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The Anthon Transcripts and the Translation of the Book of Mormon: Studying It Out in the Mind of Joseph Smith

David E. Sloan


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Prophesying of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, Nephi foretold that an unlearned man would be asked by God to read the words of a book after a learned man had failed to do so. The unlearned man was initially unwilling, claiming, “I am not learned” (2 Nephi 27:19). One interpretation of Nephi’s account is that Joseph Smith could not translate the Book of Mormon before the meeting of Martin Harris and Charles Anthon. Early historical accounts are consistent with this interpretation. However, according to Joseph Smith—History 1:64, Harris did take a translation to Anthon. Although this translation has not been found, evidence exists of similarities between this document and documents produced during the preliminary stages of the translation of the Book of Abraham. These similarities suggest that the document taken to Anthon was a preliminary and unsuccessful attempt to translate the Book of Mormon, during which Joseph Smith studied the translation problem out in his own mind as he qualified himself to receive the revealed translation from God.
Abstract: Prophesying of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, Nephi foretold that an unlearned man would be asked by God to read the words of a book after a learned man had failed to do so. The unlearned man was initially unwilling, claiming, “I am not learned” (2 Nephi 27:19). One interpretation of Nephi’s account is that Joseph Smith could not translate the Book of Mormon before the meeting of Martin Harris and Charles Anthon. Early historical accounts are consistent with this interpretation. However, according to Joseph Smith—History 1:64, Harris did take a translation to Anthon. Although this translation has not been found, evidence exists of similarities between this document and documents produced during the preliminary stages of the translation of the book of Abraham. These similarities suggest that the document taken to Anthon was a preliminary and unsuccessful attempt to translate the Book of Mormon, during which Joseph Smith studied the translation problem out in his own mind as he qualified himself to receive the revealed translation from God.

1. Introduction

Nephi’s prophetic account of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 27) indicates that Joseph Smith did not translate any of the Book of Mormon before Martin Harris presented the words of the Book of Mormon to Charles Anthon for him to
translate.\textsuperscript{1} In contrast, the 1839 *History of the Church* clearly states that Joseph Smith copied and translated a number of characters from the plates before the Harris-Anthon encounter.\textsuperscript{2}

Part 2 of this article presents an argument for the conclusions that (1) the unlearned man of 2 Nephi 27 does not translate any of the words of the book before their presentation to the learned man and (2), notwithstanding the 1839 history, a significant amount of circumstantial historical evidence exists that Joseph Smith did not translate into English any portion of the Book of Mormon before the Harris-Anthon encounter.\textsuperscript{3} Part 3 proposes that the 1839 history is not inconsistent with the position taken in Part 2 because the initial translation referred to in the 1839 history was an unsuccessful attempt by Joseph Smith to produce the actual English text of the Book of Mormon.\textsuperscript{4} Part 4 presents

\textsuperscript{1} For purposes of this paper, I am assuming that the unlearned man is Joseph Smith, the intermediary is Martin Harris, the learned man is Charles Anthon (although others exist), and the Book of Mormon is a portion of the book delivered to the unlearned man. I am also assuming that the word *deliver* means to transfer possession or to make available in an untranslated form, while the word *read* means to translate. According to John Welch, “if the study of the Book of Mormon is to become a more rigorous discipline, all of its practitioners will need to become more explicit about their methods, their assumptions, their purposes, and the degree to which their conclusions are based on various forms of evidence or depend on various theoretical predilections.” John W. Welch, “Approaching New Approaches,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 146.

\textsuperscript{2} The *History of the Church* (herein called the 1839 history) is the source from which the book Joseph Smith—History in the Pearl of Great Price is taken. For convenience, specific references to material in the 1839 history are made to the Joseph Smith—History account. Although the initial drafts of a portion of the history may have been written in 1838, Dean Jessee dates this history to 1839. He also suggests that the portion of the history covering the receipt of the plates and the preparations for translation was originally written between 30 April and 4 May 1838. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:230–31, 265, 267, 284 n. 1; cf. Richard L. Anderson, “Joseph Smith’s Testimony of the First Vision,” *Ensign* (April 1996): 10, 20 n. 3 (refers to a 1838 history).

\textsuperscript{3} These conclusions place the translation of the Book of Mormon into a number of significant scriptural themes, which I hope to develop in a subsequent article.

\textsuperscript{4} By “actual English text,” I mean any portion of the lost 116 pages or any portion of our current Book of Mormon as originally translated into the English language.
evidence that before the Harris-Anthon meeting, Joseph Smith was engaged in studying the translation problem out in his own mind, an essential part of the translation process, as identified in Doctrine and Covenants 9:8–9.

2. Prophetic and Historical Accounts of the Initial Stages of the Translation of the Book of Mormon

The Prophetic Account

In 2 Nephi 27, Nephi prophesies concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, significantly expanding Isaiah’s prophecy found in Isaiah 29. In Nephi’s prophetic account, an unlearned man delivers the words of a book to an intermediary, who then delivers the words to a learned man and requests that the learned man read the words. The learned man asks that the book be brought to him, which is not possible because the book is sealed. The learned man then declares: “I cannot read it” (2 Nephi 27:18).

After the failure of the learned man to read the words, the unlearned man is also asked to read the words, as recorded in Isaiah’s version of the prophecy: “Read this I pray thee” (Isaiah 29:12). In response, he declares: “I am not learned” (Isaiah 29:12; 2 Nephi 27:19). The Lord then instructs the unlearned man: “The learned shall not read them, for they have rejected them, and I am able to do mine own work; wherefore thou shalt read the words which I shall give unto thee” (2 Nephi 27:20). Nothing in the prophetic account suggests that the unlearned man was asked to read the words before this time. The most straightforward and reasonable interpretation of this passage is that the unlearned man could not or did not read the words before the Lord asked him to.

A possible interpretation of the prophetic account is that it does not describe a temporal sequence of events, and that the timing of the request that the learned man read has no relationship to the timing of the request that the unlearned man read. However, immediately after the learned man’s words that he cannot read the book, the prophetic account records: “Wherefore it shall come to
pass, that the Lord will deliver again the book and the words to him that is not learned" (2 Nephi 27:18–19). These words indicate that the second delivery occurs after, and as a result of, the learned man’s rejection of the book. Also, at the time of the second delivery, the learned has already “rejected” the words of the book, clearly showing a temporal relationship and sequence for these events.

The 1839 History

Joseph Smith recorded that in December 1827, “immediately after” his arrival at the home of his father-in-law, Isaac Hale, he “commenced copying the characters off the plates” (Joseph Smith—History I:62). Between December 1827 and February 1828, he “copied a considerable number of them, and by means of the Urim and Thummim [he] translated some of them” (Joseph Smith—History I:62). Sometime in February 1828, Martin Harris took the characters the Prophet had “drawn off the plates” to New York City (Joseph Smith—History I:63). Martin Harris recorded that he “presented the characters which had been translated, with the translation thereof, to Professor Charles Anthon, a gentleman celebrated for his literary attainments” (Joseph Smith—History I:64). According to Harris, “Professor Anthon stated that the translation was correct, more so than any he had before seen translated from the Egyptian” (Joseph Smith—History I:64). Harris also reported that Anthon gave him “a certificate to the people of Palmyra that they were true characters, and that the translation of such of them as had been translated was also correct” (Joseph Smith—History I:64). Following his visit to Charles Anthon, Martin Harris met with a Dr. Mitchell, “who sanctioned what Professor Anthon had said respecting both the characters and the translation” (Joseph Smith—History I:64).

Based on the foregoing, there can be little doubt that Martin Harris took with him to New York a document, which both he and Joseph Smith referred to as a translation. The question that the remainder of this paper addresses is whether that document included any part of the actual English text of the Book of Mormon. Although not conclusive, the evidence supporting the theory that Joseph Smith could not produce the actual English text
before the Harris-Anthon meeting is sufficient cause for reasonable minds to differ in their conclusions.  

It might be argued that the meaning of the 1839 history is clear and that the words of the history should be understood according to their plain meaning. However, the words of Nephi’s prophetic account are also plainly written and suggest a different interpretation of the events. Furthermore, Nephi’s words of introduction to his account are compelling: “But behold, I prophesy unto you concerning the last days; concerning the days when the Lord God shall bring these things forth unto the children of men” (2 Nephi 26:14). This prophecy was given to Nephi by the Spirit, which “speaketh of things as they really are, and of things as they really will be” (Jacob 4:13). For this reason, it is a mistake to allow a limited historical perspective to control the interpretation of an inspired prophecy. Although the 1839 history is

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5 It should be noted in this regard that, to the best of my knowledge, no evidence identifies the translation that Harris presented to Anthon with any portion of the Book of Mormon or the lost 116 pages. Furthermore, although a document (known as the Anthon transcript) that appears to contain the copied characters has been preserved, the document that contained the translation presented to Anthon has not. See Stanley B. Kimball, “The Anthon Transcript: People, Primary Sources, and Problems,” BYU Studies 10/3 (1970): 325, for a discussion of the various sources of the Anthon transcript.


7 This is especially so considering that the relevant portion of the 1839 history was written approximately ten years after the actual event, by a clerk under the Prophet’s direction, and without explicit reference to the prophecy. In contrast, the first historical account of this event, discussed below, was personally written by Joseph only four years later, specifically refers to the prophecy, and is consistent with the interpretation of the prophecy given above. According to Elder Neal A. Maxwell, most “great spiritual events went unseen by eyes spiritually untrained. . . . One day, the historical record will be complete; but, meanwhile, the scriptures will be our guide concerning those transcending spiritual events in human history which are saturated with significance.” Neal A. Maxwell, “Out of Obscurity,” Ensign (November 1984): 9.
certainly helpful in understanding Nephi’s prophecy, it should not be used to define that prophecy. The purpose of this article is not to challenge the 1839 history, but to interpret Nephi’s prophecy and, in doing so, identify a context for this portion of the 1839 history that is more compatible with the interpretation of the prophecy.

Additional Historical Accounts

The 1832 history is Joseph Smith’s earliest written account of the events surrounding the commencement of the translation. In that history, written by the Prophet’s own hand approximately four years after the events in question, he made no mention of a translation before the Harris-Anthon meeting. Joseph recorded: “the Lord had shown [Martin Harris] that he must go to new York City with some of the c[h]aracters so we proceeded to copy some of them and he took his Journey to the Eastern Citys and to the Learned <saying> read this I pray thee and the learned said I cannot.” Joseph also recorded that after the “Learned” had failed to read the characters, Martin Harris “returned to me and gave them to <me to> translate and I said I--said I cannot for I am not learned but the Lord had prepared spectacles for to read the Book therefore I commenced translating the characters and thus the Prop[h]icy of Isa(ia)h was fulfilled which is writen in the 29 chapter concerning the book.” According to the 1832 history, Joseph could not translate the very same characters that he had previously copied off the plates; furthermore, it was not until the characters were returned to him that he “commenced” trans-

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8 See editorial note in Jessee, The Papers of Joseph Smith, 1:1, 3.
9 Quoted in Jessee, The Papers of Joseph Smith 1:9, emphasis deleted. This early historical account also adds the interesting detail that Martin Harris was commanded by the Lord to take the characters to New York City, differing from the traditional view of Harris as a skeptic seeking reassurance.
10 Ibid. According to Orson Pratt, “after Martin Harris returned to Joseph Smith and told him the conversation that had taken place, how that Professor Anthon could not decipher the records, Joseph inquired of the Lord, and the Lord commanded him that he should translate the records, and that he should do it through the medium of the Urim and Thummim.” Orson Pratt, in JD 14:143 (19 March 1871).
lating them.\textsuperscript{11} This corresponds closely to the sequence of events identified in 2 Nephi 27 and Isaiah 29, and it is significant that the Prophet specifically saw in these events the fulfillment of Isaiah 29.

According to the 1834–36 history of the Church, Moroni told Joseph Smith that it was his "privilege, if obedient to the commandments of the Lord, to obtain and translate the [history] by the means of the Urim and Thummim, which were deposited for that purpose with the record."\textsuperscript{12} The 1834–36 history records that after Joseph was told he would be able to translate, Moroni made this significant comment: "'Yet,' said he, 'the scripture must be fulfilled \textit{before it is translated}, which says that the words of a book, which were sealed, were presented to the learned; for thus has God determined to leave men without excuse, and show to the meek that his arm is (not) short[ened] that it cannot save.'"\textsuperscript{13} Although the words \textit{before it is translated} could mean "before the whole book, or most of it, is translated," the most straightforward reading of Moroni's words is that before Joseph Smith would be able to translate the record, the words of the book had to be presented to the learned man.

Joseph's parents also believed that their son could not at first translate the characters and understood that one reason for sending Martin Harris to New York City was to obtain help with the translation. In 1830, Joseph Smith Sr. was reported as saying that

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item[\textsuperscript{11}] In fact, not only was Joseph Smith unable to translate, but, consistent with the scriptural protest "I am not learned," he initially may also have been unwilling. According to one source, Martin Harris told others that "the Prophet Joseph... was compelled by the angel, much against his will, to be the interpreter of the sacred record." Orsamus Turner, \textit{History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase} (Rochester: Alling, 1851), 215, quoted in Dean C. Jessee, "New Documents and Mormon Beginnings," \textit{BYU Studies} 24/4 (1984): 402.
  \item[\textsuperscript{12}] Quoted in Jessee, \textit{The Papers of Joseph Smith}, 1:53.
  \item[\textsuperscript{13}] Quoted in ibid., emphasis added. This passage is also interesting because it indicates that the prophecy of the presentation of the words of the book to the learned man was part of Moroni’s instruction to Joseph Smith in the very earliest stages of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. The account is taken from a letter Oliver Cowdery wrote to William W. Phelps. Because Oliver Cowdery did not personally hear Moroni’s words, he could only report what he heard from Joseph (or from Joseph through others). Therefore, a greater possibility is present for inaccuracy in the 1834–36 history than in the 1832 history.
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“his son, ‘not being able to read the characters, made a copy of some of them, which he showed to some of the most learned men of the vicinity.’”14 The Prophet’s mother also recorded that during this time, “Joseph was very solicitous about the work but as yet no means had come into his hands of accomplishing it”—this despite the fact that he possessed the Urim and Thummim.15

Lucy Smith also wrote that her son “was instructed ‘to take off a facsimile of the characters composing the alphabet which were called reformed Egyptian Alphabetically and send them to all the learned men that he could find and ask them for the translation of the same.’”16 According to Richard L. Bushman, “Lucy implied that once Joseph had a translation of all the basic characters, he could carry on by himself—thus the need to copy a great number of characters.”17 Lucy’s statements indicate that her son could not translate and for that reason sought out the assistance of learned men. Accordingly, Bushman writes that “The scripture


15 Lucy Smith, Preliminary Manuscript of Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, 70, quoted in Bushman, Beginnings of Mormonism, 86.

16 Ibid., emphasis added. According to Lucy Smith, “When Joseph had had a sufficient time to accomplish the journey and transcribe some of the Egyptian characters, it was agreed that Martin Harris should follow him—and that he (Martin) should take the characters to the East, and, on his way, he was to call on all the professed linguists, in order to give them an opportunity to display their talents in giving a translation of the characters.” Lucy M. Smith, History of Joseph Smith by His Mother, Lucy Mack Smith, ed. Preston Nibley (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 119. According to John Clark, Martin Harris visited him as he went “in quest of some interpreter who should be able to decipher the mysterious characters of the golden Bible,” quoted in Bushman, Beginnings of Mormonism, 218 n. 23.

17 Bushman, Beginnings of Mormonism, 86. Lucy Smith also wrote that the angel Moroni warned her son when he received the plates: “Beware, and look well to your ways, and you shall have power to retain it, until the time for it to be translated.” Smith, History of Joseph Smith by His Mother, 110, emphasis added. Although Joseph was in possession of the plates, some important event remained to be accomplished before the book could be translated. Based on Moroni’s statement recorded in the 1834–36 history (quoted here on page 63), that event may have been the fulfillment of the prophecy that the words would be presented to the learned man.
[Isaiah 29] must have struck Joseph with all the more power if at first he did not know how to translate, as his mother said. The protest 'I am not learned' would then have expressed Joseph's situation in 1827 exactly. Joseph Knight thought the circumstances fit the scripture.\footnote{Bushman, \textit{Beginnings of Mormonism}, 89. In this passage, Bushman recognizes that initially Joseph Smith may have been unable to translate. Dean C. Jesssee also recognizes the possibility that the translation may have begun after the Harris-Anthon encounter: "In February 1828, before Joseph commenced work on the record, Harris was sent to language authorities in the East with a copy of characters from the plates for their perusal." Dean C. Jesssee, ed., \textit{The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith} (Deseret Book: Salt Lake City, 1984), 223.}

Joseph Knight, who was associated with Joseph Smith from the time he first obtained the plates, thought the events accorded with the prophecy of Isaiah 29 because he believed that the Prophet was initially unable to translate. The Joseph Knight journal records: "He [Joseph Smith] now Began to be anxious to git them translated. He therefore with his wife Drew off[f] the Caricters exactley like the ancient and sent Martin Harris to see if he Could git them Translated.\footnote{Dean C. Jesssee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection of Early Mormon History," \textit{BYU Studies} 17/1 (1976): 34, emphasis added.} Knight also wrote: "he [Joseph Smith] Bing [being] an unlearned man did not know what to Do. Then the Lord gave him Power to Translate himself. Then ware the Larned men Confounded, for he, By the means he found with the plates, he Could translate those Caricters Better than the Larned."\footnote{Ibid., 35.}

Notwithstanding these statements, the Joseph Knight journal does contain another statement that could be interpreted to mean that the translation of the Book of Mormon began before the Harris-Anthon meeting:

Now when he Began to translate he was poor and was put to it for provisions and had no one to write for him But his wife, and his wifes Brother would sometimes write a little for him through the winter. The Next Spring Oliver Cowdry a young man from palmyra Came to see old Mr Smith, Josephs father, about this work and he sent him Down to pensylveny to see Joseph and satisfy him self. So he Came Down and was
soon Convinced of the truth of the work. The next Spring Came Martin Harris Down to pennsylvania to write for him and he wrote 116 pages of the first part of the Book of Mormon.\textsuperscript{21}

Based on this statement, it has been suggested that Emma Smith and her brother Reuben Hale acted as scribes between December 1827 and February 1828, before the arrival of Martin Harris.\textsuperscript{22} However, “through the winter” is immediately followed by “The Next Spring Oliver Cowdry a young man from palmyma Came.” Only two paragraphs later, Joseph Knight correctly dated the time of Oliver Cowdery’s arrival as the spring of 1829.\textsuperscript{23} Furthermore, Knight is clearly incorrect in saying that Martin Harris served as scribe for the 116 pages the spring after Oliver Crowdery became scribe. Relying on the correct “spring 1829” date, it appears that the phrase through the winter refers to the winter of 1828–29, and that Emma Smith and Reuben Hale acted as scribes during that winter, and not the previous one.\textsuperscript{24}

A common theme of the prophetic account, the 1832 history, the statements by the Prophet’s parents, and the Joseph Knight journal is that Joseph Smith initially could not translate and that one reason Martin Harris presented the copied characters to Anthon and other learned men was to obtain their assistance with the translation. Lucy Smith’s statement quoted above implies that Joseph wanted the assistance of learned men in producing a key to translation by which he could translate the remainder of the book

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{22} John W. Welch and Tim Rathbone, “The Translation of the Book of Mormon: Basic Historical Information” (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1986), 7. The suggestion is also made that it was during this time period, while translating a portion of the book of Lehi with Emma acting as scribe, that the Prophet expressed his surprise at the existence of walls around Jerusalem. Ibid., 8.

\textsuperscript{23} “In the spring of 1829 Oliver Cowdry a young man from Palmry went to see old Mr Smith.” Jessee, “Joseph Knight’s History,” 36.

\textsuperscript{24} Another reason for this conclusion is that the paragraph following the passage from the Joseph Knight journal quoted in the text describes what appears to be the same winter in similar terms, including Joseph Smith’s poverty and lack of provisions, his difficulty in finding someone to write for him, and Emma’s service as scribe. This second passage records that these circumstances existed during “the first of the winter of 1828,” referring to the winter of 1828–29. Jessee, “Joseph Knight’s History,” 35.
himself.\textsuperscript{25} The deathbed testimony of Martin Harris, recorded by his son Martin Harris Jr., is also consistent with this theme:

He went by the request of the Prophet Joseph Smith to the city of New York, and presented a transcript of the records of the Book of Mormon to Professor Anthon and Dr. Mitchell and asked them to translate it. He also presented the same transcript to many other learned men at the different schools of learning in Geneva, Ithica, and Albany with the same request but was unsuccessful in obtaining the translation of the transcript from any of them.\textsuperscript{26}

In addition to the sources cited above, one other witness has written concerning the nature of the document taken to Charles Anthon. This witness is none other than Charles Anthon himself. Although Anthon may not be entirely trustworthy, he was a primary witness to the documents that were presented to him by Martin Harris. Anthon left two written statements, both letters, describing his visit with Martin Harris. In his first letter, written in 1834, Anthon wrote that Harris had come to New York to “obtain the opinion of the learned about the meaning of the paper which he brought with him, and which had been given him as a part of the contents of the book, although no translation had been furnished at the time by the young man with the spectacles.”\textsuperscript{27} In his second letter, Anthon wrote: “Each plate, according to [Harris], was inscribed with unknown characters, and the paper which he handed me, a transcript of one of these pages.”\textsuperscript{28} Referring to

\textsuperscript{25} Bushman, Beginnings of Mormonism, 86.
\textsuperscript{26} “Martin Harris, Jr., Reports Death and Testimony of His Father,” Adventure 1/4.
\textsuperscript{27} Letter to E. D. Howe, dated 17 February 1834, published in “Martin Harris’ Visit with Charles Anthon: Collected Documents on the Anthon Transcript and ‘Shorthand Egyptian’” (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1990), appendix 4, emphasis added. The most probable meaning of this statement is that no translation had been made at the time of the Harris-Anthon meeting, although it might simply mean that no translation had been furnished to Martin Harris at the time. A different version of the letter is found in CHC1:103, which maintains that “no translation had at that time been made by the young man with spectacles.”
Joseph Smith, Anthon continued: "He had also copied off one page of the book in the original character, . . . and this copy was the paper which the countryman had brought with him."  

According to both of his accounts, Anthon was a primary witness to a transcript of the copied characters, but not to a translation. Having admitted that the characters were presented to him, Anthon had little incentive to lie about whether or not he saw a translation. His letters show that he was not concerned about allegations that he had pronounced a translation of the characters to be correct. Instead, his purpose in writing was to protect his reputation from the potentially damaging allegation that he had identified the language of the characters copied from the plates. This concern is evident in the professor's immediate response to E. D. Howe: "Dear Sir—I received this morning your favor of the 9th instant, and lose no time in making a reply. The whole story about my pronouncing the Mormonite inscription to be 'reformed Egyptian hieroglyphics' is perfectly false."  

If Anthon had been concerned about allegations that he had pronounced a translation of the copied characters to be correct, he could have simply denied the allegations and ridiculed the translation, just as he actually did ridicule and deny the validity of the copied characters.  

29 Ibid. The second letter can be read to suggest that Joseph Smith had already begun translating before the Harris-Anthon encounter, although Anthon recorded that only a transcript was presented to him. Referring to the power of the spectacles to translate, Anthon wrote: "My informant assured me that this curious property of the spectacles had been actually tested, and found to be true. A young man . . . had read several pages in the golden book, and communicated their contents in writing to certain persons stationed on the outside of the curtain." Ibid.  

30 Ibid., appendix 4. Howe's letter to Anthon may have been triggered, in part, by a letter he received from William W. Phelps dated 15 January 1831. Phelps wrote that Martin Harris took the characters "to professor Anthon who translated and declared them to be the ancient short-hand Egyptian." Ibid., appendix 3.  

31 Even after Anthon’s death, the same rumor persisted. In his 1868 "Commemorative Discourse" for Anthon, Professor Henry Drisler said: "It was about this period that Professor Anthon's name was frequently introduced into the discussions relative to the origin of Mormonism. Some of the propagators of this wretched deception had referred to him as having pronounced the inscription which had been copied from the pretended golden plates of the Mormon Bible, to be 'reformed Egyptian hieroglyphics.'" Ibid., appendix 7.
In conclusion, the earliest historical accounts of the translation of the Book of Mormon, as well as Nephi's and Isaiah's prophetic accounts, indicate that Joseph Smith was unable to translate before the Harris-Anthon meeting. Also, Charles Anthon twice recorded that he saw the characters but not a translation.

3. An Unsuccessful Translation

In contrast to the earlier historical accounts, the 1839 history is clear that Joseph Smith translated characters before the Harris-Anthon meeting, and that the translation was presented to Anthon. The apparent inconsistency between these accounts may simply be a matter of semantics, requiring an identification of the context in which Joseph Smith and Martin Harris used the word *translate* in the 1839 history. Part 3 presents a hypothesis that the initial translation described in the 1839 history was an unsuccessful attempt by the Prophet Joseph Smith to translate the actual English text of the Book of Mormon, which the Prophet nevertheless referred to as a translation.

The Book of Abraham and the Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar

Like the Book of Mormon, the book of Abraham was written in Egyptian, a language Joseph Smith could not read without divine assistance. Although the Anthon transcript is the only remaining document from the earliest stages of the translation of the Book of Mormon, a number of documents exist relating to the

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32 No attempt is made here to make a comprehensive survey of either Joseph Smith's use of the word *translate* or the general usage of that word at the time the Book of Mormon was translated. However, it is clear that the word was sometimes misused. For example, William W. Phelps wrote that Martin Harris took the characters "to professor Anthon who translated and declared them to be the ancient short-hand Egyptian," in "Collected Documents on the Anthon Transcript," appendix 3, emphasis added. In this case, *translating* apparently meant identifying the language in which the characters were written. Also, on one occasion, Martin Harris apparently confused the words *translation* and *transcription*: "the translation that I carried to Professor Anthon was copied from these same plates." Martin Harris to H. B. Emerson, Smithfield, Utah, 23 November 1870, cited in the *True Latter-day Saints' Herald* 22 (15 October 1875): 630.
preliminary stages of the translation of the book of Abraham. The evidence presented below shows that Joseph actually used similar methods in the early stages of these two translations. Because of this similarity, understanding Joseph's preliminary attempts to translate the book of Abraham can give us a better understanding of the preliminary attempts to translate the Book of Mormon. Most significant to this comparison is evidence that Joseph Smith considered an activity to be translating, regardless of the outcome of that effort.

Part of the documentation for the translation of the book of Abraham consists of a group of manuscripts known as the "Kirtland Egyptian Papers." Hugh Nibley describes these documents as "a strange batch of early Church papers, all in the handwriting of men associated with Joseph Smith in Kirtland in 1837, and all classified for one reason or another as 'Egyptian.'" Although the exact date of the production of the documents is uncertain, they were probably produced sometime during 1836 and 1837.

One of these documents, Egyptian Ms. #4, is entitled "Egyptian alphabet," and appears to be in the handwriting of Joseph Smith. The "Egyptian alphabet" consists of three columns. The first column contains a list of Egyptian characters organized according to form; the second contains a transliteration of the Egyptian characters into English; and the third contains a purported translation of the characters. For example, one of the

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33 The translation of the book of Abraham, which began roughly eight years after the translation of the Book of Mormon, represents the only other instance of which I am aware in which Joseph Smith translated an ancient record actually in his possession (assuming that Joseph never physically possessed ancient documents for his translation of the Bible, or for the translation of the parchment of John found in Doctrine and Covenants 7).


35 Ibid., 350. W. W. Phelps, Frederick G. Williams, Warren Parrish, Oliver Cowdery, and Willard Richards also participated in the undertaking. Ibid., 354.

36 Ibid., 354.

37 Ibid., 351, 364, 367.

38 Ibid., 366–67. Transliterate means "to express the words of one language in the alphabetic characters of another." Webster's English Dictionary, 1972 ed., s.v. "transliterate." For example, in Abraham 3:18, which states that
characters is transliterated as “Aleph,” and is accompanied by the interpretation “in the beginning with God His first born son.”

Interestingly, one of the definitions of grammar is “the science of language, from the point of view of pronunciation, inflexion, syntax, and historical development.” Joseph may have referred to his work as a grammar because the transliterations into English were in a sense a pronunciation guide.

Nibley summarizes Egyptian Ms. #4 as follows: “From this it would appear (1) that we have here a perfectly sane and rational approach to a problem, (2) that the approach is experimental and not authoritarian, and (3) that it was abandoned at an early stage.” He also writes: “All the Grammar and Alphabet projects . . . aborted dismally; none of them could ever have been used even as an imaginary basis for constructing the story of Abraham.” Notwithstanding the failure of the grammar and alphabet projects, Joseph Smith referred to such unsuccessful attempts as “translating”: “The remainder of this month, I was continually engaged in translating an alphabet to the Book of Abraham, and arranging a grammar of the Egyptian language, as practiced by the ancients.” This statement is evidence that Joseph considered

spirits “are gnolaum, or eternal,” Joseph provided first a transliteration and then a translation of an Egyptian word. Book of Mormon examples of this same format include: “Irreantum, which, being interpreted, is many waters” (1 Nephi 17:5); “Rameumptom, which, being interpreted, is the holy stand” (Alma 31:21); and “desert, which, by interpretation, is a honey bee” (Ether 2:3).

Although it is unlikely that the “translation” of this character had anything to do with the content of the revealed book of Abraham, this attempt to assign meaning to a particular Egyptian character is certainly a logical one. Once the character had been identified as “Aleph,” which if Hebrew, would be the first letter of the alphabet, then the explanations of “in the beginning with God” and “first born son” make perfectly good sense.


Ibid., 365. In Phelps’s “Grammar & Alphabet [sic] of the Egyptian Language” (Egyptian Ms. #1), he transliterated the first character as “Za Ki on hish.” Although Phelps wrote instructions for “Translating this character,” and apparently considered the activity to be translating, no actual translation is provided. Like Egyptian Ms. #4, it is unlikely that Egyptian Ms. #1 was used as a basis for preparing the actual text of the book of Abraham. Ibid., 361.

HC 2:238 (July 1835). Although Egyptian Ms. #4 may have been produced at a later time than the 1835 journal entry, the Prophet said that he was “translating” an alphabet to the book of Abraham, and Egyptian Ms. #4 is the
experimental and preliminary attempts as translating, regardless of the outcome.

**A Comparison of the Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar with the Reformed Egyptian Alphabet (and Grammar)**

The available evidence suggests that the document taken to Charles Anthon was similar to the documents prepared during the Egyptian alphabet and grammar projects. First, Lucy Smith wrote that her son “was instructed ‘to take off a facsimile of the characters composing the alphabet which were called reformed egyptian Alphabetically and send them to all the learned men that he could find and ask them for the translation of the same.’” Like the Egyptian alphabet, this reformed Egyptian alphabet may have consisted of a list of the different characters, organized in columns, which Joseph Smith found on the plates. According to Anthon’s first letter, the document presented to him actually “consisted of all kinds of crooked characters disposed in columns”; he also wrote that these characters “were arranged in perpendicular columns.”

Second, Anthon’s 1834 letter suggests that more than just an alphabet was found on the document. Although Anthon wrote that “no translation had been furnished” at the time Martin Harris visited him, he also reported that Joseph Smith had “decyphered the characters in the book, and, having committed some of them to paper,” gave copies to others. The document presented to Anthon contained these deciphered characters. The same dis-

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44 Bushman, *Beginnings of Mormonism*, 86. Interestingly, Anthon recorded that the “import” of the written statement he gave to Martin Harris was “that the marks in the paper appeared to be merely an imitation of various alphabetical characters, and had, in my opinion, no meaning at all connected with them.” “Collected Documents on the Anthon Transcript,” appendix 5, 18, emphasis added.


46 Ibid., emphasis added.
tinction between the words decipher and translate is made in Anthon’s 1841 letter, in which he wrote that the “spectacles” enabled an individual “not only to decipher the characters on the plates, but also to comprehend their exact meaning, and be able to translate them!!”

Some of the related meanings of the word decipher are (1) “To convert into ordinary writing (what is written in a cipher)”; (2) “to make out or interpret (a communication in cipher) by means of the key”; and (3) “to read or transliterate from secret writing.” If, as suggested by Charles Anthon, the document presented to him contained a decipherment rather than a translation of reformed Egyptian characters, the Prophet may have transliterated the characters into ordinary written English without conveying their actual meaning. Such a transliteration would be entirely consistent with Joseph Smith’s Egyptian alphabet. Furthermore, if the reformed Egyptian alphabet did contain transliterations of reformed Egyptian characters, then like the Egyptian alphabet, the document would have contained a pronunciation guide and could properly have been referred to as an “alphabet and grammar.”

Finally, although Anthon did not mention seeing a translation, both Joseph Smith and Martin Harris referred to a translation. With a column for a translation, the reformed Egyptian alphabet would have had exactly the same three columns that the Egyptian alphabet had. However, if Joseph Smith’s reformed Egyptian alphabet was anything like his Egyptian alphabet, it was not a source
for any of the actual English text of the Book of Mormon. Nevertheless, the Prophet may well have referred to the product as a "translation," much like he did in his 1835 journal entry quoted above.52

One final comparison between the translation of the Book of Mormon and the translation of the book of Abraham can be made. According to the 1839 history, the learned Charles Anthon told Martin Harris "that the translation was correct, more so than any he had before seen translated from the Egyptian" (Joseph Smith—History 1:64). A few years later, Michael Chandler, the owner of the Egyptian papyrus from which the book of Abraham was produced, asked Joseph Smith to translate some of the characters on the papyrus. Accordingly, "the Prophet gave Mr. Chandler a translation of some few of the Egyptian characters, which agreed with the interpretation given by learned men in other cities."53 Therefore, with respect to both the Book of Mormon and the book of Abraham (or at least, part of the papyrus), Joseph’s preliminary translations apparently agreed with those given by learned men.

However, the translation given to Chandler was made in early July 1835,54 before the experimental Egyptian alphabet projects were undertaken. It is unlikely that Joseph would at first be able to provide an accurate translation of the characters on the papyrus, and would then regress to the failed Egyptian alphabet projects. We should consider the possibility that when Joseph’s preliminary translations, whether of Egyptian characters or of reformed Egyptian characters, agreed with the translations of the learned men of the world, the Prophet was himself translating as a man, or as the student of languages that he was, in the same experimental form evidenced by his Egyptian alphabet. This is especially so considering that the world cannot find the revealed book of Abraham in

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52 Interestingly, when the Lord told Oliver Cowdery "it is because that you did not continue as you commenced, when you began to translate, that I have taken away this privilege from you" (D&C 9:5), he also used the word translate in reference to a failed attempt to produce the actual English text of the Book of Mormon. This assumes that Oliver Cowdery did not successfully translate any of the Book of Mormon.
53 HC 2:350n.
54 HC 2:235.
the preserved papyrus, nor could an uninspired Charles Anthon provide a correct translation of the unknown language of reformed Egyptian. 55

In summary, just as the Egyptian alphabet was an unsuccessful experiment, yet considered by Joseph Smith to be a translation, the reformed Egyptian alphabet may also well have been a failed experiment that Joseph Smith considered to be a translation.

Translating an Alphabet

Regardless of how much alike the reformed Egyptian alphabet and the Egyptian alphabet were, if the document taken to Anthon really was a list of individual alphabetic characters, as the Egyptian alphabet was and as Lucy Smith and Charles Anthon reported, it is unlikely that Joseph could have translated those characters into the actual text of the Book of Mormon. Translating the characters under these circumstances would be comparable to translating the letters of the English alphabet. For example, it would be similar to trying to translate the letter d. Because each character in the list would have been completely removed from the context of the original text, unless an individual character had independent significance, any translation would be meaningless. 56

Assuming that reformed Egyptian characters were derived from Egyptian hieroglyphics, 57 a single reformed Egyptian

55 My assumption that Anthon could not translate reformed Egyptian is based on Moroni’s statement that “none other people knoweth our language; and because that none other people knoweth our language, therefore [the Lord] hath prepared means for the interpretation thereof” (Mormon 9:33). Furthermore, no one has ever translated the characters on the Anthon transcript, and Charles Anthon certainly knew less about the ancient Egyptian language than Egyptologists know today.

56 “The basic idea of writing is that symbols represent sounds and that smaller units make up larger units—not compounds or composites, but true units. Thus a letter by itself is without significance; there must be a reference to something which goes beyond it—other letters making a word or a name.” Hugh W. Nibley, “Genesis of the Written Word,” in Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 471.

57 Although no one knows exactly what type of language reformed Egyptian is, Nibley has suggested that the reformed Egyptian characters appearing on the Anthon transcript are similar to demotic Egyptian characters. Hugh W. Nibley, Since Cumorah, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS,
character is unlikely to have independent significance. Taking the characters individually or as a group, any attempt by Joseph Smith to translate such an alphabet would have been futile and the translation would most likely have had no intelligible meaning.

1988), 149–50. Charles Anthon apparently thought so, because by way of Martin Harris, he is very likely the source from which William Phelps became aware of the term short-hand Egyptian, a term being used at the time to describe demotic or hieratic writing, as shown in “Collected Documents on the Anthon Transcript,” appendix 3. Demotic Egyptian is a highly abbreviated and cursive form of Egyptian writing that is “intimately related” to hieroglyphic writing. Sir Alan Gardiner, Egyptian Grammar, 3rd cd. rev. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 13. Nibley, Since Cumorah, 150, also suggests that Meroitic Egyptian, which developed out of demotic, “has the most striking affinities to the characters on the so-called Anthon Transcript.” Even if the relationship were distant, it is unlikely that Nephi would start with “the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 1:2) and work backward to a written language in which each character was a symbol of something else. On the morning Michael Chandler first presented his Egyptian papyri to Joseph Smith, he was shown “a number of characters like those upon the writings of [Chandler] which were previously copied from the plates, containing the history of the Nephites, or book of Mormon.” Messenger and Advocate 2/3 (December 1835): 235.

58 Although hieroglyphic writing is not alphabetic, an individual hieroglyphic character generally has no independent significance. According to Gardiner, Egyptian Grammar, 8, the two types of signs in Egyptian hieroglyphics are ideograms and phonograms. Phonograms are “signs used for spelling” that have “acquired sound-values.” A phonogram may represent a single consonant (and in that sense be alphabetic) or may represent a combination of two or three consonants. Ibid., 25. Signs representing two or three consonants “are almost always accompanied by alphabetic signs expressing part or the whole of their sound-value.” Ibid., 38. Ideograms “convey their meaning pictorially” and “signify either the actual object depicted . . . or else some closely connected notion.” Ibid. Ideograms are “more often than not . . . accompanied by sound-signs . . . indicating the precise word to be understood.” Ibid., 30. Some ideograms operate as “determinatives,” being placed at the end of a word, where they serve “to determine the meaning of the foregoing sound-signs and to define that meaning in a general way.” Ibid., 31. Also, many hieroglyphic signs were alphabetic in nature. Frank Moore Cross recently stated that “it never occurred to conservative Egyptian scribes that they could take . . . one-consonant signs and use them as an alphabet.” Cross refers to such signs as a “pseudo-alphabet,” which “existed unrecognized in their massive syllabary of three or four hundred signs in regular use.” Frank Moore Cross, “How the Alphabet Democratized Civilization,” Bible Review (December 1992): 21.

59 I have no doubt that God could have revealed the correct translation of the Book of Mormon to Joseph regardless of the nature of the alphabet he
The Words of the Book

If the theory is accepted that Joseph Smith’s alphabet of reformed Egyptian consisted of a random list of characters with no independent meaning, either individually or collectively, how was the prophecy to be fulfilled that the “words” of the book would be delivered to “the learned” (2 Nephi 27:15)? One answer is that two different documents were presented to Charles Anthon. Joseph Smith “copied a considerable number” of characters, but translated only “some of them” (Joseph Smith—History 1:62). The Prophet may have copied the “considerable number” of characters just as he found them on the plates and then produced his alphabet from that transcription. If so, the first document would have contained the untranslated “words” of the Book of Mormon, and the prophecy would have been fulfilled when this document was shown to Anthon.

According to Martin Harris, he first presented Anthon with “the characters which had been translated, with the translation thereof,” and “then showed him those which were not yet translated” (Joseph Smith—History 1:64). The fact that the document with only characters has apparently survived, while the document with the “translation” has not, may suggest something about the relative value of the two documents. Once Joseph had begun his inspired translation of the Book of Mormon, the document with the alphabet and accompanying “translation” would not only have been useless, but would also have been incorrect, and may therefore have been discarded.

4. The Requirement of Studying It Out

According to Joseph Fielding Smith, Joseph Smith did not immediately translate the Book of Mormon but was initially involved in a period of study and investigation. President Smith wrote that although “nothing was done towards translating the record that year [1827],” Joseph “was busy studying the characters and making himself familiar with them and the use of the Urim and Thummim. He had a great deal more to do than merely

produced. However, for the reasons discussed in Part 4, I don’t believe that God would reveal the translation during a preliminary and experimental stage.
to sit down and with the use of the instrument prepared for that purpose translate the characters on the plates.” President Smith concluded: “Nothing worth while comes to us merely for the asking. 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.”

This principle is demonstrated in Oliver Cowdery’s failed attempt to translate, which provides an illustration of the translation process that at least partially applied to Joseph. Although Oliver had a gift to “receive a knowledge concerning the engravings of old records, which are ancient” (D&C 8:1, 4), and also may have had the use of the Urim and Thummim and even the plates, he still failed in his attempt to translate. As a result, the Lord gave the following counsel to Oliver Cowdery:

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. But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is

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61 Ibid., 216, emphasis in original.
62 B. H. Roberts thought that although Doctrine and Covenants 9 is “the Lord’s description of how another man could exercise the gift of translation, . . . doubtless it is substantially the manner in which Joseph Smith did exercise it, and the manner in which he translated the Book of Mormon,” CHC1:132, emphasis in original.
wrong; therefore, you cannot write that which is sacred save it be given you from me. (D&C 9:7–9)

The Lord’s use of the word if in the revelation is significant, for it tells us that even if he studied it out in his mind and used the Urim and Thummim, the translator could produce a translation that was incorrect. Whether the translator was Joseph or Oliver, each had to study the problem out in his mind and then ask God if his conclusion was correct. According to the revelation, if the translation was not correct, the translator would have a stupor of thought. Given this process, we should not be surprised by the suggestion that Joseph made unsuccessful attempts to translate. In fact, we should expect that this would be the case. The Kirtland Egyptian Papers are an excellent example of documents that would have resulted in a stupor of thought. The translation taken to Charles Anthon may also have been the result of a similar stupor. At least, that document is lost or destroyed, much like “a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong” (D&C 9:9).

This mandatory requirement of studying a problem out in one’s own mind before qualifying to receive revelation suggests that before God intervenes, he first requires his children to do all that is in their power to accomplish a task. B. H. Roberts wrote: “God sets no premium upon mental or spiritual laziness; for whatever means God may have provided to assist man to arrive at the truth, he has always made it necessary for man to couple with those means his utmost endeavor of mind and heart.” Therefore, although Joseph’s initial efforts may have been unsuccessful in the sense that he was unable to translate the actual text of the Book of Mormon, they were nevertheless successful in the sense

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64 Referring to the Kirtland Egyptian Papers, Nibley writes: “If the brethren were invited to try a hand at inspired writing and translation, to study it out in your mind; then . . . ask me if it be right,’ (D&C 9:8) we need not be surprised if all sorts of speculative papers, diagrams and word-jugglings turn up as remnants of such preliminary study; it would be surprising, rather, if they did not.” Nibley, “Kirtland Egyptian Papers,” 362.

65 An analogous principle was taught by Nephi: “for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23).

66 CHC 1:130.
that they qualified Joseph to eventually receive the divinely revealed text of the Book of Mormon.

Sending Martin Harris to seek Charles Anthon's help in preparing a translation key for the Book of Mormon may have been part of Joseph Smith's doing all that was humanly possible to bring about the translation, thereby qualifying himself for divine assistance. In an 1870 interview, Martin Harris was reported to say that Joseph did not translate the Book of Mormon "until after the most learned men had exhausted their knowledge of letters in the vain effort to decipher the characters, . . . and after all human means had failed to secure a translation, Smith was commissioned to undertake the task."67

Niblery's conclusion regarding the Kirtland Egyptian Papers should be considered for its possible application to the early stages of the translation of the Book of Mormon:

The Kirtland Egyptian Papers, we submit, represent that mandatory preliminary period of investigation and exploration during which men are required to "study it out in your mind" (D&C 9:8), making every effort to "obtain for themselves" whatever can be so obtained, thereby discovering and acknowledging their own limitations, before asking for direct revelation from on high.68

The foregoing discussion is summarized well in the following statement: "All his life Joseph Smith dealt with ancient documents, constantly stretching his own mind to bridge the gap of the unknown, and then calling upon the Lord when a problem exceeded his powers. It is thus that we grow in knowledge and understanding."69

67 Iowa State Register, Des Moines (16 August 1870), emphasis added. This interview took place during Martin Harris's journey to Utah with Edward Stevenson after many years away from the Church.

68 Nibley, "Kirtland Egyptian Papers," 398. "And Joseph freely lets them go their way while he goes his, each under obligation to 'study it out in your mind' before asking for revelation." Ibid., 365, emphasis in original.

69 Ibid., 365.
5. Conclusion

Although the 1839 history clearly records that Joseph Smith translated a number of characters off the plates before the Harris-Anthon encounter, Nephi’s prophetic account and a number of historical accounts indicate that Joseph Smith was initially unable to translate the Book of Mormon and sought the assistance of learned men to help with the translation. Evidence also exists that Joseph referred to experimental and preliminary attempts as translating, regardless of the outcome. For this reason, Joseph could consistently refer to translated characters even at a time when he had been completely unsuccessful in his efforts. This is exactly the process of human effort and study that one would expect from reading Doctrine and Covenants 9.

In conclusion, Nibley’s description of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers can appropriately be applied to the translation of the Book of Mormon: “[The Anthon transcript was] a milestone, now left far behind. . . . There will be other milestones, but the lesson of each will be the same, namely, that the more diligently we seek, the better right we have to ask.”\(^70\)

\(^70\) Ibid., 399.