

The Lost 116 Pages Story

WHAT WE DO KNOW, WHAT WE DON'T
KNOW, AND WHAT WE MIGHT KNOW

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From the outset, one thing we can say that we *do* know about the story of the lost 116 pages is that from the summer of 1828 until now, this episode has loomed large in the narrative history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹

It would be difficult to imagine a more agonizing string of events in the life of Joseph Smith than what he experienced in June and July of 1828. Under pressure, he let Martin Harris take the hundred-plus manuscript pages of the Book of Mormon translation that Martin had scribed while Joseph had dictated.² The pages represented two months of work. The day after Joseph and his wife Emma bid farewell to Martin, Emma gave birth to their first child. The child was either stillborn or died soon after birth. Emma almost died in childbirth. After two weeks, and although Emma was still very much convalescing, Joseph and Emma's mutual anxiety about those manuscript pages prompted him to leave his wife in the care of her parents and make the long trip to Palmyra to find out why he had not heard anything yet from Martin.

Joseph had good reason to be uneasy as he made the trip. He reported that an angel had taken the interpreters from him even *before* he had discovered that the pages had been lost, taken “in consequence of [his] having wearied the Lord in asking for the privilege of letting Martin Harris take the writings.”³ This nagging anxiety so visibly affected Joseph that a fellow stagecoach passenger insisted that he accompany Joseph on the last leg of the trip to Joseph’s parents’ home in order to ensure that Joseph did not collapse under the weight of his worries.⁴

The sheer frequency with which the story of the pages’ loss was retold in interviews and publications has something to say about the impact it made on all involved. So too does the emotion with which Martin Harris recounted this story to interviewers, by their account.⁵ And as difficult as later setbacks and persecutions would undoubtedly be in the life of Joseph Smith, there is something uniquely piercing in the pain of self-recrimination. “It is I who have tempted the wrath of God. I should have been satisfied with the first answer which I received from the Lord,” Lucy Mack Smith recalled her son crying out when he learned the pages were gone.⁶

This story has also been marked as a definitive moment in the prophetic career of Joseph Smith by two biographers who come at that career from completely different angles.⁷ Such was the import of the events of the summer of 1828. This we do know.

What we do *not* know, of course, is what happened to those pages—or even if they are still extant.

Other than that, it seems that the most reasonable approach to be taken here is to discuss things that we *might* know, with varying degrees of substantiation and probability. Therefore, this chapter aims to survey current scholarship related to this formative moment in Mormon history, to draw on research from the Joseph Smith Papers Project and other documentary evidence to give a sense of the “state of the story,” and to consider possible readings of early texts of revelations that grew out of what was both a pivotal point in Joseph Smith’s life and ministry and a pivotal point in the development and makeup of the Book of Mormon.

Probabilities: Pages and Plots

The consensus of Joseph Smith’s early critics and supporters alike seems to be that the 116 manuscript pages did, at one time, exist. That may seem

like stating the obvious, but it is nevertheless worth stating. Even those who thought of Joseph Smith as a charlatan took it as a given that Martin Harris really did have a sheaf of handwritten pages from which he read to friends and family—and then subsequently lost. Joseph Smith and Martin Harris, over the course of the spring of 1828, really had produced *something*—and that something was apparently substantial enough, in Martin Harris’s eyes, that he felt sure it would quell his family’s doubts about the veracity of the work he was supporting. If anything, it was Martin’s enthusiasm for the content of the pages that proved to be his undoing in this case. He had solemnly covenanted to show the pages to only a handful of family members; it was his disregard of this oath that was the transgression that precipitated the devastating loss. Later recollections had Martin not only breaking his promise, but also breaking the lock on his wife’s bureau to do so, when the pages were apparently locked in that bureau for safekeeping and Martin wanted to get at them to show them to a visitor.⁸

The corroborating evidence of the pages’ existence, then, even if that evidence is all in the form of human testimony, is strong on this point. Martin Harris, throughout his life, affirmed the basic details of the story; Joseph Smith recounted the story in the preface of the first edition of the Book of Mormon—and that preface was written just a year after the pages were lost. The fact that Joseph Smith made this story so public so early speaks to the common-knowledge status of the manuscript’s disappearance.⁹

Just as telling, perhaps, is the absence of controverting testimony—the absence of claims, for example, that there never *was* a lost manuscript, or the absence of claims that the losing of the pages was a fabricated tale. This is especially significant when considering the principal actor in this drama—Lucy Harris—who had the most to gain, with regards to reputation, by disputing the *existence* of the pages if such were an open question. Lucy Harris was almost immediately implicated as the thief in question—and arguing that the pages never *existed* would have been a ready alibi to clear her name. But nothing in the historical record suggests that Lucy Harris (or anyone else, for that matter) attempted to dispute the pages’ existence. It simply seems that such was not an open question.¹⁰ Instead, as shall be seen, some acquaintances remembered her tacit corroboration of the pages’ reality.

A more contested question is whether or not there was a plot to manipulate those pages. Joseph Smith said that he did not retranslate the lost

manuscript because he had learned by revelation that a scheme existed to discredit him—and his detractors’ manipulation of the 116 pages was central to that scheme. A tradition that has emerged in reminiscences, though, is that Lucy Harris burned the 116 pages immediately; one writer has recently concluded that this is “probably” what happened.¹¹ Hence, in that view, if Lucy Harris really burned the pages immediately, then Joseph Smith’s fears (as outlined in the Book of Mormon preface) reflected a simple paranoia rather than well-founded (or divinely revealed) apprehensions about an actual conspiracy. But challenging Joseph Smith’s credibility on that point seems much too hasty a conclusion, one that privileges some sources while downplaying others. This is because other early retellings of the 116 pages story suggest that a different report about the fate of the pages was still in circulation within only a few years of the pages’ disappearance. For example, E. D. Howe, in his 1834 *Mormonism Unveiled*—a book that draws on affidavits collected by Doctor Philastus Hurlbut—wrote, “The facts respecting the lost manuscript, we have not been able to ascertain. They sometimes charge the wife of Harris with having burnt it; but this is denied by her.”¹² In addition, John Clark, a former Palmyra pastor who had personal interactions with Martin Harris in 1827 and 1828, also assumed (in an 1840 publication) that Lucy did not immediately destroy the manuscript but instead planned to use the pages against Joseph Smith. Clark said that Lucy Harris “took the opportunity, when [Martin Harris] was out, to seize the manuscript and put it into the hands of one of her neighbors for safe keeping. When the manuscript was discovered to be missing,” Clark continued, “suspicion immediately fastened upon Mrs. Harris, she however refused to give any information in relation to the matter, but she simply replied: ‘If this be a divine communication, the same being who revealed it to you can easily replace it.’” The crux of the “plan” that “she had formed . . . to expose the deception,” according to Clark, was to “keep the manuscript until the book [of Mormon] was published, and then put these one hundred and sixteen pages into the hands of some one who would publish them, and show how they varied from those published in the Book of Mormon”—because she “[took] it for granted” that the retranslated/reproduced portion “could not possibly” be “verbatim.”¹³

John Clark may have, as one historian has read him, inferred the idea of a plot to sabotage Joseph Smith from the preface to the first edition of

the Book of Mormon.¹⁴ Yet not to be missed is the fact that the Lucy Harris plan that Clark describes is substantially different from the one that the preface describes, raising the possibility at least that Clark may have had other sources of information. It is difficult to ascertain precisely what Clark claimed as the basis of his familiarity with the story of the 116 pages. Clark said that he moved from Palmyra “very soon” after his 1828 conversation with Martin Harris but before the Book of Mormon was published in 1830. He also stated that he had “Harris’ own account . . . to me” of the Book of Mormon translation process, including the use of a “thick curtain or blanket suspended between” Joseph Smith and Martin Harris during the translation. If what Clark was describing as “Harris’ own account” referred to writing the Book of Mormon translation rather than just the so-called “Anthon transcript” of characters from the plates, then this suggests that at least one of Clark’s 1828 interviews with Martin Harris might have come after Martin Harris had returned to Palmyra from Harmony after transcribing the 116 pages. If so, it is possible that Clark was still living in Palmyra when news about the loss of the 116 pages might have initially circulated. At the same time, Clark noted in 1840 that he was familiar with both the Book of Mormon preface and the revelation (now Doctrine and Covenants 10) to which the preface referred. In any case, that preface described the conspirators’ plan to *alter* the text of the 116 pages so that this altered “original” would read differently than Joseph Smith’s second attempt. However, Clark understood Lucy Harris’s strategy to be simply holding onto the original and waiting to expose Joseph Smith when he published a second attempt that “could not possibly [be] verbatim.” While it is true that Clark’s proposal may have been his inference of the likeliest plot, based on his skepticism of Joseph Smith’s work, it is also plausible that he remembered a Palmyra tradition that he picked up from conversations with his former neighbors.¹⁵

Regardless, there are enough examples of individuals who claimed knowledge about the pages’ survival to complicate any easy conclusions about the fate of the pages. John Clark wrote in 1840 that Martin Harris “was indignant at his wife beyond measure—he raved most violently, and it is said [he] actually beat Mrs. H[arris] with a rod—but she remained firm, and would not give up the manuscript.” William Hine of Colesville, New York, stated in 1885 that Lucy Harris gave the manuscript to one of his neighbors, a Dr. Seymour. Hine then remembered that Dr. Seymour “read

most of it [the lost manuscript] to me when my daughter Irene was born; he read them to his patients about the country. It was a description of the mounds about the country and similar to the ‘Book of Mormon.’” There are problems with the dates and places in Hine’s record, but his principal assertion was that Lucy Harris had stolen the manuscript and “refused” to return it; “after I came to Kirtland,” Hine asserted, “in conversation with Martin Harris, he has many times admitted to me that this statement about his wife and the one hundred sixteen pages as above stated, is true.” Charles Comstock Richards remembered that he and his father, LDS Apostle Franklin D. Richards, met a man in 1880, Dr. J. R. Pratt, who “told my father that he could put his hand on the manuscript which Martin Harris lost, in an hour, if it was needed.”¹⁶

Hine’s and Richards’s accounts are late reminiscences that should be treated critically as such, yet so are the recollections of those who claimed that Lucy burned the pages. In 1884, Lorenzo Saunders reported that Lucy Harris herself had told him that she had burned the pages. In fact, Saunders also claimed that Lucy Harris “never denied of burning the papers.” As mentioned earlier, though, E. D. Howe reported in 1834 that Lucy Harris *did* deny burning the pages, and it is very conceivable that Howe based this denial on information he received from Philastus Hurlbut, who interviewed Lucy Harris in 1833.¹⁷ Importantly, Howe’s publication predated Saunders’s reminiscence by fifty years. Of course, Lucy Harris’s stealing the manuscript—with conspiratorial aims—on one hand, and Lucy Harris’s burning of the manuscript on the other, are not mutually exclusive traditions; it is possible that both traditions reflect actual events. That is, it is possible that she (or others) *did* burn the pages *after* the preface of the Book of Mormon disclosed that Joseph Smith would not retranslate the Book of Lehi, thus thwarting any conspiracy.¹⁸

In the end, it seems that this question of the fate of the pages, and precisely what motivated their disappearance, cannot be answered with enough certainty to make definitive conclusions. But at the very least, it should be said that an attempt to use these reminiscences to dismiss Joseph Smith’s fears or associated revelations as baseless does not do justice to the complexity of the evidence, especially the earliest evidence. To believers *and* to skeptics, Joseph Smith’s claim that there existed a plan to discredit him did not seem either unreasonable or implausible.

Rather, there are a number of elements in this narrative that suggest the believability of the story that Joseph Smith and his associates repeatedly told. For example, two Latter-day Saint historians have described what they see as an independent “prophetic voice” evident in Doctrine and Covenants 3, the revelation that came right after the loss of the pages—and likely the first revelation that Joseph Smith committed to paper. Importantly, they see an authenticity in the independence of that voice—and almost surprisingly so, in the way that Joseph Smith is chastised. Richard Bushman wrote, “The speaker stands above and outside Joseph, sharply separated emotionally and intellectually. The rebuke of Joseph is as forthright as the denunciation of Martin Harris. There is no effort to conceal or rationalize, no sign of Joseph justifying himself to prospective followers. The words flow directly from the messenger to Joseph and have the single purpose of setting Joseph straight. . . . At twenty-two, Joseph was speaking prophetically.”¹⁹

Also, in this authenticity vein, Jeffrey R. Holland asked some penetrating questions worth reconsidering: “If the loss of those 116 pages . . . was simply the disappearance of some thoughtful, wisdom literature and a few chapters of remarkably deft fiction, as opponents of the Book of Mormon would say, what’s the big deal? Why then all that business about Joseph going through the depths of hell, worrying about whether he was going to get the manuscript back and fearing the rebuke of God. He’s a quick study; he’s a frontier talent. He can just write some more!” Then, after quoting Lucy Mack Smith’s account of Joseph’s despair and Martin’s hopelessness when the pages were lost, Elder Holland said this:

Well, my goodness, that’s an elaborate little side story—which makes absolutely no sense at all unless, of course, there really were plates, and there really was a translation process going on, and there really had been a solemn covenant made with the Lord, and there really was an enemy who did not want that book to “come forth in this generation” (D&C 10:33). . . . Which is only to say what so many have said before: that if Joseph Smith—or anyone else, for that matter—created the Book of Mormon out of whole cloth, that, to me, is a *far* greater miracle than the proposition that he translated it from an ancient record by an endowment of divine power.²⁰

Possibilities: Texts and Translation

“Reasonable” and “plausible” also seem good words to apply to two additional thought questions that arise in connection with the revelations Joseph Smith received and the translation work that he did after the loss of the 116 pages.²¹ While these are tangential matters, they nevertheless offer some interesting possibilities about what we might learn about Joseph Smith’s early prophetic ministry and education. The first such question deals with the contents of the 116 pages. The second question deals with the resolution of the lost pages story—a resolution that came through the translation of the plates of Nephi.²²

First, Do we know any storyline details that were in the 116 pages but are not in the current Book of Mormon text? For a few years in the 1980s, we thought we knew more than we do now, thanks, unfortunately, to Mark Hofmann, a forger who sent shock waves through the LDS Church history community in the early 1980s, before his deceptions were discovered. In 1982, *BYU Studies* and the *Ensign* published the transcript of a purported January 1829 Lucy Mack Smith letter that a collector had purchased from Mark Hofmann. The letter was an incredible find—a window into the development of Mormonism, written as it appeared to be in the year before the Church was organized. In this letter to her sister, Lucy Smith purportedly described Joseph’s loss of a portion of the manuscript this way: “On account of negligence the translation of the first part of the record was carried off by some unknown person but God is faithfull and the work is now about to proceed.” Ten lines later in the letter, Lucy recounted to her sister some of the particulars of the Book of Mormon narrative, including the information that Lehi “fled from Jerusalem with his family and also his wife’s brother’s family a few days before Nebuchadnezzar besieged the City and layed it in ashes.” Since that Sariah-Ishmael sibling connection is not explicit in the current text of the Book of Mormon, a reasonable inference was that Lucy had learned the detail from the 116 pages—and that’s how the letter was presented in Church publications.²³

But as is well known now, by 1985 the Lucy Mack Smith letter’s provenance was called into serious question. It proved to be one of Mark Hofmann’s far-reaching forgeries. His tangled web of deceit and murder unraveled before he could track down the two “finds” that he still sought

after: the so-called William McLellin collection, and the 116 pages. At the very least, Hofmann’s reported plan to forge the lost manuscript speaks to the prevalence—and believability—of reports that the 116 pages were *not* destroyed.²⁴

Aside from this forged letter, there is, however, evidence for the possibility that another, authentic Lehi-Ishmael detail from the 116 pages did persist in Mormon tradition.²⁵ Nineteenth-century Apostle Erastus Snow mentioned in a sermon documented in the *Journal of Discourses* that

the Prophet Joseph informed us that the record of Lehi, was contained on the 116 pages that were first translated and subsequently stolen, and of which an abridgement is given us in the first Book of Nephi, which is the record of Nephi individually, he himself being of the lineage of Manasseh; but that Ishmael was of the lineage of Ephraim, and that his sons married into Lehi’s family, and Lehi’s sons married Ishmael’s daughters, thus fulfilling the words of Jacob upon Ephraim and Manasseh in the 48th chapter of Genesis, which says: “And let my name be named on them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the land.”

The current Book of Mormon text informs us that Lehi’s sons married Ishmael’s daughters, but there is no mention of Lehi’s *daughters* having married Ishmael’s *sons*, as Elder Snow described it. A careful reading of this Erastus Snow excerpt does not *require* that the 116 pages be the source of the information about Lehi’s daughters and Ishmael’s sons, but it seems a very likely inference.²⁶

In a “things we might know” vein, then, details like these at least fall into the category of intriguing possibilities, and are simply further reminders of just how complex and layered the Book of Mormon narrative is.²⁷ That complexity and richness becomes especially evident as we think about the source plates of the Book of Mormon. It is on that topic that our final 116-pages-related question centers: *Could the reference to what seems like only one set of “plates of Nephi” in what is now Doctrine and Covenants 10—the revelation that informed Joseph Smith how to compensate for the loss of the 116 pages—be a subtle evidence of internal self-consistency in the Book of Mormon translation narrative?*

This question pivots on two hinges: the order of Book of Mormon translation; and what Joseph Smith would have understood—and when he understood it—by the phrase “plates of Nephi.” What is suggested here, by way of response, is that the intricate link between the Book of Mormon translation work and the corresponding revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants (section 10) offers one more signal of Joseph Smith’s narrative consistency and credibility in all of this.

There are enough persuasive bits of evidence to make a convincing case that Joseph Smith translated what we now know as 1 Nephi to Words of Mormon *after* he had translated Mosiah through Moroni. In other words, when Oliver Cowdery arrived in Harmony in April 1829, he likely began scribing as Joseph Smith translated Mosiah, where Joseph and Martin (and Emma and other possible fill-in scribes) had left off. One such piece of evidence that supports this is the appearance of the handwriting of John Whitmer as a scribe in the original Book of Mormon manuscript in the 1 Nephi–Words of Mormon section. It seems likely, then, that this section of the Book of Mormon was translated last because Joseph and Emma and Oliver did not arrive at the Whitmer farm until the first part of June 1829, after Joseph and Oliver had already been working on the translation consistently for two months. Another corroborating indicator is that the estimated pace of translation would have put Joseph and Oliver at 3 Nephi in mid-May 1829, right where Oliver said they were when they inquired about baptism, if they had started in April at the beginnings of Mosiah. This translation order seems like something that we can assert with a high degree of confidence.²⁸

The order of translation is relevant to the story here because when Joseph Smith received the revelation that is now Doctrine and Covenants 10—the spring (probably April or May) 1829 revelation that instructed Joseph on what to do to resolve the lost manuscript dilemma—he had not yet translated the 1 Nephi–Words of Mormon portion, or that portion that we now commonly refer to as the “small plates of Nephi.”²⁹ Because of that, it seems most likely that Joseph Smith would not yet have thought in terms of “small and large plates of Nephi”—more on that later. At stake, then, is how Joseph would have understood the Lord’s words, and the Lord’s intent, on that topic. Here is the earliest extant version of that revelation (now Doctrine and Covenants 10:38–42):

And now, verily I say unto you, that an account of those things that you have written, which have gone out of your hands, are engraven upon the plates of Nephi; yea, and you remember, it was said in those writings, that a more particular account was given of these things upon the plates of Nephi. And now, because the account which is engraven upon the plates of Nephi, is more particular concerning the things, which in my wisdom I would bring to the knowledge of the people in this account: therefore, you shall translate the engravings which are on the plates of Nephi, down even till you come to the reign of king Benjamin, or until you come to that which you have translated, which you have retained; and behold, you shall publish it as the record of Nephi, and thus will I confound those who have altered my words.³⁰

The passage just quoted seems to refer to only one set of plates: *the* plates of Nephi. However, today's readers of the Book of Mormon are accustomed to thinking in terms of two sets of "plates of Nephi"—a *large* set and a *small* set. Because of that common contemporary reading, it is not unexpected that a recent and important commentary on Doctrine and Covenants 10 suggested this about the passage just quoted: "The two references to 'the plates of Nephi' in this paragraph actually point to two different sets of plates."³¹ But what if the repeated "plates of Nephi" phrases in Doctrine and Covenants 10:38–45 really only do refer to *one* set of "plates of Nephi," as they seem to do at first glance—and that is the set we know now as the "small plates"? This is the alternate (and perhaps more straightforward) reading suggested here. This reading would give the phrase more consistency because it fits the well-supported "small-plates-last" model of translation. Most important, in line with the theme here about narrative consistency and believability, this reading fits with what Joseph Smith likely would have known (and not known) about the composition of the gold plates *before* translating what is now 1 Nephi through Words of Mormon—remembering that he received Doctrine and Covenants 10 *before* translating 1 Nephi through Words of Mormon. This reading of Doctrine and Covenants 10:38–45 therefore avoids a possible anachronism and adds credence to Joseph Smith's account about the resolution of the lost 116 pages episode.

From everything we can glean about the plates that Joseph Smith possessed, only one section could accurately be called "the plates of Nephi," and that is the "small plates" section. All the other plates that Joseph translated

from, based on internal descriptions from the Book of Mormon, consisted of Mormon and Moroni's abridgments and writings on plates of their own make. Therefore, contemporary students of the Book of Mormon understand the lost manuscript/Book of Lehi as comprising a significant portion of Mormon's *abridgment* of what we now know as "the large plates of Nephi" rather than a translation of the large plates of Nephi themselves. But it is doubtful that Joseph Smith and his scribes would have even thought yet in those terms. For one thing, the "large" and "small" descriptors do not come from Nephi or Mormon, but from Jacob's writings that were included on the small plates (see Jacob 1:1 and Jacob 3:13)—and Joseph had not yet translated the small plates at the time of the receipt of the revelation that is now Doctrine and Covenants 10.

How might Joseph have conceived of the source document for the 116 pages? In the preface to the first edition of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith described the contents of the 116 pages as "the Book of Lehi, which was an account abridged from the plates of Lehi"—*not* the plates of Nephi.³² This characterization suggests a couple of key points. First, it is not unreasonable to infer that Joseph drew his understanding of this from Mormon's own characterization of, or introduction to, the opening portion of his abridgment. That is, since Lehi's story opened the record, it would have been natural for Mormon to designate that portion as the book or plates of Lehi; this fits, for example, the way Mormon introduced and grouped together books like Alma or Helaman, even though those books include abridged records of other custodial authors after Alma or Helaman. And Nephi himself wrote that he began his record (what we now call the "large plates") by documenting the account of his father, Lehi (see 1 Nephi 19:1). Second, up to this point in the Book of Mormon translation process—that is, up to the receipt of Doctrine and Covenants 10—Joseph and Martin had never translated directly from Nephi's writings (or Jacob's or Enos's) or from Nephi's plates, but rather from Mormon's abridgment of those writings—unless Mormon had included quoted passages or excerpts on his own plates from Nephi or Jacob or Enos, as he did with writings and sermons of, say, King Benjamin or Alma. But even those passages would not have come from what we know as "the small plates of Nephi," since before Benjamin's day, the "large plates of Nephi" were apparently kept by a different line of authors than were the small plates (see Jarom 3:14; Omni 1:25)—and Mormon reported that he

did not even search out the small plates until he had *finished* abridging the account “down to the reign of this king Benjamin” (Words of Mormon 1:3).³³

Therefore, if all of the references to the “plates of Nephi” in the revelation that is now section 10 of the Doctrine and Covenants refer to what modern Book of Mormon readers think of as the *small* plates of Nephi, the revelation reads very coherently. Here is a possible reading of the earliest extant copy of the revelation—chapter IX of the Book of Commandments—from that perspective, with suggested parenthetical interpretations: “And now, verily I say unto you, that an account of those things that you have written, which have gone out of your hands [the 116 pages], are engraven upon the plates of Nephi [small plates of Nephi]”—in other words, “The same basic story elements that you have already covered in translating the Book of Lehi (‘an account of those things that you have written’) are *also* narrated (‘engraven’) on the small plates of Nephi.” The revelation continues:

Yea, and you remember, it was said in those writings [the now-lost writings, or Mormon’s abridgement of the Book of Lehi] that a more particular account was given of these things upon the plates of Nephi [the small plates]. And now, because the account which is engraven upon the plates of Nephi [the small plates] is more particular concerning these things, which in my wisdom I would bring to the knowledge of the people in this account: therefore, you shall translate the engravings which are on the plates of Nephi [the small plates], down even till you come to the reign of king Benjamin.

(The wording here is another indication that when Joseph recommenced translating after the loss of the 116 pages, he “apparently picked up where he and Harris had stopped, in the book of Mosiah,” and then he translated the books of the “small plates” last, based on the instructions in this revelation.)³⁴

As if to underscore the differences between the Book of Lehi and the plates of Nephi, the revelation makes this point: “Behold they [those who stole the Book of Lehi manuscript] have only got a part, or an abridgment of the *account* [notice: *not* plates] of Nephi. Behold there are many things engraven on the plates of Nephi [the small plates of Nephi] which do throw greater views upon my gospel.”³⁵

This suggested reading matters because the complexity of the relationship between the two sets of plates of Nephi likely only became clear to Joseph Smith *after* translating the small plates. Hence, it might very well have been anachronistic for a revelation in the spring of 1829 (Doctrine and Covenants 10) to refer to anything other than *one* set of the “plates of Nephi,” since Joseph would not yet have been thinking in terms of having more than one record of Nephi, because Mormon only included in his compilation one set of records that appropriately bore the title “the plates of Nephi”: the *small* plates. The phrasing of Doctrine and Covenants 10 thus fits with what Joseph Smith would have likely learned “line upon line” as he translated the plates, such that it also fits with a principle outlined in 2 Nephi and elsewhere: the Lord “speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding” (2 Nephi 31:3; see also Doctrine and Covenants 1:24).³⁶

In summary, the evidence for the order of translation, the dating of Doctrine and Covenants 10, and especially the “plates” phraseology of that revelation—all taken together—make for another example, subtle but noteworthy, of narrative consistency and authenticity in the way Joseph Smith and his associates related the “lost manuscript” chapter of the larger Book of Mormon translation story.

What is more significant, though, for modern readers of the Book of Mormon is the way Doctrine and Covenants 10 characterizes the addition of the small plates material: “Behold, there are many things engraven upon the plates of Nephi which do throw greater views upon my gospel” (D&C 10:45). It is this “greater views” aspect—this indication of providential foresight—that adds to the wonder of the inclusion of the small plates of Nephi, not only in our day but in Mormon’s. President Boyd K. Packer has even proposed that Mormon’s searching out and then reading of the small plates of Nephi, with their “things of [the] soul” (2 Nephi 4:15) orientation, “greatly influenced . . . the rest of his [Mormon’s] abridgment.”³⁷

Conclusion: Misunderstandings and Miracles

In any event, thinking through the complex composition of the plates also defuses a criticism of Joseph Smith leveled by E. D. Howe, a criticism based

wholly on a misunderstanding of the 116 pages episode. That misunderstanding, perhaps unexpectedly, offers an appropriate note on which to conclude this story. In his *Mormonism Unveiled*, Howe misread the Book of Mormon preface when it drew from the language of the revelation that is now Doctrine and Covenants 10. Howe did not realize that the translation of the “plates of Nephi” was to be a new, though parallel, account of the same time frame covered by the lost “Book of Lehi.” Howe charged that the revelation’s instruction to Joseph to “translate from the plates of Nephi until you come to that which ye have translated, which ye have retained, and . . . publish it as the record of Nephi” was simply giving the Book of *Lehi* a new title: “the record of Nephi.” Thus, Howe accused, “the Lord, in order to counteract the works of the Devil, is represented by Smith as palming off on the world an acknowledged falsehood,—the records of Lehi must be published as the records of Nephi.” Unfortunately, Howe incorrectly read the preface as nothing more than the Lord giving permission for some creative misdirection. What is also unfortunate is that Howe therefore missed what Latter-day Saints see as the miracle of God’s foreknowledge in all of this. Howe wrote, “Again, an important record which had been made by a miracle, kept for ages by a miracle, dug from the ground by a miracle, and translated by a miracle, was *stolen* by some one, so that even a miracle could not restore it, and thus were the designs of the Lord counteracted by ‘Satan putting it into their hearts to tempt the Lord.’”³⁸

Latter-day Saints come to the precisely opposite conclusion. They see in the resolution of this lost manuscript episode—after all of the soul searching and heart wrenching it brought to Joseph Smith and Martin Harris—a miracle thousands of years in the making, beginning with Nephi’s creation of a second record, and then Mormon’s addition of that record to his abridgment (and both Nephi and Mormon wrote that they acted based on inspiration which they admitted they did not fully understand; see Words of Mormon 1:7; 1 Nephi 9:2, 5). Latter-day Saints see, in all of this, evidence that the Lord allows humans their agency, but neither human agency exercised in opposition to his will, nor “the cunning of the devil,” can frustrate the works of God (D&C 10:43). They see in the 116 pages story a reassurance that “all things” really can “work together for good to them that love God” (Romans 8:28). For them, and for that reason, it is a story worth frequent retelling.

Notes

1. The story is summarized well in Grant Underwood, “The Book of Lehi,” in *Joseph: Exploring the Life and Ministry of the Prophet*, ed. Susan Easton Black and Andrew C. Skinner (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 76–84; and in the “Historical Introduction” to “Revelation, July 1828 [D&C 3],” in Michael Hubbard MacKay, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, vol. 1 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 6–7; hereafter *JSP*, D1.
2. A groundbreaking and important new book also discusses the 116 pages episode; see chapter 5 of Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith’s Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015). One new claim the book makes—a claim about the scribing of the 116 pages—has bearing here. *From Darkness unto Light* proposes that “Emma had likely written the majority of the ‘book of Lehi’ before Harris ever arrived” (90). However, and without diminishing Emma’s important work as a Book of Mormon scribe, other evidence suggests that this innovative new claim about Emma’s primary role in the production of the 116 pages calls for further consideration. The bases for the claim seem problematic. For example, *From Darkness unto Light* has Martin Harris stating that “he wrote ‘about one third of the first part of the translation of the plates as [Joseph] interpreted them by the Urim and Thummim’” (91). The quoted statement, though, is secondhand; it comes from an 1884 letter to the editor of the RLDS Church’s *Saints’ Herald*, in which the correspondent is reporting an interview he had had with Martin Harris in 1875. See Simon Smith’s published letter in “Correspondence,” *Saints’ Herald*, May 24, 1884, 324. Significantly, that late reminiscence does not mention Emma at all, as scribe or otherwise; and in any case, Martin Harris’s comment, if remembered accurately, could be read as his estimation that the lost 116 pages constituted about one-third of the eventual Book of Mormon manuscript. The same correspondent reported that Martin Harris told him, “I was Joseph’s scribe, and wrote for him a *great deal*” (Simon Smith, “Correspondence,” 324; emphasis added). *From Darkness unto Light* also quotes from Joseph Knight Sr. to imply that Emma was the earliest principal scribe in the Book of Mormon project: “Now when he [Joseph Smith] began to translate he was poor and was put to it for provisions and had not one to write for him But his wife and his wifes Brother would sometime write a little for him through the winter” (85). But a closer examination of what follows this statement complicates that assumption. The “through the winter” time marker seems especially important, since the next line in Joseph Knight’s account deals with *Oliver Cowdery’s* arrival “the Next Spring,” in April 1829—the year following Martin Harris’s scribal work. Hence Joseph Knight’s reminiscence seems to be pointing to Emma’s work as scribe in the winter before Oliver Cowdery’s arrival—that is, the winter of 1829 (which post-dated the loss

of the 116 pages), *not* the winter of 1828. To be sure, Joseph Knight's chronology of things is confused in this recollection. After relating that Oliver Cowdery "Came Down [to Harmony, Pennsylvania] and was soon Convinced of the truth of the work," Knight wrote, "The next Spring Came Martin Harris Down to pennsylvania to write for him and he wrote 116 pages of the first part of the Book of Mormon." While these questions of timing and narrative order make the Joseph Knight source a problematic one for establishing scribal order, what seems especially relevant in the full Joseph Knight account is that he specifically assigned the writing of the 116 pages to Martin Harris. See Dean Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection of Early Mormon History," *BYU Studies* 17, no. 1 (1976): 35. Perhaps most significant in all of this is that locating Emma as a scribe in the interim *between* Martin Harris's work and Oliver Cowdery's arrival (the period "through the winter," in Joseph Knight's memory) also seems to fit with how Joseph Smith himself remembered this early translation work. In Joseph's earliest history, in 1832, *after* recounting the 116 pages story and in the context of discussing *Oliver Cowdery's* arrival, he stated "my wife had written *some* for me to translate and also my Brothr Samuel H Smith." "History, Circa Summer 1832," in Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2012), 16; emphasis added; hereafter *JSP*, H1. In Joseph Smith's 1838/1839 history, he said that Martin Harris "returned again unto my house about the twelfth of April Eighteen hundred and twenty eight, and commenced writing for me while I translated from the plates, which we continued untill the fourteenth of June following, by which time he [Martin] had written one hundred and sixteen <pages> of manuscript on foolscap paper." "History Drafts, 1838–Circa 1841 [Draft 2]," *JSP*, H1:244. Thus Joseph Smith's histories seem to support the customary assertion that Martin Harris was the primary scribe for the 116 pages portion of the translation. It should also be noted that *From Darkness unto Light*, 100n33, acknowledges other evidence in support of this customary assertion.

3. *JSP*, H1:246.
4. See Lucy Mack Smith's account of this in Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 415–17.
5. See, for example, W. W. Blair's report of an 1860 interview with Martin Harris that was included in an 1880 RLDS printing of Lucy Mack Smith's *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations*: "He seemed to be still conscience-smitten for permitting them to be stolen"; in Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 422n179; also in Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 2:311; hereafter *EMD*. See also "Interviews with William Pilkington, 1874–1875," in Vogel, *EMD*, 2:350–67.
6. Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 418.

7. See Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 69: “Eighteen twenty-eight was a turning point in Joseph Smith’s development. It was the year when he found his prophetic voice.” Compare Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd ed., rev. and enl. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), who saw in the 116 pages episode a point of no return in Joseph Smith’s pious fraud: “A retreat from the fantasy he had created was impossible. . . . Although he may not have sensed their significance, these, Joseph’s first revelations [after the loss of the 116 pages], marked a turning-point in his life. For they changed the Book of Mormon from what might have been merely an ingenious speculation into a genuinely religious book.”
8. See Lucy Mack Smith’s account of this in Anderson, *Lucy’s Book*, 420–22. W. W. Blair remembered from his 1860 interview with Martin Harris that Martin claimed to have locked the manuscript in his bureau, which he then locked in the parlor, and to have put both keys in his pocket before going to bed—“after which he never saw them [the pages].” Anderson, *Lucy’s Book*, 422n179; see also Vogel, *EMD*, 2:311.
9. Joseph Smith also briefly included the story of the 116 pages in his 1832 history; see *JSP*, H1:15–16. For a careful analysis of the timing of the writing of the Book of Mormon’s preface—based on the typesetting of the first Book of Mormon signature—see Vogel, *EMD*, 3:480. See also *JSP*, D1:93n360. It is worth noting that it is in the preface to the Book of Mormon that Joseph first “specified the number of pages lost.” The printing process, as the editors of *JSP*, D1, suggest, might thus also offer a clue to the source of the number “116”: “This page count may be an approximation based on the page numbering found on the printer’s manuscript of the Book of Mormon. The top of page 117 in that copy marks the beginning of the book of Mosiah, which corresponds to the end of the period covered in the pages lost by Harris.” It is possible, though, that the numbering reflected what had been retained of the original pagination, since the editors of D1 note, “The process of preparing the printer’s manuscript and providing portions to the typesetter suggests that the printer’s manuscript may not have comprised 116 pages by the time JS wrote the preface.” Historical Introduction to Preface to the Book of Mormon, circa August 1829, in *JSP*, D1:92–93. Compare Dan Vogel’s analysis of the page numbering in Vogel, *EMD*, 3:480–81.
10. John Clark, a former Palmyra pastor who had personal interactions with Martin Harris in 1827 and 1828, reported that, from very early on, Lucy Harris was the chief suspect in this drama—yet Clark’s account (published in 1840) only had Lucy “[refusing] to give any information in relation to the matter.” As Clark portrayed it, Lucy did not deny anything; yet Clark, and others, still assumed Lucy Harris was the guilty party. See “Martin Harris Interviews with John A. Clark, 1827 & 1828,” in Vogel, *EMD*, 2:269. In the affidavit Lucy Harris gave to Philastus Hurlbut in 1833, she spoke strongly against Joseph Smith’s work and her husband’s involvement—“the delusion of Mormonism,” she called it—yet she did not mention the well-publicized 116 pages story. In Vogel, *EMD*, 2:36.

11. See Vogel, *EMD*, 2:270n26; and 3:480–81. See also Linda Sillitoe and Allen Roberts, *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 154–55, where they report that investigators in the Mark Hofmann forgery case met a descendant of Martin Harris who told investigators that her family tradition was that Lucy Harris burned the pages.
12. E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, OH: E. D. Howe, 1834), 22. The preface to the first edition of the Book of Mormon is reprinted in “Preface to Book of Mormon, circa August 1829,” in *JSP*, D1:93–94.
13. Vogel, *EMD*, 2:269–70.
14. For Dan Vogel’s opinion that John Clark’s account is based on an “inference taken from the Book of Mormon’s preface, rather than any of the principals in the affair,” see Vogel, *EMD*, 2:270n26.
15. Vogel, *EMD*, 2:268–69; see also Dan Vogel’s analysis of John Clark’s movements based on census records, in Vogel, *EMD*, 2:260. For a helpful analysis of statements by those who remembered a curtain/sheet hung between Joseph Smith and his scribe—and for an analysis of how that might affect questions of timing in the narrative of translation, see MacKay and Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light*, 91, and 100n34–36.
16. John Clark, in Vogel, *EMD*, 2:270; William Hine, circa March 1885, in Vogel, *EMD*, 4:185–86; Charles Comstock Smith’s account is reported in Vogel, *EMD*, 3:481. Recently, author Brant Gardner has also speculated that the “verbatim” issue might have been at the heart of the Lord’s instruction not to retranslate the Book of Lehi, but Gardner comes at it from a different perspective, one based on what has been called a “loose” translation model: “Why didn’t Joseph simply retranslate it? Ultimately, we have no answer other than the one Joseph gave, but there is another possibility. On some level, Joseph may have understood that he could not translate the same document twice in the same way, not because he lacked divine inspiration, but because the very nature of that inspiration produced a translation that was only a functional equivalent of the inspired meaning.” Brant Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 285. However, a number of Joseph Smith’s associates remembered a Book of Mormon translation process where the verbiage revealed to Joseph Smith was more tightly controlled. See the extensive accounts compiled in John W. Welch, “The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 77–213.
17. Lorenzo Saunders interview, November 12, 1884, in Vogel, *EMD*, 2:149. On E. D. Howe and Doctor Philastus Hurlbut, see Dan Vogel’s analysis in Vogel, *EMD*, 3:480. There is no mention in Lucy Harris’s written affidavit of the 116 pages story, but that does not preclude the possibility that she and Hurlbut discussed the well-known story. See Vogel, *EMD*, 2:36.
18. This could be reflected in William Pilkington’s accounts of his interviews with Martin Harris that show Martin considering both traditions concerning the fate of the pages. Pilkington remembered, in a 1934 affidavit, that Martin Harris

“believed his Wife burned it up,” and then one paragraph later Pilkington reported that “[Harris’s] Wife took the manuscript and he never saw it any more. So you see Willie, it was stolen from me.” “Interviews with William Pilkington, 1874–1875,” in Vogel, *EMD*, 2:354. It is worth noting that in an autobiography Pilkington composed four years later, he only recounted the theft thesis. Pilkington said, “She [Lucy Harris] took the manuscript from him and she was perusing them when someone jerked them from her, and then another got it, and Martin told me it disappeared, and he never saw it any more.” “Interviews with William Pilkington, 1874–1875,” in Vogel, *EMD*, 2:361–62. Lorenzo Saunders did not suggest the timing for the burning of the pages in his reminiscence, but James Reeves did in his 1872 account. Reeves suggested that Lucy Harris had burned the pages even before Martin Harris realized they were gone. However, Reeves’s account is problematic (as are most of these late reminiscences) because it pictures Martin Harris “during the long winter evenings . . . [sitting] by the great open fire-place and [studying] his new text stopping now and then to pour a little inspiration into the ear of Aunt Dolly, who usually answered by telling him to ‘shut up.’” Martin Harris, of course, had the pages during the summer of 1828. See “James H. Reeves Account, 1872,” in Vogel, *EMD*, 2:342.

19. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 69. See also Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion*, updated ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 22–25.
20. Jeffrey R. Holland, “A Standard unto My People,” Eighteenth Annual Church Educational System Religious Educators Symposium, August 9, 1994, 5–6.
21. One possibility is that the mechanics of translation changed after the loss of the Book of Lehi manuscript. When Joseph resumed the translation, a curtain no longer was used to separate Joseph from his scribe; instead, the plates stayed on the table, covered by a cloth. And witnesses remembered him using a single seer stone more than the interpreters. See Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 71–72, for a summary of these recollections.
22. See Richard E. Bennett, “Joseph Smith and the First Principles of the Gospel, 1820–1829,” in *Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 23–50, for insightful commentary on the lessons Joseph Smith learned during and after the 116 pages episode.
23. Dean C. Jessee, “Lucy Mack Smith’s 1829 Letter to Mary Smith Pierce,” *BYU Studies* 22, no. 4 (Fall 1982): 461; see also “1829 Lucy Mack Smith Letter Displayed,” *Ensign*, October 1982, 70–73, which appeared under this descriptive heading: “Discusses information apparently from ‘lost 116 pages’—including Ishmael as Sariah’s brother.”
24. See Richard E. Turley Jr., *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 58–67, 271, 318; Sillitoe and Roberts, *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders*, 154–55, 534.

25. It is not unlikely that the Erastus Snow quote discussed in this paragraph served as the inspiration for the information Mark Hofmann included in his forged Lucy Mack Smith letter.
26. Erastus Snow, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1883), 23:184.
27. Recently, historian Don Bradley has proposed that there may be lingering textual echoes of Book of Lehi content in the current Book of Mormon, as well. These include things like the identity of Aminadi, an ancestor of Amulek, whose appearance in the Book of Mormon is so brief as to imply that Mormon, as narrator, assumed readers would already know about Aminadi; or the story of how the Jaredite interpreters came into the hands of Nephite seers, something not spelled out in the current text of the Book of Mormon, but hinted at in the recollections of Fayette Lapham, who recounted a conversation on that topic with Joseph Smith Sr. See Don Bradley, "Piercing the Veil: Temple Worship in the Lost 116 Pages," paper presented at the 2012 FairMormon Conference, <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2012-fair-conference/2012-piercing-the-veil-temple-worship-in-the-lost-116-pages>. Bradley has a forthcoming book on the 116 pages from Greg Kofford Books.
28. For a helpful summary of this, see Historical Introduction to "Book of Mormon Manuscript Excerpt, circa June 1829 [1 Nephi 2:2b–3:18a]," in *JSP*, D1:59–60. See also the translation order and dating analysis in Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 223n67.
29. For the dating of the revelation that is now Doctrine and Covenants 10—and the possibility that it is a composite revelation that was ultimately composed in April or May 1829—see Historical Introduction to Revelation, Spring 1829, in *JSP*, D1:38–39.
30. The revelation (the 1833 Book of Commandments version quoted here) is reproduced in Revelation, Spring 1829, in *JSP*, D1:40–42 [D&C 10].
31. The quote comes from *JSP*, D1:42n93. The reading proposed here is an alternate reading from that suggested in the D1 footnote.
32. Historical Introduction to Preface to the Book of Mormon, circa August 1829, in *JSP*, D1:93; emphasis added.
33. For a helpful discussion (and accompanying chart) of the custodians of Nephi's two sets of plates, see David Rolph Seely, "Plates of Nephi," in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 645–47.
34. *JSP*, H1:38.
35. Revelation, Spring 1829, in *JSP*, D1:40–41 [D&C 10]. The passages quoted here correspond with Doctrine and Covenants 10:38–44. While the pages that contained most of what is now Doctrine and Covenants 10, in an earlier manuscript form, are missing from the "Book of Commandments and Revelations" ("Revelation Book 1" in the Joseph Smith Papers' designation), the manuscript page with the last part of the revelation (beginning with what corresponds now to Doctrine and Covenants 10:42) is extant in the manuscript Revelation Book

1. See Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Revelations and Translations: Manuscript Revelation Books*, facsimile edition, *Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2009), 13. It is worth noting that without knowing the contents of the 116 lost pages, it is impossible to know to what extent Mormon might have included information about Nephi's creation of a second set of plates. This part of the revelation (Doctrine and Covenants 10) suggests that the Book of Lehi at least alluded to the small plates of Nephi: "It was said in those writings that a more particular account was given of these things upon the plates of Nephi." Thus it is possible that this mention of the "more particular account" might have been the impetus behind Mormon's searching out the small plates of Nephi. But it is telling that the allusion is only to "*the* plates of Nephi" rather than a specific *set* of Nephi's plates.
36. It is also worth noting that Mormon does *not* refer to what we know as the "small plates" as the "plates of Nephi" in Words of Mormon; he calls them simply "these plates" (see Words of Mormon 1:3–5, 9, 10). Mormon seems to reserve the descriptor "plates of Nephi" for the "large plates." Thus the phrasing of Doctrine and Covenants 10 seems tailored to Joseph Smith's understanding, which was different than Mormon's understanding or terminology.
37. Boyd K. Packer, *Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 276.
38. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 22–23.