



THE
Translation
 OF THE
Book of Mormon:
 A
Marvel
 AND A
Wonder



**By Elder
 LeGrand R.
 Curtis Jr.**

General Authority
 Seventy and
 Church Historian
 and Recorder

In the Book of Mormon, Nephi quotes Isaiah, the Old Testament prophet, concerning the coming forth of a book. The book will come forth “in the last days, or in the days of the Gentiles,” will contain revelations from God, some of its words will be sealed for a time, and witnesses will help establish the words of the book (see 2 Nephi 27:1, 7, 10, 13–14).

That book is the Book of Mormon. Its coming forth is an important part of the “marvelous work and a wonder,” the Restoration of the gospel prophesied by both Isaiah and Nephi (see Isaiah 29:14, 2 Nephi 27:26). The Book of Mormon is a marvel to all of us who have the blessing of reading it. No wonder President Russell M. Nelson has called it a “miraculous miracle.”¹



The coming forth of this miraculous scripture was accomplished only by the gift and power of God.

To Come Forth in Our Day

The Book of Mormon contains the teachings of ancient prophets that were written on gold plates and preserved to come forth in our day. The story of its preservation and translation fills us with wonder at the faith and perseverance of Joseph Smith and his associates and with gratitude for their devoted effort.

Moroni, the last of the prophets to write on the plates, appeared to Joseph in 1823 and showed him where the plates were located. For the next four years the angel Moroni tutored Joseph, preparing him for the work of translation and other work God had for him to do. Ultimately, Moroni gave the plates to Joseph, promising that if he “would use all [his] endeavors to preserve them,” the plates would be protected. That promise was fulfilled. Although “strenuous exertions” were made by wicked people to take the plates from Joseph, and “every stratagem that could be invented was resorted to for that purpose,” the plates remained safely in Joseph’s hands until the translation was completed and the plates were delivered back to Moroni. (See Joseph Smith—History 1:30–54, 59, 60.)

By the Gift and Power of God

But how was that translation accomplished? When Joseph received the plates, he could read and write no language other than English. In fact, he had little education. His wife Emma recalled that he “could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter; let alone dictat[e] a book like the Book of Mormon. And, though I was an active participant in the scenes that transpired, . . . it is marvelous to me, ‘a marvel and a wonder.’”²

Joseph Smith explained repeatedly that he translated the Book of Mormon “by the gift and power of God.”³ Those closest to the translation described the process in remarkably similar terms:

- “The Testimony of Three Witnesses,” which was published in the first edition of the Book of Mormon and has appeared in every edition since, uses the same phrase.
- Oliver Cowdery, Joseph’s principal scribe during the translation process, used that phrase,⁴ as did David Whitmer, who joined Oliver

“BY THE *gift* AND *power* of God”

Cowdery and Martin Harris as one of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon.⁵

- Other early Church writers also used that phrase, as does the introduction to the Book of Mormon in the current edition.⁶

The Process of Translation

Joseph himself did not elaborate about the process of translation, but Oliver, David, and Emma provided some additional information. Oliver said: “These were days never to be forgotten—to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the inspiration of heaven, awakened the utmost gratitude of this bosom! Day after day I continued, uninterrupted, to write from [Joseph’s] mouth, as he translated with the Urim and Thummim, or, as the Nephites would have said, ‘Interpreters,’ the history or record called ‘The Book of Mormon’” (Joseph Smith—History 1:71, note).

The “interpreters” used by Joseph during the translation process included the “two stones in silver bows” that were deposited by Moroni with the plates (see Joseph Smith—History 1:35). In addition to these two seer stones, Joseph used at least one other seer stone that the Lord had provided.⁷

David Whitmer, whose family provided a place for Joseph and Oliver to complete the work of translation, provided this additional information: “Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation

in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear. Thus the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God, and not by any power of man.”⁸

All of us who have tried to read illuminated words on a screen can understand why Joseph would have used a hat or something else to screen out extraneous light when he was reading the words on the seer stone.

Emma Smith recollected:

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

“When he stopped for any purpose at any time he would, when he commenced again, begin where he left off without any hesitation.”⁹

The Power of the Holy Ghost

The result of this miraculous translation is that we have the marvelous words of the Book of Mormon. Because of that, we can experience the power of the Holy Ghost as we read those inspired words (see Moroni 10:3–5).

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles describes his early encounter with the Book of Mormon: “In [my] role as witness I wish to declare that the spiritual experiences and holy affirmations I have had regarding the Savior and his restored church *first* came to me as a young man when I read the Book of Mormon. It was while reading this sacred record that I felt—again and again—the undeniable





For more information on the translation of the Book of Mormon, see *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*, vol. 1, *The Standard of Truth, 1815–1846* (2018), chapters 5–7, and the Gospel Library topic “Book of Mormon Translation.”

whispering of the Holy Ghost declaring to my soul the truthfulness of its message. To those first convictions have been added, one way or another, all of the other quickening moments and sanctifying manifestations that now give meaning to my days and purpose to my life.”¹⁰

Similarly, my first recognition of the Spirit came when I read the Book of Mormon as a young man. As a 14-year-old seminary student, I started reading that marvelous book. As I read, I felt something. The feeling was good; it was warm; and I could tell that it came from God. I loved the stories in the Book of Mormon, and I loved the wonderful teachings. But most of all, I loved how I felt when I read it.

That was 53 years ago. I have felt that feeling over and over in the intervening years as I have opened the book (or electronic device in recent years) and let the words and the Spirit envelop me. I have also felt that Spirit as I have pondered, memorized, or prayed about the words of the Book of Mormon. I have been even more blessed as I have tried to live its teachings.

I am extremely grateful for the blessing of the miraculous translation of the Book of Mormon by Joseph Smith. I am thankful for Joseph, Emma,

Oliver, the Whitmer family, and everyone else who helped in that process. Now, more than 190 years later, I am also grateful for the marvelous Spirit I feel when I open the Book of Mormon. ■

NOTES

1. Russell M. Nelson, “The Book of Mormon: A Miraculous Miracle” (address at the seminar for new mission presidents, June 23, 2016).
2. Emma Smith, “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” *Saints’ Herald*, Oct. 1, 1879, 290.
3. Preface to the Book of Mormon (1830 ed.). For additional instances when Joseph explained the process in these terms, see John W. Welch, ed., *Opening the Heavens* (2005), 121–29.
4. See Oliver Cowdery, in Reuben Miller, *Journal*, Oct. 21, 1848, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
5. See David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (1887), 12.
6. See “The Book of Mormon,” *The Evening and the Morning Star*, Jan. 1833, [2]; Doctrine and Covenants 135:3.
7. See Richard E. Turley Jr., Robin S. Jensen, and Mark Ashurst-McGee, “Joseph the Seer,” *Ensign*, Oct. 2015, 48–55.
8. Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, 12.
9. Emma Smith, in Edmund C. Briggs, “A Visit to Nauvoo in 1856,” *Journal of History*, vol. 9, no. 4 (Oct. 1916), 454.
10. Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant: The Messianic Message of the Book of Mormon* (1997), 343.