constituted hieroglyphic writing.

What finally enabled Champollion to do what neither Young nor any others were able to accomplish was applying his mastery of Coptic to the problem. As one leading scholar has written, “His knowledge of Coptic enabled him to deduce the phonetic values of many syllabic signs, and to assign correct readings to many pictorial characters, the meanings of which were made known to him by the Greek text on the Stone.”¹⁵ The system of decipherment that Champollion had been methodically developing over several years was that hieroglyphic script was mainly phonetic but not entirely so, that it also contained logograms or a sort of shorthand symbols used to write native names and common nouns from the Pharaonic period. The combination of both constituted an ancient alphabet, which he now could prove and sufficiently read or decipher. Champollion thus came to the rightful conclusion that the hieroglyphic writings were not just of the later periods of Egyptian history but of the very earliest Pharaonic era as well. He therefore decoded the entire system and showed that hieroglyphic, hieratic, and demotic all corresponded

to the same language. Whereas Young may well have discovered parts of the alphabet, it was “Champollion [who] unlocked an entire language.”¹⁶

Joseph Smith, on the other hand, could barely read or write one language, English.¹⁷ Joseph Smith had neither the time, scholarly training, nor linguistic knowledge to decode one symbol after another; indeed his mission was not to master the linguistics required to read an ancient language but to translate or convey their meanings into English. His initial work of translation consisted of copying the various “characters,” letters, phrases, or hieroglyphs found on the large plates of Nephi into some sort of working alphabet. “I copied a considerable number of them,” he records, clear evidence of the strong mental exercise and careful study he too would need before translating could actually begin. Then only gradually did he begin to use what neither Champollion nor any other translator had at their command, the Interpreters. With the aid of these ancient instruments, Joseph Smith began to translate some of the characters.

It would appear that the process was less one of decoding or deciphering the precise meaning of the individual characters and inscriptions found on the plates, as Champollion had so painstakingly done with the Rosetta Stone, and more one of discerning the meanings conveyed thereon and then, in addition, struggling to transliterate such meanings into acceptable, King James Bible–vintage literary English. The translators seemed to have functioned on two levels: conveying meaning from the ancient text while simultaneously suggesting wording in biblical-sounding English far beyond the reach then in Joseph’s limited grasp. Thus we might argue that Joseph Smith was not a decoder or a pure translator in the Champollion sense of the word but a transmitter/translator and writer who, with the aid of the interpreters, transposed what he saw into exquisite English prose and poetry.

For all of this, Oliver was ill prepared. The customized reprimand and gentle reproof he received in section 9 of the Doctrine and Covenants were less a rebuke and more a reminder that God had already called and prepared his prophet; what was needed now was a humble, penitent scribe and devoted supporter and trusted eyewitness to visions soon to occur. “Do not murmur my son, for it is wisdom in me that I have dealt with you after this manner; . . . it is not expedient that you should translate now. Behold it was expedient when you commenced; but you feared, and the time is past, and it is not expedient now; for, do you not behold that I have given unto my servant Joseph sufficient strength, whereby it is made up? And neither of you have I

condemned. . . . Be faithful, and yield to no temptation” (D&C 9:6, 10–13). It was a lesson in repentance not missed by either man.

If Joseph and Oliver learned repentance at the outset of translating, they were repeatedly reminded of its central importance as their work progressed. Well known is David Whitmer’s 1882 remembrance of a time Joseph Smith could not translate, despite all the gifts he had at his command. “He could not translate unless he was humble and possessed the right feelings towards everyone,” Whitmer recalled.

To illustrate so you can see. One morning when he was getting ready to continue the translation, something went wrong about the house and he was put out about it. Something that Emma had done. Oliver and I went upstairs [obviously this was at the Whitmer home] and Joseph came up soon after to continue the translation, but he could not do anything. He could not translate a single syllable. He went downstairs, out into the orchard, and made supplication to the Lord; was gone about an hour—came back to the house, and asked Emma’s forgiveness and then came up stairs where we were and then the translation went on all right. He could do nothing save he was humble and faithful.¹⁸

Thus, to borrow B. H. Roberts’s phraseology, the translation “was not a merely mechanical process” but rather a laboratory of spiritual and mental application governed by the principles found in the very book they were now translating. Even after almost 10 years of preparation, Joseph Smith relearned the lesson that even the smallest sins or senseless hurts prevented the free flow of inspiration and revelation. By faith, faith unto repentance that led, in turn, to the guiding and revealing influence of the Spirit of the Lord, he lived his way through to the end of the translation process.

Conclusion

I suggest a new and different perspective from that offered by some of Joseph Smith’s biographers. No where have I argued that Joseph Smith was a perfect man or without blemish. His sins and imperfections were real, and while I have not dwelt upon them in any way to discredit his life, they surely caused him a great deal of grief and hardship. Yet our theme has been that if God called a prophet, he prepared that prophet in the first principles of the gospel. The mission of Moroni, in preparing the way for the translation of the Book of Mormon, was the charge given to angelic visitors: “to minister according to the word of his command, showing themselves unto them of strong faith and a firm mind in every form of godliness. And the office of their ministry is to call men unto repentance, and to fulfil and to do the work of the covenants of

the Father” (Moroni 7:30–31). Time after time, Moroni, the master prophet, trained Joseph Smith, the apprentice prophet, in matters of the soul, of honesty and integrity, in humility and patience, in repentance and forgiveness. Joseph Smith’s partners in translation, Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery, were likewise taught the same principles and learned from hard experience that the message of the gospel had to be lived by the messengers of the gospel to have any lasting effect. Integrity, not hypocrisy, would attract the best of men and women and make for a lasting movement. This injunction was repeated all the way up to Fayette and the organization of the Church in April 1830 and indeed, for years afterward. “Preach naught but repentance:” and “the thing that will be of the most worth unto you will be to declare repentance unto this people, that you may bring souls unto me, that you may rest with them in the kingdom of my Father” (D&C 19:21; 15:6; see also 16:6). Indeed, this lesson of repentance and forgiveness would be repeated numerous times throughout the pages of later Church history, including the famous vision in the Kirtland Temple in April 1836 when the Savior pronounced once again to Joseph and Oliver, “Behold, your sins are forgiven you; you are clean before me; therefore, lift up your heads and rejoice” (D&C 110:5). **RE**

Notes

1. Oliver Cowdery to W. W. Phelps, in *Messenger and Advocate*, February 1835, 79.
2. For instance, in the spring of 1836 at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, when Christ himself appeared before the altars of the temple, among the very first words he proclaimed to Joseph Smith and to Oliver Cowdery were, “Behold, your sins are forgiven you; you are clean before me; . . . lift up your heads and rejoice” (Doctrine and Covenants 110:5). Just as faith precedes the miracle, repentance precedes the commission. The man must be “worthy of his hire” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:79).
3. Professors Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter are soon to publish a new biography of Martin Harris.
4. For more on Harris’s visit to the East, see Stanley B. Kimball, “The Anthon Transcript: People, Primary Sources and Problems,” *BYU Studies* 10, no. 3 (Spring 1970): 325–52; see also the author’s forthcoming article “‘Read This I Pray Thee’: Martin Harris and the Three Wise Men of the East” (accepted for publication in 2010 in the *Journal of Mormon History*).
5. Lucy Mack Smith, *The Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith by His Mother*, ed. Scot Facer Proctor and Maurine Jensen Proctor (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 161.
6. *History of Joseph Smith*, 164–166.
7. *History of Joseph Smith*, 166.
8. *History of Joseph Smith*, 174.
9. *History of Joseph Smith*, 176.
10. *History of Joseph Smith*, 199.

11. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 1:54–55.
12. *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, vol. 1: *Autobiographical and Historical Writing*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:10.
13. Dallin H. Oaks, “Our Strengths Can Become Our Downfall,” *BYU Speeches of the Year*, June 7, 1992, 6.
14. Lesley and Roy Adkins, *The Keys of Egypt: The Obsession to Decipher Egyptian Hieroglyphs* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 84.
15. Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge, *The Rosetta Stone in the British Museum* (New York: AMS Press, 1976), 4.
16. Richard B. Parkinson, *Cracking Codes: The Rosetta Stone and Decipherment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 40.
17. Emma Smith later retold the experience of the translation period to her son as follows: “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 could at once begin where he had left off, without seeing either 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” (“Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” *Saints’ Herald*, October 1, 1879, 290).
18. Statement of David Whitmer to William H. Kelley and G. A. Blakeslee of Gallen, Michigan, September 15, 1882, from the Baden and Kelley debate on the divine origin of the Book of Mormon, 186, as cited in Brigham Henry Roberts, *The Essential B. H. Roberts*, ed. Brigham D. Madsen (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 139.