

The Coming Forth of the

# BOOK OF MORMION



*Like Joseph Smith, you need not lead  
a perfect life in order to be a powerful  
instrument in God's hands.*





By Matthew S. Holland

*This is the second article in a two-part series about the Prophet Joseph Smith. The first article, "The Path to Palmyra," appeared in the June 2015 issue of the Ensign.*

Just as Joseph Smith's path to Palmyra was strewn with trials and grief and testing, so too was his effort to bring forth the Book of Mormon—a process that, at one point, took him to one of his deepest troughs of despair.

On the night of September 21, 1823, Joseph was restless. It had been three years since his grand theophany, seeing God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, face to face in response to his heartfelt plea to know which church was right. Since that day, he had "frequently [fallen] into many foolish errors, and displayed the weakness of youth, and the foibles of human nature" (Joseph Smith—History 1:28).

Conscious of these shortcomings, 17-year-old Joseph pleaded "for forgiveness of all [his] sins and follies" (Joseph Smith—History 1:29). In response, an angel appeared at his bedside, Joseph reported, "and he said the Lord had forgiven me my sins."<sup>1</sup>

The angel, who called himself Moroni, told Joseph that a book "written upon gold plates" and containing "the fulness of the everlasting Gospel" had been deposited in a hill near his home in Palmyra, New York. With that book "were two stones in silver bows—and these stones, fastened to a breastplate, constituted what is called the Urim and Thummim," which "God had prepared . . . for the purpose of translating the book" (Joseph Smith—History 1:34, 35).

Two more times that night Moroni visited the increasingly astonished young man, carefully repeating all he had said before. Each time, he added a caution, "telling me," Joseph said, "that Satan would try to tempt me (in consequence of the indigent circumstances of my father's family), to get the plates for the purpose of getting rich. This he forbade me, saying that I must have no other object in view in getting the plates but to glorify God, and must not be influenced by any other motive than that of building his kingdom; otherwise I could not get them" (Joseph Smith—History 1:46).

The next day Joseph was exhausted from the experiences of the night before. His father excused him from farm work, and as Joseph headed home to rest, Moroni visited him a fourth time. The angel instructed Joseph to return to his



father and tell him of the vision, which Joseph did. Then he headed for the nearby hill (see Joseph Smith—History 1:49–50).

After arriving at the hill, Joseph pried open a buried stone box in which the plates lay and reached in to take them. As he did so, a strong shock threw him backward and sapped him of his strength. When he cried out, asking why he could not obtain the plates, Moroni told him, “Because you have not kept the commandments of the Lord.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite the angel’s explicit warning, Joseph harbored thoughts that the plates might solve his family’s financial woes.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, Moroni established a four-year probationary period for Joseph to mature and prepare his heart and mind to approach his calling with the purity of purpose required for such a sacred work.

### Obstacles to Translation

Four years later Joseph was finally ready. Obstacles to translating the plates, however, were immense. Newly

married, Joseph needed to work to provide for Emma and himself, as well as for his extended family members, who still relied heavily on his contribution. Perhaps even more distracting, Joseph faced sweeping community opposition and avarice that threatened exposure and loss of the plates.

When a Palmyra mob demanded that Joseph show them the plates or be tarred and feathered, he knew he had to leave.<sup>4</sup> So, in late 1827, Joseph placed the plates in a barrel of beans, packed up some belongings, borrowed \$50 from his friend and early believer Martin Harris, and took his pregnant wife more than 100 miles (161 km) south to Harmony, Pennsylvania, to live with Emma’s parents. He hoped the change would ease their daily labors and free them of the cauldron of greed and animosity that gripped Palmyra.

Conditions improved enough that winter that Joseph was able to translate a few Book of Mormon characters. In April, Martin Harris moved to Harmony to assist Joseph as scribe, and the work of translation began in earnest. By the middle of June—roughly five years since the fateful day Joseph had first been directed to the Hill Cumorah to obtain the plates—they had produced 116 manuscript pages of translation.<sup>5</sup>

At this point Martin pleaded with Joseph for permission to take the manuscript to Palmyra to show his wife, Lucy, who quite understandably wanted to see some evidence of what was taking up so much of her husband’s time and treasure. Yet, after inquiring of the Lord, Joseph was told twice not to let Martin take the manuscript.<sup>6</sup>

Desperate to placate the skepticism and increasingly shrill demands of his wife, Martin badgered Joseph again. In agony, Joseph went to the Lord a third time. In response, the Lord told Joseph that Martin could take the manuscript if he would show it only to five designated people and then promptly return it. Reluctantly, Joseph gave the manuscript to him, but only after Martin signed a written covenant to do as the Lord had instructed.<sup>7</sup>

This began a cascade of events that would bring Joseph as low as anything that would ever happen to him. Shortly after Martin departed, Emma gave birth to a baby boy. She



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and Joseph named their first child Alvin, a comforting tribute to Joseph's dearly departed brother, who had died five years earlier. Tragically, rather than fill a void, young Alvin enlarged it when he passed away the day of his birth, June 15, 1828.

As if that were not enough to bear, between the exhaustion of a long and intense labor and the emotional distress of losing her child, Emma moved perilously close to death herself. For two weeks Joseph worried over Emma, nursing her back to health even as he worked through his own grief over baby Alvin. When Emma finally showed signs of

After Joseph arrived and finally took a little nourishment, Martin was summoned. He was to join the Smiths for breakfast but did not show up until noon. Walking slowly, he stopped at the gate to the home, got on the fence, pulled his hat over his eyes, and just sat there.<sup>10</sup>

### **“All Is Lost!”**

Finally, Martin made his way into the home. Without speaking a word, he took up his utensils to eat. But before taking a bite, he cried out, “Oh, I have lost my soul!”<sup>11</sup>

With this, Joseph jumped up and burst out: “Martin, have you lost that manuscript? [H]ave you broken your oath, and brought down condemnation upon my head, as well as your own?”

Martin somberly replied, “Yes, it is gone, and I know not where.”<sup>12</sup> (Martin had shown the manuscript pages to others besides the five, “and by stratagem,” Joseph later recounted, “they were taken from him.”<sup>13</sup>)

Joseph exploded into a wail, crying out: “All is lost! [A]ll is lost! What shall I do? I have sinned—it is I who tempted the wrath of God.” With this, “sobs and groans, and the most bitter lamentations filled the house,” Joseph showing the greatest distress of them all.<sup>14</sup>

The translation work ceased for a season, and the plates and interpreters were taken from Joseph until September 22—a poignant reminder of his earlier probational period. He also suffered this stern rebuke from the Lord:

“And 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” (D&C 3:6–8).

Imagine the difficulty of receiving such a revelation. Joseph had just lost his firstborn son. He had nearly lost his



stabilizing health, Joseph's thoughts turned to Martin and the manuscript.<sup>8</sup>

Sensing Joseph's anxiety, Emma encouraged him to return to Palmyra to check on Martin and the manuscript. With a visible gloom, he took a stagecoach north. Unable to eat or sleep on the journey, Joseph made it to his parents' home—still a good 20-mile (32 km) walk through the dead of night from where the stage let him off—only by the steadying hand of a worried fellow passenger (a “stranger”) who took pity on him.<sup>9</sup>



wife. And his decision to give Martin the manuscript was driven by an earnest desire to help a friend who was helping him in a sacred work. Yes, however distraught Joseph was, and however dependent upon Martin Harris he thought he was, he had missed one thing God fully expects of His disciples: always trust in the arm of the Lord and not in the arm of the flesh. To Joseph's everlasting credit, he learned this lesson in such a deep and profound way that he never made the mistake again, and not long after again receiving the plates and interpreters, he began a pace of religious contribution the likes of which the world had not seen since



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the personal ministry of Jesus Christ. Starting in the spring of 1829, now with Oliver Cowdery at his side, Joseph translated an astonishing 588 pages of the Book of Mormon in what was, at most, 65 working days.<sup>15</sup> This is truly blinding speed when compared with his previous efforts. It is also instructive to note that the translation of the King James Bible took 47 trained scholars, working in languages they already knew, seven years to complete.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, in the midst of this monumental production, Joseph and Oliver also preached sermons, received and recorded revelations, participated in the restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods, got baptized, attended to home duties, and moved to Fayette, New York, to get the manuscript published. But the greatest miracle in all of this is not found in how fast things were accomplished but in the complexity of what was produced in that highly demanding time frame.

### **A Remarkable, Complex Book**

According to one recent scholarly summary, here is what Joseph effectively produced in those 65 working days of translation: “Not only are there more than a thousand years of history [in the Book of Mormon] involving some two hundred named individuals and nearly a hundred distinct places, but the narrative itself is presented as the work of three primary editor/historians—Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni. These figures, in turn, claim to have based their accounts on dozens of preexisting records. The result is a complex mix that incorporates multiple genres ranging from straightforward narration to inserted sermons and letters to scriptural commentary and poetry. It requires considerable patience to work out all the details of chronology, geography, genealogy, and source records, but the Book of Mormon is remarkably consistent on all this. The chronology is handled virtually without glitches, despite several flashbacks and temporally overlapping narratives; . . . and the narrators keep straight both the order and family connections among the twenty-six Nephite record keepers and forty-one Jaredite kings (including rival lines). The complexity is such that one would assume the author worked from charts and maps, though Joseph Smith’s wife . . . explicitly denied that he had written something out beforehand that he either had memorized or consulted as he translated, and indeed she claimed that Joseph began sessions of dictation without looking at the manuscript or having the last passage read back to him.”<sup>17</sup>

*Joseph and Oliver participated in the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood in the Susquehanna Valley in the spring of 1829.*



And this is to say nothing of the presence of highly sophisticated literary structures and striking parallels with ancient customs and forms of communication, among other things, associated with the book and its translation.<sup>18</sup>

In the face of this, one simply has to ask, how did a man—especially one with practically no formal education—accomplish such a feat? To my mind, at least, Joseph Smith did not make up the Book of Mormon because he could not have made it up. But this logic, as strong as it may seem, is not, finally, decisive proof of the book’s veracity; nor does it stand as the foundation of my testimony. What it does do is give added weight to that which the Spirit taught me not so long ago as a full-time missionary. In the hallowed halls of the Provo Missionary Training Center and in the verdant hills and valleys of Scotland, I experienced spiritual witness after spiritual witness that Joseph Smith was called of God, that he was His instrument in these latter days, and that he brought forth a book that existed long before he was born, a book that is true and without peer—the unparalleled keystone of a godly life of happiness.

I also declare that Joseph Smith’s life is a searing testimony of what may be the unifying message of the book itself. As the Book of Mormon opens, Nephi declares, “Behold, I, Nephi, will show unto you that the tender *mercies* of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen, because of their faith” (1 Nephi 1:20; emphasis added). As the book closes, Moroni pleads, “Behold, I would exhort you that when ye shall read these things . . . that ye would remember how *merciful* the Lord hath been unto the children of men,

from the creation of Adam even down until the time that ye shall receive these things” (Moroni 10:3; emphasis added).<sup>19</sup>

From beginning to end, Book of Mormon testimony and history show that God is anxiously willing to work with, heal, and bless those who—despite their sins and imperfections—turn to Him in genuine contrition and faith.

### Put Your Trust in God

Like Joseph Smith, you need not lead a perfect life in order to be a powerful instrument in God’s hands. Mistakes, failure, and confusion were part of Joseph’s life and mission, and they are going to be part of yours too. But do not despair. Do not be tempted to think that “all is lost.” All is not lost and will never be lost for those who look to the God of mercy and live. You have a Brother who watches over you, ready to rescue you and advance your service with arms far stronger than your arms—far stronger, in fact, than all other arms of the flesh combined. Those arms are there to sustain and bless you, “in every time of trouble” (D&C 3:8), no matter how alone and discouraged you may feel. Therefore, as you move forward with your life, trust in those arms and “be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid . . . for the Lord thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee” (Deuteronomy 31:6).

Joseph discovered this and changed the world. You can too. ■

*From a devotional address, “The Making of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith, and You,” delivered at the Provo Missionary Training Center on February 15, 2014. The author lives in Utah, USA.*

#### NOTES

1. In *Histories, Volume 1: 1832–1844*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* (2012), 14; see also [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
2. In *Histories, Vol. 1: 1832–44*, 83.
3. See Oliver Cowdery, “A Remarkable Vision,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star*, Nov. 1840, 175.
4. See Martin Harris, in *Tiffany’s Monthly*, June 1859, 170.
5. See *Histories, Vol. 1: 1832–44*, 244; see also Gospel Topics, “Book of Mormon Translation,” [lds.org/topics](http://lds.org/topics).
6. See *Histories, Vol. 1: 1832–44*, 245.
7. See *Histories, Vol. 1: 1832–44*, 245–46.
8. See Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (1853), 118.
9. See Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 119–20.
10. See Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 120.
11. In Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 121.
12. In Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 121.
13. In *Histories, Vol. 1: 1832–44*, 247.
14. In Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 121–22.
15. See John W. Welch, “How Long Did It Take Joseph Smith to Translate the Book of Mormon?” *Ensign*, Jan. 1988, 47.
16. See “King James I of England,” [kingjamesbibleonline.org/King-James.php](http://kingjamesbibleonline.org/King-James.php).
17. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (2010), 6–7.
18. See Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (2002), 156.
19. See Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 8.