



Type: Magazine Article

Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon

Author(s): Joseph Fielding Smith

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 30, No. 11 (September 1927)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 946–948

Abstract: This article surveys the events leading to the publication of the Book of Mormon and discusses the length of translation time, the roles of Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and the Three Witnesses, the obtaining of the copyright, and the preparation for publication.

As I grew older and "put away childish things," I became a devout student of the Gospel, and learned to appreciate the sublime doctrines set forth in the Nephite record; for I had developed a testimony of the truth, and as a young missionary was out preaching it to people in the world. Not until my mind was matured however, did I grasp with anything like a full and clear comprehension, the significance of the risen Savior's appearance upon the Land of Zion—this land, where the New Jerusalem will yet rise, and the way be prepared for the glorious coming of the King of kings.

TRANSLATION AND PUBLICATION OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

BY ELDER JOSEPH FIELDING SMITH, OF THE COUNCIL OF THE
TWELVE, AND CHURCH HISTORIAN

The idea seems to prevail quite generally among members of the Church that the Prophet Joseph Smith spent the greater part of his time between September, 1823, when he received the plates, and the fall of 1829, translating the Book of Mormon.

As to the Length of Time

Because of lack of dates it is impossible to tell exactly how long it took him to complete the translation, but we know from the historical information at hand that there were many days spent in other work, when no attempt was made to translate after that labor had been undertaken. There were times when the Lord commanded him to cease translating. For instance, the Lord said on one occasion (Doc. and Cov. 5:30): "I say unto thee Joseph, when thou hast translated a few more pages thou shalt stop for a season, even until I command thee again." The reason given for this is that his enemies were lying in wait to destroy him and the work. Again the Lord said: "Do not run faster or labor more than you have strength and means provided to enable you to translate; but be diligent unto the end." (Doc. and Cov. 10:4).

Time for Study and Practice

Joseph Smith received the plates and the Urim and Thummim September 22, 1827. Because of persecution, poverty, and the necessity of "laboring with his hands" for a living, nothing was done towards translating the record that year. However, he was busy studying the characters and making himself familiar with them and the use of the Urim and Thummim. He had a great deal more to do than merely to sit down and with the use of the instrument prepared for that purpose translate the characters on the plates. Nothing worth while comes to us merely for the asking. All knowledge and skill are ob-

tained by consistent and determined study and practice, and so the Prophet found it to be the case in the translating of the Book of Mormon. It will be remembered that the Lord said to Oliver Cowdery when he desired to translate: "But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind." Oliver thought it would be easy, but found it difficult and therefore was content to accept the advice from the Lord and continue as scribe to Joseph Smith.

The Lost Pages

It was between December, 1827, and February, 1828, that the Prophet copied the characters from the plates; and, in the month of February, Martin Harris carried them to New York to Professor Charles Anthon (*History of the Church*, vol. 1, p. 19.) April 12, 1828, Martin Harris commenced to write, and the Prophet to translate the abridgment giving the history of Lehi and down to the days of King Benjamin. These pages Martin Harris lost, and because of his disobedience he was not permitted to act again as scribe and the Prophet Joseph lost his gift for a season.

Oliver Cowdery Appears

Oliver Cowdery came to the Prophet at Harmony, Pennsylvania, April 5, 1829, and two days later commenced to write at Joseph Smith's dictation. It must be remembered that they had to commence once more at the beginning and cover the same ground that had been covered in the lost manuscript, but in more detail, for they were now translating the small plates of Nephi. The translating with Oliver Cowdery as scribe, continued without interruption (*History of the Church*, vol. 1, p. 35) until May 15, 1829, when these two men having a desire to know something more about baptism went into the woods to pray and received the Aaronic Priesthood from John the Baptist. Following this important event, it became necessary for Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery to change their place of residence because of opposition, and they therefore moved from Harmony, Pennsylvania, to Fayette, Seneca county, New York, to the home of the Whitmers.

The Witnesses are Shown the Plates

It was early in June, 1829, that Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and Martin Harris, with Joseph Smith retired to the woods and sought the Lord in prayer and were visited by the angel who revealed to them the plates. It was also on this occasion that they heard the voice of the Lord declaring unto them that the record *had been translated* by the gift and power of God.

Copyright Secured

About this time Joseph Smith also writes: "Meantime, our translation *drawing to a close*, we went to Palmyra, Wayne county, New York, secured the copyright, and agreed with Mr. Egbert B. Grandin

to print five thousand copies for the sum of three thousand dollars.”

I think we may conclude that the copyright was not secured until the translation was completed, and these words of the Prophet Joseph indicate that this is the case. The copyright bears the date of June 11, 1829.

Book Ready for Distribution

After completing the translation it took some time to make arrangements with Mr. Grandin and to raise the sum required to print the book, the funds being furnished by Martin Harris through the sale of his personal property. In the meantime Oliver Cowdery, at the request of Joseph Smith, made a complete copy of the manuscript, and it was this manuscript copy that was taken to the printer, sheet at a time, until the Book of Mormon was printed. Mr. Grandin commenced the printing in August, 1829, and the Book of Mormon was ready for distribution about the first of March, 1830.

We may conclude from the evidence that the actual time of translating the record, as we have it in the Book of Mormon, was between April 7, 1829, and the first week of June of that same year, or, not to exceed two full months.

TESTIMONIES OF THE WITNESSES TO THE BOOK OF MORMON

BY ELDER JOSEPH FIELDING SMITH, OF THE COUNCIL OF THE
TWELVE, AND CHURCH HISTORIAN

The question has been asked many times of our Elders:

Where are the Plates?

“Does the Church have in its possession the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated by Joseph Smith?” When the answer is given that the plates were received again by the Angel Moroni, who through the centuries since they were “hid up unto the Lord” has been their special guardian, the reply is generally made: “What a wonderful aid it would be to your people in convincing the world of the truth of your story if you could show the plates to prove that Joseph Smith really had them.”

Perhaps it is natural for a man who hears for the first time the story of Joseph Smith and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon to propound such a question, and to think that the plates, if they had been placed in some museum where the public could examine them, would have added much to prove the authenticity of the Prophet's story. With deeper reflection we discover that this would not have been the case, for, it is not the way the Lord proves his truth, now or at any other time. However, in surprise, and in some cases with an