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### Sealed in a Book: Preliminary Observations on the Newly Found 'Anthon Transcript'

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**Abstract:** Editor's Note: Please be aware that the document described in this article is a Mark Hofmann forgery. For more information, see Richard E. Turley Jr., *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992)



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# Sealed in a Book: Preliminary Observations on the Newly Found “Anthon Transcript”

Danel W. Bachman

Among the many fascinating and problematical stories of early Church history is the Anthon transcript episode. The outline of that story is generally understood by both Latter-day Saints and non-Latter-day Saints interested in Mormon history. Following Joseph Smith's reception of the gold plates from the angel Moroni in September 1827, persecution increased, forcing the Smiths to move to Harmony, Pennsylvania, the home of Joseph's wife Emma, where the couple initially found the peace and quiet required to begin the translation. Joseph tells us that while in Harmony he spent his time from December 1827 to February 1828 “copying” the characters off the plates, and that he transcribed a considerable number, and translated some with the aid of the Urim and Thummim.<sup>1</sup> Sometime in February, Martin Harris, a farmer and a benefactor of Joseph Smith, visited the Smiths at Harmony. One source says that Martin came to Harmony in obedience to a revelation.<sup>2</sup>

Martin obtained a copy of some of the characters from Joseph Smith and took them to New York for evaluation. His account of this trip is sketchy, but historians believe he visited at least three important scholars—Luther Bradish, Dr. Samuel Mitchill, and Professor Charles Anthon. Professor Anthon, at Columbia College, is the only

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1932–1951), 1:19–20; hereafter cited as *HC*.

<sup>2</sup>Paul R. Cheesman, “An Analysis of the Accounts Relating to Joseph Smith's Early Visions” (M. A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1965), Appendix D, p. 131.

Characters

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z  
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 + - = : ; , . / ' ( ) \* [ \ ] ^ \_ ` { | } ~   
! " # \$ % & ' ( ) \* + - = : ; , . / ' ( ) \* [ \ ] ^ \_ ` { | } ~   
! " # \$ % & ' ( ) \* + - = : ; , . / ' ( ) \* [ \ ] ^ \_ ` { | } ~   
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Courtesy of Buddy Youngreen

Figure 1. The Whitmer Text

one who concerns us, because he left the only known description of the document Martin Harris exhibited.<sup>3</sup>

Until recently, historians have had only one manuscript copy and two printed versions before 1845 of this document to work with. The manuscript copy (see Figure 1), owned by the RLDS Church, came into their possession at the turn of the century through the heirs of David Whitmer, who owned it along with a manuscript of the Book of Mormon. Students of this document have been puzzled because it does not fit Anthon's description. Yet, without a better document, most scholars have been content merely to question Anthon's memory or motives, or to ignore the problem altogether. Most have assumed that the Whitmer text was the original. David Whitmer thought that it was. But in April 1980 a new document was discovered that challenges that priority.<sup>4</sup>

The two published versions of portions of the document Martin Harris took to New York both appeared in 1844. The first version is a broadside or placard printed in gold on black stock, exhibiting three lines of characters (see Figure 2). Among the few known copies of this version are two copies in the LDS Church Archives and a copy in Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University. A statement in the hand of Thomas Bullock written on the back of the broadside in the Church Archives reads, "1844 placard Stick of Joseph. This was formerly owned by Hyrum Smith and sent to the Historian's Office March 22, 1860, by his son, Joseph Fielding Smith."<sup>5</sup> What appears to be the pencil signature of Mary Fielding Smith, who died in 1852, is also on the back. The title of the broadside reads: "The Stick of Joseph, taken from the Hand of Ephraim. A correct copy of the characters taken from the plates of the BOOK OF MORMON!! Was translated from<sup>6</sup>—the same that was taken to Professor Anthon of New York, by Martin Harris, in the year 1827 [*sic*] in fulfillment of Isaiah 29:11, 12." This placard contains characters

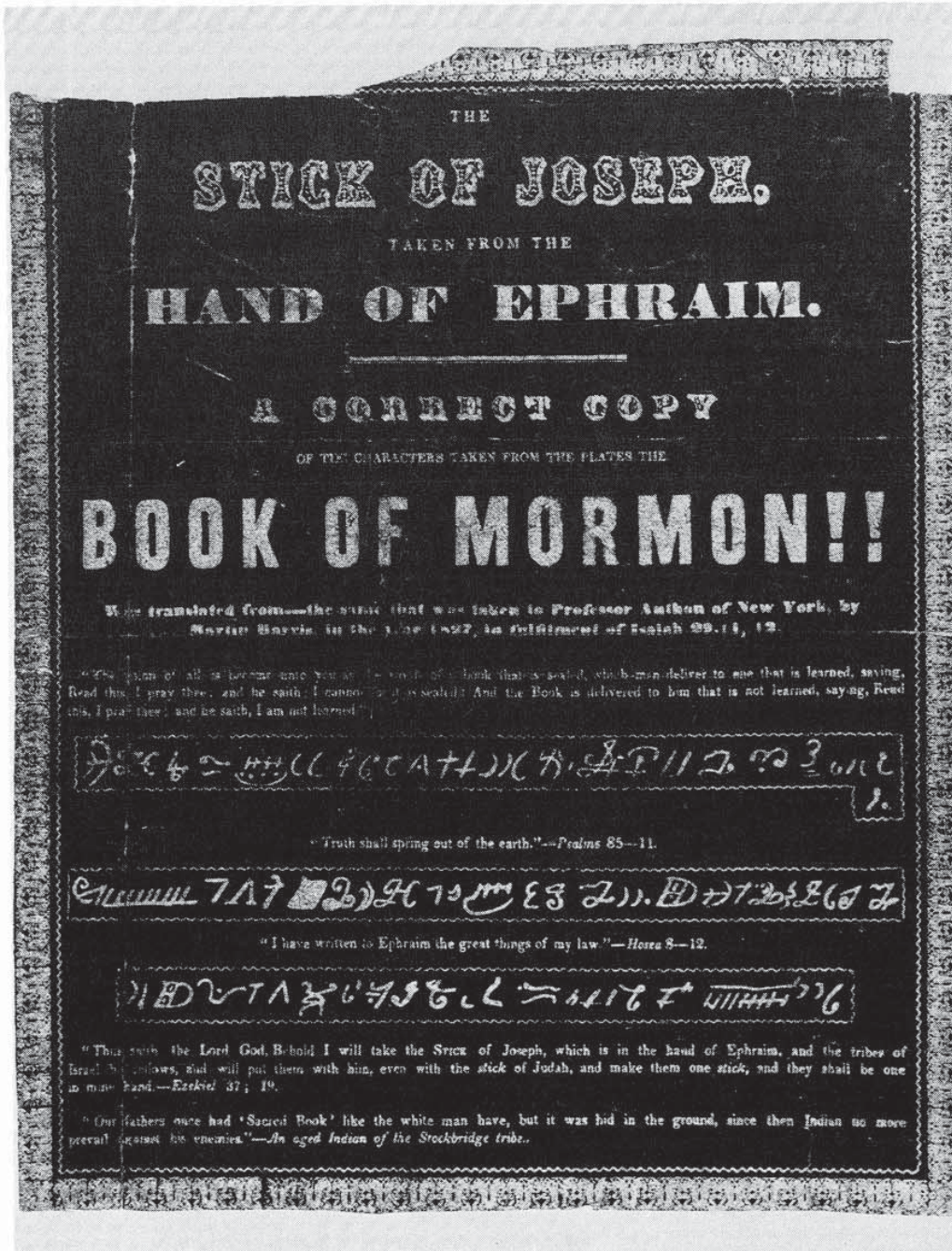
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<sup>3</sup>Stanley Kimball has provided excellent research on the background of the earlier manuscripts and on Martin Harris's trip to the East. See his "The Anthon Transcript: People, Primary Sources, and Problems," *Brigham Young University Studies* 10 (Spring 1970): 325–52; "I Cannot Read a Sealed Book," *Improvement Era* 60 (February 1957): 80–82, 104, 106; and "Charles Anthon and the Egyptian Language," *Improvement Era* 63 (October 1960): 708–10, 765.

<sup>4</sup>David Whitmer thought both manuscripts—the Book of Mormon and the Anthon—were originals. The Book of Mormon manuscript proved to be the printer's copy, and if the present discovery is the original Anthon transcript as this paper asserts, then he did not possess the originals he thought he did. For details about the donation of the Whitmer manuscript to the RLDS Church, see Frederick M. Smith to John A. Widstoe, 9 May 1941, quoted in Ariel Crowley, *About the Book of Mormon* (Idaho City, Idaho: n.p., 1961), pp. 9–10.

<sup>5</sup>"The Stick of Joseph," broadside, Library Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as Church Archives), and Special Collection, Harold B. Lee Library, BYU, Provo, Utah. See also Kimball, "The Anthon Transcript," p. 347.

<sup>6</sup>The punctuation here is confusing, but the sense is "A correct copy of the characters taken from the plates the Book of Mormon was translated from. The same that was taken . . ." An example of how the punctuation can be misleading can be seen in Kimball's reproduction with an insert of the word *of* after the word *plates* (*ibid.*).



Courtesy of Harold B. Lee Library, BYU

Figure 2. 1844 Placard Stick of Joseph

which are on the Hofmann document but not on the Whitmer text.

The broadside most likely was published in early December 1844 by Samuel Brannan, editor of the *The Prophet*, a Church-owned newspaper in New York City. The following announcement appeared in *The Prophet* on 14 December 1844:

We have published a very neat specimen of the original characters or hieroglyphics that were copied from the plates which the Book of Mormon was translated from, and were presented by Martin Harris to Professor Anthon for translation.—We have been to some trouble in having it engraved [*sic*] by Mr. Strong: one of the most skillful engravers in the city of New York; those who wish to obtain a copy to preserve as a memorial, can procure them by applying to the Prophet Office, New York.<sup>7</sup>

The second version was published on 21 December 1844 by Brannan in *The Prophet* (see Figure 3). It duplicates the same three lines of characters as the placard, but the last half of the third line is inverted, or upside down and backwards. The text printed with the characters on the broadside was also printed in this second version.<sup>8</sup>

#### THE DISCOVERY

In early March 1980, Mark Hofmann, a student at Utah State University and a collector of Smithiana and other Mormon materials, acquired a 1668 Cambridge edition of the Bible from a gentleman in Salt Lake City. Hofmann's interest in the book was aroused by the fact that the owner said he had purchased it from Catherine Smith Salisbury's granddaughter, who lived in Carthage, Illinois, in the 1950s. Mrs. Salisbury was Joseph Smith's sister, and her granddaughter was Mrs. Mary Hancock, who assisted Cecil McGavin in the preparation of his volume on the Smith family.<sup>9</sup> Hofmann's interest was further excited by evidence in the Bible that it was a Smith family

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<sup>7</sup>*The Prophet* (New York), 14 December 1844.

<sup>8</sup>*The Prophet* (New York), 21 December 1844. The conclusion that the placard was the source for Brannan's reproduction was first suggested by Kimball ("The Anthon Transcript," p. 347) and is here based on a comparison of the texts. The symbols are very similar, but of particular note is the unique feature that both documents break off reproduction of the characters of the Hofmann (and Whitmer) texts in the middle of line three after the "L"-shaped character and skip over to the fifth column and include the characters between the vertical rectangle and the circles. Brannan's version, as is noted in the text later, inverts this portion which comprises the last half of line three.

<sup>9</sup>E. Cecil McGavin, *The Family of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1963), pp. 96–97. On 27 June 1980, Mark Hofmann visited Dorothy Dean of Carthage, Illinois, the daughter of Mrs. Hancock, in an attempt to verify the purchase. Miss Dean was very helpful in checking a handwritten ledger kept by her mother of some of the sales transactions. Miss Dean did find an entry for 13 August 1954 that fits the description. She provided photocopies of the ledger page and a written affidavit to Mr. Hofmann concerning the transaction. (Dorothy Dean, Affidavit, 29 July 1980. Original in possession of Mark W. Hofmann; copy in possession of author.)

Supposition of some Smith family members in Carthage is that Catherine Smith Salisbury inherited the Bible from Lucy Mack Smith. The author speculates that the document may have been given to Mother Smith by Joseph as part of her museum collection and thus was in her possession and became part of Catherine's inheritance.

... address the Saints in  
abbath morning, Elder  
and evening.

**Klym.**

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non' and Elder Miles in

d for the visit made us  
New Bedford, but we  
nted in his not tarrying

**ests.**

eived intelligence of the  
Philadelphia by the pros-  
ster, for acting as agent  
ophet" that contained an  
Wm. Smith, in which he  
; language: "It is a well  
chester was engaged in  
Nauvoo," the truth of  
7 until the matter of fact  
l that Elder Smith must  
making the assertion or  
ned the article for publi-  
n confidence in him as a  
he does with the rest of  
of the kingdom, is the  
offer for its publication.  
d any malicious feelings  
or that we wished to in-  
g those who placed con-  
say against this Church.  
that he was guilty as  
m the position and stand  
Church, truly demanded  
me; and that too for the  
n heart. We are sorry  
n called to suffer for any  
l; but as we have ever  
esent aware that Elder  
in the rise and progress  
was called to suffer, and  
amid the toil, calumni-  
t came upon the Saints  
the least doubt but that  
e consequences be what  
me time rejoice in God  
y to suffer for his breth-  
ur choice, we should pre-  
upon ourselves. The

... this I pray thee; and he saith, I cannot for it is  
sealed: and the book is delivered to one that is  
not learned, saying, "I pray the, and he  
saith I am not learned of br

Handwritten text in three columns, likely a translation or commentary on the adjacent text. The script is a cursive, possibly shorthand or a specific dialect, and is oriented vertically.

... has not been regarded, no  
ed to hear our voice; bu  
who would plunder and d  
minish us, and hide their  
not their yoke from us, bi  
slay us; who conceal our  
that they have lifted up  
I swear to you, ye righte  
angels record your good  
the Mighty one. Wait  
erly you have been di  
affliction; but now you  
naries of heaven. You  
gates of heaven shall be o  
have cried for judgment;  
you, for an account of all  
required from the princ  
who has assisted your  
patient hope, nor relinqui  
great joy shall be yours  
heaven. Consider yours  
you shall not be conceale  
judgment. You shall no  
and eternal condemnation  
as long as the world exist  
righteous, when ye see  
prospering in their ways.  
them, but keep yourselfe  
oppression, be ye associa  
ven. You, ye sinners sa  
shall not be taken accou  
but all your transgression  
And be assured by me t  
day and night, behold all  
Be not impious in your  
render not the word of up  
the word of the Holy an  
not your idols; for all y  
impiety is not for righte  
crime. Now will I poin  
sinners shall turn and tra  
of uprightness. They s  
they shall utter falsehood  
takings, and compose boo  
But when they shall writ  
in their own languages, t  
nor diminish them, but sh  
ly; all of which, from the  
cerning them. Another r  
To the righteous and the  
of joy, of integrity, of g  
shall books be given, in  
and in which they shall r  
eous shall be rewarded, wh  
the knowledge of every  
days, saith the Lord, the  
of the earth and make the  
Show them that you are  
muneration shall take pl  
—for I and my son will  
with them in the paths o  
are still alive. Peace s  
children of integrity, in t  
just remark that whoeve  
read the history of the p  
of Jesus Christ of Latter

The Prophecy of Enoch, the Seventh

Figure 3. Published Version in *The Prophet*, 21 December 1844

heirloom. The front flyleaf has several initials written on it which appear to be "S. S.," "I. S.," and perhaps "J. S.,"; inserted in the center of the Bible is a handwritten copy of the entire book of Amos with the signature of Samuel Smith at the end<sup>10</sup> (see figures 4 and 5). Hofmann's supposition was that this Samuel was either the great-grandfather or the great-great-grandfather of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Although the Bible was purchased in March, the document in question was not discovered until 16 April 1980. As Mr. Hofmann leafed through the Bible on that day, he noticed two pages at the beginning of Proverbs were partially stuck together. The leaves were open only along their top edges. His wife Doralee noticed a separate piece of paper appeared to be pocketed between the pages. Mr. Hofmann carefully separated the pages and removed the paper.

It appeared to be a normal-sized page, "folded in fourths with some black, gluelike substance holding the document together at the folds and sticking it to the pages of the Bible."<sup>11</sup> The paper was folded in such a way that the signature of Joseph Smith Jr. could be seen on the outside. When the paper was removed from the Bible, the paper broke at the middle fold. To avoid the risk of damaging the document further, Mr. Hofmann took it the next day to the office of A.J. Simmonds, curator of the Utah State University Special Collections and Archives, who helped him separate the glued edges.<sup>12</sup> Shortly thereafter, the document was brought to my office, and we arranged to have Dean Jessee, an expert on Joseph Smith's handwriting, examine it. On Friday, 18 April, Dean Jessee gave a preliminary opinion that it seemed to have the features of a Joseph Smith holograph. By Tuesday, 22 April 1980, he was confident

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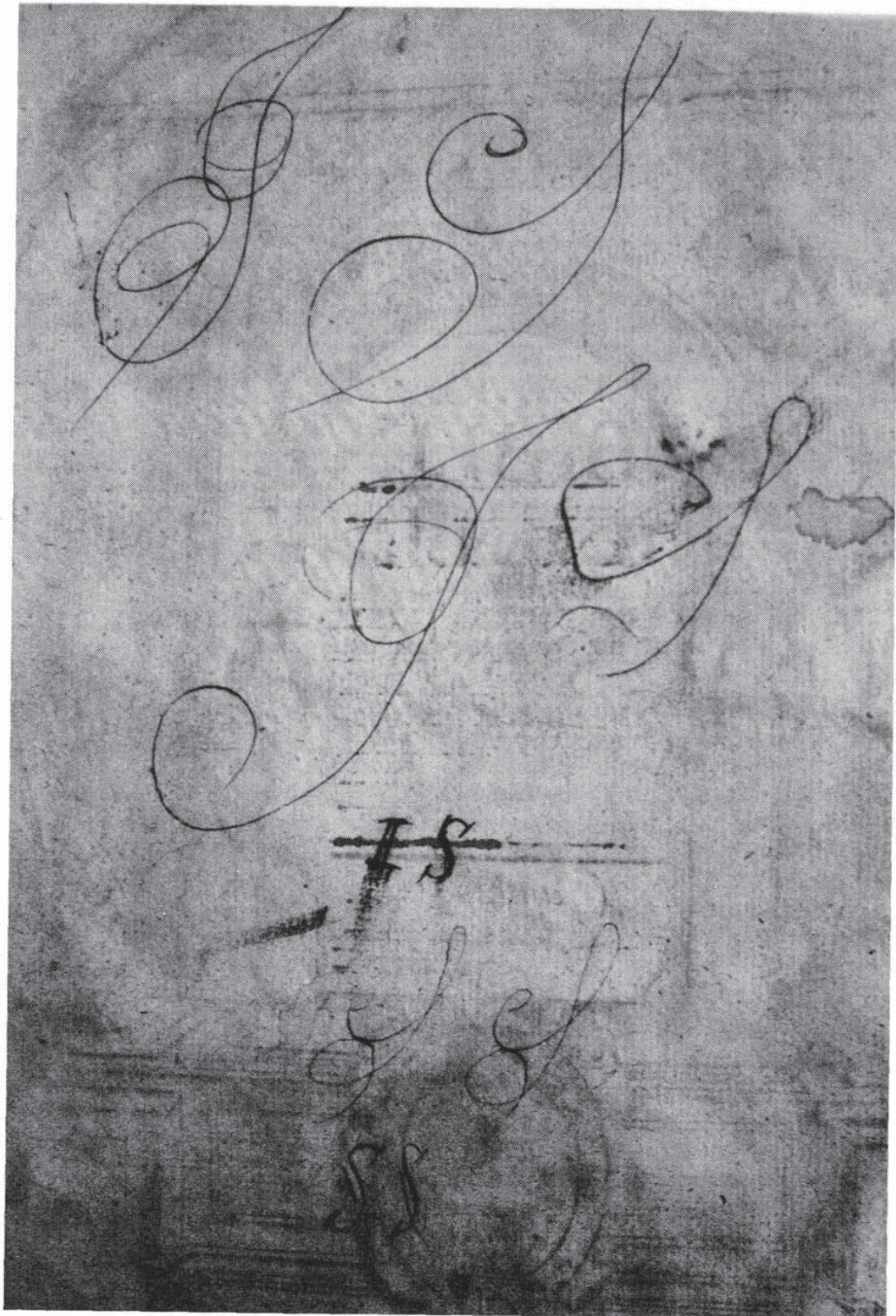
<sup>10</sup>The Bible is presently housed in the Church Archives Vault.

<sup>11</sup>Mark William Hofmann, "Finding the Joseph Smith Document," *Ensign*, July 1980, p. 73. This author is uncertain whether the black substance was glue or sealing wax or something else. Perhaps we may never know, for Don Schmidt, Church archivist, said that the substance will be cleaned off when the paper is deacidified.

<sup>12</sup>Jeff Simmonds, who assisted Mr. Hofmann in opening the document the day after it was removed from the Bible, has left an erroneous impression in his published account of the matter. He said: "The paper was carefully folded and one end had been tipped-in to the binding. Originally it was so glued that it could be easily folded out. But over the years the glue which had been used to insert the Book of Amos pages into the binding had oozed through the stitching and had solidly welded the free end of the inserted page to the glued end, making a neat little package." ("Being There at the Moment of Discovery . . . A Historian's Dream," *Herald Journal/Valley*, 5 May 1980, p. 3.)

However, Simmonds was not with Hofmann when the document was removed and apparently was not aware that the glued side was not in the spine of the Bible but in the middle of the page. There is no evidence in the Bible or on the document itself that glue from the rebinding seeped out and caused the edges of the document or the pages of the Bible to be sealed. Examination of the document shows that the two edges of the paper were intentionally sealed. However, whether they were glued into the Bible intentionally or whether over the years the glue from the document eventually adhered to the pages of the Bible is not certain at present. Evidence seems to suggest that the latter is the case. It is not likely that someone would ruin an heirloom simply to preserve the document. Moreover, the glue was not stuck along the entire edge of both the document and the page in the Bible. It was stuck only at certain points where it appears there was an excess of glue.





*Courtesy of Mark Hofmann*

Figure 4. Front Flyleaf of 1668 Bible Showing Initials  
"S.S.," "I.S.," and (Perhaps) "J.S."

<p>10. Behold, saith the Lord I will command the wind, and it shall blow away the house of Israel among all na- tions, like as corn is sifted in a sieve, yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth. 11. All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword, which saith the Lord, which shall not overtake nor prevent us. 12. In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it up as in the days of old. 13. That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the heathen, which are called by my name, saith the Lord that doeth this. 14. Behold, the days come, saith the Lord that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that sows seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine; and all the hills shall</p>	<p>again the captivity of my people of Israel, and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vine- yards, and drink the wine thereof; they shall also make gardens, and eat the fruit of them. 15. And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be pulled up out of their land, which I have given them, saith the Lord thy God.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Samuel Smith</p>
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Courtesy of Mark Hofmann

Figure 5. Handwritten Insertion of Book of Amos Signed by Samuel Smith

enough to provide a written declaration which said, "I have carefully inspected the document . . . and conclude that [it] is a Joseph Smith holograph."<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, Mr. Hofmann was concerned about the preservation, authentication, and housing of the manuscript, as well as handling the growing publicity and speculation. On Tuesday, 22 April, he showed the manuscript to several General Authorities, including the First Presidency of the Church, and decided to loan it to the Church and to leave it in the custody of the LDS Church Archives. On Monday, 28 April, at a press conference in the conference room of the Church Historical Department, the announcement of the discovery was made.

#### DESCRIPTION OF THE DOCUMENT

The Hofmann manuscript (see Figure 6) is a single sheet that measures 11 1/4 by 7 7/8 inches. Side one contains characters arranged in five vertical columns. The symbols in the first four columns are large, carefully drawn, and quite legible. The fifth column is unique with a long vertical rectangle enclosing two parallel rows of characters, smaller than those in the previous four columns. Below the characters are several intricately drawn figures and below these are concentric circles. Characters occupy the space between the outer and inner circles and fill the four compartments of the inner circle. The fifth column ends with a small horizontal rectangle filled with characters.

A handwritten note signed by Joseph Smith on the reverse side of the document (see Figure 7) reads as follows:

These caractors were dilligently coppied by my own hand from the plates of gold and given to Martin Harris who took them to New York Citty but the learned could not translate it because the Lord would not open it to them in fulfillment of the propscy of Isaih written in the 29th chapter and 11th verse.<sup>14</sup>

Judging by the style and shape of the letters, the note was written with a quill pen or an equivalent. The paper and ink seem to be of a vintage similar to the original Book of Mormon manuscript owned by the Church; they also match the description of the Whitmer text owned by the RLDS Church.<sup>15</sup> The ink has seeped or "bled"

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<sup>13</sup>Dean Jessee, Statement, 22 April 1980. Original of statement in possession of Mark W. Hofmann; copy in possession of author.

<sup>14</sup>Manuscript of Book of Mormon characters; hereafter referred to as Hofmann document. Original in the Church Archives Vault; copies in possession of the author. I am indebted to Mr. Hofmann for allowing me to quote from and use this document.

<sup>15</sup>Smith to Widstoe, 9 May 1941, in Crowley, *About the Book of Mormon*, pp. 9–10.

through the paper from one side to the other but not so as to greatly hinder the readability of the text. Chemicals in the paper and the glue have discolored both the manuscript and the Bible.<sup>16</sup> Discoloration and fading have made the Joseph Smith note difficult to read. Apparently, the manuscript was in the Bible for decades; it is brittle and in danger of breaking into fourths at the folds.

#### EVIDENCE THAT IT IS THE ORIGINAL ANTHON TRANSCRIPT

In addition to paper, ink, and script comparisons, there are other indications that the document is authentic and is the original "Anthon transcript" that Martin Harris carried from Harmony, Pennsylvania, to New York in the spring of 1828.

Foremost is Dean Jessee's judgment of the handwriting of the Joseph Smith note. Among the details that are characteristic of Joseph Smith's handwriting, Jessee has noted:

1. The signature appears to be authentic.
2. There are typical misspelling of words, such as "caractors," "coppied," "Citty," "propscy," and "Isaih."
3. There are unique separations of words at the end of a line; for example, the word *ban-d* at the end of the first line.
4. There is a characteristic formation of certain letters and words.
5. There are also distinctive pen lifts, done out of habit as the writer moved his hand across the page.<sup>17</sup>

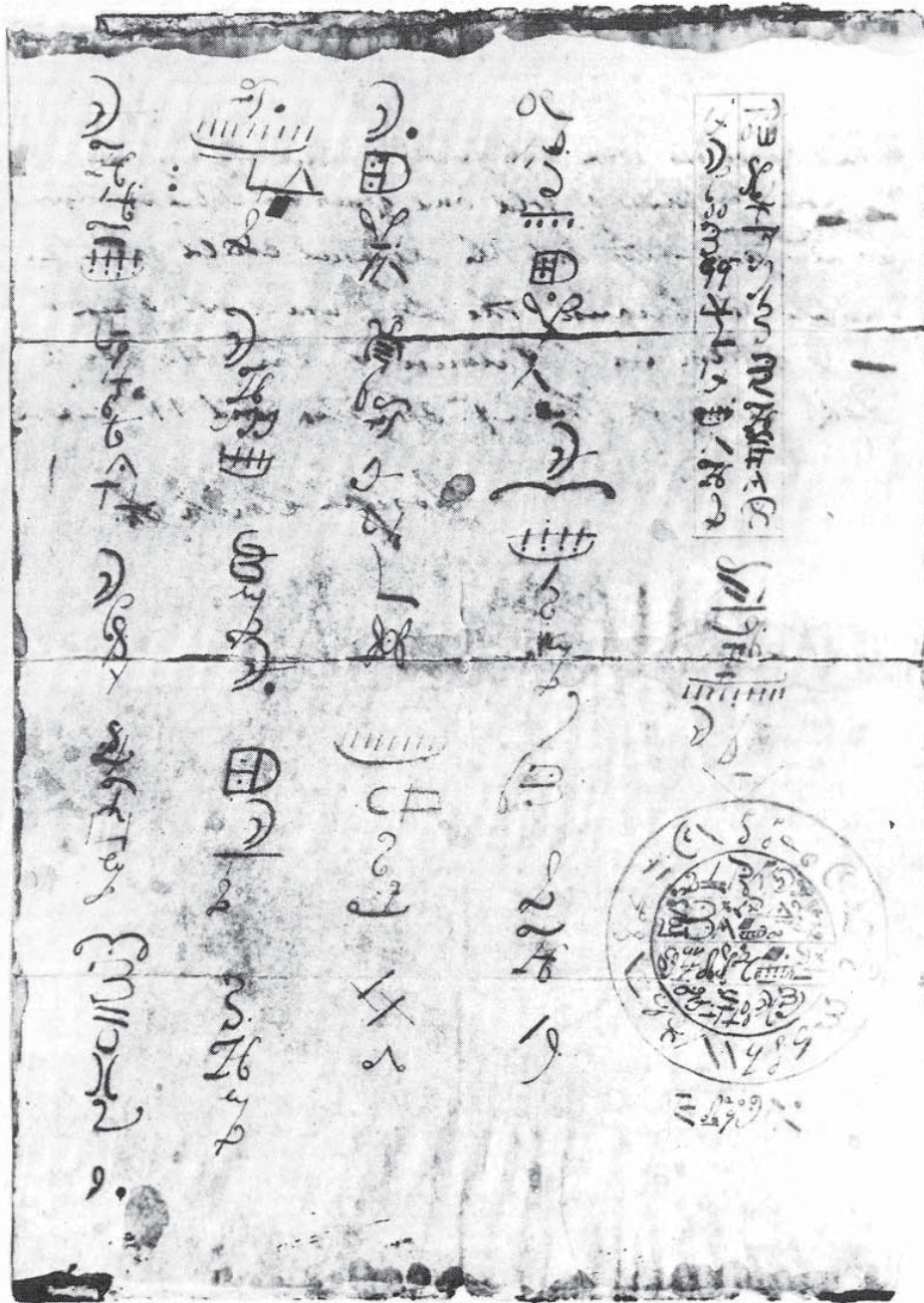
Second, the document corresponds closely with Charles Anthon's description. Professor Anthon wrote two accounts of Martin Harris's visit. Both accounts are in general agreement, and both contain descriptions of the document Martin Harris showed him. The first account was written to E. D. Howe, 17 February 1834.

This paper was in fact a singular scrawl. It consisted of all kinds of crooked characters disposed in columns, and had evidently been prepared by some person who had before him at the time a book containing various alphabets. Greek and Hebrew letters, crosses, and flourishes, Roman letters inverted or placed sideways, were arranged in perpendicular columns, and the whole ended in a rude delineation of a circle divided into various compartments, decked with various strange marks, and evidently copied after the Mexican Calender [*sic*] given by

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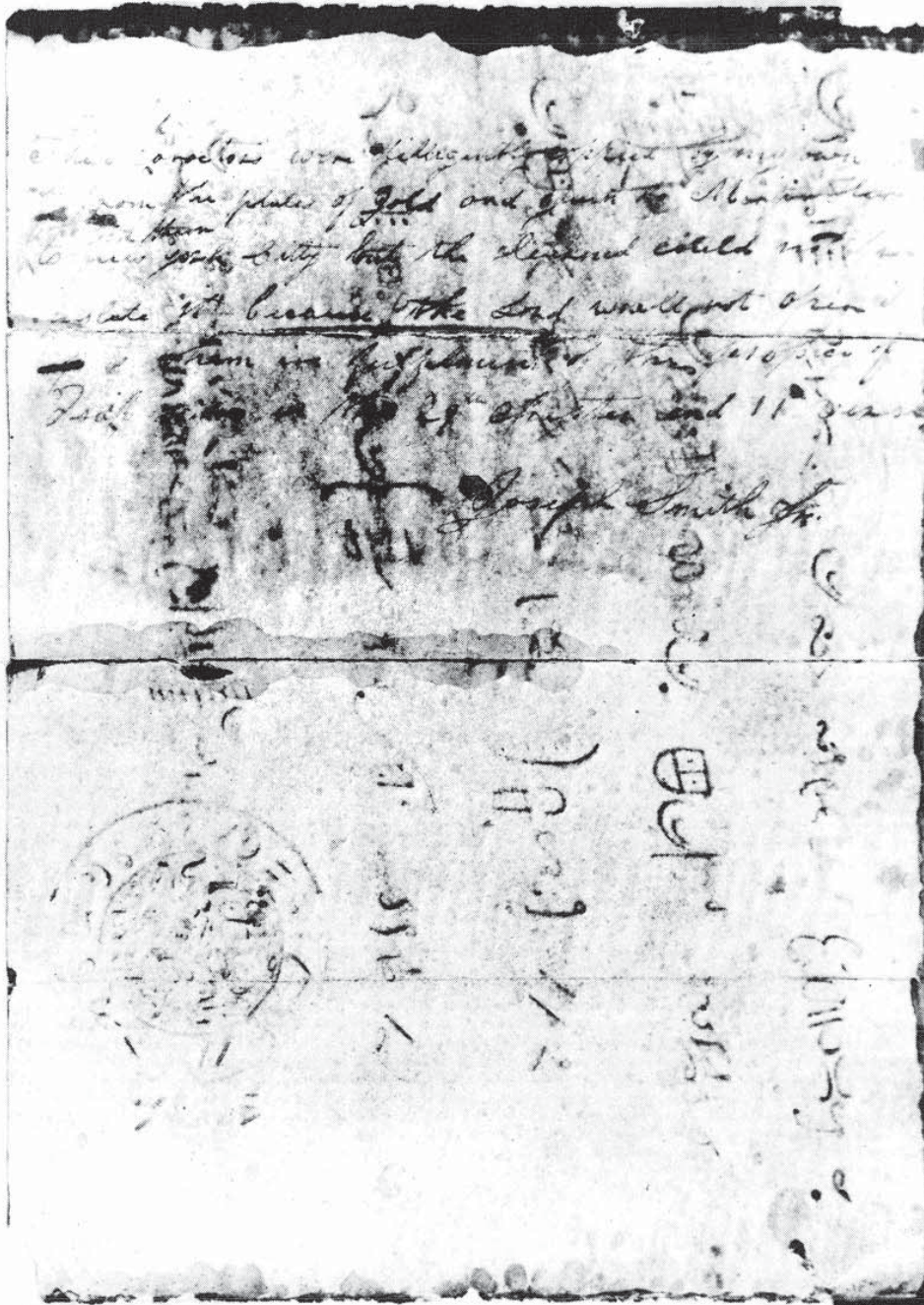
<sup>16</sup>Discoloration of the pages in Proverbs has left a distinct outline of the position of the transcript in the Bible during the last several decades. This is perhaps another important evidence for the authenticity of the document, as it would be difficult to forge the discoloration in the Bible.

<sup>17</sup>This list was compiled by the author from notes taken in several conversations with Dean Jessee during the meetings involving the discovery, evaluation, and public announcement of the document.



*Courtesy of Mark Hofmann*

Figure 6. Hofmann Document



Courtesy of Mark Hofmann

Figure 7. Note Written by Joseph Smith  
on Reverse Side of the Hofmann Document

Humbolt, but copied in such a way as not to betray the source whence it was derived.<sup>18</sup>

In 1841 Professor Anthon wrote the second account to the Reverend T.W. Coit:

The characters were arranged in columns, like the Chinese mode of writing, and presented the most singular medly that I ever beheld. Greek, Hebrew, and all sorts of letters, more or less distorted, either through unskilfulness, [*sic*] or from actual design, were intermingled with sundry delineations of half moons, stars, and other natural objects, and the whole ended in a rude representation of the Mexican zodiac.<sup>19</sup>

The Hofmann manuscript and the Anthon descriptions coincide. First, characters are arranged in vertical or “perpendicular columns,” as Anthon notes. Second, Anthon’s “Mexican zodiac” or “Mexican calendar” matches the circle in the lower right corner of the Hofmann sheet. Third, there are more “flourishes” and Roman-styled letters on the new document than on the Whitmer text. In fact, a cursory look at the Whitmer text gives the general impression that numerous characters are Arabic numerals. This is not the case with the Hofmann manuscript. Professor Anthon’s critical eye certainly would have caught this impression had he been looking at the Whitmer script.<sup>20</sup>

Also noteworthy is the phrase “plates of gold” in the Joseph Smith note. Phrases such as “plates of brass,” “altar of stone,” “river of water,” and “plates of gold” are found throughout the Book of Mormon.<sup>21</sup>

Another phrase contained in the note which bears on the genuineness of the manuscript is “diligently copied.” The Hofmann document appears to have been executed with much greater care than used in any of the other three sources; there is a marked deterioration of quality in the Whitmer text and the two published versions. Individual characters often lack detail, particularly in the reproduction of the smaller and more dense characters from the fifth column. In the Hofmann document, note the hash marks at the top and bottom, and the dots within the “3”-shaped figures in both columns in the vertical rectangle at the top of the fifth column. Compare also line

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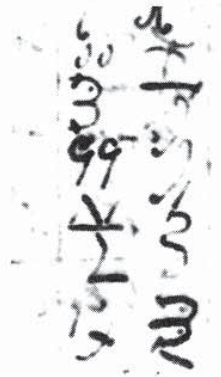
<sup>18</sup>Charles Anthon to Eber D. Howe, 17 February 1834, quoted in E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* [*sic*] (Painesville, Ohio: Published by author, 1834), pp. 271–72. Incidentally, B. H. Roberts took some editorial liberty in reproducing these quotes in *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Century 1*, 6 vols. (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1965), 1:100–101.

<sup>19</sup>Charles Anthon to the Rev. T. W. Coit, 3 April 1841, quoted in John A. Clark, *Gleanings by the Way* (Philadelphia: W.J. and J.K. Simon, 1842), pp. 232–38.

<sup>20</sup>Note that Charles A. Shook did notice this about the Whitmer transcript (see Charles A. Shook, *Cumorah Revisited* [Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Company, 1910], pp. 12–13).

<sup>21</sup>See 1 Nephi 2:7, 5:14, 8:13, 19:22, 22:1 and 30; 2 Nephi 4:2; and Mosiah 21:27, 28:11.

five of the Whitmer text with the Hofmann manuscript. The last two or three characters in line five and all of line six of the Whitmer text correspond to the symbols within the four compartments of the inner circle in the Hofmann manuscript. Much detail is lost in the Whitmer text, not to mention loss in elegance and style in the characters themselves. (See Figure 8.)



From Columns 5 and 6 of the Hofmann Document



From Line 5 of the Whitmer Text

Figure 8

Equally clear is the elimination of the clustering of characters so obviously noticeable in the Hofmann text. In addition to the constellations created by the rectangles, circles, and compartments of the circle, there seems to be an intentional grouping of symbols in the first four columns. In the first column, for instance, one can see five (perhaps six) sets, five or six in column two, four in column three, and two or three in column four. These groupings have been ignored in the Whitmer text and the published versions. These groupings may prove to be critical to the translation process.

Finally, several complex or compound characters in the Hofmann text have been transformed in the other versions into two or three and sometimes more individual characters. Three examples stand out. First, the third character in the second column is clearly a unified symbol in the Hofmann manuscript but is dismembered into four



separate elements in the other sources. (Compare characters three through six in line two of the Whitmer text and the same in the



Hofmann Document



Whitmer Text

published versions.) A second example is the butterfly-shaped figure in column three just above the center fold of the Hofmann manuscript. In the Whitmer text this figure has less detail and has been divided into three elements that look like the number 206. If the 2 and the 6 were moved over and attached to the 0, the figure



Hofmann Document

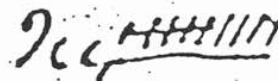


Whitmer Text

would more nearly match the Hofmann version. A third example includes the series of elegant symbols between the vertical rectangle and the circle in column five. These are not reproduced at all in the Whitmer text, but they are in line three of the printed versions. (See Figure 9.) The graceful symbol at the top has been segmented into three or four parts. In the Hofmann manuscript the “F”-shaped character above the long horizontal line with the nine hash marks below it is attached to that line, forming one large figure. However, in the published versions it is split into two. This series is upside down and backwards in the reproduction in *The Prophet*.



Hofmann Document



1844 Placard  
Stick of Joseph



*The Prophet*  
21 Dec. 1844

Figure 9. Comparison of Symbols

It is not clear whether this fragmentation process is a case of poor copying, or whether it was someone's attempt to study the individual components of the marks. Regardless, there is a unity to them that was not known until the new discovery. In summary, when compared with the other available versions, the Hofmann document is its own proof that it was "diligently copied"; it also becomes its own best witness that it is the manuscript described by Professor Anthon and consequently the original made by Joseph Smith. It should be much more useful in solving the mysteries of translation.

The new manuscript also appears to be a source for the other copies. With two exceptions the same symbols appear line for line in both the Hofmann and Whitmer manuscripts. At the top left of the Hofmann document and on down the column are the same characters that appear on the top row from left to right of the Whitmer text. This pattern holds for the first four columns and rows of the two documents.

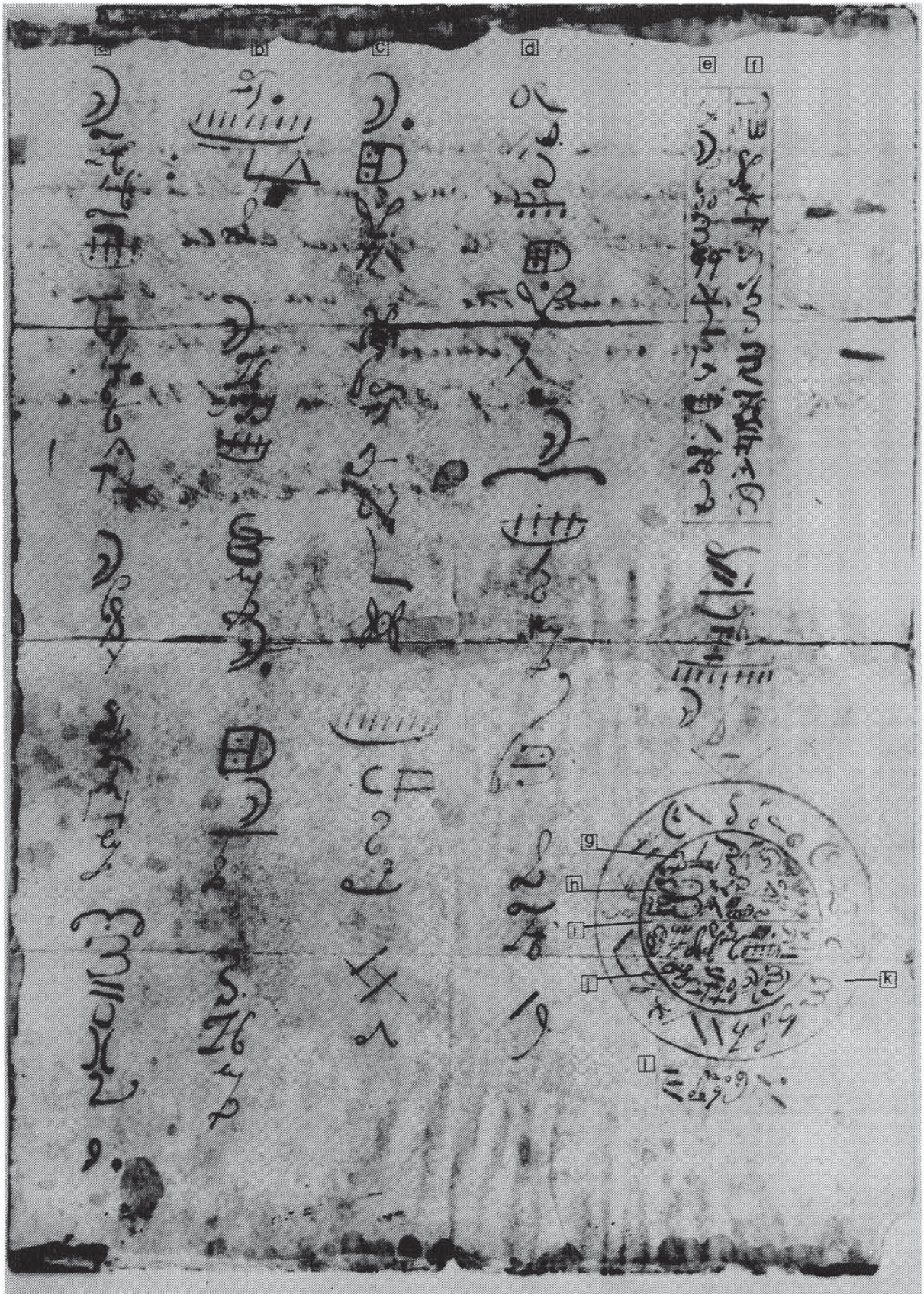
Scholars have observed that the last three lines of the Whitmer manuscript are much smaller than the first four lines. Some thought this was simply a matter of available space. However, the change in size is more likely due to the fact these figures are copies of those in the fifth column of the new document which are proportionately smaller than most of the other characters on it. (See Figure 10.) The two texts match up in the following order for the fifth column: (1) The material in the vertical rectangle matches all but the last two characters of the fifth line of the Whitmer text. (2) Those in the compartments of the inner circle beginning at the top and reading from left to right are identical with the last portion of line five, all of line six, and about one-sixth of line seven of the Whitmer text. (3) The figures from between the circles beginning with the first one to the right of the fourth (bottom) compartment and proceeding clockwise coincide with nearly half of line seven of the Whitmer text. (4) The characters in the horizontal rectangle are the same as the remainder of line seven.<sup>22</sup> Note that the large figures between the vertical rectangle and the circle were not included in the list because they are not on the Whitmer text; however, they are in line three of both 1844 published versions.

Other details of the Hofmann document that are missing are the last two-and-one-half characters on the bottom of column one.<sup>23</sup> These figures are found in the unique "L"-shaped configuration on

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<sup>22</sup>The author is indebted to Mark W. Hofmann for sharing the results of his research comparing the documents.

<sup>23</sup>In July 1980 Hofmann visited the RLDS Library-Archives and was permitted to examine the Whitmer text. He concluded that the characters had not faded or been broken off but simply were never there.



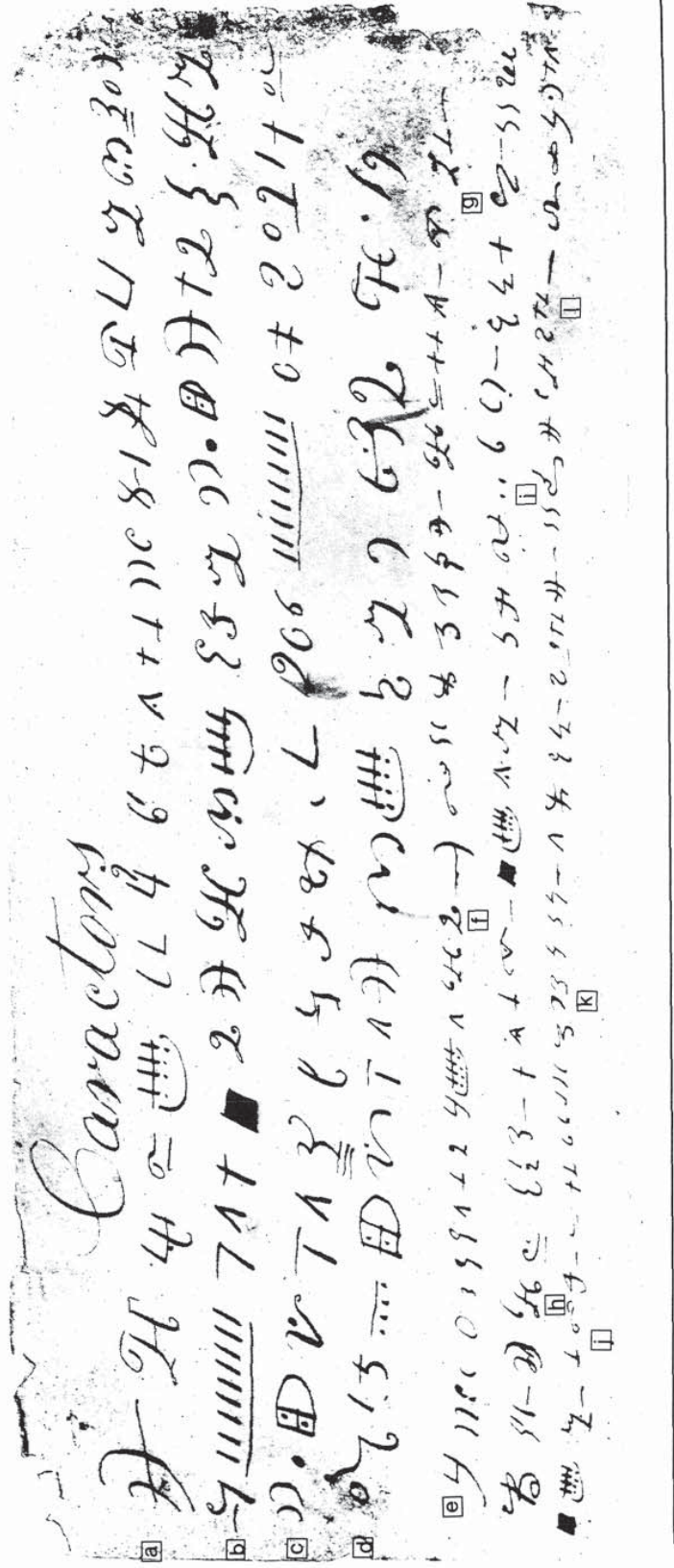
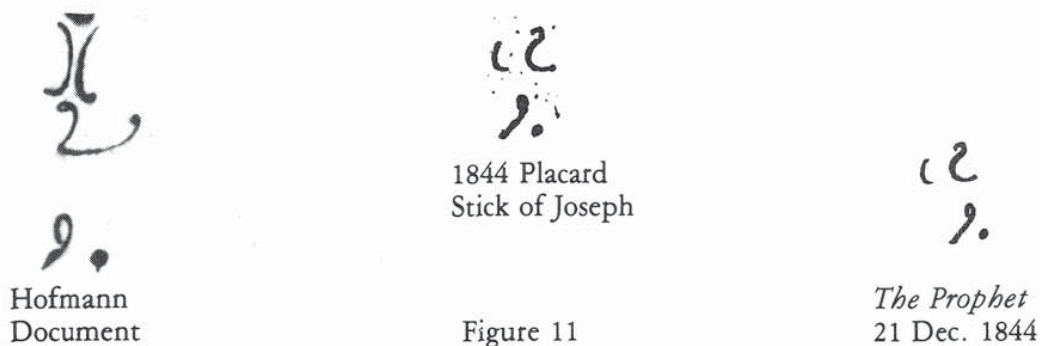


Figure 10. Comparison of Characters on the Hofmann and Whitmer Manuscripts

The characters between each of the superimposed letters on the Hofmann document and the same letters on the Whitmer text indicate corresponding characters. For example, from *a* to *b* or row 1 on the Hofmann document is the same as from *a* to *b* or line 1 on the Whitmer text. The Hofmann document reads up and down; whereas, the Whitmer text reads across.



both published versions at the end of line one (see Figure 11). Finally, it is evident that the characters of the printed versions generally resemble the Whitmer text more closely than they do the new manuscript, except for a few details on specific symbols and the nonrepeated elements mentioned earlier. In summary, this evidence points to the conclusion that the Hofmann document was the ancestor of both the Whitmer text and the published renditions. The unique features in the printed texts which are not found in the Whitmer text can be explained only by the Hofmann document.

#### THE LANGUAGE OF THE CHARACTERS

The language in which the characters are written has long been of interest to students of the history of the Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith was inclined to allow the book to speak for itself on the matter. Moroni said: “We have written this record according to our knowledge, in the characters which are called among us the reformed Egyptian, being handed down and altered by us, according to our manner of speech.” He said that Hebrew was not used because the plates were too small, and he made it clear that “none other people knoweth our language; therefore he [God] hath prepared means for the interpretation thereof.” (Mormon 9:32–34.) This theme was often repeated. In a note accompanying his publication of the title page of the Book of Mormon in June 1829, E. B. Grandin said the book was “written in ancient characters, impossible to be interpreted by any to whom the special gift has not been imparted by inspiration.”<sup>24</sup> This message was implicit in D&C 9 and explains why Oliver Cowdery failed in his efforts to translate. In 1835 Oliver wrote that the language “cannot be interpreted by the learning of this generation.”<sup>25</sup> In 1843 Joseph Smith explained to James Arlington

<sup>24</sup>Wayne Sentinel, June 1829, quoted in Robert Hullinger, *Mormon Answer to Skepticism: Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1979), p. 87.

<sup>25</sup>Messenger and Advocate 2 (October 1835): 198.

Bennet that he “translated the Book of Mormon from hieroglyphics the knowledge of which was lost to the world.”<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, scholars, students of the Book of Mormon, and naysayers alike have theorized about the origin of the characters. Martin Harris asserted that Professor Anthon told him they were Egyptian, Chaldaic, Assyriac, and Arabic.<sup>27</sup> Anthon, on the other hand, described them in his correspondence as “anything but Egyptian hieroglyphics”: to him they looked more like Greek, Hebrew, and Roman letters.<sup>28</sup>

Since the early days, numerous other hypotheses have appeared. In the early 1940s Ariel L. Crowley found 121 parallels between the characters on the Whitmer text and various forms of Egyptian writing, but some were not convinced by his work.<sup>29</sup> Crowley and others also observed parallels with Mesoamerican scripts such as Mayan. One writer even found similarities between Phoenician writings and the characters.<sup>30</sup> More recently some Mormon scholars have compared them with a Nubian corruption of Egyptian called Meroitic.<sup>31</sup>

In 1910, Charles A. Shook critically described the symbols as “deformed English” rather than “reformed Egyptian” and concluded that the Book of Mormon was a fraud pawned off by Joseph Smith. His conclusion was based on his claim that he had found in the Whitmer text all the Arabic numerals from one to zero as well as sixteen parallels to the English alphabet. He wrote, “The fact is that Joseph Smith, in drawing the transcript, employed different kinds and styles of English letters, changing a few of them to make the imposture less observable.”<sup>32</sup>

Contemporary critics have abandoned linguistics for the occult. Dr. Asael Lambert, a longtime student of Joseph Smith and of magic, believes that certain books of magic and astrology were the inspiration for the transcript.<sup>33</sup> Lutheran minister Robert Hullinger argues that there are parallels between the characters and a “secret alphabetical code” of the Masons. The Reverend Hullinger would have us believe that Joseph Smith’s connection with such writing

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<sup>26</sup>Joseph Smith to James Arlington Bennet, 13 November 1843, cited in *Reply of Joseph Smith to the Letter of J. A. B. of A--n House* (New York: R. Hedlock & T. Ward, 1844), p. 12.

<sup>27</sup>HC, 1:20.

<sup>28</sup>See fns. 18 and 19.

<sup>29</sup>Crowley, *About the Book of Mormon*, pp. 16–26. Originally published as a three-part series in the *Improvement Era* from January through March 1942 (45: 14–15, 58–59; 76–80, 124–25; 150–51, 182–83).

<sup>30</sup>J. M. Sjodahl, “Book of Mormon Characters,” *Improvement Era* 27 (December 1923): 146–48. Sjodahl quotes Dr. Augustus Le Plongeon, who believed the characters bore resemblance to Phoenician.

<sup>31</sup>Daniel Ludlow, professor at BYU, prepared a handout entitled “A Comparison of the Anthon Transcript with a Type of Reformed Egyptian,” in which this parallel is drawn. Copy in possession of author.

<sup>32</sup>Shook, *Cumora Revisited*, pp. 538–39.

<sup>33</sup>Asael C. Lambert Papers, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

came when he supposedly visited the home of George and Lucinda Morgan Harris in Far West, Missouri, in 1828. Not only has the Reverend Hullinger not demonstrated that the Harrises had the book or that Joseph saw it there, assuming Lucinda Morgan Harris had a copy because she was the widow of the famous anti-Mason William Morgan, but also he makes a mistake in the date of Joseph's visit, predating it by a decade. Joseph Smith was not in Far West until 1838. There is another problem of dates. The book which Joseph Smith is supposed to have seen in 1828 and used in obtaining inspiration for the characters was not published until 1829.<sup>34</sup>

The most recent effort to identify the language of the script has emerged since the discovery of the document. Soon after its discovery, a copy of the Hofmann document was sent to Barry Fell, professor emeritus at Harvard University. Within weeks he reported that the language is from Arabic and that he had found the key to the decipherment of the text in ancient North African Lybian code books. His study and translation are to be published in Volume 9 of *Occasional Papers of the Epigraphic Society* (Arlington, Mass.).

To accept all the theories put forth, one would be compelled to believe that the book was derived from the writings of Solomon Spaulding, Ethan Smith, and a host of other source books. Similarly, the candidates for the language of these symbols include various forms of Egyptian, Mayan, Phoenecian; books on necromancy; Masonic alphabets; "deformed English"; Lybian code books; and Egyptian texts supposedly available in the Manchester, New York, library. It is unthinkable that the "Anthon transcript" was inspired by all of these, and it is equally unlikely that unanimity will be reached on any of these theories. Certainly Church critics will continue to try to prove that the characters were derived from some source other than that which Joseph Smith said they were, and proponents will likewise continue to seek verification of Joseph Smith's claim.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DOCUMENT

Doubtless the significance of the document will increase with time. Its importance is likely more historical than theological;

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<sup>34</sup>Hullinger, *Mormon Answer to Skepticism*, pp. 91, 94, 98, 99, and fns. 104 and 105 on p. 99. Even if the Harrises had the book, the burden of proof that Joseph actually looked at it is on Hullinger. Alfred L. Bush, curator of Collections of Western America at Princeton University, has graciously provided me copies of David Bernard's *Light on Masonry: A Collection of All the Most Important Documents on the Subject of Speculative Free Masonry . . .* (Utica, N.Y.: William Williams, Printer, 1829), the book in question. I have examined it and found only superficial parallels in a few instances.

however, it will provide additional evidence for some theological-historical problems. For instance, considerable debate has centered on why Martin Harris went to New York with these characters in the first place and exactly what documents he took with him. Unfortunately Martin Harris's and Professor Anthon's accounts differ at critical points, but the new document substantiates Anthon's description and demands that new consideration be given to his story.

The prophecy of Isaiah 29:11–12 has long been associated with the visit to Charles Anthon:

And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed: And the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I am not learned.

Scholars have asked the question, did Joseph Smith want Martin Harris to go to New York with the express purpose of fulfilling this prophecy, or did he even know of it at the time? In the 1838 published version of the story (JS 2), which has become part of the official LDS history, Joseph does not mention the prophecy specifically but quotes Martin, who uses the language of Isaiah. According to Martin, Professor Anthon doubted the existence of divine aid in bringing forth the gold plates and demanded the return of his certification of the authenticity of the characters. Joseph quotes Martin's description of what followed:

I accordingly took it out of my pocket and gave it to him, when he took it and tore it to pieces, saying, that there was no such thing now as ministering of angels, and that if I would bring the plates to him, he would translate them. I informed him that part of the plates were sealed, and that I was forbidden to bring them. He replied, "I cannot read a sealed book."<sup>35</sup>

At this point there is some confusion because Oliver Cowdery, Lucy Smith, and Edward Stevenson all state that Joseph sent Martin Harris to the East to fulfill the prophecy. Oliver even said that Moroni so directed the Prophet.<sup>36</sup> But in an 1832 account Joseph Smith says that Martin Harris received a revelation in which he learned that he must make the trip to fulfill the prophecy.<sup>37</sup> Regardless of who

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<sup>35</sup>HC, 1:20.

<sup>36</sup>For Cowdery, Smith, and Stevenson respectively, see Oliver Cowdery, *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (February 1835): 80; Lucy M. Smith, *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother Lucy Mack Smith* (Salt Lake City: Stevens & Wallis, 1945), p. 119; Edward Stevenson, *Reminiscences of the Prophet Joseph Smith and the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Published by author, 1893), pp. 28–29, as cited in William E. Berrett and Alma P. Burton, *Readings in LDS History from Original Manuscripts*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1953), 1:43.

<sup>37</sup>Cheesman, "Accounts Relating to Joseph Smith's Early Visions," Appendix D, p. 131.



originated the mission, the question remains, why was it necessary? Opponents of Joseph Smith claim that it was just a scheme to satisfy Martin's doubts so that he would finance the publication of the Book of Mormon.<sup>38</sup> Others say the mission was to give "the learned" a chance to translate it, and if they failed, the world would be left without excuse for not accepting the divine inspiration of the book once the untutored farm boy had translated and published it.<sup>39</sup> The Hofmann document does not resolve these questions, but the note on the reverse side, if it were written shortly after the trip as it seems to have been,<sup>40</sup> would be the earliest connection between the trip and the prophecy.

For now it may simply be enough to suggest that the importance of the document lies in the fact that it is the earliest known Mormon document and also the earliest known Joseph Smith holograph.<sup>41</sup> Caution must be taken in assessing what it does and does not say about the Book of Mormon, but it is one more piece of the puzzle, a piece that suggests that Joseph Smith did what he said he did—copy some characters and give them to Martin Harris to take to New York.

While the new discovery does answer some important questions, like most other discoveries of this nature, it also raises a plethora of new questions that demand answers: Why were the characters between the vertical rectangle and the circle left off the Whitmer transcript but included in the published versions? Why was the format changed from a vertical one to a horizontal one in subsequent copies? Why were the groupings of characters, the details of the characters, and the rectangles and circles ignored in the copies? Why was the Whitmer transcript produced? Was it a copy for a printer, or does it represent the copy made by Mr. Dikes, a suitor of Miss Lucy Harris, to assuage her mother's opposition to their marriage as told by Lucy Smith?<sup>42</sup> Or is it a second generation copy? This discovery also raises the question about the existence of a second document, the supposed translation of these characters which Martin Harris said he took with him to New York. Moreover, it would be nice to know the

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<sup>38</sup>Reverend Wesley P. Walters asserts that Joseph Smith added the same prophecy of Isaiah to the Book of Mormon so that it would appear to refer to Joseph as the translator of the record (Wesley P. Walters, "Whatever Happened to the Book of Mormon?" *Eternity* [May 1980], pp. 32–34).

<sup>39</sup>This was Oliver Cowdery's view. He said, "For thus has God determined to leave men without excuse, and show to the meek that his arm is not shortened that it cannot save" (*Messenger and Advocate* 1 [February 1835]: 80).

<sup>40</sup>That the note was written shortly after Martin Harris returned is Dean Jessee's opinion, based on the similarity of ink in the note to that of characters on the front of the document, and Joseph's style of signature and script.

<sup>41</sup>Again on the authority of Dean Jessee. He also feels that all indications are that Joseph Smith wrote the word *Characters* at the top of the Whitmer text and that this manuscript is in the Prophet's hand. However, it is very difficult to be positive of a sample of handwriting when it contains only one word.

<sup>42</sup>Lucy M. Smith, *History of Joseph Smith*, p. 120.

provenance of the 1668 Bible and the document beyond Salt Lake City and Carthage, Illinois. Where did the characters come from? The big question, of course, which is beyond the historians' pale, is, What do the characters represent and mean? Mormons and non-Mormons alike will continue to search for the answers and to learn more in the years ahead of the significance of this amazing discovery.