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Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript

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CHAPTER 4

TRANSLATING THE BOOK OF MORMON

EVIDENCE FROM THE ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT

Royal Skousen

Introduction

In this article I discuss what the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon tells us about how Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon. Historical statements by witnesses of the translation process also provide valuable information about how Joseph Smith translated, but sometimes these statements are unreliable. In many respects, the physical evidence from the original manuscript provides, as we shall see, an important means of verifying historical statements.¹

This physical evidence and the witness statements that it confirms also shed light on the question of the authorship of the Book of Mormon. They do not support theories that Joseph Smith composed the text himself or that he took the text from some other source. Instead the physical evidence and witness statements are most compatible with the account

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that Joseph himself gave, that he translated the Book of Mormon “by the gift and power of God.”²

Witnesses of the translation process make two kinds of claims. First of all, they provide valuable evidence of what they actually saw taking place. Generally speaking, their actual observations are consistent with the physical evidence in the original manuscript. On the other hand, these witnesses frequently made claims about matters that they themselves could not observe. For instance, some described what they believed Joseph Smith actually saw in the interpreters; and many claimed that Joseph Smith could not go on until the scribe had written down letter-for-letter what Joseph saw. It turns out that these kinds of claims are not supported by the original manuscript. Of course, the witnesses themselves did not see what Joseph saw. Here they were either offering their own conjecture or perhaps recalling what Joseph might have told them. Nonetheless, all seemed to believe that Joseph Smith actually saw words in English, and there is evidence in the original manuscript to support this idea.

This paper will not encompass a complete rehearsal of the witnesses’ statements. Instead, I will provide, when needed, brief quotes from the fuller statements, which can be found in a number of sources.³

Statements from Witnesses of the Translation

During the translation process, the witnesses were able to observe, in an open setting, the following:

- Joseph Smith placing the interpreters (either the Urim and Thummim or the seer stone) in a hat and placing his face into the hat
- Joseph Smith dictating for long periods of time without reference to any books, papers, manuscripts, or even the plates themselves

- Joseph Smith spelling out unfamiliar Book of Mormon names
- After each dictated sequence, the scribe reading back to Joseph Smith what was written so that Joseph could check the correctness of the manuscript
- Joseph Smith starting a dictation session without prompting from the scribe about where the previous session had ended

The translation process that these witnesses observed was an open one—that is, others in the room could observe the dictation from Joseph Smith to the scribe. But early on in the translation, from late 1827 to early 1828, it appears that Joseph Smith used a different process while translating. During this time Joseph first copied some of the characters directly from the plates onto sheets of paper, from which sheets he would then translate his transcribed characters into English by means of the Urim and Thummim:

By this timely aid was I enabled to reach the place of my destination in Pennsylvania, and immediately after my arrival there I commenced copying the characters of <all> the plates. I copied a considerable number of them and by means of the Urim and Thummim I translated some of them . . .⁴

In the above quote, the angled brackets < > surrounding *all* represent a crossout.

During this early period, the plates were uncovered while Joseph Smith translated (or at least while he copied the characters from the plates to paper); and since no one was permitted to see the plates until later, Joseph took precautions to prevent anyone from seeing him working directly with the plates. Martin Harris, in a couple of early statements, said that a blanket or curtain separated Joseph Smith from

him at the time he (Harris) obtained a sample transcript and translation to take to Professor Anthon in New York City.⁵

In place of this early method, Joseph Smith soon turned to a method of translation that depended directly on the interpreters alone, so that the plates did not have to be viewed, and thus the translation could be done openly. All witnesses that refer to the translation of the lost 116 pages and our current Book of Mormon text (Emma Smith, Martin Harris, and members of the Whitmer family) openly observed this translation process—one without a curtain or blanket separating Joseph from his scribe. In fact, according to Emma Smith, the plates were wrapped up and not directly used.⁶

On the basis of the witnesses' statements, we can identify the following stages in the translation process:

1. Joseph Smith sees (in some way) the English text,
2. Joseph Smith reads off the text to the scribe,
3. the scribe hears the text,
4. the scribe writes the text.

Evidence from the original and printer's manuscripts suggests that the only revealed stage in the translation process was what Joseph Smith himself saw by means of the interpreters. Witnesses seemed to have believed that Joseph Smith actually saw an English text in the interpreters, but it is possible that Joseph saw the text, so to speak, in his "mind's eye." But in any event, all other stages—from Joseph Smith reading off that text to the scribe's writing it down—potentially introduced human error and had to be carefully monitored.

There appear to be three possible kinds of control over the dictation of the Book of Mormon text:

1. *Loose control:* Ideas were revealed to Joseph Smith, and he put the ideas into his own language (a theory advocated by many Book of Mormon scholars over the years).

2. *Tight control*: Joseph Smith saw specific words written out in English and read them off to the scribe—the accuracy of the resulting text depending on the carefulness of Joseph Smith and his scribe.
3. *Iron-clad control*: Joseph Smith (or the interpreters themselves) would not allow any error made by the scribe to remain (including the spelling of common words).

One can also conceive of mixtures of these different kinds of control. For instance, one might argue for tight control over the spelling of specific names, but loose control over the English phraseology itself.

A number of statements from the witnesses definitely show that virtually all of them believed in the iron-clad theory:

Joseph Knight (autograph [between 1833 and 1847]):

But if it was not Spelt rite it would not go away till it was rite, so we see it was marvelous.⁷

Emma Smith (Edmund C. Briggs interview, 1856):

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 a 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.⁸

Martin Harris (Edward Stevenson's 1881 account):

By aid of the seer stone, sentences would appear and were read by the Prophet and written by Martin, and when finished he would say, "Written," and if correctly written, that sentence would disappear and another appear in its place, but if not written correctly it remained until corrected, so that the translation was just as it was

engraven on the plates, precisely in the language then used.⁹

David Whitmer (Eri B. Mullin interview, 1874):

... the words would appear, and if he failed to spell the word right, it would stay till it was spelled right, then pass away; another come, and so on.¹⁰

David Whitmer (James H. Hart interview, 1884):

Sometimes Joseph could not pronounce the words correctly, having had but little education; and if by any means a mistake was made in the copy, the luminous writing would remain until it was corrected. It sometimes took Oliver several trials to get the right letters to spell correctly some of the more difficult words, but when he had written them correctly, the characters and the interpretation would disappear and the interpretation would disappear [*a dittography?*], and be replaced by other characters and their interpretation.¹¹

A similar example advocating iron-clad control is the secondary witness of Samuel W. Richards (in a statement recorded over fifty-eight years later, on 25 May 1907).¹² According to Richards, Oliver Cowdery explained to him during the winter of 1848–49 how Joseph Smith had translated:

1. Every word was distinctly visible even down to every letter;
2. and if Oliver omitted a word or failed to spell a word correctly, the translation remained on the “interpreter” until it was copied correctly.

As we shall see, the first statement is apparently true, but the second one is definitely false.

Evidence in the Manuscripts

We now turn to the original manuscript and what it can specifically tell us about the translation process. In a number of instances, it provides valuable support (or at least consistent evidence) for some events that witnesses actually saw. This manuscript also provides valuable evidence for procedures that none of the witnesses described in any of their statements.

The Original Manuscript Was Written from Dictation

Errors in the original manuscript (O) are based on the scribe mishearing what Joseph Smith dictated rather than visually misreading while copying from another manuscript. Consider, for instance, the difficulty the scribe had in hearing the difference between *and* and *an*. In 1 Nephi 13:29 of O the scribe (designated as scribe 2) wrote down the following:

& because of these things which are taken away out of the
gospale of the Lamb & exceeding great many do stumble

Obviously, scribe 2 misheard “an exceeding great many” as “and exceeding great many”. The use of the ampersand (&) shows that the error was not based on visual similarity. Hearing *an*, the scribe interpreted it as the casual speech form *an’* for *and*.

A mishearing could also occur when the actual word was rather infrequent and the scribe replaced it with a more frequent but phonetically similar word, as in the following example from 1 Nephi 17:48 of O, when Oliver Cowdery wrote *weed* rather than *reed*:

& whoso shall lay their hands upon me shall wither even
as a dried weed

In this example, as well as in the previous one, the scribe of the original manuscript did not catch the error.

In the following example Oliver Cowdery immediately corrected a misheard word in Alma 57:22 of O. The incorrect *meet* is crossed out (angled brackets are used to represent crossouts) and the correct *beat* is inserted above the crossout (as indicated by the caret):

for it was they who did <m^eet> \beat/ the Lamanites

One particular difficulty for the scribe occurred whenever Joseph Smith pronounced unstressed *'em* (for either *them* or *him*). In the following two examples, Oliver Cowdery first interpreted *'em* as *him*, then immediately corrected it by writing *them*:

& behold they saw him <a> comeing & they hailed him
but he sayeth unto <him> them fear not (Alma 55:8)

wherefore Akish administered it unto his kindreds &
friends leading {<%him%> | them} away by fair promises
(Ether 8:17)

In the first instance, Oliver Cowdery simply crossed out the *him* and wrote the correct *them* immediately afterwards on the same line. In the second case, Oliver erased the incorrect *him* (represented as <%him%>) and then overwrote the erasure with *them* (the percent sign with angled brackets stands for erasure; curly brackets are used to represent overwriting). Both examples show the problems Oliver was having in interpreting the unstressed *'em* of Joseph Smith's dictation.

Sometimes a following word, when read aloud, interfered with the scribe's ability to hear the correct reading. For instance, in Alma 41:14 Oliver Cowdery wrote *Sons* instead of *Son* in O (he later corrected the error in the printer's manuscript [P]). In this example, underlining is used to highlight the textual change:

therefore my Sons see that ye are merciful unto your Brethren (O) > Son (P)

The source of this error is the following word *see*, whose initial *s* would have made it hard for Oliver Cowdery to hear any difference between *son see* and *sons see*. This passage comes from Alma's discourse to his son Corianton; he is speaking to only one son. In other places in this passage (listed below) *son* is correctly transcribed in both O and P because the context does not lead to ambiguity; in these cases *son* is immediately followed by either a vowel or a consonant other than *s*:

now my Son I do not say that their resurrection cometh at the resurrection of Christ (Alma 40:20)

& now my Son this is the restoration of which has been spoken (Alma 40:24)

& now my Son I have somewhat to say concerning the restoration (Alma 41:1)

I say unto thee my Son that the plan of restoration is requisite with the Justice of God (Alma 41:2)

& now behold my Son do not risk one more offence against your God (Alma 41:9)

& now my Son all men that are in a state of Nature . . . (Alma 41:11)

& now my Son I perceive there is somewhat more which doth worry your mind (Alma 42:1)

now behold my son I will explain this thing unto thee (Alma 42:2)

& now remember my Son if it were not for the plan of redemption . . . (Alma 42:11)

In Alma 41:13 (“O my Son this is not the case”), the text is not fully extant to show whether *Son* or *Sons* was in O; P definitely has *Son*.

In contrast to these examples from O, the errors that are found in P show that it was visually copied. We have examples where Oliver Cowdery incorrectly read O when copying it to produce P. In each case, the error leads to a more difficult reading. As before, underlining is used to indicate the textual change.

yea & I always knew that there was a God (O) > also (P)
(Alma 30:52)

& Parhoran retained the Judgment seat which caused much rejoicing among the Brethren of Parhoran & also among the People of liberty (O) > many (P*) > many of (Pjg, 1830) (Alma 51:7)

[The correct spelling of the name should be *Parhoron*; the first four occurrences of this name in O were spelled *Parhoron* (Alma 50:40, 52:2–3), not *Pahoran* (as it appears in the current text) or *Parhoran* (as shown above in Alma 51:7); the symbol *P** refers to the original hand in P, while *Pjg* refers to a correction (in the printer’s manuscript) made by John Gilbert, the compositor for the 1830 edition.]

and he also saw other multitudes pr*ssing their way towards that great and specious bilding (O) > feeling (P)
(1 Nephi 8:31)

All of these errors are due to visual similarity. In the first two examples Oliver Cowdery miscopied his own hand in O. In the second example, Oliver wrote “many the People of liberty” in P, which made no sense, so the 1830 compositor, John Gilbert (whose marks are designated here by *Pjg*), inserted the *of* to improve the reading. And in the last example, the hand in O is scribe 3’s. This scribe’s open *p* has a high ascender, which makes his *p* look like an *f*. The *e* vowel is

missing. And the first *s* in *pressing* was an elongated *s* (represented as **s* in the above transcription), which Oliver interpreted as an *l*.

Immediate corrections in the printer's manuscript also show the influence of visual similarity in producing P. Here I list some of the clear examples found in P that show an incorrect word crossed out and the correct visually similar word from O inserted or written immediately afterwards:

<sanct[^]ified> \satisfied/ (Mosiah 15:9)

<deliver> declare (Mosiah 27:37)

<curse[^]d> \caused/ (Alma 8:13)

<sacra[^]ment> \sacrifice/ (Alma 34:10)

<prisoner[^]s> \provisions/ (Alma 56:27)

[This same correction is also found in Alma 57:11 and 57:15.]

<suppose>[^] \suffer/ (Alma 58:22)

<cau[^]se> \cease/ (Helaman 4:25)

<burne[^]d> \buried/ (3 Nephi 8:25)

<rewa[^]rd> \rearward/ (3 Nephi 20:42)

Joseph Smith Was Working with at Least Twenty to Thirty Words at a Time

There is some evidence in the original manuscript for the minimal amount of text Joseph Smith had access to as he was dictating. Consider, first of all, the evidence from scribal anticipations. Frequently the scribe, in attempting to keep up with Joseph's dictation, jumped ahead of the actual text. As an example, we have the following case of Oliver Cowdery anticipating the text in Alma 56:41 of O:

& it came to pass that again <we saw the Lamanites>
when the light of the morning came we saw the
Lamanites upon us

This example suggests that Joseph and Oliver started out together, but by the time Oliver finished writing “& it came to pass that again” Joseph had moved along far enough that he was then dictating “we saw the Lamanites upon us” and Oliver started to write that down when he realized he had skipped the intervening text “when the light of the morning came,” so he immediately crossed out “we saw the Lamanites” and wrote the correct sequence, possibly with Joseph repeating the correct text for him. If this explanation is correct, then it indicates that Joseph Smith had at least twenty words in view as he was dictating.

It is also possible that this error was produced by Joseph Smith as he was dictating; that is, Joseph himself may have accidentally skipped the phrase “when the light of the morning came” and then corrected himself. In either case, the implication remains that Joseph had access to at least twenty words.

Another kind of evidence for the length of dictation can be seen in a change of scribe found in Alma 45:22 of O; Oliver Cowdery (OC) suddenly stops acting as scribe and Joseph Smith (JS) himself takes over the scribe’s task for twenty-eight words:

OC: . . . therefore Helaman & his Brethren went forth to
establish the church again in all the land

JS: yea in every city throughout all the land which was
possessed by the people of Nephi and it came to pass
that they did appoint priests and teachers

OC: throughout all the land over all the churches . . .

These twenty-eight words in Joseph Smith's hand are written very carefully. And except for one spelling variant (*citty*), all the extant words are spelled according to standard orthography.

One possible explanation for this momentary switch in scribes is that it represents Oliver Cowdery's unsuccessful attempt to translate. It even suggests that Oliver, like Peter the apostle walking on the water, succeeded at first. For instance, verse 5 of section 9 in the Doctrine and Covenants implies an initial success on Oliver's part:

And, behold, it is because that you did not continue as you commenced, when you began to translate, that I have taken away this privilege from you.

Nonetheless, there is, in my opinion, some difficulty with the suggestion that these twenty-eight words in Alma 45 represent Oliver Cowdery translating. One problem is that the switch to Joseph Smith's hand occurs in the middle of the narrative, in fact, in the middle of a sentence (although at a point of semiclosure). One would think that Oliver Cowdery's attempt to translate would have come at a more suitable break in the narrative.

My explanation for this scribal switch is that there was a sudden need for the scribe to break off and Joseph Smith had to get down what he was currently viewing in the interpreters, so he wrote it down himself. The reason Joseph would have had to do this is possibly explained by Emma Smith's claim in her 1879 interview with her son Joseph Smith III that his father, Joseph Smith Jr., started dictation sessions without prompting:

I am satisfied that no man could have dictated the writing of the manuscripts unless he was inspired; for, when acting as his scribe, your father would dictate to me hour after hour; and when returning after meals, or after

interruptions, he would at once begin where he had left off, without either seeing the manuscript or having any portion of it read to him. This was a usual thing for him to do. It would have been improbable that a learned man could do this; and, for one so ignorant and unlearned as he was, it was simply impossible.¹³

This ability to continue without prompting suggests that before ending a dictation session or going on to the next portion of text, Joseph Smith would have to finish getting copied down all of what he was viewing; otherwise the uncopied part would be lost. In other words, Joseph had to deal with what was in front of him and could not quit until what he was seeing was transcribed.

Joseph's careful handwriting for these twenty-eight words as well as his accurate spelling for several difficult words (*throughout*, *possessed*, *appoint*) suggests that he might have been visually copying and not listening to someone else dictating the text (unless that person was also spelling out English words for Joseph). In other early holographic writings of Joseph Smith, we find numerous examples suggesting that Joseph was not a particularly good speller. Yet in those writings he does consistently spell *through* correctly. In documents dating from 1832, 1833, and 1839, he writes only *through*, so the correct spelling of *throughout* in Alma 45 may simply be due to the fact that Joseph already knew how to spell this word.¹⁴ Early on, in 1833, Joseph Smith spelled *possess* as *posess*, with a single *s* in the middle of the word. Yet later, in 1840, he had apparently learned how to spell *possession* correctly, with two *s*'s instead of one.¹⁵ And an 1832 spelling of *appointed* is also correctly written by Joseph Smith.¹⁶ So ultimately this brief passage in Alma 45 has too few words in Joseph Smith's hand to demonstrate that he was visually copying from an orthographically correct text. In a cursory examination, I have found only one holographic writing of Joseph's that contains an incorrect spelling (that

is, *possess*) for one of the three potentially difficult words in this short passage. And of course, we must remember that Joseph did misspell *city* as *citty* in this passage from Alma 45. So the spelling evidence is not conclusive.

Still, if this explanation is right (that the generally correct spelling of the text in Joseph Smith's hand here in the original manuscript suggests visual copying), then Joseph Smith was viewing at least these twenty-eight words.

Joseph Smith Could See the Spelling of Names

Several witnesses to the translation process claimed that Joseph Smith sometimes spelled out names to the scribe. And we find evidence in the original manuscript in support of this process. Frequently the first occurrence of a Book of Mormon name is first spelled phonetically, then that spelling is corrected; in some instances, the incorrect spelling is crossed out and followed on the same line by the correct spelling, thus indicating that the correction is an immediate one. For example, in Alma 33:15 the text of O reads as follows:

for it is not written that Zenos alone spake of these things
but <Zenock> Zenoch also spake of these things

Oliver Cowdery first wrote *Zenock* using the expected *ck* English spelling for the *k* sound when preceded by a short vowel. But then Oliver crossed out the whole word and immediately afterwards, on the same line, wrote *Zenoch*, thus indicating that the spelling agrees with the biblical name *Enoch*. This example also suggests that Joseph Smith spelled out the *ch* sequence for Oliver Cowdery, although it is possible that Joseph could have repronounced the *ch* sequence with the incorrect *ch* sound rather than with the correct *k* sound in order to help Oliver get it down right.

But there are also examples for which it is impossible to find a repronunciation that will guarantee the correct spelling. For instance, in Helaman 1:15 Oliver Cowdery first

wrote the name *Coriantumr* phonetically, as *Coriantummer*, then he crossed it all out and wrote out the correct spelling, *Coriantumr*:

& they were lead by a man whose name was
<Coriantummer> Coriantumr

In this case, no matter how slowly or carefully Joseph Smith might have repronounced *Coriantumr*, it would have been impossible for him to have indicated that there was no vowel between the *m* and *r* at the end of the name except by actually spelling out the separate letters *m* and *r*. Nor could Oliver Cowdery have guessed this spelling since no word (or name) in English ends in *mr*. In fact, Oliver ends the correct spelling *Coriantumr* with a large flourish on the final *r*, which Oliver produces nowhere else in either the original or the printer's manuscript. This addition probably reveals Oliver Cowdery's frustration at having to guess at such a weird spelling.¹⁷

Emma Smith and David Whitmer claimed that Joseph Smith sometimes spelled out, in addition to names, English words that were difficult to pronounce:

Emma Smith (Edmund C. Briggs interview, 1856):

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 . . .¹⁸

David Whitmer (*Chicago Tribune* interview, 1885):

In translating the characters Smith, who was *illiterate* and but little versed in Biblical lore, was oftentimes compelled to spell the words out, not knowing the correct pronunciation . . .¹⁹

There appears to be no firm evidence in what remains of the original manuscript to support this claim of Emma Smith

and David Whitmer. Long English words found in what remains of the original manuscript are frequently misspelled, as in the following sampling from 1 Nephi (where misspelled letters are underlined):

Oliver Cowdery:

2:3 obediant
 2:11 immaginations
 4:20 treasurey (3 times)
 16:19 fateagued
 17:30 expediant
 17:51 miricles
 19:10 esepecially

Scribe 2:

3:16 inheritence
 13:5 tortereth
 13:23 covanants (2 times)
 15:20 passified

Scribe 3:

4:20 treash <u>u</u> ry	7:1 fam <u>m</u> aly
4:34 dillig <u>e</u> nt	7:8 examp <u>e</u> l
4:36 desir <u>u</u> s	7:12 exers <u>i</u> se
5:2 inherrit <u>a</u> nce	8:21 concors <u>e</u> s
5:8 sur <u>i</u> ty (2 times)	10:2 dilag <u>e</u> nce
5:9 sacraf <u>i</u> ce	10:4 mas <u>a</u> iah
5:13 prophas <u>i</u> es	11:6 hos <u>a</u> na
5:14 jenealej <u>a</u>	11:26 condes <u>e</u> nsion
5:14 des <u>e</u> ndant	11:34 apost <u>e</u> ls
6:2 sofis <u>e</u> th	12:4 tumult <u>i</u> us

Of all these examples, only the spelling for *genealogy* lends support to the idea that Joseph Smith spelled out English words. Scribe 3's spelling *jenealeja* for *genealogy* definitely suggests some difficulty in dealing with this word. In 1 Nephi we have the following spellings for *genealogy* in the original manuscript:

<i>Reference</i>	<i>Scribe</i>	<i>Spelling</i>
3:3	Oliver Cowdery	genealogy
3:12	scribe 2	genealogy
5:14	scribe 3	jenealeja
5:16	scribe 3	genealogy
6:1	scribe 3	genealogy
19:2	Oliver Cowdery	genealogy

The fact that both Oliver Cowdery and scribe 2 were readily able to spell *genealogy* correctly suggests that they had no difficulty in dealing with this word, nor did Joseph Smith in pronouncing it. But the first time scribe 3 tries to spell *genealogy* (in 1 Nephi 5:14), he writes *jenealeja*, a very naive spelling. This scribe's use of *j* in place of *g* suggests that he had no idea how to spell this word—and perhaps he didn't recognize or even know the word. But a short time later, when the word is used in verse 16, it suddenly appears in its standard spelling (as also in 6:1). This sudden change implies that someone—possibly Joseph Smith—could have told scribe 3 how to spell this word.

In any event, if Joseph Smith did spell out long English words, it appears to have been fairly infrequent. The lack of consistent evidence for spelling out words of English does not, however, necessarily contradict Emma Smith's statement. Emma's description refers to when she was acting as scribe, which presumably would have been at the beginning of the original book of Lehi (which formed part of the 116 manuscript pages that were later lost). Joseph Smith's pronunciation of long English words might have improved sufficiently as the 116 pages were being dictated that eventually he hardly ever needed to spell out difficult English words. Even in the beginning there probably wouldn't have been that many words causing him difficulty. Having learned how to pronounce the difficult words, he would have simply

relied on the scribe to correctly spell the words he dictated, except for unfamiliar names.

The original manuscript suggests that the spelling of names could have been checked whenever the scribe felt unsure of the spelling. This situation would naturally occur with the first occurrence of an unfamiliar name in the text. (It could also occur after a substantial hiatus, during which the scribe might have forgotten the spelling.) As an extended example of this phenomenon, consider the spelling of *Amalickiah* in the book of Alma. The first couple of occurrences are spelled correctly, but then Oliver Cowdery (the scribe here) starts spelling the second and third vowels of *Amalickiah* as *e*'s. At first Oliver catches these errors and corrects them. But eventually he apparently remembers that once the scribe has made sure that the first occurrence of a name is spelled correctly, there is really no need to worry about spelling variance in subsequent occurrences of the name. In this case, the first spelling *Amalickiah* establishes the correct spelling. As long as this is kept in mind, there is no problem if subsequent occurrences of *Amalickiah* are spelled differently. So after the first handful of occurrences, Oliver rather consistently spells *Amalickiah* as *Ameleckiah*, although sometimes he immediately corrects the second *e* to an *i*; or sometimes he later corrects the first *e* to an *a* (always with a heavier ink flow).

In the following list, we have all the occurrences of *Amalickiah* and in order of appearance. Correct spellings are marked with an asterisk (*); some examples are not fully extant in O and are represented by a question mark (?); an *e* corrected to an *a* is written as {e|a}; a plus sign (+) means that the change of *e* to *a* was done in heavier ink; {e|i} stands for an *e* corrected to an *i*; and finally, parentheses containing blank spaces means that the text here is not extant:

correct spelling, without overwriting:

* 46:3 Amalickiah
* 46:4 Amalickiah

overwriting of *e*'s begins:

*+ 46:5 Am{e|a}l{e|i}ckiah
*+ 46:6 Am{e|a}l{e|i}ckiah
? 46:7 —

overwriting suddenly ends; *e*'s not corrected at all:

46:10 Ameleckiah
46:11 Amelickiah
? 46:28 —
46:28 Ameleckiahites
? 46:29 —
? 46:29 —
46:30 Amaleckiah
46:30 Ameleckiah
46:30 Ameleckiah
46:31 Ameleckiah
? 46:32 —
46:33 Ameleckiah
46:35 Ameleckiahites
47:1 Amaleckiah

overwriting briefly returns with some consistency:

+ ? 47:3 Am{e|a}()ckiah
*+ 47:4 Am{e|a}lickiah
*+ 47:8 Am{e|a}lickiahs
*+ heading Am{e|a}lickiah
*+ 47:11 Am{e|a}lickiah
? 47:12 —
+ 47:13 Am{e|a}leckiah
*+ 47:13 Am{e|a}l{e|i}ckiah

overwriting becomes fairly inconsistent:

+ 47:13 Am{e|a}leckiah
47:14 Amel{e|i}ckiah

	47:15	Amel{e i}ckiah
*	47:15	Amal{e i}ckiah
	47:16	Ameleckiah
	47:18	Ameleckiah
*+	47:19	Am{e a}{e i}ckiah
	47:20	Amel{e i}ckiah

overwriting becomes quite sporadic and infrequent:

	47:21	Amelickiah
	47:21	Ameleckiah
	47:22	Amel{e i}ckiah
	47:25	Ameleckiah
	47:27	Ameleckiah
?	47:27	—
	47:30	Ameleckiah
	47:32	Amel{e i}ckiah
	47:33	Ameleckiah
	47:34	Ameleckiah
	47:35	Amaleckiah
	heading	Amel{e i}ckiah
	48:1	Ameleckiah
+	48:7	Am{e a}leckiah
	49:9	Amel{e i}ckiahites
*+	49:10	Am{e a}{e i}ckiah
?	49:11	—
	49:25	Amel{e i}ckiah
?	51:9	—
?	51:11	—
?	51:12	—
	heading	Ameleckiah
+	51:23	Am{e a}leckiah
	51:23	Amelickiah
*+	51:25	Am{e a}{e i}ckiah
	51:27	Amelickiah
	51:30	Amelickiah
	51:32	Ameleckiah
	51:33	Ameleckiah

?	51:37	()el()
	52:1	Ameleckiah
*+	52:3	Am{e a}lickiah
	52:3	Ameleckiah
	heading	Ameleckiah
	54:16	Amelickiah
	55:5	Ameleckiah
?	62:35	—

Quite obviously, the scribe can make errors. There is definitely no iron-clad control over the text.

The spelling *Ameleckiah* also provides evidence that Joseph Smith was pronouncing this name with stress on the first syllable, with the result that the second and third vowels were reduced to the indistinct schwa vowel (“uh”). If Joseph Smith had been pronouncing *Amalickiah* as we do currently, with stress on the second syllable, then Oliver Cowdery would have consistently and correctly spelled at least the second vowel.

Most of the witnesses believed that Joseph Smith or the interpreters had some ability to know what the scribe was writing. They may well have occasionally observed Joseph Smith correcting the scribe without directly looking at the manuscript. Yet this interference was not automatic, nor did it prevent the scribe from making mistakes.

The Scribe Repeated Back the Text to Joseph Smith

According to David Whitmer (as found in his own 1887 publication *An Address to All Believers in Christ*), a dictation of words was followed by a checking sequence in which the scribe would read back the text to Joseph Smith. If an error was discovered, Joseph Smith would presumably then read off the correct text once more until he was satisfied that the scribe had written it down correctly:

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.²⁰

David Whitmer also referred to this repetition in an 1881 interview published in the *Kansas City Journal*:

He did not use the plates in the translation, but would hold the interpreters to his eyes and cover his face with a hat, excluding all light, and before his eyes would appear what seemed to be parchment, on which would appear the characters of the plates in a line at the top, and immediately below would appear the translation in English, which Smith would read to his scribe, who wrote it down exactly as it fell from his lips. The scribe would then read the sentence written, and if any mistake had been made, the characters would remain visible to Smith until corrected, when they faded from sight, to be replaced by another line.²¹

The specific evidence from the original manuscript is consistent with the claim that the scribe read back what had been written. In such a process, Joseph Smith would be checking what he was hearing from the scribe against what he was viewing in the interpreters. But such agreement would not guarantee the accuracy of the manuscript. For instance, *Amalickiah* could be spelled *Ameleckiah*, but since both spellings were pronounced the same (when stress was on the first syllable), there would be no way for Joseph to detect the incorrect spelling when the scribe pronounced the name. This same difficulty applies to phonetically similar words (such as mixing up *weed* with *reed*, *and* with *an*, and *sons* with *son* when immediately followed by a word beginning with an *s*). Most of the undetected errors that remain in the original manuscript could not have been caught

when read back because there was little if any difference in pronunciation.

Corrections in the original manuscript are also consistent with a repetition sequence. The clear majority of changes in the original manuscript were made immediately; that is, the scribe caught the error during Joseph Smith's initial dictation. Evidence for these immediate corrections include: corrections following on the same line, erasures showing ink smearing (since the ink had not yet dried), or supralinear corrections or insertions in the line with no change in the level of ink flow or difference in the quill. These immediate corrections also include numerous cases where the crossed-out word is only part of the intended word or is obviously miswritten.

On the other hand, there are also numerous changes that are consistent with a process of correcting errors found while repeating the text. In these instances, the original form is complete and the error is usually not obvious (that is, the reading is not a difficult reading); the correction is supralinear or inserted in the line, but there is no erasure, only a crossout of the error, and the level of ink flow for the correction is usually different.

We should also note that there is evidence that some corrections were done considerably later, that is, some time after the repetition sequence. In fact, a few of these later corrections in the original manuscript were apparently made when the printer's manuscript was being copied from the original or even later when sheets of the 1830 edition were being proofed. Sometimes the change was by a different scribe or in a different medium (such as pencil). In virtually every case these few corrections eliminated difficult readings in the original manuscript.

The Word *Chapter* and the Corresponding Chapter Numbers Were Not Part of the Revealed Text

Evidence from both the original and printer’s manuscripts shows that Joseph Smith apparently saw some visual indication at the end of a section that the section was ending. Although this may have been a symbol of some kind, a more likely possibility is that the last words of the section were followed by blankness. Recognizing that the section was ending, Joseph Smith then told the scribe to write the word *chapter*, with the understanding that the appropriate number would be added later.

There is considerable evidence in both manuscripts to support this interpretation. First, the word *chapter* is never used by any writer in the text itself, unlike the term *book*, which is used to refer to an individual book in the Book of Mormon (such as the book of Helaman) as well as a whole set of plates (such as the book of Nephi, meaning the large plates of Nephi; see Helaman 2:13–14).

Second, chapters are assigned before the beginning of a book. For instance, in the original manuscript, we have the following at the beginning of 2 Nephi:

<Chapter <{V|I}> VIII>

second Chapter I

The ^ Book of Nephi ^ An account of the death of Lehi . . .

Oliver Cowdery first wrote *Chapter* at the conclusion of the last section in 1 Nephi—that is, at the conclusion of Chapter VII in the original chapter system; our current chapter system dates from Orson Pratt’s 1879 edition of the Book of Mormon (which has 22 chapters in 1 Nephi). At this point, Joseph Smith had no indication that a new book was beginning. All he could see was the end of Chapter VII (namely,

the words “and thus it is Amen” followed probably by blankness or maybe a special symbol). Later, when Oliver Cowdery was adding the chapter numbers, he first assigned the Roman numeral *VIII* to this first chapter of 2 Nephi. But when he realized that this was actually the beginning of a new book, he crossed out the whole chapter designation and inserted (with slightly weaker ink flow) “Chapter I” after the title of the book, which originally was simply designated as “The Book of Nephi.” Later he realized that there was more than one book of Nephi, which led him to also insert the word *second* (with considerably heavier ink flow).

This system of assigning chapters also explains why the two manuscripts have chapter numbers assigned to the short books found at the end of the small plates (Enos, Jarom, Omni, and the Words of Mormon) as well as 4 Nephi. These books contain only one section, but at the beginning of each of these short books, Joseph Smith apparently had no knowledge that this was the case. This fact further shows that Joseph Smith himself did not know in advance the contents or structure of the text.

Probably the strongest evidence that the word *chapter* is not original to the revealed text is that the chapter numbers are assigned later in both manuscripts. The numbers are almost always written in heavier ink and more carefully. In many cases, Oliver Cowdery added serifs to his Roman numerals. On the other hand, his *Chapter* is always written rapidly and with the same general ink flow as the surrounding text. In the printer’s manuscript, at the beginning of Chapter XVII in Alma (now the beginning of Alma 36), the Roman numeral *XVII* was written in blue ink, not the normal black ink. In this part of the printer’s manuscript, Oliver had been using this same blue ink to rule the manuscript sheets of P prior to copying. Here he also used this blue ink to assign the chapter number as well as add an *s* to

the word *Commandment* in the next line. This example clearly suggests that this part of the original manuscript itself did not yet have chapter numbers assigned to it when Oliver Cowdery started to copy it, perhaps six months after it had been dictated.

In addition, there is one case when the scribe got off in his counting of the chapters. While producing the printer's manuscript, when he came to Chapter VIII in Mosiah (now starting at chapter 13, verse 25), Oliver Cowdery accidentally assigned the Roman numeral *IX* to this chapter, with the result that all the numbers for the subsequent chapters in Mosiah are off by one. The compositor for the 1830 edition caught this error and penciled in the correct number for all but one of these later chapters.

Internal Evidence for Tight Control

The evidence for loose control seems to rely heavily upon the notion that the nonstandard use of English in the original text could not have come from the Lord (since he supposedly only speaks "correct" English). The use of dialectal English, in this view, is said to be Joseph Smith's contribution; thus by inference the Lord only gave Joseph Smith ideas, not specific words.²² Of course, the spelling out of names definitely suggests that a theory of loose control must be revised in some way; Joseph Smith had some view of the specific spelling for names, in particular, names with impossible spellings for English literates.

In addition, there is substantial evidence within the text itself for tight control over specific words, phrases, and sentences of English. For instance, John W. Welch and Tim Rathbone have pointed out an interesting case where the Book of Mormon makes the same identical (nonbiblical) quote in widely separated parts of the text.²³ The example

they give is based on Lehi's vision of the kingdom of God as found in 1 Nephi 1:8 and Alma 36:22:

and he thought he saw
God sitting upon his throne
surrounded with numberless concourses of angels
in the attitude of singing and praising their God
(1 Nephi 1:8)

and methought I saw
even as our father Lehi saw
God sitting upon his throne
surrounded with numberless concourses of angels
in the attitude of singing and praising their God
(Alma 36:22)

This identity of quotation provides striking support for a theory of tight control over the translation.

One of the interesting complexities of the original English-language text of the Book of Mormon is that it contains expressions that appear to be uncharacteristic of English in all of its dialects and historical stages. These structures also support the notion that Joseph Smith's translation is a literal one and not simply a reflection of either his own dialect or the style of early modern English found in the King James Version of the Bible.

For instance, in the original text of the Book of Mormon we find a number of occurrences of a Hebrew-like conditional clause. In English, we have conditional clauses like "if you come, then I will come," with *then* being optional. In Hebrew this same clause is expressed as "if you come and I will come." In the original text of the Book of Mormon, there were at least fourteen occurrences of this non-English expression. One occurrence was removed in 1 Nephi 17:50 as Oliver Cowdery was producing the printer's manuscript by copying from the original manuscript:

if he should command me that I should say unto this water be thou earth and it shall be earth (O) > it should be earth (P)

The remaining thirteen occurrences were all removed by Joseph Smith in his editing for the second edition of the Book of Mormon, published in 1837 in Kirtland, Ohio. One example comes from the famous passage in Moroni 10:4:

and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart with real intent having faith in Christ and he will manifest the truth of it unto you by the power of the Holy Ghost (P, 1830) > NULL (1837)

This use of *and* is not due to scribal error, especially since this *if-and* expression occurs seven times in one brief passage (Helaman 12:13–21):

13 yea and if he sayeth unto the earth move and it is moved

14 yea if he say unto the earth thou shalt go back that it lengthen out the day for many hours and it is done . . .

16 and behold also if he sayeth unto the waters of the great deep be thou dried up and it is done

17 behold if he sayeth unto this mountain be thou raised up and come over and fall upon that city that it be buried up and behold it is done . . .

19 and if the Lord shall say be thou accursed that no man shall find thee from this time henceforth and forever and behold no man getteth it henceforth and forever

20 and behold if the Lord shall say unto a man because of thine iniquities thou shalt be accursed forever and it shall be done

21 and if the Lord shall say because of thine iniquities thou shalt be cut off from my presence and he will cause that it shall be so

These examples of the *if-and* construction in the original text suggest that Joseph Smith did not simply get the idea of a conditional construction in his mind. If that had been the case, he should have translated that idea using the English *if-then* construction, possibly without the *then*, but in any event, without the connective *and*. The multiple occurrence of the non-English *if-and* construction suggests that even the word *and* was controlled for.

Conclusion

Evidence from the original manuscript supports the traditional belief that Joseph Smith received a revealed text through the interpreters. This idea of a controlled text originates with statements made by the witnesses of the translation. The evidence from the original manuscript, when joined with internal evidence from the text itself, suggests that this control was tight, but not iron-clad. The text could be “ungrammatical” from a prescriptive point of view, but the use of nonstandard English is not evidence that the text was not being tightly controlled, or that it did not come from the Lord, who apparently does not share our insistence on “proper English” (see D&C 1:24). In fact, the occurrence of non-English Hebraisms such as the *if-and* construction strongly suggests that the text was tightly controlled, down to the level of the word at least. And the spelling of names such as *Coriantumr* suggests that control could be imposed down to the very letter.

All of this evidence (from the original manuscript, witnesses’ statements, and from the text itself) is thus consistent with the hypothesis that Joseph Smith could actually see (whether in the interpreters themselves or in his mind’s eye) the translated English text—word for word and letter

for letter—and that he read off this revealed text to his scribe. Despite Joseph’s reading off of the text, one should not assume that this process was automatic or easily done. Joseph had to prepare himself spiritually for this work. Yet the evidence suggests that Joseph Smith was not the author of the Book of Mormon, not even its English language translation, although it was revealed spiritually through him and in his own language.

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Notes

1. I wish to thank Richard L. Anderson and John W. Welch for their critiques of an earlier version of this paper.
2. Manuscript History of the Church, Book A-1, 121–2, cited in Richard Lloyd Anderson, “By the Gift and Power of God,” *Ensign* 7 (September 1977): 79–85.
3. See the general bibliography at the end of this paper for a list of sources that discuss the witnesses’ statements.
4. Joseph Smith, “History, 1839,” in *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:284.
5. Milton V. Backman Jr., *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1983), 209–13 (quoting John A. Clark, *Gleanings By the Way* [Philadelphia: W. J. and J. K. Simon, 1842], 222–31) and 215–23 (quoting two letters of Charles Anthon, the first in E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* [Painesville, Ohio: E. D. Howe, 1834], 270–2), and the second in Clark, *Gleanings By the Way*, 233, 237–8).
6. Joseph Smith III, “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” *The Saints’ Herald* 26/19 (1 October 1879): 289–90.
7. Dean C. Jessee, “Joseph Knight’s Recollection of Early Mormon History,” *BYU Studies* 17/1 (autumn 1976): 35.
8. John W. Welch and Tim Rathbone, “The Translation of the Book of Mormon: Basic Historical Information” (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1986), 8 (citing Edmund C. Briggs, “A Visit to Nauvoo in 1856,” *Journal of History* 9 [January 1916]: 454).
9. Edward Stevenson, “One of the Three Witnesses. Incidents in the Life of Martin Harris,” *The Latter-Day Saints’ Millennial Star* 44/5–6 (30 January and 6 February 1882): 78–9, 86–7.
10. Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 3.
11. Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 115.
12. The original typescript signed by Samuel Richards is located in the LDS Church Historical Department (Samuel Whitney Richards Collection, Ms 6576, Box 2, Folder 14); the quotes here are based on a transcript (made by Scott Faulring) of the statement.

13. Joseph Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," 290.

14. See Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 252, 260, 285, and 427.

15. See the example *possess*, first crossed out and then rewritten the same way, in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 21; the 1840 *possession* is found on page 468.

16. *Ibid.*, 261.

17. For a published photograph of this respelling, see page 221 in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992).

18. Welch and Rathbone, *The Translation of the Book of Mormon*, 8.

19. Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 174.

20. David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, Mo.: David Whitmer, 1887), 12.

21. Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 62.

22. For further discussion of whether or not the Lord himself insists on using standard English, see the discussion in Royal Skousen, "Towards a Critical Edition of the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 30/1 (winter 1990): 54–6.

23. John W. Welch and Tim Rathbone, "Book of Mormon Translation by Joseph Smith," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:210–3.