





CHAPTER 5

All Is Lost

This is chapter 5 of the new four-volume narrative history of the Church titled Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days. The book will be available in 14 languages in print, in the Church History section of the Gospel Library app, and online at saints.lds.org. The next several chapters will be published in upcoming issues until volume 1 is released later this year. Those chapters will be available in 47 languages in the Gospel Library app and at saints.lds.org.

After Joseph brought the gold plates home, treasure seekers tried for weeks to steal them. To keep the record safe, he had to move it from place to place, hiding the plates under the hearth, beneath the floor of his father's shop, and in piles of grain. He could never let his guard down.

Curious neighbors stopped by the house and begged him to show them the record. Joseph always refused, even when someone offered to pay him. He was determined to care for the plates, trusting in the Lord's promise that if he did everything he could, they would be protected.¹

These disruptions often kept him from examining the plates and learning more about the Urim and Thummim. He knew the interpreters were supposed to help him translate the plates, but he had never used seer stones to read an ancient language. He was anxious to begin the work, but it was not obvious to him how to do it.²

As Joseph studied the plates, a respected landowner in Palmyra named Martin Harris had become interested in his work. Martin was old enough to be Joseph's father and had sometimes hired Joseph to help on his land. Martin had heard about the gold plates but had thought little

about them until Joseph's mother invited him to visit with her son.³

Joseph was out working when Martin stopped by, so he questioned Emma and other family members about the plates. When Joseph arrived home, Martin caught him by the arm and asked for more details. Joseph told him about the gold plates and Moroni's instructions to translate and publish the writing on them.

"If it is the devil's work," Martin said, "I will have nothing to do with it." But if it was the Lord's work, he wanted to help Joseph proclaim it to the world.

Joseph let Martin heft the plates in the lockbox. Martin could tell something heavy was there, but he was not convinced it was a set of gold plates. "You must not blame me for not taking your word," he told Joseph.

When Martin got home after midnight, he crept into his bedroom and prayed, promising God to give all he had if he could know that Joseph was doing divine work.

As he prayed, Martin felt a still, small voice speak to his soul. He knew then that the plates were from God—and he knew he had to help Joseph share their message.⁴

Late in 1827, Emma learned she was pregnant and wrote to her parents. It had been almost a year since she and Joseph had married, and her father and mother were still unhappy. But the Haleses agreed to let the young couple return to Harmony so Emma could give birth near her family.

Although it would take him away from his own parents and siblings, Joseph was eager to go. People in New York were still trying to steal the plates, and moving to a new place could provide the peace and privacy he needed to do the Lord's work. Unfortunately, he was in debt and had no money to make the move.⁵

Hoping to get his finances in order, Joseph went to town to settle some of his debts. While he was in a store making a payment, Martin Harris strode up to him. "Here, Mr. Smith, is fifty dollars," he said. "I give it to you to do the Lord's work."

Joseph was nervous about accepting the money and promised to repay it, but Martin said not to worry about it. The money was a gift, and he called on everyone in the room to witness that he had given it freely.⁶

Soon after, Joseph paid his debts and loaded his wagon. He and Emma then left for Harmony with the gold plates hidden in a barrel of beans.⁷

The couple arrived at the Haleses' spacious home about a week later.⁸ Before long, Emma's father demanded to see the gold plates, but Joseph said he could only show him the box where he kept them. Annoyed, Isaac picked up the lockbox and felt its weight, yet he remained skeptical. He said Joseph could not keep it in the house unless he showed him what was inside.⁹

With Emma's father around, translating would not be easy, but Joseph tried his best. Assisted by Emma, he copied many of the strange characters from the plates to paper.¹⁰ Then, for several weeks, he tried to translate them with the Urim and Thummim. The process required him to do more than look into the interpreters. He had to be humble and exercise faith as he studied the characters.¹¹

A few months later, Martin came to Harmony. He said he felt called by the Lord to travel as far as New York City to consult experts in ancient languages. He hoped they could translate the characters.¹²

Joseph copied several more characters from the plates, wrote down his translation, and handed the paper to Martin. He and Emma then watched as their friend headed east to consult with distinguished scholars.¹³

When Martin arrived in New York City, he went to see Charles Anthon, a professor of Latin and Greek at Columbia College. Professor Anthon was a young man—about 15 years younger than Martin—and was best known for publishing a popular encyclopedia on Greek and Roman culture. He had also begun collecting stories about American Indians.¹⁴

Anthon was a rigid scholar who resented interruptions, but he welcomed Martin and studied the characters and translation Joseph had provided.¹⁵ Although the professor did not know Egyptian, he had read some studies on the language and knew what it looked like. Looking at the characters, he saw some similarities with Egyptian and told Martin the translation was correct.

Martin showed him more characters, and Anthon examined them. He said they contained characters from many ancient languages and gave Martin a certificate verifying their authenticity. He also recommended that he show the characters to another scholar named Samuel Mitchill, who used to teach at Columbia.¹⁶

"He is very learned in these ancient languages," Anthon said, "and I have no doubt he will be able to give you some satisfaction."¹⁷

Martin placed the certificate in his pocket, but just as he was leaving, Anthon called him back. He wanted to know how Joseph found the gold plates.

"An angel of God," Martin said, "revealed it unto him." He testified that the translation of the plates would change the world and save it from destruction. And now that he had proof of their authenticity, he intended to sell his farm and donate money to get the translation published.



Looking at the characters, Professor Anthon saw some similarities with Egyptian and told Martin Harris that the translation was correct.



“Let me see that certificate,” Anthon said.

Martin reached into his pocket and gave it to him.

Anthon tore it to pieces and said there was no such thing as ministering angels. If Joseph wanted the plates translated, he could bring them to Columbia and let a scholar translate them.

Martin explained that part of the plates were sealed and that Joseph was not allowed to show them to anyone.

“I cannot read a sealed book,” said Anthon. He warned Martin that Joseph was probably cheating him. “Beware of rogues,” he said.¹⁸

Martin left Professor Anthon and called on Samuel Mitchill. He received Martin politely, listened to his story, and looked at the characters and translation. He could not make sense of them, but he said they reminded him of Egyptian hieroglyphics and were the writings of an extinct nation.¹⁹

Martin left the city a short time later and returned to Harmony, more convinced than ever that Joseph had ancient gold plates and the power to translate them. He told Joseph about his interviews with the professors and reasoned that if some of the most educated men in

America could not translate the book, Joseph had to do it.

“I cannot,” Joseph said, overwhelmed by the task, “for I am not learned.” But he knew the Lord had prepared the interpreters so he could translate the plates.²⁰

Martin agreed. He planned to go back to Palmyra, set his business in order, and return as soon as possible to serve as Joseph’s scribe.²¹

In April 1828, Emma and Joseph were living in a home along the Susquehanna River, not far from her parents’ house.²² Now well along in her pregnancy, Emma often acted as Joseph’s scribe after he began translating the record. One day, while he translated, Joseph suddenly grew pale. “Emma, did Jerusalem have a wall around it?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, recalling descriptions of it in the Bible.

“Oh,” Joseph said with relief, “I was afraid I had been deceived.”²³

Emma marveled that her husband’s lack of knowledge in history and scripture did not hinder the translation. Joseph could hardly write a coherent letter. Yet hour after hour she sat close beside him while he dictated the record without the aid of any book or manuscript. She knew only God could inspire him to translate as he did.²⁴

In time, Martin returned from Palmyra and took over as scribe, giving Emma a chance to rest before the baby came.²⁵

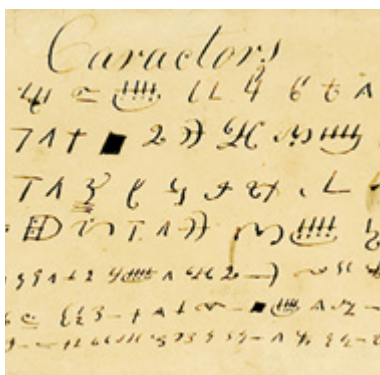
But rest did not come easy. Martin’s wife, Lucy, had insisted on coming with him to Harmony, and both Harrises had strong personalities.²⁶ Lucy was suspicious of Martin’s desire to support Joseph financially and was angry that he had gone to New York City without her. When he told her he was going to Harmony to help with translation, she had invited herself along, determined to see the plates.

Lucy was losing her hearing, and when she could not understand what people were saying, she sometimes thought they were criticizing her. She

also had little sense of privacy. After Joseph refused to show her the plates, she started searching the house, rifling through the family’s chests, cupboards, and trunks. Joseph had little choice but to hide the plates in the woods.²⁷

Lucy soon left the house and lodged with a neighbor. Emma had her chests and cupboards to herself again, but now Lucy was telling the neighbors that Joseph was out to get Martin’s money. After weeks of causing trouble, Lucy went home to Palmyra.

With peace restored, Joseph and Martin translated quickly. Joseph was growing into his divine role as a seer and revelator. Looking into the interpreters or another seer stone, he was able to translate whether the plates were in front of him or wrapped in one of Emma’s linen cloths on the table.²⁸



Facsimile of characters from the Book of Mormon plates.

Throughout April, May, and early June, Emma listened to the rhythm of Joseph dictating the record.²⁹ He spoke slowly but clearly, pausing occasionally to wait for Martin to say “written” after he had caught up to what Joseph had said.³⁰ Emma also took turns as scribe and was amazed how after interruptions and breaks, Joseph always picked up where he left off without any prompting.³¹

Soon it was time for Emma’s baby to be born. The pile of manuscript pages had grown thick, and Martin had become convinced that if he could let his wife read the translation, she would see its value and stop interfering with their work.³² He also hoped Lucy would be pleased with how he had spent his time and money to help bring forth God’s word.

One day, Martin asked Joseph for permission to take the manuscript to Palmyra for a few weeks.³³ Remembering how Lucy Harris had acted when she visited the house, Joseph was wary of the idea. Yet he wanted to please Martin, who had believed him when so many others had doubted his word.³⁴

Unsure what to do, Joseph prayed for guidance, and the Lord told him not to let Martin take the pages.³⁵ But Martin was sure showing them to his wife would change things, and he begged Joseph to ask again. Joseph did so, but the answer was the same. Martin pressed him to ask a third time, however, and this time God allowed them to do as they pleased.

Joseph told Martin he could take the pages for two weeks if he covenanted to keep them locked up and show them only to certain family members. Martin made the promise and returned to Palmyra, manuscript in hand.³⁶

After Martin left, Moroni appeared to Joseph and took the interpreters from him.³⁷

The day after Martin’s departure, Emma endured an agonizing labor and gave birth to a boy. The baby was frail and

sickly and did not live long. The ordeal left Emma physically drained and emotionally devastated, and for a time it seemed she might die too. Joseph tended to her constantly, never leaving her side for long.³⁸

After two weeks, Emma’s health began to improve, and her thoughts turned to Martin and the manuscript. “I feel so uneasy,” she told Joseph, “that I cannot rest and shall not be at ease until I know something about what Mr. Harris is doing with it.”

She urged Joseph to find Martin, but Joseph did not want to leave her. “Send for my mother,” she said, “and she shall stay with me while you are gone.”³⁹

Joseph took a stagecoach north. He ate and slept little during the journey, afraid that he had offended the Lord by not listening when He said not to let Martin take the manuscript.⁴⁰

The sun was rising when he arrived at his parents’ home in Manchester. The Smiths were preparing breakfast and sent Martin an invitation to join them. By eight o’clock, the meal was on the table but Martin had not come. Joseph and the family started to grow uneasy as they waited for him.

Finally, after more than four hours had passed, Martin appeared in the distance, walking slowly toward the house, his eyes fixed on the ground in front of him.⁴¹ At the gate he paused, sat on the fence, and pulled his hat down over his eyes. He then came inside and sat down to eat in silence.

The family watched as Martin picked up his utensils, as if ready to eat, then dropped them. “I have lost my soul!” he cried, pressing his hands on his temples. “I have lost my soul.”

Joseph jumped up. “Martin, have you lost that manuscript?” “Yes,” Martin said. “It is gone, and I know not where.”

“Oh, my God, my God,” Joseph groaned, clenching his fists. “All is lost!”

He started pacing the floor. He did not know what to do. “Go back,” he ordered Martin. “Search again.”



Joseph and Emma Smith’s home in Harmony, Pennsylvania.

“It is all in vain,” Martin cried. “I have looked every place in the house. I have even ripped open beds and pillows, and I know it is not there.”

“Must I return to my wife with such a tale?” Joseph feared the news would kill her. “And how shall I appear before the Lord?”

His mother tried to comfort him. She said maybe the Lord would forgive him if he repented humbly. But Joseph was sobbing now, furious at himself for not obeying the Lord the first time. He could barely eat for the rest of the day. He stayed the night and left the next morning for Harmony.⁴²

As his mother, Lucy, watched him go, her heart was heavy. It seemed everything they had hoped for as a family—everything that had brought them joy over the last few years—had fled in a moment.⁴³ ■

A complete list of works cited is available at saints.lds.org.

The word *Topic* in the notes indicates additional information online at saints.lds.org.

NOTES

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